

Rowden House School

CONTENTS

[Introduction and summary](#)

[Purpose and scope of the inspection](#)

[Information about the school](#)

[Summary of main findings](#)

[What the school does well](#)

[What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations](#)

[Next Steps](#)

[Compliance with the regulations for registration](#)

[1. The quality of education provided by the school](#)

[The quality of the curriculum](#)

[The quality of the teaching and assessment](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[What does the school need to do to comply with the regulations?](#)

[6. The quality of information for parents and other partners](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints](#)

[Does the school meet the requirements for registration?](#)

[School details](#)

Introduction and summary

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

Purpose and scope of the inspection

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

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

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

Rowden House is an independent special school which opened in 1986. It gained approved status from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 1990. Originally privately owned, it became part of the SENAD Group in 2003. It is located on a 22 acre site in extensive parkland in the Herefordshire countryside. It shares the campus with Winslow Court, which provides residential accommodation for young adults with severe learning difficulties.

The school provides 52-week residential accommodation for 30 students of secondary school age and post-16. There are currently 29 students: 21 male and 8 female, all of whom are resident. A very small number of students come from minority ethnic communities. The residential provision was inspected in August 2004 by the Commission for Social Care (CSC) and received a positive report.

All students have statements of educational needs in respect of their severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviours. Students may have associated conditions such as autistic spectrum disorders, epilepsy and Tourette's syndrome. The attainment levels of the students fall within the range of severe learning difficulties. They are placed by local education authorities and social services departments from across the country.

Summary of main findings

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

Rowden House School is a good school committed to further improvement. There is a very positive atmosphere which promotes and celebrates students' achievement and progress. The school is well led and managed by the headteacher, who is strongly supported by her management team. The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum, well matched to students' needs. The quality of teaching is good and all staff provide very effective support for students' learning, care and welfare. The assessment procedures are thorough and used very effectively in planning for students' further development. Accommodation and resources are very good and expanding, with new facilities under construction.

What the school does well

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

- students' very challenging behaviour is well and consistently managed and they make good progress over time in developing their self-control;
- the care and welfare of the students are a priority for all staff;
- the school ensures that the teaching and management of students is appropriate to the age range; and
- the school meets its aims well in ensuring that learning experiences extend beyond the classroom, providing many and varied opportunities for students' improved independence and the acquisition of social skills.

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

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

The school meets all the regulations.

Next Steps

[▲ CONTENTS](#)

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school should consider the following points for development in order to raise standards further:

- complete the development of schemes of work;
- improve communication with the local college of further education with respect to the content of courses;
- develop further the joint working between classroom and residential teams; and
- continue to develop links with other schools.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The school meets its aim of enabling the students of statutory school age to experience all the subjects of the National Curriculum (NC). This ensures that the requirements of students' statements of special educational need are met, as many require their access to the NC. Teachers' interpretation of the curriculum at the level of weekly and daily planning ensures a good match to students' capabilities and interests. Most of the content of NC programmes of study is modified considerably to meet the special needs and learning styles of the students, and some material is drawn appropriately from earlier key stages of the NC. Students are given experience of the culture and language of European countries in annual 'modern foreign language' weeks. This provides a suitable alternative to regular lessons in foreign languages for those who have little or no spoken language. A similar strategy is used to enhance the teaching of history, with a themed week each year. A recently-developed course in work-related learning for students at Key Stage 4 and post-16 is proving successful in involving them in vocational tasks and in learning about the adult world.

Work on Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) modules related to independence and life-skills is introduced in Key Stage 4. Further work on ASDAN modules related to independence and citizenship forms the basis of the curriculum for post-16 students. An overview of the coverage and sequence of the whole of the ASDAN work ensures that students have a progression of challenge and experience.

The full potential for joint working between classroom and residential teams has not yet been realised. Some targets for students are shared between classroom and residential teams. However, the residential units renew students' targets on a six monthly basis, while the classroom teams review them three times each year. Moving to a common six-monthly timetable might benefit joint planning. There is considerable further potential for shared working on activities related to independence and life-skills, for example those within ASDAN modules.

A small group of older students attend the local college of further education. Their courses this term are not ideally selected to complement the facilities available in school, and the content of a recently introduced 'travel awareness' course is not known to the school. While attendance at the college undoubtedly benefits the students, the school's communication with the course providers needs to be improved.

