

Inspection report

Helen Allison School

Independent special school

DfES ref no: 886/6046

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 6 - 8 February 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A 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

The Helen Allison School is an independent residential special school owned and operated by the National Autistic Society. It was opened in 1968 and provides co-educational and weekly boarding facilities for children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) aged 5 -19 years. The school occupies two sites. The primary and secondary departments are situated on the edge of the village of Meopham, Kent, in a semi-rural area 6 miles from the nearest town of Gravesend. The post-16 department is situated on the Overcliffe, near the centre of Gravesend. All pupils and students have statements of special educational need. They are referred predominately by neighbouring local authorities, but also by other authorities from around the country.

At the time of the inspection there were 53 pupils and 12 post-16 students on roll, 21 of whom were boarders. The residential provision was inspected in December 2005 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) which reported positively. There are 12 pupils and students from a variety of ethnic minority backgrounds .

The primary aim of the school is to provide a high quality and relevant education designed to meet the specific needs of his young people with ASD in a structured and safe environment, enabling them to reach their fullest potential and to prepare them for adult life.

Summary of main findings

The Helen Allison School is a good and improving school. It achieves its stated aim very effectively, providing an education which meets the specific needs of children and young adults with ASD. It satisfies the academic, personal and social needs of its pupils and students by providing an appropriate curriculum and learning environment. Relationships between staff, pupils and students are outstanding. The quality of teaching is good for school-age pupils and satisfactory for those at post-16. The school is well provided with speech and language therapists and educational psychologists who make a significant contribution to pupils' and students' progress. A good programme of personal, social and health education promotes pupils' understanding of safe and healthy living and right and wrong, and a developing appreciation of social relationships. This is underpinned by an imaginative programme of Community Based Education (CBE) which takes place within the local and wider community. Systems and procedures to ensure pupils' and students' welfare, health and safety are very thorough. The quality of the accommodation for primary- and secondary-aged pupils is good, and it is satisfactory for the post-16 group. There are systems in place for assessing and recording pupils' progress, but

they would benefit from greater precision. Parents and pupils are overwhelmingly positive about the quality of the education and care provided. The school meets all the regulations.

What the school does well:

- it promotes very supportive relationships between staff and pupils and students;
- it provides very effectively for the specific needs of each individual learner;
- it sets very high expectations of what its most able pupils can achieve, which stimulates their desire to learn;
- it provides pupils of compulsory school age with a broad and flexible curriculum which encompasses a full range of subjects and enables them to pursue a variety of externally accredited courses, including General Certificate of Education (GCSE); and
- it provides very good opportunities for its post-16 students to access local college courses and work-related experiences.

Next Steps

Whilst not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- creating greater opportunities across all lessons and activities for post-16 students to think and solve problems for themselves;
- ensuring greater precision of the recording and use of assessment data, and developing a marking policy which more effectively informs learners what they must do to make progress; and
- ensure that learning objectives in lesson plans are specific and measurable.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good overall. For pupils of compulsory school age it is broad and balanced, while also successfully focusing on their specific and individual needs. Elements of the Foundation Stage are incorporated into the curriculum for the youngest pupils; older pupils are provided with appropriate subjects of the National Curriculum. The oldest pupils study accredited courses such as the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) which are individually planned to meet the specific needs of each. The most able pupils are encouraged to work towards attaining GCSE qualifications. These courses are complemented by activities such as work experience, 'Enterprise' projects and the extension of leisure skills which support personal development, social skills and language acquisition. This is consistent with the school's aims to increase young people's independence.

The school has worked hard to provide those in the post-16 department with a relevant programme. Appropriate courses are chosen by students, both on the post-16 site as well as at college. All students' accreditation routes are personalised to their needs and this is a significant strength. These include, for example, low level horticultural courses as well as higher level vocational courses. Evening courses are undertaken by some students as part of the school's extended day. ASDAN courses such as the Bronze Award and Transition Challenge provide appropriate challenges for the less able students.

