



**Office for Standards
in Education**

Inspection report
Access School At Harmer Hill
Independent special school
DfES ref no: 893/6096

Dates of inspection: 1 – 3 March 2004

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Introduction and summary

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 163 of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Access School at Harmer Hill is an independent day special school in the ownership of Family Care Associates. It provides education for boys and girls aged between seven and 16 who experience emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. There are currently eight pupils on roll, of whom two are girls. Almost all pupils are in the care of social services and live in homes run by Family Care Associates. All pupils have statements of special educational need and their places are funded by their local authorities.

The school is set in approximately 24 acres of grounds, six miles north of Shrewsbury. The present site has been occupied since November 2003, and comprises a former farmhouse and four additional classrooms. There are plans to develop the site to include an adventure play area and indoor sports area with a climbing wall.

The central aim of the school is to provide a settled environment in which pupils make sufficient progress to enable them to return to a mainstream school. To support this aim, the school sets out to create a positive learning environment and all subjects of the National Curriculum are taught, except music.

Individual programmes are designed to help pupils improve their behaviour and social skills and all pupils have access to regular creative therapy. There is also a strong emphasis on promoting self-esteem and confidence through a programme of outdoor education.

Summary of main findings

Access School at Harmer Hill provides a safe and caring environment in which pupils make good progress in managing their behaviour, developing social skills and improving their academic work. Teaching is good and staff provide a positive ethos for learning in attractive classrooms with good displays. The school is well led and managed on a day-to-day basis, operating as an orderly community, although curriculum leadership is currently under-developed and there are insufficient resources to support teaching in most subjects. The school has made considerable progress in establishing effective provision in a short period of time since moving to the present site in November 2003. The school is successful in achieving its primary aim, to prepare pupils who have the potential for return to mainstream school. However, the school currently admits all pupils from within the Family Care organisation who are unable to attend mainstream school, including two pupils with very complex and challenging needs who are beyond the current capacity of the school.

What the school does well

- pupils make good progress both academically and socially which enables a significant number to return to mainstream school;
- the quality of teaching is good overall, with high expectations encouraging pupils to be constantly aware of the need to make progress and to have a desire to improve;
- there is a strong focus on developing speaking and listening skills which fosters pupils' confidence and their ability to express themselves;
- relationships between staff and pupils and between the pupils themselves are good; the school is very successful in raising pupils' self-esteem;
- pupils have positive attitudes; they work hard and behave very well in lessons and around the school;
- the school provides a high standard of pastoral care. There are good levels of supervision and staff are sensitive to pupils' needs;
- the curriculum provides a broad range of subjects supported by several after-school clubs, creative therapy and an outdoor pursuits programme which is well planned and valued by pupils; and
- staff are committed and enthusiastic; they work well together as a team.

What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations

- continue to develop schemes of work for all subjects;
 - consider new admissions carefully so as to ensure that the school can meet their learning needs;
 - develop teachers' subject knowledge and understanding so that they are adequate for all the lessons they teach;
 - extend the quantity and range of classroom resources to support teaching and learning in all subjects;
 - provide pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England;
 - ensure that pupils acquire an appreciation and respect for their own and other cultures;
 - provide for local authorities (and on request to the Secretary of State) an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of each pupil they fund; and
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- ensure that the complaints procedure sets out clear timescales for the management of any complaint and states that parents may attend the panel hearing and, if they wish, be accompanied.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

In accordance with its aim to prepare pupils for return to mainstream education, the school provides a broad and balanced curriculum, which takes close account of the National Curriculum. With the exception of music, which is involved only incidentally in pupils' 'creative therapy' sessions, all National Curriculum subjects and religious education (RE) are taught. The curriculum satisfies the requirements of pupils' statements of special educational need. The personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum has strengths in the area of developing pupils' self-esteem, but has insufficient content in relation to citizenship and life-skills. The planning for design and technology (D&T) is at an early stage as the instructor is newly appointed. As there are no facilities for physical education on the site, this is taught principally through the school's outdoor pursuits programme. The outdoor pursuits curriculum successfully challenges and develops pupils' capabilities and confidence.

The group of pupils in Key Stage 2 ranges in age from Year 3 to Year 6. Despite the age range, the pupils' capabilities and learning needs are closely similar. On this account, whole-class activities can be planned with little need for differentiation. Should less able younger pupils, or more able older pupils, be admitted within this key stage, work will need to be planned at more than one level.