There are well-written policies for all subjects and for ASDAN. Schemes of work are in place for all NC subjects. The school recognises that these require further refinement as the documentation has not kept pace with developments in day-to-day practice. In addition, the schemes would benefit from containing further reference to the specialised teaching approaches which are necessary. The schemes are being redrafted to a common format at present. Learning objectives are included in the schemes for topics and modules of work, but not all of these are sufficiently precise to support teachers in setting lesson objectives which can be shared with students and teams of support staff. The published ASDAN materials for Key Stage 4 and post-16 make clear the nature of the tasks to be undertaken, but lack sufficient guidance on the agreed specialised teaching methods and resources to be used.

The quality of the teaching and assessment

▲ CONTENTS

The quality of teaching is good and is a strong feature of the school. The majority of lessons seen were good or very good. Only one unsatisfactory lesson was observed. The structure of the day is designed to provide short, well-planned activities in each lesson, which keeps students focused and enthusiastic to learn. The knowledge the staff have of each student's abilities, needs and potential underpins the good and very good teaching achieved in the majority of lessons. Work is modified effectively to the needs of each student and the outcomes of lessons are routinely evaluated. These assessments are used well in planning for future activities.

Relationships between adults and students are based on mutual respect and staff treat all students with dignity, but also with firmness on those occasions when they exhibit challenging or volatile behaviour. All staff manage inappropriate behaviour very skilfully and are consistent in their practice. They are concerned to investigate any triggers for difficult behaviour so as to avoid them, or to help students become less sensitive to them. As a consequence of these positive management strategies, students improve their behaviour and social skills, learning to associate appropriate behaviour with valued rewards which are tailored to their needs.

In teachers' interpretations of programmes of study and topics there is an emphasis on practical and sensory activities which support students at the pre-literacy stage in preparing, discussing and recording their work. The Picture Exchange System (PECS) is used with those students with little or no verbal communication skills, in conjunction with photographs and objects of reference. These techniques are very successful. For example, the student questionnaire used for the inspection was modified to include the use of symbols, which enabled all students to contribute their views. All staff in the school and the residential units are trained in the use of PECS and this makes a significant contribution to students learning. Teamwork between staff is very good and this has positive outcomes for students in all aspects of their development.

A physical education session held in the sports hall at the local leisure centre was not as successful as other sessions. It provided no opportunity for students' involvement with the community, or for them to use the general facilities. Some students responded adversely to the large, echoing space. For short periods of the lesson the students were focused and involved. However, too much of the students' time was spent off-task.

The assessment of students' attainment and progress is very good and a strength of the school. Data on students' achievements are electronically collated and analysed, and used effectively to set detailed and specific targets in individual education plans. Older students have the opportunity to gain nationally accredited qualification through the ASDAN award scheme.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

▲ CONTENTS

Provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall.

Students' spiritual development is supported satisfactorily by the daily whole-school assemblies and work in religious education (RE), and by opportunities taken to enjoy the woods and grassland within the extensive grounds. There are active links with the local church, which students attend for

major festivals. The assemblies provide a lively and enjoyable act of collective worship, and students manage to participate and pay attention remarkably well in the whole-school group, in a room with harsh acoustics. The school plans to establish separate assemblies for the upper and lower schools to allow a quieter and more contemplative approach to collective worship and enhance its value further.

Students' moral development is strongly supported. Work in ASDAN, RE, personal, social and health education (PSHE), and citizenship enables them to consider issues such as justice and fairness from the personal to the international level. Staff in school and in the residential provision are consistent in their guidance to students in considering the effects of their behaviour on others. Students are helped to come to terms with feelings of aggression and anxiety and they learn to apologise, when this is appropriate. They raise funds for those less fortunate than themselves. The staff support students' moral development strongly through the examples they set in respecting and showing concern for others.

The school is very successful in developing students' social skills. This is an aim which permeates all the work undertaken in classrooms, and which underpins the support and encouragement given in the residential setting. A great deal of effort goes into promoting independence in academic work, leisure-time activities and self-care. Considerable progress has already been made in providing distinctive residential and educational provision for post-16 students and building work is in progress to further enhance this. Many opportunities are created in classroom, residential and community settings for students to make and express choices. At the heart of the work on students' social development is the consistent focus on developing skill and confidence in communication. As a result of the expertise and effort brought to bear on the development of social skills and self-management, some remarkable gains have been made by students in the first weeks following admission, while all make very good progress over time. Contact with other schools is not well developed, but one student has recently been integrated part-time into a local mainstream school.

