

# High Close School

Barnardos, High Close School, High Close, Wiltshire Road, Wokingham, Berkshire  
RG40 1TT

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this residential special school

High Close School is a non-maintained school operated by a national charity. It provides for both day and residential pupils, aged from seven to 18 years. Up to 20 weekly residential pupils are accommodated in three residential units on the school site. At the time of this inspection, 16 children were accessing the residential provision.

The school accommodates children who have education, health and care plans arising from social, emotional and mental health difficulties and speech, language and communication needs.

### Inspection dates: 18 to 20 October 2022

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>outstanding</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	outstanding
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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The residential special school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

**Date of previous inspection:** 3 November 2021

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

The children who access the residential provision at this school enjoy a positive experience and, in some cases, make exceptional progress. One parent described their child's experience as 'life changing'. Examples of children not settling or making progress are rare. The children build positive relationships with the care staff and benefit from the care they receive in a warm and homely environment. There is a relaxed atmosphere in the residential houses and the children were observed enjoying a range of activities and friendly interactions with the staff caring for them.

There is an embedded culture of listening to the children and responding positively to their suggestions for developing the residential provision. For example, suggestions made by the school council have resulted in changes being made to the daily school routine and elements of the school uniform. The children play an active role in the recruitment of staff, and this helps them to develop a sense of belonging in the school community.

The children benefit from having weekly meetings with their key worker and this provides them with the opportunity to discuss any worries or anxieties they may be experiencing. It also allows time for the children to reflect on how they are progressing towards meeting their targets, and this helps to build their confidence and self-esteem.

The school provides an excellent range of therapeutic interventions to help the children overcome past trauma. An assessment is undertaken of the children's psychological and mental health needs, and individualised support programmes are then developed and implemented by skilled practitioners. Some children have made exceptional progress in overcoming their mental health difficulties. One parent commented that because of the support their child has received 'they now have a future'.

Equal importance is given to promoting the children's physical health. There is good liaison with external health professionals, and this ensures that the children are well informed and supported to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Over time, the children become more confident and ready to engage positively with their educational provision. Many of the children have struggled with their education prior to coming to the school and so this is a new and positive experience for them. The children who access the residential provision compare favourably in terms of their academic progress to the day pupils attending the school. They also make excellent progress in developing their independence skills. A careful approach is taken to ensure that children have sufficient knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe before they progress to having free time away from the school premises.

Diversity is celebrated at the school and the children are supported to develop their unique personalities and characteristics. They learn to respect and support their peers. For example, an older child gave his younger peer encouragement and support when he was struggling to explain a situation to one of the inspectors. When difficulties do arise in the children's peer relationships, the staff are quick to identify the issue and intervene to ensure that differences are resolved.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding**

A culture of keeping children safe and protecting them from harm is embedded in practice in the residential provision. The residential staff know the children well and understand their individual needs and vulnerabilities. They build trusting relationships with the children, and this gives the children the confidence to talk about any worries and concerns they may have. Some children have been able to reflect on how their difficult emotions can result in them engaging in behaviours that could be harmful.

The children say that they feel safe in the residential houses, and they do not experience bullying or discrimination. On the rare occasions when the staff do detect a child expressing discriminatory attitudes, they are swift to challenge these. When appropriate, the staff make referrals to external professionals to ensure the child receives appropriate guidance and support.

Residential staff maintain high levels of professional curiosity. They have been quick to identify situations when a child, or children, may have used social media sites inappropriately and have taken prompt action to prevent the situation from deteriorating. This has included bringing in external professionals to ensure that the children receive up-to-date information on how to stay safe online.

No children have gone missing from the residential provision since the last inspection in November 2021. The individual work that goes into planning how to respond if a child does go missing is comprehensive.

There are strong and effective risk management processes in place. A pre-admission assessment, to identify the potential impact of a new child staying in the residential houses, is undertaken before a child is accepted. Risk assessments are also undertaken in respect of which bedroom is allocated to each child. The children's individual risk assessments are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the child's changing circumstances.

