

Doucecroft School

Independent Special School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	881/6032
Unique Reference Number	115426
Inspection number	318122
Inspection dates	4 - 5 December 2007
Reporting inspector	Alan Lemon 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 Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

The school is registered for 79 pupils in the age range of 3 to 19. At present, it has 46 pupils on roll aged 10 to 19. The large majority are either between the ages of 11 and 14 years or they are post-16 students in the further education department. There are 29 boarders and, of these, seven are over the age of 16. All but three of the pupils are boys; all have statements of special educational need identifying they have autism. Many pupils have additional needs relating to medical conditions and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Pupils and students are placed by a number of local authorities in the east and south east of England, including some London boroughs. The pattern of referrals from local authorities shows an increase in the number of pupils with Asperger's Syndrome. These pupils function at a much higher level than the other pupils. Furthermore, there are now more requests for places for post-16 students.

The school has two sites. The main site, at Eight Ash Green on the outskirts of Colchester, is a large campus with a school, boarding accommodation and administration offices. Seven miles away, in the village of Kelvedon, a substantial property houses the main post-16 facilities. The Kelvedon site has places for 15 students and currently has 14. An additional group for post-16 students has been set up recently on the main site in response to the increase in the number of students. The students in this new group have higher levels of dependency than students in Kelvedon.

The school was last inspected in November 2001 and the Commission for Social Care Inspection last reported on the school's residential provision in January 2007.

Evaluation of the school

Doucecroft is a good school and it has improved substantially since its last inspection. The quality of education is good. The school has considerable expertise in meeting the needs of pupils with autism. The curriculum is broad and it is relevant to pupils' learning difficulties. Teaching and learning are good. Provision for post-16 students and boarders across the school is good. Pupils are well cared for and supported. They make good progress academically and in their personal development.

Quality of education

The curriculum is good. It has developed well because of the school's good knowledge and understanding of pupils' learning difficulties and additional needs. The school's vision and values in providing for its pupils are clearly seen in its work and they have been embedded effectively in the aims of the curriculum. The high levels of commitment and expertise of school leaders and staff ensure the curriculum is implemented effectively. As a result, it offers a broad, balanced programme of work and activities that are matched well to all pupils' needs and capabilities. Good management in general and effective leadership of boarding provision in particular means that the planning for pupils' residential hours is linked firmly to curriculum aims. Boarding makes a positive contribution to developing pupils' and students' basic skills including their independence.

Planning is comprehensive. This covers the subjects of the National Curriculum and each programme of study is adapted effectively so that activities are interesting and relevant to pupils and meet their needs. As pupils fall into two distinct ability groups because of the nature of their learning difficulties, planning is also carefully adjusted so that each group is appropriately challenged. Some subjects have developed parallel schemes of work to reflect these differences. This has a positive impact on the quality of learning and the good progress all pupils make, including the relatively new group of post-16 students.

The provision for basic skills for pupils and post-16 students on the main site is good. In particular, there are effective approaches in place to develop communication skills to suit pupils' capabilities. These include signing, symbols as well as provision to develop pupils' speaking and listening. Numeracy, and the use of number skills in everyday applications such as handling money, is well provided. Good resources for information and communication technology (ICT) ensure pupils use these effectively for learning and as a source of information and applications. In general, resources supporting learning opportunities emphasise appropriately visual, tactile and other sensory approaches to learning. A good programme of personal, social and health education together with the stress on promoting pupils' personal development improves pupils' self-confidence, independence and social skills effectively. A healthy lifestyle and staying safe are prominent elements in what pupils and students are taught.

The curriculum for students in the further education department in Kelvedon is good. It is sharply focused on increasing their independence and supporting an effective adjustment to the demands of adulthood. As a result, students make good progress in preparing for the future. They gain a good range of accreditation including Entry Level Certificates in literacy and numeracy and various vocational awards. Work and activities at Kelvedon are planned carefully so that students learn about work and managing in a working environment through a variety of enterprise activities. Students gain work experience in a good range of settings that suit their interests

and talents. Their personal, social and health education programme enables students to take a lot of responsibility in Kelvedon and the local community is used extensively to accustom students to shopping, travelling and joining in community leisure and other activities. The use of the community also promotes students' awareness of keeping safe. The new group of post-16 students recently established as a class at the main site are being provided for well. However, at present, there is no formal co-ordination of the provision for post-16 students at the two sites when the experience developed at Kelvedon would be of benefit to the new provision.

Teaching and assessment are good. Teachers and all support staff are well trained for meeting the needs of pupils with autism. This includes boarding staff who spend part of their day alongside pupils in lessons, which greatly helps the transfer of learning opportunities into residential hours. Good relationships are evident and there is a strong rapport and trust between staff and pupils and students. Pupils' behaviour, which is often challenging, is managed effectively. Pupils' work and approaches that best meet their needs, the use of visual aids, sensory resources and ICT, in particular, are planned in detail. What pupils and students need to learn is targeted well and their progress is tracked effectively.

Senior leaders aim for teachers to be consistent in how their lessons are structured with a well-defined start, middle and end based on a clear learning objective. This is not being used to good effect in all lessons and the limited monitoring of teaching and learning hinders further development of teaching.

