

Inspection report

Portfield School

Independent special school

DfES ref no: 835/6008

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 24 April – 27 April 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

Portfield School is an independent residential special school registered for up to 80 pupils. Currently there are 63 boys and girls on roll aged from 4 to 19 years. Boys outnumber girls by 6:1. All pupils are on the autistic spectrum and many also have severe learning difficulties. There are no pupils for whom English is an additional language. Approximately one third of pupils are resident in one of the five residential settings, four of which are located on the site of the main school in Parley Lane. The main school, and its boarding accommodation, was relocated to its current site in 2002 and the sixth form boarding accommodation was renovated in 2005. The sixth form education and some additional boarding provision is based in Christchurch, four miles away. The school was originally founded in 1971 by its proprietor, The Wessex Autistic Society. It works in partnership with Dorset Local Education Authority. In 1999, it gained full accreditation from the National Autistic Society's Quality and Accreditation Unit.

The school's aim is to provide for the pupils' communication, social, thinking, sensory and behavioural needs. It seeks to provide *'a fully inclusive environment with all students being given the opportunity to participate in all the activities on offer'*

The residential homes were last visited by inspectors from the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) in June 2005.

Summary of main findings

Portfield School provides a satisfactory education for its pupils. The quality of teaching is adequate, although there are good examples throughout the school. The pupils' achievement is satisfactory overall. Staff have very good relationships with pupils; the concern and care they provide has a positive impact upon their achievements. However, the overall curriculum provided is unsatisfactory due to insufficient whole-school planning. The more structured provision in the Foundation Stage and post-16 is good. Whilst provision for pupils' personal development is good due to the general school ethos, there is a lack of a planned programme for their personal, social, and health education (PSHE) and citizenship, to ensure that pupils experience these subjects fully. The boarding provision is good and makes a significant contribution to the pupils' personal development.

What the school does well:

- it succeeds in developing pupils' communication skills;

- it ensures that relationships between staff and pupils are very strong;
- its boarding provision makes a very strong contribution to pupils' personal development;
- it provides very good accommodation on the main site; and
- its pupils receive very strong encouragement to lead safe and healthy lifestyles.

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

- improve the curriculum and teachers' planning to ensure suitable activities for all pupils as detailed in section 1 of this report;
- review its welfare policies in light of recent guidance indicated in section 3;
- improve the one aspect of the premises recorded as hazardous in section 5;
- provide further information for parents as detailed in section 6; and
- improve its complaints procedures as set out in section 7.

What the school must do to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002:

- devise a three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is unsatisfactory overall, although there is variation in the quality of learning opportunities made available to pupils of different ages. Post-16 students and pupils below compulsory school age follow curricula that are well matched to their ages and needs. The curriculum provided for pupils in Years 1 to 11 is much less effective.

The post-16 curriculum combines the promotion of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology skills with accredited coursework, ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) and work-related learning. The work-related learning component gives students opportunities to be part of a young enterprise scheme, to participate in off-site work experience and to sample taster vocational courses at a local college. This prepares them effectively for leaving school.

The six areas of learning of the Foundation Stage curriculum form the basis of the programme provided for pupils below compulsory school age. This gives them a well-balanced range of experiences, with an appropriate and particular focus on the promotion of their communication skills and personal development.

Pupils in Years 1 to 11 study a good variety of subjects, and the curriculum requirements identified in pupils' statements of special educational need are met. However, there are a number of shortcomings in this age group's curriculum. Most of these stem directly from the absence of a clearly articulated and implemented curriculum policy that is supported by effective long-term planning. Consequently, no subject has developed a scheme of work that shows the units pupils will study as they move through the school. As a result, there is no mechanism for ensuring that pupils build on prior learning in a planned, progressive and hierarchical way. The situation is made worse by the length of the planned taught week. Significant periods of time are devoted to snacks and breaks, and there are a number of other daily sessions that are variously referred to as exercise, relaxation, reflection, candle time and schedules. None of these sessions is sufficiently well planned to constitute genuine taught time.

The lack of useful long-term planning is true for PSHE too. Staff use opportunities to develop pupils' confidence, independence, social interactions and communication skills during snack times and breaks, but these situations focus on a very limited range of social skills. They are not an adequate substitute for a planned PSHE and citizenship programme, although for most classes these are the only PSHE sessions shown on timetables. Consequently, there is no planned careers education or work-related learning component to the PSHE programme for secondary aged pupils, and their absence reduces significantly the school's effectiveness in preparing pupils for leaving school.