A trauma-informed behaviour management model is fully implemented in practice. This approach seeks to support the children in naming and understanding difficult emotions and equips the staff to de-escalate potentially volatile situations. There has been a steady decline in serious behaviour incidents and the need for restrictive physical intervention since the model was introduced seven years ago. Physical intervention is kept to a minimum and is only used in accordance with relevant guidance.

The designated safeguarding lead is knowledgeable and experienced in responding to child protection concerns. She oversees effective monitoring systems to ensure that emerging concerns for a child's welfare are kept under review. There is also a system for identifying any common themes pertaining to an individual child's welfare. The staff are required to speak to the designated safeguarding lead, or one of her deputies, before raising a concern on the school's electronic reporting system. This ensures that the staff can fully explore the reasons why they are becoming concerned that a child may be at risk of harm.

There is a very high standard of working in partnership with external safeguarding professionals. Child protection referrals are made in a timely way, and detailed records are kept of the actions taken. There is close monitoring of the children who are vulnerable due to their care or child protection status.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

The residential provision is exceptionally well managed by a suitably qualified head of care. There is a dedicated and stable team of residential care staff who provide consistent, high-quality care for the children. They feel exceptionally valued and well supported in their role. This can be partly attributed to initiatives such as staff members having individual 'wellness action plans'. Consequently, the staff develop resilience in their role, and this empowers them to focus their energy on meeting the needs of the children.

There are effective mechanisms for monitoring the quality of care being provided. This includes external scrutiny from an independent visitor who makes thorough assessments of how effectively the residential houses are being managed. There is a relatively new governor with responsibility for overseeing the boarding provision, who is committed to making regular visits to the residential houses. However, the new governor is not yet fully conversant with the responsibilities associated with this role.

Leaders and managers oversee effective planning processes for the children accessing the residential provision. Each child has an individual plan that sets achievable targets that are focused on the child's personal and social development needs. The children are fully involved in developing these plans and there is a strong commitment to ensuring that the child's views are thoroughly considered when agreeing support strategies.

There is a sensitive admissions process to the residential provision, which is taken at the child's pace. A proactive approach is taken to ensuring that other agencies working with the child are supportive of the admissions process. One parent commented on the efforts that the staff made with her child during the admission process and said, 'they got to know him, and they saw the whole picture, which was really refreshing'.

The high quality of care being provided is partly attributable to the excellent range of training opportunities that the staff can access. In the training programme, there is a strong emphasis on safeguarding and meeting the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the children who attend this school. This ensures that staff are well prepared for meeting the challenges that they are likely to face in their day-to-day interactions with the children.

Overall, there are effective systems in place for managing health and safety matters. One shortfall was brought to the attention of the leaders and managers during this inspection, and this was quickly addressed. The quality of the residential accommodation is very good, and the children say that they are comfortable and sleep well at night. Despite this good practice, the inspectors did identify that the children could potentially prevent a member of staff from unlocking a bedroom door if there was an emergency. There are also some doors in communal areas of the residential houses that can be locked from the outside, but not opened from the inside.

Leaders and managers are committed to developing practice within the residential provision and exploring new and innovative ways to meet the needs of the children. For example, the school is currently taking part in an NHS pilot project to improve children's access, in residential special schools, to audiology tests. The residential staff have been trained to undertake these tests and are submitting the data for analysis.

The residential houses are an integral part of the school's provision. The care staff work collaboratively with the teaching staff, and this ensures that the individual children's needs are understood by all those working with them. The children benefit from receiving consistency of care in an environment where they feel safe enough to begin addressing the impact of past negative experiences.

## **What does the residential special school need to do to improve?**

### **Recommendations**

- Senior leaders should ensure that the new governor with responsibility for the residential provision is familiar with the role, responsibilities and expectations associated with the position.
- Senior leaders should undertake a review of whether the locks on bedroom doors and in some communal areas are appropriate, and whether they would allow the staff to access all areas in an emergency.

### **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.

## **Residential special school details**

**Social care unique reference number:** SC011327

**Headteacher/teacher in charge:** Mark Shears

**Type of school:** Residential Special School

**Telephone number:** 0118 9785767

**Email address:** [enquiries@highclose.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@highclose.org.uk)

## **Inspectors**

Stephen Collett, Social Care Inspector (lead)

Hannah Cox, Social Care Inspector

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