The curriculum for Key Stage 3 is not fully developed. The current Key Stage 3 (Year 7) pupils are working largely within Key Stage 2 programmes of study, as these are well matched to their ability and the work is helping to fill gaps in their prior learning. The school should, as a matter of urgency, plan an appropriate Key Stage 3 curriculum for these pupils in anticipation of their likely progress, and also to meet the needs of any higher ability Key Stage 3 pupils who may be admitted. There are two Key Stage 3 pupils on roll with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties and complex learning needs which the school cannot meet. These pupils do not receive a satisfactory curriculum. One is currently excluded on a fixed-term basis. The school should pursue its intention to review their placement and ensure in future that it admits only pupils whose needs can be met and who are compatible with pupils currently on roll.

There are curriculum policy statements for all subjects except music and modern foreign language (MFL). Staff have begun to compile schemes of work, but those for subjects other than science and information and communication technology (ICT) are not yet complete. The two class teachers are expected to draft their own schemes of work for English, mathematics and humanities, but they have insufficient subject expertise to undertake this broad-ranging task for two key stages. Leadership of curriculum development is unsatisfactory as there is no provision to develop staff roles as curriculum coordinators, or to provide sufficient support for teachers working outside the scope of their personal subject expertise.

One pupil has two half days a week of integration into a local primary school. This is successful in terms of the pupil's growing confidence, marked by the recent discontinuation of

support for him by a residential social worker from the home. However, there is no written policy for integration for this or future placements, no clear forward planning, and a poor level of communication between Access School and the primary school. As re-integration is at the centre of Access School's aspirations for all its pupils, this process needs to be planned and managed more effectively, and school staff more closely involved with pupils' placements.

Homework is set regularly, and the school has taken firm action to ensure that the children's homes support the pupils in completing their assignments. Pupils consider that homework is useful. After-school clubs (for technology, MFL and games) supplement the classroom curriculum effectively. A technology club meeting observed, attended by all the pupils, was a lively and enjoyable practical session where pupils worked together happily.

The quality of the teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is good overall. The teaching in two thirds of lessons seen was good or better with almost all other lessons being at least satisfactory. Teachers have high expectations, encouraging pupils to be constantly aware of the need to make progress and to have a desire to improve. Introductions to lessons are clear and activities are generally well matched to pupils' ability, which enables them to concentrate and achieve. There is a strong focus on developing speaking and listening skills, which fosters pupils' confidence and their ability to express themselves. In the best lessons, pupils are also encouraged to solve problems for themselves, for example when they use dictionaries to find new words and there is a review at the end of the lesson to remind pupils of what they have learned.

Staff consciously manage pupils in a manner which reflects practice in mainstream schools. This is consistent with the school's central aim to prepare pupils for return to mainstream school.

The teaching assistants demonstrate skill in working with individual pupils and taking responsibility for groups. In some lessons their role is not sufficiently clear and their skills are under-used.

There are good relationships between staff and pupils and between the pupils themselves. Staff use praise appropriately to recognise good behaviour and achievement and pupils accept correction when they misbehave. Pupils have positive attitudes to learning and recognise how they are being helped to improve. They are proud of their achievements, for example when they show their books and describe how they are "now doing better writing".

Staff teach a wide range of subjects to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum. However, teachers do not always demonstrate sufficient subject knowledge and understanding in all the subjects they teach. This is particularly evident in the teaching of art, geography and MFL. Teaching a full range of National Curriculum subjects imposes considerable demands on a relatively small staff team. The school would benefit from developing staff subject knowledge to teach two key stages and should consider supplementing existing staff expertise with additional part-time specialist teaching.

Resources to support teaching and learning are insufficient in all subjects. Staff are creative in using the books and equipment available, and there is a separate room allowing each pupil

access to an individual computer. However, there is a particular lack of equipment to support the teaching of science and D&T in Key Stage 3 and ICT is under-used to support learning across the curriculum.

There are satisfactory arrangements for assessing pupils' progress. The school tests progress in spelling, reading and numeracy on entry. Thereafter, progress is measured twice yearly against National Curriculum levels using a recognised scheme for pupils with special needs. Assessment is used to record skills learned in ICT and a 'target sheet' is being introduced to record progress in science. However, the recording of progress in other subjects is not yet in place.

Measuring pupils' progress over time is limited since a fire in the former premises destroyed records eighteen months ago. However, scrutiny of pupils' work and record files shows they are making good progress both academically and socially. As a result, a significant number are successful in returning to mainstream school.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *support the curriculum policy with appropriate plans and schemes of work for all subjects (paragraph1(2));*
- *carefully consider new admissions so as to ensure that the curriculum provides the opportunity for all pupils to learn and make progress (paragraph1(2)(i));*
- *develop teachers' knowledge and understanding so that it is appropriate for the subjects being taught (Paragraph 1(3)(e); and*
- *extend the quantity and range of classroom resources so they are adequate to support teaching and learning in all subjects(paragraph 1(3)(f)).*

