

Pebble Brook School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	110576
Local Authority	Buckinghamshire
Inspection number	325169
Inspection dates	17–18 June 2009
Reporting inspector	Anne Duffy HMI

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 under pilot arrangements; it was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Boarding provision	Pebble Brook School
Social care URN	SC023096
Social care inspector	Lucy Martin (AI)

The inspection of social care was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of students	11–16
Gender of students	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	59
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Janet Pentony
Headteacher	Mrs Donna Jolly
Date of previous school inspection	2 May 2006
Date of previous social care inspection	17 October 2008
School address	Churchill Avenue Aylesbury HP21 8LZ
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Age group	11–16
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Introduction

This pilot inspection was carried out by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors and one social care inspector. The inspectors visited 11 lessons, and held meetings with governors, staff and students. They observed the school's work, and looked at documentation including students' work, the school's planning, records and policy documents as well the newsletter. They also considered 17 parental questionnaires and over 60 student questionnaires about school and boarding.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the progress made by all learners as shown by the effectiveness of target-setting, tracking and analysis of data
- the quality of teaching and use of assessment by teachers to support learning
- the contribution made by both school and boarding to students' outcomes, including preparation for adult life
- the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governors, in ensuring accountability, communicating ambition and driving improvement.

Information about the school

Pebble Brook is a day and residential special school for secondary-aged students with moderate learning difficulties, many of whom have additional emotional, social and behavioural difficulties and/or disabilities. Boys outnumber girls by almost three to one. Most students are White British but a minority are of Asian heritage. The school provides flexible weekly boarding for up to 25 students. This includes provision of boarding accommodation for students from other Buckinghamshire special schools. In the past year the school was unable to offer boarding provision for a period of three months as a result of a failure in the heating system and consequent damage to the building. At the time of the inspection, areas of the building, including those used by the school, were still unusable.

Inspection judgements

Grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Overall effectiveness

2

Capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Pebble Brook School is a good school which prepares its students well for adult life. Support, guidance and care are particularly strong for older students, and an increasingly tailored curriculum ensures that they are able to develop the skills they will need in future. The impact of this is evident in the 100% of school leavers who have entered further education, employment or training in the past two years.

Demonstrating effective self-evaluation, the school's capacity for sustained improvement is evident in many areas. The headteacher and senior leaders have successfully focused upon the issues raised by the previous inspection. Over the past three years the school has worked hard to improve the quality of teaching and assessment for all students. Teaching overall is now good. All groups of students achieve well, both academically and socially, regardless of ethnicity or gender, and despite the boy–girl imbalance. This is shown by the increasingly detailed tracking system used to monitor students' progress against academic as well as personal targets. For some students, progress, both in work and personal development, is outstanding. This is recognised by one student who said, 'This school is good at helping people with anger problems and people who need to learn to read and write. I like coming here because I know that they can help.'

While teaching is generally strong, arrangements are not fully in place for teachers to observe one another's practice and consequently the quality of lessons varies. Not all capture students' enthusiasm and interest in a way that inspires the best learning. Opportunities to link subjects across the curriculum are sometimes missed, particularly in Key Stage 3. For example, the enjoyment of a lesson in which students create their own food chain, or make sculptures 'from Easter Island' is not built upon by writing about these subjects in English or researching them in information and communication technology lessons.

Those students who board at the school benefit from the activities and support that it provides and boarding makes a satisfactory contribution to students' achievement. However, links between school and boarding are not strong enough to ensure that, for those who board at the school, all who work with them do so as effectively as possible. Target-setting is not rigorous enough to support progress made in school.

The strong leadership shown by the headteacher is broadly echoed by the leadership and management of the whole team. This includes the governors, who have been

proactive in trying to address with the local authority the need for urgent repairs to the building. However, there is more work to be done to ensure that all departments of the school, including care, contribute equally well to continuing improvement.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the number of lessons in which students make outstanding progress by:
 - making more use of topics and themes to strengthen the links between different subjects and make learning more exciting, particularly at Key Stage 3
 - encouraging teachers to use a wider variety of teaching approaches to challenge and motivate all learners
 - extending opportunities for staff to observe each other's practice.