Pupils who board benefit from the '24 hour curriculum', a series of well-planned activities that includes additional use of the community. This provision makes a significant contribution to their personal and social development as well as furthering their communication skills.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The overall quality of teaching is satisfactory, although there are examples of good teaching throughout the school. In keeping with the school's stated aims, the staff show a strong commitment to improving the pupils' communication skills and their ability to form positive relationships. The positive relationships between staff and pupils are a strength.

Classes are small and the staff:pupil ratio is good which promotes a good awareness of each pupil's preferred learning style. Teachers place a strong emphasis on social development and provide many opportunities for this purpose.

Parents are justified in their view that staff treat pupils with a high level of respect. Teachers have high expectations for the pupils' personal development. When working individually, work is usually set at appropriate levels. However, when taught in whole-class groups, academic expectations do not always reflect pupils' prior attainment, where all pupils are provided with very similar work. Significant elements of planning focus on pupils' personal development with few academic learning objectives that can be easily measured. Consequently, pupils' academic progress is not always maximised. The school has identified the need to review its assessment and planning procedures. In order to improve the quality of teaching and planning, the recently appointed headteacher has re-introduced classroom observation and has provided detailed guidance related to the creation of sharper lesson plans and individual education plans.

Staff manage the pupils' behaviour well. When pupils present challenging behaviours, the staff remain calm, yet firm in their approach. Opportunities are provided for the pupils to calm down and return to learning as soon as possible. Staff support each other very well.

A significant amount of teaching is performed by unqualified teachers, residential care staff and teaching assistants. The team work is often of a high standard and contributes well to the overall quality of teaching. The recent appointment of a full-time speech and language therapist is also having a positive impact upon the ability of staff to meet the communication needs of the pupils.

The care and education staff liaise well at 'handover' times where relevant information is exchanged about the pupils' previous evening's activities and responses to what was provided. This knowledge assists all staff in being sensitive to any particular problems that may arise.

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:

- *develop and implement a curriculum policy supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work (paragraph 1(2));*
- *increase the length of planned and supervised education for pupils of compulsory school age (paragraph 1(2)(a)(i));*
- *develop and implement a personal, social and health education programme which reflects its aims and ethos (paragraph 1(2)(f));*
- *provide appropriate careers guidance for secondary age pupils (paragraph 1(2)(g));*
- *ensure that the curriculum provides the opportunity for all pupils to learn and make progress (paragraph 1(2)(i));*
- *improve the provision that enables pupils to prepare adequately for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life (paragraph 1(2)(j)); and,*
- *ensure that all lessons are well planned to provide suitable activities for all pupils (paragraph 1(3)(c)).*

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

The school is very successful in developing pupils' social skills. There is an underlying focus throughout the school day on promoting skills and confidence in communication. This is fundamental to all work in the classrooms and is particularly well-developed in the provision for the oldest pupils. While younger pupils regularly go out of school for horse-riding and swimming, the arrangements for students to undertake college courses with outside providers and to be involved in work placements provide them with direct access to the local community and the opportunity to integrate with their peers. The oldest pupils in particular are able to make their views known. They are encouraged to be responsible for the resources they use and for the tidiness of their surroundings. Recent changes to the structure of the weekly primary and secondary phase assemblies places greater priority upon the recognition of individual achievements.

The impact of the school's work to promote social development is constrained because of the inconsistent provision for citizenship education as a result of weaknesses in curriculum planning and the absence of a progressive programme of work.

Pupils' spiritual development is satisfactory. Although it is difficult to identify specific elements in planning designed to support spiritual awareness, there is some good practice in relation to moments for reflection during the day. In all classes there is

some time available for the sharing of experiences each day. This encourages pupils to learn to take turns and to be aware of the need to listen to each other. Moral development is supported well. Pupils are respected in the school and are encouraged to be concerned about the needs of others. They in turn make a contribution to the community through fund-raising, for example for the annual Children in Need appeal.

Pupils' cultural development is satisfactory. There is some awareness of other faiths and cultural groups. Again, however, provision is spasmodic because of weaknesses in the overall rigour of curriculum planning. Overall, pupils have good opportunities to listen to music and to paint in the style of established painters. Recently, a range of art-work, reflecting other cultural traditions, has been on public display. The school is firmly committed to equal opportunities and to racial harmony.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Overall, pupils are safe and cared for well, although day-to-day practice is not at present fully supported by the procedures as set out in the school documentation. The recently-appointed headteacher is currently reviewing and updating a range of staff guidance and school procedures. Standards of care are regularly monitored both in the school and in the residential provision. Child protection procedures are thorough and all staff are systematically trained in their implementation. The school has detailed risk assessment procedures covering most aspects of the school's work. However, written guidance in relation to pupils on activities outside school does not yet take account of the latest national guidance. Health and safety procedures are satisfactory.

