

Acorns School

Independent Special School

Inspection report

DfES Registration Number	356/6027
Unique Reference Number	131551
Inspection number	296766
Inspection dates	8-9 March 2007
Reporting inspector	Susan Aldridge AI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 (as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005).

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, 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

Acorns is an approved special day school that caters for pupils with social emotional and behavioural difficulties who require a therapeutic educational placement. It is accommodated in a large semi-detached house which adjoins a children's home also owned by Keys Childcare. Most of the pupils are in the care of local authorities; they live either in homes owned by Keys Childcare or in external children's homes or foster homes. All pupils have statements of special educational need. Those residing in Keys Children's Homes have weekly therapy sessions off the school site; school staff take part in monthly consultancy sessions with the therapy team in school.

In the last 12 months the school has experienced a period of turbulence that started with a change of proprietor. In the period from September 2006 to February 2007 the headteacher, deputy headteacher and several staff left the school. The present headteacher took over in the middle of the autumn term; he works closely with Keys Childcare's Head of Education.

Evaluation of the school

Acorns provides a satisfactory standard of education and care for its pupils. It is particularly successful in improving pupils' attendance and behaviour. Under the leadership of the present headteacher a number of significant improvements have been made. Despite a period of considerable turbulence in the last year, there has been satisfactory improvement since the last inspection. The school meets most of the independent schools' regulations.

Quality of education

The curriculum is satisfactory; it covers all the areas required by the regulations, and enables pupils to make satisfactory academic progress and acquire personal skills and qualities. It meets pupils' needs as described on their statements. The school teaches all National Curriculum subjects with the exception of a modern foreign language in Years 7 to 9; French is to be introduced following staff training. Links with other schools or community organisations extend opportunities in subjects such as physical education and science. A link with a local college enables older students to experience 'taster' vocational courses, in health and beauty or bricklaying, for example. The revision of planning is a major focus for staff at present; it is not yet complete for all subjects, but is sufficient to guide teachers in planning lessons for

English and mathematics. In science, planning is complete for this term. Where planning is incomplete, teachers cannot be sure that pupils do not miss out topics or repeat some unnecessarily. Religious education and a good, broad and relevant programme of personal, social and health education are also taught. There are adequate opportunities for older pupils to obtain external recognition for their achievements; these include Entry level GCSE courses in English, mathematics and science, and AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) unit awards in a wide range of subjects. The Bronze and Silver Youth Award Scheme, accredited by ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) is being introduced to accredit personal, social, health and citizenship education. The curriculum is suitably enriched by a range of visits, many on Friday afternoons as part of the rewards session. A residential school journey last summer included many outdoor and adventurous activities and gave pupils a real sense of achievement.

Teaching, learning and assessment are satisfactory. Pupils are carefully assessed when they arrive and the school has a suitable means of assessing and recording their achievements and progress during their time at the school. There are some gaps in existing records, but this is being rectified with the introduction of commercial recording system. Staff manage pupils well, as they build good relationships with them. Pupils value the school's system that enables them to accumulate points for their behaviour, attitudes and application during lessons. As a result, there is a calm and purposeful atmosphere in most lessons. Staff know pupils and their abilities well; they plan tasks that provide a suitable challenge in lessons. Lesson planning has been a recent focus for development, and staff identify clear learning objectives which they share with pupils at the start and review later. However, they do not involve pupils in assessing their learning in the same way that they are involved in assessing their behaviour. Some enjoyable and effective methods help pupils to learn. For instance, primary pupils have made a large relief map of India using twists of tissue paper of different colours to represent land at different altitudes. Occasionally teachers do not select tasks that pupils see as relevant; as a result pupils are less well motivated in these lessons. Teachers use a satisfactory range of resources; these are being increased as planning is completed.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Pupils improve both their attendance and behaviour whilst at the school. Their attendance is good, and their behaviour satisfactory. The school has simple rules and a clear system for recognising and rewarding good behaviour; pupils value this and look forward to the rewards they can reap on Friday afternoons. They increase their self-control and confidence while at the school. They are particularly proud of their achievements in design and technology and say that they enjoy practical activities. Primary pupils have lunch in a family setting with staff; they help with setting tables, clearing away and washing up. Older pupils take responsibility for their common room and all pupils take part in fund raising activities, such as making and selling cakes on Red Nose day. Pupils get on well together, and show tolerance of differences in race and