- Ensure that the boarding provision consistently fulfils the objectives contained in its statement of purpose through:
 - increasing cooperative working between care and school staff
 - ensuring that students' personal/other skills targets are known and supported across both school and boarding by incorporating appropriate targets into students' care plans
 - developing the contribution made by the care department so that it enhances and extends the impact of leadership and management of the school as a whole.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of students

2

Students learn well and make good progress. Although levels of attainment are below those nationally expected, students, as well as their parents, are positive about the difference that Pebble Brook School makes to their learning. Individual attainment varies but no particular group of students stands out. Students are proud of their work and enjoy contributing to assessments of how well they are doing and what they could do to improve. They rightly recognise that school helps them to improve their behaviour. They act sensibly and safely in the food, design and technology, and science classrooms and are very willing to help one another in lessons. They know who they could go to if they have a problem and cite a number of occasions when any bullying incident has been dealt with swiftly, so that they feel safer from physical or verbal abuse. Students enjoy very much the out-of-school activities that are organised. One student reported, 'I keep safe in school. I enjoy my trips.' School and boarding council members are proud of the role they play and the changes that they have influenced. Although some younger members find it difficult to understand why their every request has not been granted, older ones show maturity in being able to see both sides when a decision has been made. A few express disappointment in the quality of the school environment, especially since the heating failure has placed certain areas out of use.

Students' cultural, moral and spiritual development is good. It is enhanced by interesting and reflective assemblies in which students often take a lead. Students make full use of the range of sporting opportunities available both within and outside

school. They demonstrate that they understand the risks associated with smoking or drug misuse and how to lead healthy lifestyles. Through many work-related opportunities, underpinned by good progress in numeracy, information and communication technology and particularly literacy, students develop skills that will support them when they leave school. They know the importance of attending regularly but sometimes find it hard to do this. This is usually because for some reason they are not able to make use of the transport that is arranged to take them to and from school.

These are the grades for students' outcomes

Students' attainment ¹	4
The quality of students' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and their progress	2
How well do students achieve and enjoy their learning?	2
To what extent do students feel safe?	2
How well do students behave?	2
To what extent do students adopt healthy lifestyles?	2
To what extent do students contribute to the school and wider community?	2
Students' attendance ¹	3
How well do students develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?	2
What is the extent of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development?	2

How effective is the provision?

There is much good teaching, which reflects the school's focus upon teaching and learning as its priority area. Lessons are well planned because teachers know the students well and the work is well matched to the full range of abilities. Lessons are well balanced so that students not only learn something new, but also have the chance to consolidate and practise their skills. Students behave at their best where teachers use a variety of techniques to improve and support learning and demonstrate their own enthusiasm for their subject, so that lessons move at a lively pace. At times, however, students spend more time than necessary listening to the teacher before trying things for themselves. Thorough processes for assessment begin soon after the students join in Year 7 and provide regular opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to monitor progress alongside the students themselves.

The curriculum provides an appropriate balance of subjects within a wide range of experiences, well tailored to the school population. Links between subjects are not always effectively made, especially at Key Stage 3. However, provision for a

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

curriculum personalised according to older students' needs, interests and ambitions is a strength of the school. It has had a very positive effect both upon the standards reached by school leavers and on the high numbers who now go on to further education, employment and training. Students are able to gain a range of qualifications, including GCSE, Entry Level Certificate and vocational skills accredited by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network. In 2008 all students gained at least one GCSE A* to G. The curriculum is enhanced by a wide range of enrichment activities which includes a two-day event involving the whole school in sailing and other activities. Boarders are able to join in activities outside school, of which swimming is the most popular.

Well-organised arrangements for the care and guidance of the students support their learning and contribute to their good personal development in school. The impact of these upon the future life chances for particularly vulnerable students is marked. Staff in the care department work hard to support students in being able to care for themselves and go some way towards promoting independence skills. However, links between school and care are not strong enough to ensure that targets are shared and built upon as effectively as possible.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
The use of assessment to support learning	2
The extent to which the curriculum meets students' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	2

How effective are leadership and management?

