

Inspection of Little Acorns School

London Beach Farm, Ashford Road, St Michael's, Tenterden, Kent TN30 6SR

Inspection dates: 7 to 9 November 2023

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Outstanding**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

Little Acorns School is a happy place. Smiles are never far away. Most pupils attend school regularly and on time. Generally, they behave very well. However, if things do slip, staff have good strategies at hand to resolve problems and calm anxieties. As a result, relationships between staff and pupils are positive and overtly respectful. Pupils say that they enjoy good friendships here. The start and finish of the school day reflect these sentiments. Well-established routines and friendly interactions are clear to see as pupils happily arrive and depart the school site.

Pupils describe Little Acorns as a 'kind' school. They think that their teachers are patient and understand them well, particularly when they are struggling with their self-esteem or inner emotions. The pastoral care of pupils is a strength and very much a shared responsibility amongst all staff, no matter their role. All work hard to support pupils, both in and out of classrooms. One pupil told an inspector, 'They expect a lot from us, but when we struggle, they give us all we need to succeed.' This view was similarly shared by external educational professionals who talked to the lead inspector and confirmed further by inspectors as the inspection unfolded.

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

The aspirations of all staff are high. The school understands its pupils well and continues to improve because of this. Leaders at all levels are reflective and not afraid to take advice or simply listen when they need to. This includes when parents or carers have questions or when pupils need time to be heard. Leaders' vision for the school is understood and shared by all staff. Members of the proprietor's advisory board are also wedded to the school's supportive ethos. Their oversight is carefully balanced, enabling staff to work their daily magic for pupils in a safe and caring environment.

The school's curriculum has evolved since the last standard inspection. Areas identified for improvement at that time have been addressed, though leaders know there are always new priorities to work on. In particular, the school's work to support pupils to read has been transformed and is having a positive impact on outcomes across the wider curriculum. Some pupils are reluctant readers, often due to poor experiences in previous schools. Conversations with inspectors revealed varying levels of enthusiasm for reading, though some who feigned indifference appeared to be better equipped than they were willing to admit. At the other end of the scale, some pupils' love of reading shone clearly, including when the lead inspector was challenged to discuss the merits of Michael Crichton's book, *Jurassic Park*, rather than the popular film.

The development of pupils' mathematics understanding often has a cross-curricular element and is grounded in real life. As a result, pupils enjoy these lessons, including when using 'real' money as opposed to debit cards when shopping at the supermarket.

Many pupils arrive at the school well behind age-appropriate levels academically. Many have been out of education for long periods of time before arriving here. Staff are quick to assess where new pupils have gaps in knowledge and skills. An initial focus on mathematics and English quickly moves to other curriculum areas, as well as identifying pupils' wider interests. Staff generally use this information wisely to build bespoke programmes for each individual. However, not all staff are as adept at using the school's approach to planning and checking pupils' understanding when designing lessons. This leads to an inconsistent approach that needs to be addressed if all pupils are to benefit from the different elements of the provision.

One of the school's main strengths is its work to support pupils' personal development. This goes beyond what might be expected, though focuses on the basics equally well. Staff ensure that there is a clear focus on building self-esteem and resilience at every turn. Much effort is put into making pupils believe in themselves. This was very evident in classroom visits where negativity from pupils was challenged but always in a positive way.

Age-appropriate careers guidance and relationships and sex education are in place. Pupils are supported to learn about equalities and difference. They also benefit from personalised enrichment activities to support their wider development, including equine or art therapy. Others are supported to develop their communication and life skills with trips into the local community for sport or forest school activities. Staff ensure that these activities do not happen in isolation. They know that this aspect of the school's offer impacts directly on tying together the more formal curriculum while actively supporting pupils' emotional development.

This is a small school community. The proprietor has ensured that all elements of the independent school standards continue to be met over time. This is a minimum requirement, but nevertheless a constant challenge when the context of the school is considered. All staff are leaders here. No one shies away when they need to step up. Everybody's contribution is valued by leaders and staff feel positive about their work because of this.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Sometimes, teachers are not fully aware of what pupils already know and can do when they plan lessons. This is because not all staff use the school's assessment tool to evaluate and record pupils' progress through the curriculum as consistently as they might. When this is the case, staff are less aware of the key knowledge they need to teach. This means that on occasion, opportunities for pupils to consolidate or to build on prior learning are missed. Leaders need to support all

staff to use the school's assessment and planning tool more consistently and across all subjects, to ensure that pupils make the progress they are capable of.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	131810
DfE registration number	886/6085
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10267619
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 15
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	20
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Little Acorns London Beach Farm Limited
Chair	Jawad Sheikh
Headteacher	Alison Neal
Annual fees (day pupils)	£42,234
Telephone number	01233 850 422
Website	www.littleacornsschool.co.uk
Email address	alison.neal@littleacornstc.com
Dates of previous inspection	6 to 8 November 2018

Information about this school

- Little Acorns School is a mixed independent special school offering education for pupils aged five to 15 years old.
- The school specialises in working with pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties. All pupils have an education, health and care plan and are placed by local authorities.
- The school does not currently make use of alternative provision.
- Since the last standard inspection, the school has been subject to two successful material change inspections, both to increase pupil numbers.
- Governance of the school is provided by a small advisory board who act on behalf of the proprietor to ensure that the school meets the independent school standards and provides a good quality of education for pupils.
- The school has recently undergone a change in proprietor. This is not currently reflected correctly on the government's Get Information about Schools website. The new proprietor is Little Acorns London Beach Farm Limited, registered at Companies House. Previously the school had a sole proprietor, Jawad Sheikh. Jawad Sheikh is the chair of the proprietor company, along with three other directors.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

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

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held a wide range of meetings with the headteacher, other leaders and teaching and support staff.
- The lead inspector held meetings with a representative of the proprietor company and the chair of the school's advisory board. He also talked on the telephone or exchanged emails with three different representatives of local authorities who place pupils at the school.

- The lead inspector met formally with two representative groups of pupils to gain their views of the school. Pupils were also spoken to during classroom visits and as inspectors moved around the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, mathematics and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also spoke to leaders about some other subjects. The lead inspector also heard pupils read to a member of staff.
- Inspectors toured the school's premises and accommodation. They checked a range of policies and documents, including the school's single central record. They also reviewed other records regarding the welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff, linked to the independent school standards.
- Inspectors gathered evidence to explore the impact of pupils' behaviour, the school's wider curriculum offer and how leaders support staff with their workload.
- Inspectors took the responses to Ofsted Parent View into account. Ofsted's staff survey was also considered.

Inspection team

Clive Close, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Graham Chisnell

Ofsted Inspector

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