

# Acorns School

Independent School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	356/6027
Unique Reference Number	131551
Inspection number	334995
Inspection dates	3–4 June 2009
Reporting inspector	John Coleman HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended.

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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, the purpose of which is 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

Acorns School is situated in a semi-rural location near Stockport and provides accommodation in a converted Edwardian detached house for pupils of secondary school age. A purpose-built adjacent building has two classrooms for pupils of primary school age. Most pupils have a statement of special educational needs. Many pupils are in the care of local authorities (LAs) and the majority reside in children's homes run by Keys Childcare Group Ltd, who also own the school. Pupils are admitted to the school with backgrounds of significant social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Class sizes are very small with pupil/adult ratios of around 2:1. The senior leadership of the school has experienced considerable change in the last year and the current temporary headteacher, who took up post in February 2009, is an operation education manager for the Keys group. He is assisted by an additional operation education manager who is a previous headteacher of the school. The school was opened in 1997 and was last inspected in March 2007.

The school aims to, 'Ensure that children and young people are given a holistic education that will provide them with learning opportunities, which target their specific individual educational needs. Our challenge is to help these children and young people to achieve their academic and personal potential and hence equip them with the skills they need to enjoy a full, well integrated and satisfying life'.

## Evaluation of the school

Acorns School provides a satisfactory quality of education and good provision is made for pupils' welfare, health and safety. It meets almost all the regulations required for continued registration as an independent school. As a result of satisfactory provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and good relationships between staff and pupils, behaviour is satisfactory and pupils make satisfactory progress. Since the last inspection the school has acted well to rectify issues which were raised, including improved planning for the curriculum, attention to areas of the premises and providing the appropriate information to parents.

## Quality of education

The overall quality of education provided by the school is satisfactory. The curriculum and other activities are satisfactory in meeting the range of needs and interests of pupils. The National Curriculum forms the basis for much of the school's provision. In the morning sessions pupils receive lessons in English, mathematics and science in the main. During the afternoons, the curriculum for the primary age and Key Stage 3 pupils extends to the humanities, art, physical education (PE), religious education (RE) and food technology. Pupils in Key Stage 4 have opportunities to gain external qualifications including Entry Level GCSE courses, Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) unit awards and Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) awards. Pupils in Years 10 and 11 also have opportunities for work experience, as in gym management, childcare and catering. Since the last inspection, plans and schemes of work for much of the curriculum have been developed and expanded so that each subject now provides suitably for pupils' needs. Individual plans are in place for each pupil and these are matched closely to their needs, taking full account of their statements of special educational needs where applicable. A modern foreign language is not currently provided to pupils in Key Stage 3, but this is in line with their statutory assessed needs, and is available when required.

The curriculum for pupils' personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) is given a high priority. A good policy is in place. Pupils' individual education plans and personal education plans contribute significantly to pupils' work in this area. In Key Stage 4, pupils receive a life skills programme and this prepares pupils effectively for adult life. A therapeutic programme is also provided and this contributes well to pupils' personal development. PE is aided by the use of the local gym and swimming pool. Links are also in place with a local special high school to make use of their sports hall facilities. Visits are made to places of educational interest such as museums and outdoor education centres.

The effectiveness of teaching and assessment is satisfactory in meeting the full range of pupils' needs. The quality of teaching is variable, but is satisfactory overall. Lesson plans tend to outline the content of activities or the resources to be used and do not always specify the skills and knowledge which pupils are to learn. However, they take careful note of the individual pupil's targets to be found in the individual education plans. Classes are very small and staff know their pupils well. Very good relationships between staff and pupils encourage learning and help ensure that pupils stay on task. Pupils' behaviour is satisfactory and staff deal effectively with occasions of disruptive responses. The style of teaching varies. At best, as seen in an art lesson, the teachers use a range of modelling, coaching and demonstrating methods to guide and support learning. Very good preparation of resources and a mix of learning activities lead to good progress by pupils. In the least successful lessons, teaching lacks sufficient preparation and does not motivate pupils to learn; there is insufficient subject knowledge by teachers and this results in inadequate responses and inadequate progress by pupils. There are several classrooms showing displays of pupils' work to good effect. This creates a motivating and stimulating

environment and helps pupils to concentrate and maintain interest in their education. Not all classrooms are consistent in this regard. In some lessons such as food technology, teachers successfully encourage pupils to produce their own reflections on their learning. This is very effective in helping pupils to identify what they need to do to improve.

The formal, written marking of pupils' work ranges from that which is incomplete, to useful and constructive comments which pupils find helpful.

There is a range of assessment procedures which measure pupils' attainment at certain intervals. These range from standardised tests in English and mathematics to teachers' assessments against National Curriculum levels of attainment. Each of these is recorded systematically but this is at an early stage of being embedded. Reports to parents include the National Curriculum levels. There is however, no rigorous analysis of these results to target pupils' future learning, to measure their progress or to identify areas of underperformance in the school. An additional weakness is that the standardised tests are at irregular intervals, making measurements of pupils' progress difficult to calculate. Targets contained in pupils' personal and individual education plans, for improvements to behaviour, social development and some aspects of academic learning, are reviewed more rigorously and regularly.

