

Inspection of Acorn School

Seckington Cross, Winkleigh, Devon EX19 8EY

Inspection dates: 30 January to 1 February 2024

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Outstanding**

Personal development **Outstanding**

Leadership and management **Outstanding**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Good

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

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are at the heart of Acorn School. The school's ambition for pupils to succeed and flourish is exceptional. Pupils overcome many significant challenges because the school enables them to be resilient and persistent when faced with difficulties. Pupils reflect, with a sense of pride and positivity, the impact the school has on them so that they can achieve aspirational future goals.

Pupils aspire to reach the high expectations the school has of them, academically, socially and emotionally. They are inspired by the staff that role model these expectations to them. The trusted and highly nurturing relationships between staff and pupils enable pupils to manage the increasing demands placed on them. Pupils feel safe. Many describe how much they value the ability to be themselves and not feel shamed or judged for this. There is a culture of openness and sharing around concerns and worries. As a result, pupils are very well prepared to lead a fulfilling and active life in modern society.

Pupils are fully accepting of the diverse needs of their peers. They are encouraged to extend this to diversity and cultural awareness in a much wider sense. Pupils confidently embody tolerance and respect for difference, reflected in one pupil's words: 'I like everyone for who they are. They're human at the end of the day.'

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

Pupils benefit from a highly individualised curriculum. It requires staff to have precise and detailed knowledge and understanding of each pupil. Staff have the necessary subject knowledge and knowledge of special educational needs/and or disabilities (SEND) to fulfil this well. The school encourages staff to have a reflective approach and to work collaboratively. This ensures that the wealth of expertise that the staff have is used as effectively as possible. For example, staff continually share best practice, and the integrated therapy team work closely with staff to strengthen their approach to each pupil's education.

Pupils learn a wide range of subjects and have a rich set of enrichment opportunities to hone and strengthen their talents and interests. There is a well-considered, coherent design to this provision. Each pupil's timetable is carefully constructed. It provides a breadth of learning and enrichment which motivates pupils to engage with their education and achieve well. The successful design of subjects in the core curriculum has led to some pupils working towards increasingly aspirational qualifications. The qualifications on offer are appropriate and relevant for the next stage in their education. Pupils make this transition successfully. A priority for the school is to identify future pathways and opportunities for pupils where they can thrive and experience success. This is commonly shared and upheld by the staff. The school is creative in how it blends academic and functional aspects of each pupil's education.

The curriculum is under continuous scrutiny to strengthen and improve it to meet

the changing needs of pupils. In some subject areas, where the curriculum is currently being refined, the knowledge that the school intends pupils to learn and remember is not as precise and clear. This also impacts how well the school can check and monitor the progress pupils make in these areas.

The school ensures that there is real clarity in routines and boundaries for pupils. Pupils respond to these positively because they provide structure and predictability. Staff challenge low-level behaviour exceptionally well. They are calm, empathetic and unintrusive when supporting pupils who are struggling. Pupils can then focus on their learning and development because they are calm and regulated. Consequently, pupils want to be in school. Leaders take highly effective action to support pupils, and their families, so that they can be in school and not let external pressures and challenges have a detrimental impact. It is this which leads parents and carers to say that the school goes above and beyond.

Pupils have a secure understanding of fundamental British values. They are aware of the importance of these in going about their daily life and as they prepare for adulthood. For example, in English, the curriculum includes texts that engage pupils, while increasing their awareness of the world around them. Pupils are increasingly confident in expressing their views and opinions. They can do so with clarity and respect for the views of others in the conversation. Pupils are reflective about how much they have changed for the better since joining the school.

The leadership of the school, with full support from the proprietor board and those responsible for governance, are inspirational in maintaining staff's commitment and determination to help pupils achieve the best possible outcomes. They ensure that the school meets the independent school standards in full and the requirements of schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- In some subjects, there is not enough clarity and specificity of the most important knowledge that pupils need to learn and remember. As a result, pupils do not learn as successfully as they do in other subjects. The school should ensure that the specific knowledge they want pupils to learn is clearly identified, sequenced and then checked so that pupils can practise, consolidate and apply new learning as well as they do in more established areas of the curriculum.

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	135773
DfE registration number	878/6061
Local authority	Devon
Inspection number	10299207
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent day school
Age range of pupils	8 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	37
Proprietor	Phoenix Learning and Care Group
Chair	Jonathan Pain
Headteacher	Zoey Shelley
Annual fees (day pupils)	£55,714.73 to £86,897.79
Telephone number	0330 135 8201
Website	www.phoenixschools.org.uk
Email address	acorn@phoenixschools.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	19 to 21 November 2019

Information about this school

- The school is run by Phoenix Learning and Care Group.
- Since the previous standard inspection in November 2019, the Department for Education have agreed an increase to the number of pupils on roll from 35 to 42.
- The school accommodates pupils with SEND, including social, emotional and mental health needs and autism.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- All the 37 pupils currently in the school are funded by Devon local authority
- The school makes use of three unregistered alternative providers. Inspectors met with one provider and spoke with pupils and parents of pupils who attend.

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.

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

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

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the special educational needs and disabilities coordinator, the operations director for education and the regional education lead. In addition, inspectors met with the chair of the proprietor board.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, science and history. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to staff, therapists and pupils and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors sampled individual pupils to gather evidence about the quality of education.
- A member of staff was present when inspectors spoke with some pupils. This was agreed in order to support pupils to engage with inspectors and reduce their anxiety.
- 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 observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school site.
- Inspectors analysed school documentation, including leaders' evaluations and plans for improvement. Inspectors scrutinised a range of policies and procedures, including those that relate to the curriculum, SEND, safeguarding and admissions.
- Inspectors checked the safety and suitability of the premises. They considered risk assessments and the policies in place to promote the well-being of pupils.
- Inspectors gathered the views of parents through Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments, as well as speaking with parents face to face and on the telephone. Inspectors evaluated responses to Ofsted's staff and pupil surveys.

Inspection team

Leanne Thirlby, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Wendy D'Arcy

His Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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