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The school supports pupils' spiritual development well through work in RE and outdoor pursuits. In RE, besides studying established faiths, pupils consider their own emotions and responses. The outdoor pursuits curriculum develops trust between pupils and makes them aware of their reliance on each other and on adults. Pupils' self-esteem is enhanced as they often surprise themselves with their physical achievements, for example negotiating narrow passages in caving, climbing high cliff faces, and acquiring skills in canoeing. During some outdoor activities opportunities are provided for quiet reflection, for example watching the sunset. Pupils speak highly of their experiences in outdoor pursuits. In a science lesson,

pupils observed closely the development of frog spawn and the germination of cress seeds and became very excited and inquisitive as changes became apparent. Work in PSHE, particularly that in creative therapy sessions, focuses on enhancing pupils' self-esteem. All pupils have a confidential weekly session with a trained therapist which involves activities in art, drama and music. They have opportunities to discuss their difficulties, to consider how they might move forward, and to agree how to achieve their potential. Tutorial periods are timetabled at the start of each day. These are not fully successful as there is no policy to guide teachers' planning of the sessions, and they do not always occur if all pupils arrive on time ready to start the first lesson. Provision for pupils' spiritual development would be further enhanced if the school were to pursue its intention to provide regular opportunities for collective worship.

Pupils' moral education is supported effectively by the ethos of the school which has high expectations for their behaviour towards adults and towards each other. Adults set a good example, and make it very clear to pupils why particular behaviours are unacceptable. The science curriculum includes work on issues related to drugs, smoking and alcohol abuse.

Pupils' social development is encouraged strongly within the school context. The most diffident of pupils become confident contributors within lessons and all learn to take turns and to respect contributions made by other pupils. Pupils learn to work together in groups, and are even able to work together as a whole-school group, for example in PSHE. At lunchtime pupils eat their packed lunches in their classrooms. Their social development might be further enhanced if the school took advantage of available space within the site to provide a dining-room. Pupils' social development would also benefit from the provision of play activities for break times on the rather bleak concrete play area. The school should pursue its plan to develop an adventure playground. The present cohort of pupils in Key Stage 3 plays well with those in Key Stage 2 and sets a good example with their behaviour and attitudes. If the nature of the Key Stage 3 cohort changes, it may be necessary to provide a segregated play area.

As the school has only recently moved to its remote rural location, there are limited opportunities for pupils to become part of the local community. The school recognises that experiences of this nature will need to be planned as part of the curriculum for PSHE. A beginning has been made through a project in which pupils have 'adopted' a local dogs' home, contributing from their pocket money to purchase dog food, which they take it in turn to deliver.

Pupils behave very well in lessons and around school. They return the respect of adults and show concern and respect for each other. In lessons, they attend well, work very hard, and show great pride in their progress. The challenging behaviour of one pupil is not effectively managed.

The school does not provide satisfactorily for pupils' cultural development. In RE they learn about the religions of the world but there is little within the planning for other subjects to introduce pupils to other cultures. There is no strongly developed programme of visits to cultural centres such as theatres and museums. The planning for PSHE does not make reference to this aspect of pupils' development. The PSHE curriculum does not as yet support pupils' development of a knowledge of public institutions and services.

A girl had been placed on fixed term exclusion shortly before the inspection. The circumstances meant that this was an appropriate response by the school pending the review of her placement. There was one girl in school at the time of the inspection, following the exclusion of the other girl. The pupil was aware of her situation as the only female pupil, but did not find it oppressive. She was well supported, had greatly grown in confidence since her arrival and was participating fully in lessons. Another girl was to be admitted the following week.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *provide pupils with a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services in England (paragraph 2(d)); and*
- *assist pupils to acquire an appreciation of and respect for their own and other cultures, in a way that promotes tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions (paragraph 2(e)).*

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Staff take great care to ensure pupils' welfare and safety. Parents and carers feel that their children like the school and are treated fairly and with respect. Pupils express a similar view. In addition, they feel that the school helps them to settle in on first arrival, and helps them with any problems with work. Each pupil has a home-school book in which school staff note details of good work and responses and any difficulties. Carers respond with accounts of pupils' activities and behaviour at home. Pupils' attendance is very good, often in strong contrast with that in their previous educational placements. Admission and attendance registers are appropriately maintained, and sanctions are recorded.

The school has a full range of policies providing practical guidance to staff in their management of pupils. Behaviour is very well managed overall, but staff have limited experience in planning to deal with severely challenging behaviour. The behaviour policy sets out the system for rewards and sanctions. The policy complies with regulations but would be improved if it reflected the whole range of strategies employed by staff to improve behaviour. The school has begun to collate and chart patterns of behaviour for individuals. This is yielding valuable information. Each pupil has an individual behaviour plan which sets out the priorities for improvement and the strategies to achieve these. Staff are trained in an appropriate system of physical restraint, although this is rarely needed.