Realistic self-evaluation has helped the school to address identified areas for development well. The very real impact is evident in the improvement in teaching and in the increased progress made by students. Resources are used well. Appropriately accurate and challenging targets are in place and school leaders have a clear understanding of how well individual students are progressing. Information is used effectively to monitor progress and drive forward improvement at a wider level. The school works very effectively with a range of partners to support and guide students; one student spoke movingly about how much the counselling arranged by the school had helped him. This reflects the school's commitment to equality of opportunity for the increasingly diverse needs of its learners. The leadership team are aware of the difficulties faced by parents who live some distance away, and use a variety of means, including a very informative newsletter, to keep them in touch. The headteacher is appropriately considering with governors whether more could be done in this area.

The governing body provides a good level of challenge and has supported the school well through a period of change, development and, at times, rather trying circumstances. It undertakes all its duties diligently, including those relating to monitoring boarding. Governors are evident within the school and work well not only with staff but also with students. The school and boarding student councils are both

chaired by school governors. Arrangements for safeguarding are sound, although at the time of the inspection a few lapses in protocol were evident.

The school's contribution to building a cohesive community within its own population is strong. Despite their difficulties, students show that they are aware of one another's differences and respectful of different background and cultures. Through the targeted efforts of the school they are helped to develop understanding about the main world issues which appear on the news or in newspapers. The school is not yet taking every opportunity to provide students with tangible links, for example with schools in other areas or countries, in a way which would give them more direct experience of these.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in communicating ambition and driving improvement	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	2
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	3
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	2
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	2

Boarding provision

The quality of the boarding at Pebble Brook School is satisfactory. Boarders enjoy their time and receive a standard of care which broadly meets their needs. Progress has been made in relation to most of the five recommendations made at the last inspection: the bedroom areas are now more homely and personalised, the children's guide has been reviewed and updated and key-work sessions have been taking place on a more regular basis. Care plans still do not cover all areas required and target-setting has not been sufficiently developed.

The health needs of boarders are clearly identified and met. Information is gathered prior to admission, including parental consent, and detailed in individual health care plans. Not all medication is securely stored; some items are currently kept openly in the boarding office, which can be accessed by the young people. There are sound medication administration systems in place and the records are routinely monitored by the headteacher. A small amount of non-prescribed medication is administered but records do not record show why it has been given.

The food provided at breakfast and lunch is varied and choice is available. There is less variety and quantity provided at tea and supper and some boarders stated that

these meals were insufficient, particularly supper.

Boarders say that they feel safe and privacy is respected in the boarding accommodation. Any complaints made are taken seriously and clear written records are maintained of any subsequent actions taken. Few incidents of bullying take place, staff being mindful of possible tensions between individual students. There are good levels of supervision which ensure issues are quickly dealt with. The staff recruitment procedures in place are sound.

There are clear child protection systems in place with the headteacher as the designated person. Regular staff training in this area takes place and appropriate action is usually taken when concerns are raised. However, not all staff have followed the relevant reporting procedures; two child protection matters had not been brought to the attention of the designated person.

The management of behaviour is good; few sanctions and no physical interventions have taken place in boarding since the last inspection. All incidents are recorded. There are good relationships between the boarders and the staff team. Health and safety is well managed, including regular fire drills.

Boarders enjoy the evening activities: a good range is provided, including swimming, youth club and Girl Guides, in-house films, computer games or television. The key-worker system provides individual support to boarders and regular individual sessions are now taking place.

The care staff have little knowledge of the boarders' on-going educational needs and progress. There are few opportunities for care and teaching staff to work together. The care staff set targets for the boarders but these do not always link with those made in education and are not always achievable or measurable. The care plans are based primarily around health needs and do not cover areas such as behaviour management or cultural, racial or religious needs. The school has a clear statement of purpose listing the objectives of boarding but does not currently demonstrate whether it fulfils them.

The standard of the boarding accommodation is satisfactory and there have been improvements made since the last inspection, for example repainting and new furniture. Bedrooms now look genuinely personalised. Since February 2009, when there was a major failure in the heating systems and the school was temporarily closed to boarders, there have been limitations placed on boarders moving freely around the school. They must go outside to enter the dining room, cannot use the semi-independence flat, the library or the art room and female boarders have to exit the boarding area through the male boarders' corridor. The school is currently managing on auxiliary heating and there is no timescale agreed with the local authority for the heating system to be replaced.