culture. They develop satisfactorily their basic skills and increase their chances of future employment. They have appropriate opportunities to learn about public institutions and services.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of pupils are satisfactory. There is good pastoral care by staff who are committed to helping pupils improve personally and academically. Staff work productively with a range of other agencies to support pupils. A suitable range of policies underpins this area of the school's work, including child protection. However, the headteacher has not yet received the required training as child protection coordinator, although this is booked for May. Most pupils feel safe in school. They are well informed about forms of bullying; most feel that occasional instances of this are dealt with effectively. Supervision is good, and pupils respect the rules made for securing their personal safety, including the following of hygiene procedures in food technology and the wearing of protective masks, goggles and gloves in design and technology. They are also taught about healthy eating and the benefits of regular exercise. A few would like more opportunities for physical exercise. The school has not drawn up a three-year plan for improving accessibility, although this is identified in the improvement plan.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

Recruitment procedures include appropriate checks on staff to ensure that they are suitable to work with children.

School's premises and accommodation

The premises and accommodation allow pupils to learn effectively and safely. They have been improved recently with the refurbishment of classrooms in the main building, and there is a suitable maintenance programme. The school now has well appointed classrooms of sufficient size for the small teaching groups; it also has an information and communication technology suite, a small music room, a common room for secondary pupils, a withdrawal room for primary or nurture group pupils and a kitchen area that is used as a food technology room. An outbuilding is used for teaching design and technology; this is small and rather cluttered; the floor is inappropriately covered with carpet and there are no safety markings on the floor around machinery. Nevertheless, pupils are very closely supervised in this room, usually being taught in ones or twos, so the risks to them are minimal. There is a suitable plan to move the teaching of design and technology to a room inside the main house.

Outside, there is a small, enclosed playground area for primary pupils. In addition to this there is a separate garden area intended for use by secondary pupils. However, this is not suitable in all weathers as the grassed area is muddy during wet spells.

There are also some broken and uneven paving slabs. The improvement plan shows that this is to be properly resurfaced as a play area when funding is available.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school has a clear prospectus that contains all of the information that is required. However, it does not include the details of pupils' examination passes and unit awards in the academic year 2005-06, and there is no other mechanism for informing parents of these or letting them know that this information is available. Reports on pupils' progress go to parents twice a year, are detailed and cover all curriculum areas, but they do not show attainment levels in subjects as they should. In the past, reports compiled prior to annual review meetings have not been circulated to those invited to the meeting; the school has now revised its procedures to ensure that this happens.

Procedures for handling complaints

There is a suitable complaints policy that allows for complaints to be considered fairly.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005, with the exception of those listed below.

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the curriculum (standard 1) and must:

- complete schemes of work for all subjects and courses taught (paragraph 1(2)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- ensure that the designated child protection coordinator has been suitably trained for this role (paragraph 3(2)(b)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the premises and accommodation (standard 5) and must:

- ensure that there are safety markings around machinery in the design and technology room and that playground surfaces are even (paragraph 5(j))
- provide suitable flooring in the design and technology room (paragraph 5(s))

- provide an outdoor recreation area for secondary pupils that can be used all year round (paragraph 5(t)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the provision of information for parents, carers and others (standard 6) and must:

- ensure that parents are aware they can request details of the school's examination results and pupils' externally accredited achievements (paragraph 6 (2)(i))
- include in pupils' progress reports the attainment levels reached in each subject (paragraph 6(5))
- ensure that written reports are circulated to all those invited prior to the annual review meeting (paragraph 6(8)).

In order to comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002 the school should devise a three-year accessibility plan.

School details

Name of school	Acorns School		
DfES number	356/6027		
Unique reference number	131551		
Type of school	Special		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1997		
Age range of pupils	7-16		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 16	Girls: 3	Total: 19
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 16	Girls: 3	Total: 19
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 13	Girls: 2	Total: 15
Annual fees (day pupils)	£32,800		
Address of school	19B Hibbert Lane Marple Stockport Cheshire SK6 7NN		
Telephone number	01614490953		
Fax number	01614490953		
Email address	staff@keys-acornschoo.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mr Steve Williams		
Proprietor	Keys Childcare Ltd		
Reporting inspector	Susan Aldridge AI		
Dates of inspection	8-9 March 2007		