

Heathlands School

Heathlands School for Deaf Children, Heathlands Drive, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL3 5AY

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Heathlands School is a school and residential provision which caters for deaf children. The school is situated within easy access of St Albans. It provides education for 134 students aged three to 16 years. At the time of the inspection, 24 children were staying at the residential provision for up to four nights a week.

The accommodation is in a two-storey building linked to the main school.

The inspector only inspected the social care provision at this school.

Inspection dates: 28 February to 2 March 2023

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| Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account | outstanding |
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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 last inspection: 1 March 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children make unquestionable progress because of the individualised and high-quality support they receive from the residential staff. The children who stay at this residential provision do so primarily to gain access to school. The exceptional quality of the residential experience reflects the same high standard as their education.

Children flourish in the residential provision, and develop friendships and social skills. Children who previously attended mainstream schools said that their friendship circles were virtually non-existent before coming to the school. However, all the children spoke confidently about the positive benefits of staying in residence. The children's lived experiences and future opportunities are enhanced as a direct result of their stays. The residential provision is exceptionally nurturing and stimulating and designed to promote the best learning opportunities.

The staff are experienced, dedicated and skilled. They forge strong relationships with the children, which are unmistakably positive. These interactions are filled with high regard and mutual respect. Consequently, children develop the sense of security and stability that they need to make progress and thrive.

The staff are exceptional role models. Most of the staff are deaf and, therefore, understand some of the challenges the children can face in a hearing world. Several staff also attended boarding schools when they were growing up and can empathise with the children, who are away from their families. During the inspection, the interactions between the children and staff were observed to be consistently warm and nurturing.

The staff provide excellent support to help the children with their homework during the evening. Hour-long homework sessions take place daily, with additional input from academic staff on two evenings per week. Bedtime reading and other educational activities have helped children to make impressive academic progress.

Children experience well-organised inductions to the residential provision. Introductions are planned between the children, families and residential staff at a pace that is right for the child. As a result, these introductions are consistently successful.

Right from the start, children's independence skills are encouraged. Children have responsibility for chores in the residential provision, such as taking out the recycling, clearing the dinner table or tidying up after activities. These chores give the children a sense of ownership of the house. The children are encouraged to help the staff cook. Mealtimes are communal affairs, with each child contributing to the experience. Often, children will sit at the table after the meal has finished, chatting and joking with each other, as family members would.

Feedback from parents is exceptionally positive. Parents said that the residential staff are 'fantastic' and 'excellent'. One parent said that the school and residential provision have given her children 'the best experiences, preparing them and enabling them to be able to function in a hearing world, to be confident and proud of their deaf identity'.

Children enjoy a diverse and wide range of meaningful activities. Forward-thinking and enthusiastic staff are committed to furthering children's social experiences. Creative planning introduces the children to a wide range of local activities which help to broaden children's experience of the world around them. These include underwater hockey, cinema trips, skateboarding, football training and going to a youth club for deaf children in London. All these activities enrich the children's lives and help build their confidence.

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

Safeguarding children is a high priority at the school and residential provision. There are clear safeguarding procedures that are understood by the staff. Comprehensive safeguarding training ensures that exceptional safeguarding practices are embedded throughout the school. When concerns are reported, they are followed up promptly by the designated safeguarding lead, to ensure children are protected from harm.

Children said that they feel safe in the residential provision. They know who to talk to when they are worried or upset. An independent person is available, either virtually or in person, once a week. The headteachers are a visible presence at the house. Governors complete regular monitoring reviews, which include talking to the children. Therefore, children have access to several familiar faces should they need to raise a concern.

Parents are highly complimentary and positive about the provision. They have confidence in the staff and know that their children are safely supervised and cared for.

Exemplary monitoring and routine checks ensure that the physical environment is in excellent condition. Adapted safety measures are in place to ensure children and staff are alerted in the event of a fire alarm going off. Vibrating buttons under pillows, flashing lights and fire doors are checked weekly. Bedroom lights are flashed before anyone enters, to alert others when they are about to come in. All these arrangements help children to feel safe.

Effective support from staff enables children to understand how to be safe online. Children do not go missing from this school. There have been no incidents of harm from exploitation or radicalisation. Parents and children said that bullying is not an issue.

Comprehensive risk assessments are in place for activities and trips. Staff make use of their detailed knowledge to minimise risks to children. Positive behaviour and risk management plans provide staff with clear guidance on how to support individual children. As a result, staff are confident and consistent in their approach to risk management.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The two headteachers provide exceptionally strong and effective leadership. They work seamlessly with the senior residential support worker to lead a motivated and dedicated staff team. They have extremely high aspirations for the children. The benefits of residential for the children and their families are profound. The children's lives are enriched because of the time spent with staff.

Senior leaders and staff have extremely good relationships with parents, who provided unquestionably positive feedback about the quality of care. Parents highlight the excellent level of communication and the overall benefit to children.

External and internal monitoring arrangements are exceptionally rigorous. Governors regularly and actively review the residential provision. This external monitoring is undertaken to an excellent standard and provides comprehensive and objective scrutiny of the quality of care. Because of this thorough operational oversight, the governors have an excellent understanding of the progress that children are making.

The staff receive regular support and supervision from the senior leaders. Formal supervisions are planned with an agenda and captured in detailed records. The staff feel well supported, guided and listened to. The staff have access to a comprehensive range of training opportunities. Senior leaders maintain good oversight of staff development through annual performance reviews.

A comprehensive development plan identifies areas for improvement and is regularly reviewed by senior leaders and governors. Meticulous monitoring supports the senior leaders in understanding the residential strengths and areas for development. Actions taken in response to this monitoring further enhance the high-quality care that the children receive.

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: SC056396

Headteachers: Lesley Reeves Costi and Sarah Shields

Type of school: Residential special school

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Inspector

Rachel Watkinson, Social Care Inspector

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