

Inspection of a good school: The Acorns School

43 Ruff Lane, Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 4QX

Inspection dates:

12 and 13 September 2023

Outcome

The Acorns School continues to be a good school.

What is it like to attend this school?

The Acorns is a welcoming and nurturing school. Pupils join at different times during their secondary education. Many pupils have had poor educational experiences prior to joining this school. They said that they feel well supported by the school. The school has high expectations for all pupils' achievement. Most pupils meet these expectations by achieving well.

Pupils are happy and feel safe. They reported that the small size of the school helps them to get to know each other well. They learn about understanding differences between people. Most pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. The school has effective ways of managing challenging behaviour. Staff help pupils who struggle to behave well to calm down and settle back into their work.

The school ensures that pupils experience a range of activities, which include support for positive mental health. Pupils benefit from a range of experiences, such as bowling, football and outdoor learning. These activities help them to develop their self-esteem. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about a recent debating competition and raising money for charity.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Staff are proud to work at the school. They reported that the school discusses changes with them before putting things into place. This helps to improve staff well-being. The management committee, which is responsible for governance, supports and holds the school to account effectively.

The majority of pupils who attend the school have struggled in their previous educational settings. Many have been temporarily or permanently excluded from mainstream schools. The school is ambitious for all pupils. Pupils follow a broad and enriched curriculum that follows the requirements of the national curriculum. Pupils achieve well across a wide range of subjects. The majority of pupils in key stage 3 successfully return to their

mainstream school. Others complete key stage 4 at this school. Almost all pupils go on to education, training or employment when they leave Year 11.

The school has designed a curriculum that enables pupils to build their knowledge in a logical way. However, in a small number of subjects, it is less clear what knowledge pupils will acquire. This means that teachers do not know exactly what they should teach and when. As a result, in these subjects, pupils do not learn some of the building blocks that are essential for their future learning.

Teachers ensure that the checks that they carry out give them specific information about gaps in pupils' learning. This helps them to address gaps in knowledge and to build on what pupils know.

The school promotes reading well. Pupils across the school have more opportunities to read for pleasure than in the past. Those who find reading difficult get the extra help that they need to catch up. Pupils read with increasing confidence and fluency. The school places a strong emphasis on developing pupils' understanding of subject-specific vocabulary. This helps them to follow the curriculum successfully.

The school identifies the additional needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) quickly. It ensures that staff have the information that they need to support these pupils in class. This helps pupils with SEND to learn and achieve well as they move through the school.

The school is skilled in helping pupils who have difficulty managing their emotions. From their starting points, pupils' behaviour improves considerably over time. Typically, the school is calm and orderly. Pupils socialise well at breaktimes and lunchtimes. In lessons, most pupils concentrate well. Lessons are rarely disrupted.

Pupils learn about relationships and sex education in age-appropriate ways. They learn about different faiths and beliefs. This helps them to develop respect for, and tolerance of others. They receive helpful careers advice and guidance. This helps them to make well-informed decisions about their next steps. The school has developed strong links with a local university. This is helping to raise pupils' aspirations.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In a small number of subjects, the school has not identified clearly enough what knowledge it wants pupils to acquire. As a result, pupils do not learn some of the building blocks that are essential for future learning. The school should ensure that in

these subjects, it carefully sets out the knowledge that it wants pupils to learn and remember.

Background

When we have judged a school to be good, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains good. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good in January 2013.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	134872
Local authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	10226090
Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	65
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Beverley Harrison
Headteacher	Joanne Hodson
Website	www.theacornsschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	21 February 2017, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- This school caters for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. A small number of pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- Most pupils have been permanently excluded or are at risk of exclusion from mainstream schools, mainly in Skelmersdale. The school admits pupils throughout the year. Some pupils at this school are dual registered with their mainstream school, while others are on longer, single-registration placements.
- The school is registered for a maximum of 75 pupils. There are currently 65 pupils on roll.
- A new headteacher and deputy headteacher were appointed in September 2022.
- The school makes use of six unregistered alternative providers for a small number of pupils.
- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors spoke with the headteacher and the deputy headteacher, subject leaders and staff. An inspector spoke with representatives of the school's management committee, which is responsible for governance, a representative of the local authority and representatives of alternative providers.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in English, mathematics, and personal, social, health and economic education. For each deep dive, they held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. An inspector observed pupils reading to familiar staff.
- Inspectors also discussed the curriculum in some other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors spoke to many pupils about their experience of school and their views on behaviour and bullying. They also observed pupils' behaviour during lessons and at breaktimes.
- Inspectors reviewed a wide range of evidence, including a self-evaluation document and improvement plans. They also reviewed minutes of management committee meetings.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View and the responses to Ofsted's staff and pupil surveys.

Inspection team

Ahmed Marikar, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Lindy Griffiths

Ofsted Inspector

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