The school prioritises the development of communication skills. The availability of two full-time speech and language therapists makes a significant contribution to progress at all ages. For those with severe communication disorders, a pictorial communication system has been incorporated into all lessons, alongside photographs and objects of reference. This is a key feature in the planning of individual schemes of work. These techniques are very successful. For example, the pupil and student questionnaire used for the inspection was modified to include the use of symbols which enabled all to contribute their views. Communication is also supported by electronic aids for a few pupils, giving them full access to all activities in lessons. Language acquisition is further encouraged through regular social communication group work and circle time. In all lessons and activities there is an emphasis on communicating, speaking and listening, and on interaction between all those present. As a result, pupils and students gain in skill and confidence and are comfortable talking to visitors and those they meet in the local community.

There is a comprehensive programme of personal, social and health education and citizenship for all ages. This is underpinned by the school's CBE programme which enables pupils to interact with the local and wider community. They make visits to venues relevant to current schemes of work, for example, a combined maths and information and communication technology (ICT) topic on ordering over the internet is a development from pupils' experience within local shopping centres, transferred to the classroom. Emphasis for younger pupils is placed on healthy life styles,

personal hygiene, nutrition and keeping safe. These elements of the personal, social and health education programme support the school's emphasis on independence. Sex and relationships education and lessons on the dangers of drugs and other addictive substances are handled sensitively. The study of citizenship is supported by the CBE programme, for example visits to the local fire station and contact with the police service.

Careers and work-related learning is well supported by the Connexions service who attend annual reviews and provide guidance as to choices at 14+ and post-16. The school effectively prepares its pupils for the working environment through a staged programme of activities from Year 8 onwards. Younger pupils are introduced to the world of work through examination of health and safety issues such as the use of protective clothing and awareness of fire hazards. They move on to working around the school, taking responsibility for aspects of its environment, co-operating in groups and working as individuals. For the oldest pupils, the skills learned are transferred to more formal work experiences within the community. This ensures that all pupils are fully prepared and confident to undertake work-related activities. For post-16 students a well-selected programme of work experience is in place.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching in the primary and secondary departments is good and it is satisfactory in the post-16 department.

The majority of teaching in the primary and secondary departments is good, while some is very good. Teachers provide pupils in the primary and secondary departments with well modified tasks which are planned around their specific needs. The strength of the teaching is in the attention teachers give to the structuring of lessons. Teachers make very clear to pupils the progress they are making by ticking off on the board those sections of the lesson which have been completed. At the end there is a formal feedback session when pupils show and share their achievements with each other, celebrating each other's success and assessing their own progress at the same time with staff. This strategy is entirely consistent with the special educational needs of the pupils, embedding routines and practices with which they quickly become accustomed.

The teaching of the most able pupils was outstanding, not only because the teachers have good subject knowledge, but also because their expectations of pupils are very high. In a science lesson for example, older pupils were recording their results from an experiment to measure chemical reaction. They were very confident in their explanations of what they had done, what they expected to happen and why. In another outstanding lesson the youngest pupils were finding out about the properties of gravity. They not only made significant progress in their understanding of how and why things fall over, but had a great deal of fun doing it and sharing their findings with each other. However, in some lessons, pupils are not always told explicitly what they are going to learn and achieve. Learning objectives for pupils are not always sharply identified and, in some cases, are confused with teaching tasks and activities. Inconsistent behaviour management was the significant feature of the one inadequate lesson seen.

The quality of teaching in the post-16 department is mostly satisfactory, while some is good. Very good relationships between staff and students are clearly evident and staff understand the students' needs implicitly; consequently students are managed well. Support staff generally provide appropriate help during the practical part of lessons, although at times they are under-employed. As a result, some take little part, particularly when the teacher is addressing the whole group. There is a strong desire on the part of staff that students should do their very best and this is understood by the students. The opportunities provided to interest them and involve them in activities which meet their needs are generally good. However, there are missed opportunities to review what they have learned and to remind them of personal targets. Neither are students always challenged sufficiently to think for themselves and solve problems. At other times, staff plan the steps in learning too finely so that students are too easily led to a conclusion rather than thinking it through for themselves.