Students' cultural development is supported well. They experience a good range of activities involving music and drama in school, and also pursue a course in popular culture through ASDAN. The wide range of visits undertaken in and out of school time gives them access to the life of the wider community and experience of venues such as theatres, museums, cinemas and leisure centres. Work in RE, PSHE and ASDAN gives students an insight into cultures and religions other than their own, and encourages them to value such beliefs and traditions.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils



Rowden House School safeguards and protects its students very effectively. It provides policies and practices that minimise the health and safety risks to students and meet fully the registration requirements. All staff undertake their responsibilities in relation to students' welfare, health and safety thoroughly and with care.

School policies are comprehensive and include procedures for child protection, anti-bullying strategies, health and safety issues, fire safety and educational visits. The school ensures that there is always one member of staff who is qualified in First Aid on the premises and included in educational visits. Fire safety precautions are carried out regularly and systematically recorded. Students have good, supervised access to designated areas within the school and residential units; care is taken that they are always escorted outside the buildings.

Policies and procedures for the management of behaviour are very good. They are specific to the needs of students with very challenging behaviour. Separate policies on the handling and restraint of students are detailed and evaluated regularly. All staff are trained in these procedures and the school has the benefit of regular advice from a specialist psychologist on issues of behaviour management. Sanctions and incidents are recorded appropriately and logged in students' files. Parents recognise the success of the school's behaviour management policies.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

 CONTENTS

There are very effective administrative systems in place to ensure the suitability of newly appointed staff. Appropriate checks are made through the Criminal Records Bureau on all applicants for posts. Thorough checks are carried out, before appointments are confirmed, on the authenticity of references. Applicants' medical fitness is checked.

There are sufficient and suitably qualified staff to meet the needs of the students in all settings. Induction procedures for newly appointed staff are effective.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

 CONTENTS

The school is in a very attractive setting and very well maintained, both internally and externally. The high standard of accommodation overall has a very positive impact on students' learning and social development. Classrooms are bright and attractive, appropriately furnished and carpeted, and resourced according to the age and needs of the students.

Specialist accommodation for creative activities is very good. The school has easy access to a local leisure and sports centre; a new, specially designed sports and activity hall is being built on site. There is specialist provision for information and communication technology and food technology. The school makes effective use of the extensive grounds and gardens, both for educational purposes and recreation.

Residential accommodation is of a good standard and high quality care is provided. The accommodation units provide for students who are ill. Separate residential facilities for those post-16 students who are moving towards greater independence provide an appropriate recognition of their increased maturity and progress in social skills.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

▲ CONTENTS

Parents and those concerned for the welfare and care of the students are provided with thorough and comprehensive information about the school and its aims. The school's 'Statement of Purpose', which is sent to all parents, potential parents, and funding agencies, provides detailed information of the school's ethos, policies on admissions, bullying, child protection, complaints procedures and staffing, and meets the regulations fully.

Annual reports are of a very high quality and provide comprehensive information about students' academic and personal development which is used to evaluate progress and set new targets for them. Parents are pleased with the progress made by their children. Nearly all the parents responding to the questionnaire were very confident that the school was well run and that they were kept well informed about their children's progress.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

▲ CONTENTS

Prior to the inspection, the complaints procedure did not meet all the regulations as there was no provision for the establishment of a panel to consider unresolved complaints. During the inspection, the procedure was re-drafted so as to meet the requirements.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

School details

▲ CONTENTS

Name of school:	Rowden House School		
DfES ref number:	884/6006		
Type of school:	Special		
Status:	Independent		
Age range of pupils:	11-19 years		
Gender of pupils:	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys 21,	Girls 8,	Total 29
Number of boarders:	Boys 21,	Girls 8,	Total 29
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys 21,	Girls 8,	Total 29

Annual fees (boarders):	£94,397 - £136,000
Address of school:	Rowden House Winslow Bromyard Hereford HR7 4LS
E-mail address:	HeatherHardy@rowdenhouse.com
Telephone number:	01885 488096
Fax number:	01885 483361
Headteacher:	Ms Heather Hardy
Proprietor:	The SENAD Group Limited
Lead Inspector:	Mrs Helen Maskew
Dates of inspection:	11 - 14 October 2004

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