

Barndale House Special School

Barndale House, Howling Lane, Alnwick, Northumberland NE66 1DQ

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

This residential special school is maintained by a local authority. The school is in the heart of the town of Alnwick. The residential provision is in the main school building.

All children have complex needs, including some with autism. Many children also have multisensory needs and/or communication needs. All children have education, health and care plans.

At the time of this inspection, 91 children and young people, aged from five to 19 years, were on the school roll. A total of 21 children currently access the residential provision, each for one night a week.

The head of care has been in post since 2005 and holds a suitable management qualification for the role.

Inspection dates: 1 to 3 July 2025

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers good

The residential special school provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 30 April 2024

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Life in residence is centred around staff giving children the opportunity to have fun while learning through the skilled application of the school's 'step-up programme'. The foundation for this is the trusting and respectful relationships that staff have established with children. As a result, staff have created a vibrant, loving and creative child-focused environment where children feel safe and at ease.

The head of care has embedded ways of working that promote effective communication between staff and children. An example of this is how children use the daily communication board effectively to learn about several topical subjects associated with life in residence. Moreover, efficient communication between staff and children enriches life in residence as children have a voice in choosing activities and food, and being in a stronger position to develop their independence through the guidance of staff.

Children look forward to their stay in residence and often arrive with smiles on their faces. One parent said that their child is always excitable at the anticipation of enjoying an evening in residence. The parent added that the activities on offer have developed their child's confidence and self-esteem, resulting in them overcoming their fear of water-based activities.

All children in residence are enrolled on an accredited award scheme. Progress through the programme involves children contributing to their local community through voluntary activities. These experiences have developed the children's resilience and ability to empathise.

The school deploys a 24-hour curriculum model for children in residence. The programme covers a variety of topical subjects that are pitched at the child's age and stage of development, typically in a fun and interactive manner. Therefore, children do not sense that their school day is frustratingly extended. Additionally, the head of care is constantly exploring ways to evolve the programme. This ensures that the programme does not stagnate and keeps pace with society.

Staff naturally capture the children's experiences using photos. Indeed, there is an abundance of photos on display in residence and collated for the children's memory books, which have been lovingly put together by staff. Furthermore, the head of care is learning how to make better use of technology to give the children's parents an enhanced insight into their child's experience of life in school residence.

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

The head of care applies the school's resources and networks effectively to support the children's ability to recognise and respond to abusive situations, such as hate crime and the various forms of child exploitation. Notably, these sessions are devoid

of professional jargon. Staff sensitively approach these sessions while being conscious about each child's emotional state. Again, the sessions are interactive and often involve fun, practical activities to support a more informal learning experience.

The creation of the family support partner role has resulted in a stronger link between the school and its relationship with some of the children's families. Additionally, the role has strengthened the communication and working relationship with the local authority. This means that the local authority is better able to determine whether a child's family requires more help.

Parents receive termly newsletters from school, overseen by the family support partner. Again, relatable language is used to assist parents in their understanding of several topical safeguarding issues, such as their child safely accessing the internet, using social media apps and the subject of radicalisation. For children in residence, parents can make links to their child's learning in the 24-hour curriculum, meaning that there is the opportunity to carry on their child's learning at home.

There is a synergy between the teaching and care staff in relation to information-sharing around the children's welfare. For example, there is a coordinated response between teachers and staff in residence when children use worry boxes in school. In one instance, this resulted in a child receiving the appropriate support in a critical time frame, enabling the child to receive prompt reassurance and emotional support from their family and professionals.

The school has established a strong working relationship with the local authority designated officer. Through this model, designated safeguarding leads in school and residence receive reflective supervision sessions. This has created a dynamic working relationship that has strengthened the school's approach to safeguarding.

The school ensures that suitably qualified individuals carry out a fire risk assessment of the building. However, the issues that were raised in the fire risk assessment report have not been entirely addressed within the specified timescale. Additionally, the monthly audit checks of the fire doors do not acknowledge the issues raised through the fire risk assessment. The school's headteacher had already consulted the local fire brigade to ensure that there is sufficient mitigation in place. Furthermore, the issues raised are not deemed as being severe, but nonetheless require action.

Although staff are deemed as being competent with handling and administering the children's medication, there are no internal auditing systems in operation. This has created a vulnerability around mishaps associated with the children's medication going unnoticed. An example of this concerned contradictory information around how a specific child's medication should be administered. However, there has been no impact on children, and the head of care has plans to address this area of practice.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Staff in residence are confident, committed and proud of their role in school. Staff are galvanised through their leader's support and guidance, whether this be through the quality of supervision sessions, the synergy with teaching and clinical staff or the quality of the school's training offer. These attributes have created a positive culture in residence.

The statement of purpose provides a clear overview of the running of the residence. Relatable language used in this document better enables children's parents and loved ones to understand what life in residence will look like for their child.

The head of care is meticulous in their planning around children being introduced into residence. There is good dialogue with children's parents, which enables the head of care to better plan how the child's needs will be met, including the child's intimate personal care needs. In doing so, the child and their loved ones are reassured through this process.

Practitioners from occupational therapy and mental health are allocated staff from residence. These practitioners mentor the allocated staff, referred to as 'champions', to better support specific children in residence. Champions subsequently cascade this knowledge to other staff in residence, promoting better consistency of practice. The specialist practitioners say that they have had a positive experience of working with staff and said that staff are 'keen and motivated to learn new skills'.

Leaders and managers have commissioned an experienced independent visitor to monitor the residential provision. Reports are produced, shared and used as a monitoring tool for the head of care. There is a wide range of consultation with children, parents and professionals. When issues are raised through this process, there is an immediate and effective response from the head of care, meaning that the system operates effectively.

The governor for residence brings critical experience to the board of governors. The school values this and promotes new ideas and learning. The governor for residence visits the children and reports to the board of governors. This provides an additional layer of scrutiny and shows the school's commitment to working transparently.

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

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standard for residential special schools:

- The school complies with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and ensures that action points that are raised in the Fire Risk Assessment are completed within the recommended timescale. (Residential special schools: national minimum standards 15.2)

Points for improvement

- Policies for administration of medication should reflect guidance provided by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the Royal College of Nursing. In particular, leaders and managers should ensure that audit trails are in place to underpin the storage and administration of children's medicines. (Residential special schools: national minimum standards 12.6)

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: SC041487

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Mark Phillips

Type of school: Residential Special School

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Inspectors

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