Teaching resources are good overall. ICT is used widely and effectively to support learning, particularly for pupils of school age. All pupils have some access to ICT, often modified to their specific use, and the internet is regularly used in all subjects to extend knowledge. Although physical resources are somewhat limited in the science room, good use was made in one lesson of a microscope linked to an interactive white board to graphically demonstrate to the whole class how sugar crystals dissolve. The resources of the wider community, accessed through the CBE programme, support teaching well. For example, history and geography are enriched through the opportunities for visits to relevant venues.

Assessment procedures are satisfactory. The school undertakes a rigorous and extended programme of assessment when pupils first enter the school, which is enhanced by the information gathered by the school's educational psychologist. As a consequence, individual targets are finely tuned. However, while most staff have a very good general knowledge of pupils' capabilities and needs, the formal use of assessment data is not well embedded. The daily recording of progress in the IPFs is not precise, and there is no evidence to show that staff are aware of the levels at which pupils are working. Therefore it is difficult for staff and pupils to have accurate knowledge of the progress made. The marking of work, although it supports and encourages, does not tell the pupils how to improve.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

Opportunities for spiritual development are good. The staff seek to provide an atmosphere in the school which is peaceful and calm. Times are set aside daily for reflection and for sharing experiences. For younger pupils this takes the form of a story with a moral theme, for example, keeping promises and trust, as in the tale of the Pied Piper. Older pupils discuss topical issues and contribute to weekly whole-school assemblies. Circle times and social communication groups also provide opportunities for pupils to learn to take turns and listen to each other. The staff

support moral development strongly through the examples they set in respecting and showing concern for others. Pupils are shown how they can make a contribution to the community, for example through raising money for the tsunami appeal, the 'Jeans for Genes' charity, and working to help preserve the local environment.

The school is very successful in developing pupils' and students' social skills. At the heart of the work on social development is the consistent focus on developing skills and confidence in communication. Increasing independence is also a priority. This underpins all the work undertaken in classrooms, and is reflected in the support and encouragement given in the residential setting. It is also well-supported by the CBE programme through which pupils have direct access to the local community. Pupils and students are also given opportunities to make their views known, especially at annual reviews in which they are fully involved. They are able to make specific requests. For example, older pupils in the secondary department asked for their own common room, which was agreed. Pupils and students are encouraged to take responsibility for care of their equipment and to tidy up the classroom at the end of lessons. Contact with other schools fluctuates according to the needs and capabilities of individual pupils on roll at any time, but the post-16 students attending the local college are successfully integrating with other students from the community.

Pupil and students' cultural development is very good. The school raises awareness of other faiths and ethnic groups. Assemblies reflect aspects of the main world faiths. The school arranges visits by leaders of different faiths who interact with the pupils and provide practical and visual experiences which impact well on understanding. Pupils and students also enjoy a wide range of cultural visits. There are appropriate opportunities for creative experiences in the school. For example, all pupils have the opportunity to participate regularly in music lessons and the oldest pupils are currently studying and performing African music. Leisure and physical activities are well-provided for locally. The school has a firm commitment to equal opportunities and racial harmony.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school's policies and practice for pupils' welfare and health and safety make a very good contribution to their well-being. Standards of care are regularly monitored in conjunction with the residential provision. Child protection procedures are rigorous and all staff, including those newly recruited, are trained in their implementation. All areas of welfare, health and safety are supported by clear and effective policies which are overseen by a full-time manager. The school has comprehensive risk assessment procedures covering a wide range of activities, including off-site educational visits. Procedures for dealing with bullying and racism are good and all staff takes these issues very seriously.

There are full and very clear arrangements written for control and discipline. The availability of one Chartered Educational Psychologist and one Assistant

Psychologist enables the precise and individualised assessment of behaviour for pupils for whom it is appropriate. However, in a few cases where pupils exhibit very challenging behaviour, not all staff are clear as to the management strategies available to them. Opportunities at staff briefings are not always used effectively to share good practice in the management of behaviour such as strategies which are known to work with a particular pupil.