There are good staffing levels, including at night. Staff feel well supported but regular formal supervision sessions are not taking place at the required frequency. Staff meetings are also not taking place even termly. There are satisfactory opportunities for training and qualification.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. Individual needs are identified and supported by the care team but are not currently included in care plans. Good monitoring systems have been put in place by senior management and the governing body is visiting the school and reporting on a regular basis.

National Minimum Standards (NMS) to be met to improve social care

- ensure that all medication is securely stored (NMS 14)
- ensure that the administration record maintained for non-prescribed medication records why the medication was needed (NMS 14)
- review the food provided to boarders at tea and supper (NMS 15)
- ensure that all safeguarding matters are referred to the designated person (NMS 5)
- increase cooperative working between care and school staff and ensure that care staff are familiar with the educational needs of children (NMS 12)
- review the care plans to ensure that they include all relevant areas and that there are clear measurable targets set (NMS 17)
- ensure that the boarders have unrestricted access to all facilities and that the heating system is in good working order (NMS 24)
- ensure that the boarding provision fulfils the objectives contained in its statement of purpose (NMS 1)
- ensure that formal supervision sessions and staff meetings take place at the intervals detailed in the National Minimum Standards (NMS 30)

How effective is the boarding provision in meeting the needs of boarders?	3
What is the quality of the boarding experience and what impact does it have on boarders' development?	3
How effectively is the boarding provision led and managed?	3

Views of parents and carers

Parents' comments reflect the generally high level of satisfaction they feel about the school and the support it offers both them and their child. There were very few negative comments and many more positive ones, such as, 'I cannot praise Pebble Brook School enough. The staff know the children all so well as individuals...the headteacher and staff are all so welcoming and caring.'

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of students registered at Pebble Brook School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school. If a parent has more than one child at the school, we ask them to record an answer against all the questions, for each of their children.

The inspector received 17 completed questionnaires. In total, there are 59 parents and carers registered at the school.

	Always	Most of the time	Occasionally	Never
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	12	4	1	0

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its students' needs. In 2007-8, 15% of schools were judged to be outstanding.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its students well. In 2007-8, 49% of schools were judged good.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its students. In 2007-8, 32% of schools were judged satisfactory.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its students. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves. In 2007-8, 5% of schools were judged inadequate.

Common terminology used by inspectors

- Attainment:** the standard of the students' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
- Progress:** the rate at which students are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the students' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
- Achievement:** the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, training or development. This may refer to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, understanding or desired attributes. Attributes include qualities or personal competencies which are important to the development of the pupil; for example personal, social, cultural, emotional or health.
- Capacity to improve:** the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
- Leadership and management:** the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.



03 July 2009

Dear Students

Inspection of Pebble Brook School, Aylesbury, HP21 8LZ

Thank you very much for welcoming us to your school. We really enjoyed our visit, and it was good to meet so many of you. I am writing this letter to tell you what we found.

Your school is good and the boarding is satisfactory. Many of you told us that you enjoy school and we could see that you have good relationships with the staff. We could also see that many of you have improved your behaviour and this has helped you to learn more. Teachers work hard to plan lessons that are interesting and this is helping you to make good progress, especially in reading. The school does a good job of preparing you for work or college. There is a good range of things for you to study and to do inside and outside school, although we agree with those of you who are boarders that you could have more independence at times. We also understand why you are fed-up with the problems over the heating which is taking a long time to put right.

Your headteacher and the staff have many ideas about how the school can get better. We have asked them:

- to make lessons even more interesting by joining some of them together in topics and making sure that all teachers know what works best to help you learn
- to make sure that those of you who are boarders are helped to make as much progress as you can both in and out of school.

We have asked the care staff:

- to make sure that they meet all the rules which mean that you are safe and well looked after.

I hope that you will all try your best and do well in the future.

Yours faithfully

Anne Duffy
Her Majesty's Inspector

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