A fire risk assessment has been undertaken by the school and regular fire practices are held and recorded. There are no evident fire hazards, and extinguishers and fire exits are well

provided. The school has not so far been able to arrange a visit by the local Fire Officer despite their best efforts.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

The Family Care Association owns another similar school and several registered children's homes. Staff benefit from central training and some staff are deployed between both schools.

Senior managers are committed to recruiting high quality staff and the company has good systems in place for the appointment of all staff to posts within the school. Thorough procedures are followed for taking up references, checking the accuracy of information, and making a Criminal Records Bureau check prior to any new appointment. Files are regularly updated as staff circumstances change.

New staff receive appropriate induction and are given regular support in developing their work. All staff have job descriptions and an annual professional review is held with management.

The combined skills of staff provide a broad range of interests and experience well suited to the needs of the pupils. All staff responsible for classes and groups are either qualified teachers or instructors. Although many assistants are recently appointed, all have had experience of working with children and have, or are studying for, relevant qualifications.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The standard of premises and accommodation is satisfactory. The premises are well maintained and there is a high standard of hygiene and cleanliness. The school has made considerable progress in establishing effective teaching areas since moving to the site from temporary accommodation in November 2003.

A former farmhouse is used as an office, medical room, staff room, kitchen and creative therapy base. An adjoining building has been converted into two classrooms; one is used for pupils in Key Stage 2 and the other for pupils in Key Stage 3. The rooms are small, but they are pleasant with good displays. They share a central resource room.

A recently refurbished block provides two rooms, one of which is occasionally used by the school for meetings and the teaching of PSHE. The second room is designated for teaching

ICT and science, although it lacks a sink and facilities for practical experiments. A separate, portable building is being used to establish a base for D&T. There is currently no specialist subject accommodation for art and music and some of the rooms are too small to be effective as bases for teaching practical subjects.

The accommodation is suitable for the needs of the eight pupils currently on roll. However, the school should review available classroom space to consider how it can be better used to support delivery of the full range of National Curriculum subjects, particularly in Key Stage 3. This will be necessary if the school is to make suitable provision for any future increase in pupil numbers.

Outside play space is provided by a small yard and extensive fields, for which the school has plans to develop an adventure play area, a sports field and an environmental area with a pond.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The school provides satisfactory information to parents and other partners. The prospectus is given to the parents and carers of newly admitted pupils and describes the school's purpose, organisation, behaviour policy, exclusions and admission arrangements. The school compiles information on pupils' academic performance and sends this out annually to parents. Policies on bullying, child protection and health and safety and information on the school's complaints procedure are available separately on request. A compact disk providing basic information is also given to new pupils, welcoming them to the school.

Parents attend annual reviews of pupils' statements of special educational need and the school produces detailed reports on each pupil's academic and behavioural progress.

In responding to the parental questionnaire sent out prior to the inspection, almost all parents felt they were well informed about pupils' progress and all felt comfortable about approaching the school with questions, suggestions or a problem.

The school has not yet made arrangements to inform local authorities of the income received and expenditure incurred for each of the pupils they fund at the school.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *provide to local authorities (and on request to the Secretary of State) an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of each pupil they fund (paragraph 6(7)).*

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

A letter is sent to all parents making it clear that they may make informal or formal complaints to the school. The letter offers to send a copy of the full complaints policy if requested. This meets requirements. However, the school has recently begun to send a copy of the full policy to all parents and carers of newly-admitted pupils. This is good practice.

The complaints policy meets most of the regulations, but does not detail the timescales that the school intends to achieve in the various stages of meeting a complaint. It does not note that the parent or carer may attend a complaints panel hearing and may be accompanied.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

No.

What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- *set out clear timescales for the management of the complaint (paragraph 7(c)); and*
- *state that parents may attend the panel hearing, and, if they wish, be accompanied (paragraph 7(h)).*

School details

Name of school:	Access School At Harmer Hill		
DfES ref number:	Error! Reference source not found.		
Type of school:	Special: day school for pupils with emotional, behavioural and social difficulties		
Status:	Independent		
Age range of pupils:	7 - 14		
Gender of pupils:	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys 6,	Girls 2,	Total 8
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys 6,	Girls 2,	Total 8
Annual fees (day pupils):	£31,395		
Address of school:	Access School at Harmer Hill Holbrook Villa Farm Harmer Hill Broughton Shrewsbury SY4 3EW		
E-mail address:	midlands@family-care.co.uk		
Telephone number:	01939 220 700		
Fax number:	01939 220 703		
Headteacher:	Mr Stephen Ellis		
Proprietor:	Mr Gerard Williamson		
Lead Inspector:	Mr Andrew Redpath		
Dates of inspection:	1 – 3 March 2004		

Notes