The supervision of pupils is very good. Indeed, for post-16 students there is sometimes an over-abundance of staff, which somewhat diminishes students' opportunities for independence. Staff have received appropriate training in physical restraint.

The school provides good quality meals which reflect current guidelines on healthy eating for young people. Meals are taken in a separate dining room where pupils and staff eat together. This contributes well to the development of social skills.

The school has a very thorough written plan to improve access which complies with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school is very thorough in ensuring that all staff are suitable to work with its pupils. Checks at an enhanced level are made with the Criminal Records Bureau, referees contacted and qualifications checked and recorded.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

Accommodation is satisfactory overall. Evacuation of the school buildings can be carried out quickly and efficiently, but neither site is fully accessible to disabled pupils, staff or visitors. A thorough plan is in place to improve this. However, there is extremely limited access for wheelchair access at the Jubilee (post-16) Unit and without major structural changes there is little possibility of significantly improving this.

The premises on the Meopham site are good; occupying what was originally an infant school. The building has been adapted well to meet the needs of pupils with autism and the necessity to provide specialist rooms for the pupils of secondary age. These have been expanded over the past few years when the open courtyard in the centre of the school was built over to provide much needed additional space. Classrooms are light, airy and very well maintained. The school is sited in a semi-rural setting next to a mainstream primary school.

The school now has a good range of rooms. These include a library, specialist science, art/design and technology, music, and ICT rooms, as well as speech and language therapy bases, and additional rooms which can be used flexibly. The seating and bench height in the ICT room is considerably higher than desirable for the youngest pupils. Outdoor space and recreational equipment is adequate and there is an excellent conservation area.

The accommodation at the Jubilee Unit is adequate. It is well located near the centre of the town. The building is very old but has been satisfactorily maintained. There are reasonably spacious teaching areas which support students' self-management. However, there are few specialist facilities for the teaching of those students with the greatest needs who require education on this site rather than externally.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The school's prospectus is well-presented. There are clear references for parents and other partners as to the availability of full policy documents. It includes details of curriculum arrangements, age groupings, and styles of teaching, all of which are easy to understand. The admissions criteria leave no room for doubt as to whom the school can accept. There are also clear statements on discipline, exclusions and physical restraint policies.

Very good liaison is maintained with parents, carers and external agencies, who all participate fully in the review and planning procedures for each young person. Each has a home contact book which provides a sound link through which information can be passed either way. Home visits are a feature of the work of the speech and language therapists. Parents and pupils are unanimously positive about the education and care the school provides. Pupils themselves, when asked, feel safe and secure in the school, trusting all the adults and certain that any difficulties they might encounter will be swiftly and effectively dealt with.

The information recorded concerning pupils' and students' academic achievements and personal progress, as well as any concerns, is detailed and provides detailed information on each pupil and student.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

The school has a clear policy for handling complaints. Alongside initial informal measures, there are well-structured formal procedures by which complaints can be

considered fairly and objectively. The complaints panel includes an independent member of the local community.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Helen Allison School		
DfES Number:	886/6046		
Type of school:	Special residential (autism)		
Status:	Independent		
Age range of pupils:	5 – 19 years		
Gender of pupils:	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 64	Girls: 1	Total: 65
Number of boarders:	Boys: 21	Girls: 0	Total: 21
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 64	Girls: 1	Total: 65
Annual fees (day pupils):	£31,952		
Annual fees (boarders):	£55,330		
Address of school:	Longfield Road, Meopham, Kent DA13 0EW		
Telephone number:	01474 814878		
Fax number:	01474 812033		
Email address:	HelenAllison@nas.org.uk		
Headteacher:	Mrs Jacqui Ashton Smith		
Proprietor:	National Autistic Society		
Reporting Inspector:	Mrs Helen Maskew		
Date of inspection:	6 - 8 February 2006		

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