Day-to-day procedures for dealing with bullying are secure. However, the current policy does not reflect recent guidance in relation to the redress available to those who feel themselves to be the victims of the actions of others. There are thorough written guidelines and much good practice in relation to the management of pupils' sometimes challenging behaviour. Detailed individual risk assessments alert staff to the patterns of behaviour customary to each pupil. The Admissions and Exclusions Policy details the circumstances under which exclusion might arise, although this is not explicitly communicated to parents. The school does not maintain a written record of sanctions imposed upon pupils. Although the school feels that these circumstances seldom arise, there is a lack of clarity at present as to the desirability of logging periods of withdrawal from normal lessons and the extent to which these should be regarded as sanctions. Overall, the school prospectus gives limited information as to the nature and extent of the school's response to behavioural issues.

The supervision of pupils is good, given the high level of staffing. Staff have received appropriate training in physical restraint. The school also provides good quality meals which reflect best practice in relation to healthy eating.

Although the main school building has been constructed in compliance with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002, the school does not have the expected three-year development plan in relation to the additional buildings not on the main school site.

Recommendations made following the last CSCI report have been implemented. Child protection procedures are more closely aligned to recommended policy and care staff receive appropriate 1:1 supervision as required. The proprietor now makes regular scheduled visits to report upon the quality of the provision. The head of care works actively with the headteacher to promote a close working relationship that provides well for all pupils.

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:

- *prepare and implement a written policy to prevent bullying which has regard to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) guidance : 'Bullying: don't suffer in silence' (paragraph 3(2)(a));*
- *prepare and implement a written policy relating to the health and safety of pupils on activities outside the school which has regard to DfES guidance : 'Health and Safety of pupils on educational visits (paragraph 3(2)(c));*
- *write and implement a satisfactory policy on First Aid (paragraph 3(6));*
- *maintain written records of actions imposed on pupils for disciplinary offences (paragraph 3(8)).*

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

In order to comply with the requirements of the DDA the school should:

- *devise a three-year plan to improve the accessibility of the premises.*

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

The proprietor has secure procedures for checking the identity, fitness, qualifications, and employment history of school staff before they take up their appointment. Character references and professional references are also sought. Staff are informed that their appointment depends on gaining enhanced clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau. Relevant documents and copies of evidence used for staff selection are stored securely in staff files.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The school comprises two sites. Pupils up to the age of 16 years are taught on the main site. This is modern, purpose-built accommodation. Post-16 students are taught in a large converted house in a quiet residential area approximately six miles from the main site. Overall, the premises are very good. The buildings are warm, well lit and ventilated and internal noise is within acceptable levels. They are clean, pleasantly decorated and in a very good state of repair. There is a variety of floor coverings; these are in good condition and appropriate for the areas in which they are found. The location of the two sites means that pupils enter and leave the buildings very safely.

The accommodation has been designed well to enable pupils to learn effectively. The main site has spacious general classrooms, a good range of specialist teaching areas, such as for science and food technology, and other specialist areas, like the very well equipped sensory room and accommodation within which therapists work. Rooms in the post-16 building are adequate in number and floor space for the size of class groups. All teaching areas are equipped with appropriate furniture and fittings.

Other features of the accommodation meet requirements. Both sites have an adequate number of washrooms and each has a dedicated medical room for pupils who are unwell. The main site has an excellent outside central play area, but the space set aside for the youngest pupils has climbing equipment situated on paving slabs, rather than on material that would cushion any fall. This needs to be addressed. The post-16 house has well maintained gardens for students to enjoy.

The boarding accommodation on both sites is very good. On the main school site the four houses are very well-designed to afford the boarders sufficient privacy, space to relax and study. The off-site post-16 boarding accommodation is based in a recently refurbished detached house that has a 'homely' feel and enables the students to demonstrate age-appropriate independence.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets all but one of the requirements.