Careful assessment means that staff develop a good understanding of each pupil's needs and this is reflected well in lesson planning and pupils' targets. The school is endeavouring to develop its tracking and analysis of pupils' progress from the number of assessments it carries out. The data this produces is difficult to evaluate in terms of how good progress is, or for predicting the progress pupils should make over time. However, assessment of pupils' progress towards their targets shows they are achieving well, overall. An effective system for measuring small steps in progress means targets are kept realistic and challenging.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Moral, social and spiritual development is good because it is embedded in the curriculum and in every exchange between adults and pupils. This results in strong relationships, good behaviour and a good level of enjoyment. Attendance is good. Pupils make good gains in understanding what constitutes acceptable behaviour and conforming socially. Their attitudes to work are good. Cultural diversity is addressed well through art, music, religious education and humanities. The school is good at identifying pupils' personal cultural interests and using these to harness their interest, for example using the 'Doctor Who' theme music in a music lesson in which pupils learnt to maintain a beat.

Assemblies provide a sense of occasion and celebrate pupils' successes, so they contribute to pupils' enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence and an increased awareness of their peers. Pupils contribute well to their immediate community by increasingly taking turns, listening to each other and by helping with daily routines such as handing out the fruit at snack time. Because pupils become increasingly independent and sociable they are well prepared for the future. The school is successful in its mission to promote individual growth in 'independence, social skills and self esteem'.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school makes good provision for the welfare, health and safety of the pupils. Staff are very safety conscious and successful in ensuring that the school is a safe place for pupils. Health and safety and behaviour policies are implemented effectively and most take close account of the particular needs of pupils with autism. Detailed risk assessments are carried out before visits outside school, and very detailed risk assessments relating to individual pupil behaviour in school help to keep them safe. Arrangements for first aid and medical care are implemented satisfactorily. However, the school's written policy is not specific to the needs of the school and lacks essential details about required first aid procedures. Furthermore, the school has not written a three-year accessibility plan in order to comply with the Disability Discrimination legislation.

Pupils are encouraged to follow healthy lifestyles. They willingly participate in healthy eating and take regular exercise. The policy for managing behaviour is strongly based on the principle of rewarding good behaviour and has a very positive impact. Pupils' good behaviour means they are increasingly aware of their own safety and that of others.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school's very efficient administration has robust procedures for checking the suitability of staff and others to work with children. Employees who are from overseas all have the appropriate checks from their countries of origin and in the United Kingdom. The school maintains a record of all the required recruitment and vetting checks on staff and others.

School's premises and accommodation

School and boarding accommodation is of high quality. Most buildings on the main site have been well-refurbished and some, boarding accommodation in particular, are purpose built. Otherwise accommodation has been expensively renovated from their former private residential usage. Classrooms are all pleasant, well designed and spacious. The school provides the full range of facilities including for post-16 students accommodated on the main site. There are substantial grounds with plenty of options for play, recreation and relaxation. Post-16 accommodation in Kelvedon is

a period building in good condition which has been well-adapted to serve as a centre for further education. It has all the facilities required and reflects an appropriate adult education ethos, particularly because easily accessible community facilities are used to good effect.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

Nearly all requirements are met in the information provided for parents and others. The school's prospectus publishes, in considerable detail, information on the curriculum and how pupils are cared for and supported. Reports to parents and carers, on the progress of their children, is comprehensive. However, there are omissions on a small number of matters where information is required.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school's procedures for handling complaints do not meet requirements. In particular, the arrangements for dealing with any complaints taken beyond the initial stages of resolution are unclear.

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 provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety (standard 3) and must:

- write and implement a satisfactory policy on first aid (paragraph 3(6)).

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

- publish the telephone number of the Essex Autistic Society's registered office (paragraph 6(2)(b))
- ensure that parents are aware they can request details of the school's complaints procedure and that they are given information on the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year (paragraph 6(2)(j))
- publish information on the number of staff employed at the school, including temporary staff, and a summary of their qualifications (paragraph 6(2)(k))
- supply each local authority which has placed a pupil at the school with an annual account of income and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of that pupil (paragraph 6(7)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of procedures for handling complaints (standard 7) and must:

- ensure the complaints procedure is available on request to parents of pupils and prospective pupils (paragraph 7(b))
- make provision for a hearing before a panel of at least three people who have not been directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint (paragraph 7(f))
- make provision to allow parents to be accompanied, if they wish, to a panel hearing (paragraph 7(h))
- make clear that a panel hearing may make findings and recommendations and stipulate that the complainant, proprietor and headteacher, and, where relevant, the person complained about, should be given a copy of any findings and recommendations (paragraph 7(i))
- make provision for written records to be kept of all complaints indicating whether they were resolved at the preliminary stage, or whether they proceeded to a panel hearing (paragraph 7(j))
- ensure procedures provide that correspondence, statements and records of complaints are kept confidential (paragraph 7(k)).

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

What the school could do to improve further

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

- develop the analysis of assessment information in order to track and analyse pupils' progress more accurately
- improve the monitoring of teaching and learning in order to identify and promulgate good practice
- ensure arrangements for the effective co-ordination of provision for post-16 students accommodated at Kelvedon and the main site.

School details

Name of school	Doucecroft School		
DCSF number	881/6032		
Unique reference number	115426		
Type of school	Special		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	May 1977		
Age range of pupils	10-19		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 43	Girls: 3	Total: 46
Number of boarders	Boys: 28	Girls: 1	Total: 29
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 43	Girls: 3	Total: 46
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 15	Girls: 0	Total: 15
Annual fees (day pupils)	£32211 - £51393		
Annual fees (boarders)	£52893 - £84057		
Address of school	Abbotts Lane Eight Ash green Colchester Essex CO6 3QL		
Telephone number	01206 771234		
Fax number	01206 571964		
Email address	kc@essexautistic.org.uk		
Headteacher	Ms K Cranmer		
Proprietor	Essex Autistic Society		
Reporting inspector	Alan Lemon AI		
Dates of inspection	4-5 December 2007		