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

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

- *ensure that the early years outside play area does not compromise pupils' health or safety (paragraph 5(j)).*

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The documentation that the school is required to provide to the parents of prospective pupils, or to make available upon request, has some important omissions. The prospectus contains the name and contact details of the headteacher, but does not include similar information for the chair of governors or the proprietor. The school's aims are clearly stated in the prospectus, as are details of its policies on admissions, behaviour management and the curriculum. However,

there are no references to how it might meet the needs of pupils who do not have English as their first language, or its approach to exclusions. In addition, it fails to inform parents that they can request copies of policies relating to child protection, health and safety, and sanctions adopted in the event of pupils misbehaving. Pupils' results in public examinations during the preceding school year are not forwarded, and the staff list in the prospectus is incomplete. Parents are informed that they can request a full copy of the complaints procedure, but are not told how many formal complaints have been lodged in the previous year. In addition, local authorities that fund pupils are not provided with information about how the fee for each pupil is broken down to support different elements of the school's expenditure.

The school submits detailed and informative reports about pupils' academic achievements and personal development to 'looked after children' reviews and to annual reviews of pupils' statements of special educational need. The format of the annual report forwarded to parents is being reviewed, although the current one does give a comprehensive picture of their children's progress.

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 parents with the address of the proprietor and a telephone number on which contact can be made at all times (paragraph 6(2)(b));*
- *inform parents of the name of the chair of governors and an address for correspondence (paragraph 6(2)(c));*
- *ensure that parents have particulars of the school's policy on and arrangements for exclusions (paragraph 6(2)(e));*
- *include in the documentation it produces, particulars of the educational and welfare provision for pupils for whom English is an additional language (paragraph 6(2)(f));*
- *ensure that parents know that they can request particulars of policies relating to child protection, health and safety, and sanctions adopted in the event of pupils misbehaving (paragraph 6(2)(h));*
- *make available on request particulars of pupils' academic performance during the preceding school year, including the results of any public examinations (paragraph 6(2)(i));*
- *inform parents on request of the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year (paragraph 6(2)(j));*
- *tell parents that they can request a copy of the number of staff employed at the school, including temporary staff, and a summary of their qualifications (paragraph 6(2)(k)); and*

- *submit to a local authority an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of any registered pupil who is wholly or partly funded by that local authority (paragraph 6(7)).*

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

The school's policy and procedures for managing complaints fall some way short of meeting requirements. The policy fails to identify clear timescales for all stages of the procedure, and does not state that all documentation relating to complaints will be kept confidential. Parents know that they can make an informal complaint and, if still dissatisfied, that they can lodge their complaint formally in writing. However, the school does not have procedures for allowing this complaint to be heard by a panel who have not been involved in any matters related to the complaint. The absence of such a panel has significant implications. No one who is independent of the management of the school is involved in examining the complaint; parents are not given an opportunity to attend a hearing; and findings and recommendations are not made available to all parties involved. In addition, the school needs to ensure that details of the procedure provided in the pack given to the parents of new students reflect exactly the information contained in the school's official policy, which is not currently the case.

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 all stages of the management of a complaint (paragraph 7(c));*
- *respond to parents who are not satisfied with the response to a written complaint by establishing a hearing before a panel appointed by the proprietor of at least three people who have not been directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint (paragraph 7(f));*
- *ensure that one person on any panel that is set up is independent of the management and running of the school (paragraph 7(g));*
- *make provision for parents to attend the panel hearing, and, if they wish, to be accompanied (paragraph 7(h));*
- *ensure that the procedure enables the panel to make findings and recommendations, and that it stipulates that the complainant, proprietors and headteacher, and, where relevant, the person complained about, should be given a copy of any findings and recommendations (paragraph 7(i)); and*

- *state in the procedure that correspondence, statements and records of complaints are to be kept confidential (paragraph 7(k)).*

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Portfield School
DfES Number:	835/6008
Type of school:	Special - residential
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	4 - 19 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 53 Girls: 9 Total: 62
Number of boarders:	Boys: 19 Girls: 4 Total: 23
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 53 Girls: 9 Total: 62
Annual fees (day pupils):	£26,339 - £45,739
Annual fees (boarders):	£48,958 - £124,352
Address of school:	Parley Lane Christchurch Dorset BH23 6BP
Telephone number:	01202 573808
Fax number:	01202 580532
Email address:	Portfield-school@school.twas.org.uk
Headteacher:	Mrs Janis Rogers
Proprietor:	The Wessex Autistic Society
Reporting Inspector:	Mr Greg Sorrell
Date of inspection:	24 - 27 April 2006

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