Pupils make satisfactory progress in their learning overall. Inspection analysis of test results, of pupils' work and observations in lessons, shows many variations across subjects and between individual pupils. The amount of progress fluctuates partly because of differences in the quality of teaching in each subject or class, and partly because of the often considerable impact of pupils' social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties which is a barrier to their learning. Pupils make consistently good progress in food technology, art, PE and in their personal development.

### Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

The quality of provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils is satisfactory. There is a positive ethos in the school and staff set a good example in the respectful way they treat pupils. This supports the moral development of pupils well. Staff are approachable and show understanding and tolerance in managing often challenging behaviour by pupils. Appropriate behaviour is recognised and rewarded and, as a result, pupils mostly behave sensibly in lessons and around the school. Their behaviour is satisfactory overall. Many pupils say that they like and enjoy school because they are able to participate in a range of different activities such as outdoor leisure pursuits. Pupils' attendance is satisfactory. They gain an appropriate knowledge and awareness of public services and institutions. Recently, a school council was set up and was used to help pupils understand an election procedure. The council requested a mosaic school sign and this now has pride of place in the school entrance. Pupils have other opportunities to contribute to the life of the school such as working on the grounds, planting pots with plants and

flowers. The day-to-day organisation of the school helps pupils to develop their social skills well. For example, when they break for lunch the pupils sit down and eat together, they help prepare food and drinks, set the table and clear away afterwards. Pupils are encouraged to take part in, and contribute to, assemblies and in discussions about charitable fund raising such as for Red Nose Day. Many fund-raising activities are run by pupils such as car washing, a sponsored football match and face painting. Pupils' knowledge of other cultures is promoted effectively through the curriculum: they experience different foods from around the world, study other faiths in RE lessons and explore other civilisations in history. Pupils visit local museums as part of units of work in science, history and art.

## Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

Provision for the overall welfare, health and safety of pupils is good. All the required policies and procedures are in place to help ensure that pupils are kept safe and free from harm. Risk assessments are carried out for fire dangers, premises checks and for trips and visits. External contractors regularly check the fire systems, food hygiene requirements and electrical appliances. On admission to school, pupils are also risk assessed for their own well-being and this is used very effectively to provide appropriate support, guidance and where necessary, intervention. The curriculum for pupils' PSHCE teaches about the dangers of drugs and alcohol and a programme is included for sex education. The curriculum, teaching and assessment for food technology are good. The benefits of healthy eating are promoted well in food technology lessons, which pupils enjoy and they learn at a good rate. Lunches are provided with a healthy focus and the pupils comment that they are encouraged to exercise and to make healthy choices. Visits include PE at the local leisure centre, swimming at a nearby pool, local walks and use of public park areas for recreation. A suitable outdoor visits policy is in place. The school admission register does not meet statutory requirements but immediate action was taken during the inspection to rectify this.

## Suitability of the proprietor and staff

All the required safeguarding checks on staff, such as those by the Criminal Records Bureau, are made and recorded appropriately in a single central register.

## School's premises and accommodation

The school provides accommodation which enables pupils to learn and make progress. Classrooms are mostly of a good size given the small numbers of pupils in each. The standard of decoration and maintenance varies, but is satisfactory overall. Some teaching areas are bright, display pupils' work and make a good contribution to motivating pupils to learn and achieve. Other areas lack stimulus, are poorly ventilated and do not provide an inspiring area in which pupils may learn. Outside, the school has recently resurfaced the playground and this now provides a good recreational area, complete with a small covered shelter. In the main building there is a computer suite providing access to the internet. There is a specialist art room

and pupils are helping to develop nurture and breakout rooms. Overall, whilst the premises are still in need of some improvement to maintenance and decoration, the school building is much improved since the last inspection and there are plans in place to further this development.

## Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school provides a good prospectus which fulfils the statutory requirements for information to parents. This includes details of pupils' success in external examinations. Reports about pupils' progress to parents include assessments of National Curriculum levels of attainment, an improvement since the last inspection.

The annual reviews of pupils' statements of special educational needs give good information to parents and LAs. Communication between the school and the external agencies that support pupils is good and effective. For example, there is a regular exchange of information with the therapeutic services for pupils. The school does not provide an annual statement of income and expenditure to LAs as required by the regulations. A draft has been prepared but is not yet implemented.

## Procedures for handling complaints

The procedures fully meet the requirements.

## Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended ("the Regulations"), 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:

- Maintain an admission register which records all the statutory requirements including details of pupils' home addresses and emergency contact telephone numbers (paragraph 3(9)).

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 an annual account of income and expenditure is sent to each local authority from which the school receives funding (paragraph 6(7)).

## What the school could do to improve further

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

- full embedding of the whole-school assessment system throughout the school
- analysis and use of the outcomes of pupils' test results to target their future learning
- monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning to identify and share the best practice and improve the consistency of good teaching.



## Inspection Judgement Recording Form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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### The quality of education

Overall quality of education			✓	
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils			✓	
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs			✓	
How well pupils make progress in their learning			✓	

### Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development			✓	
The behaviour of pupils			✓	

### Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils		✓		
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## School details

Name of school	Acorns School		
DCSF number	356/6027		
Unique reference number	131551		
Type of school	Special day school		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	1997		
Age range of pupils	7–16		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 18	Girls: 14	Total: 32
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	01614 495820		
Fax number	01614 490953		
Email address	staff@keys-acornschool.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mr Mark McQuillan		
Proprietor	Keys Childcare Ltd		
Reporting inspector	John Coleman HMI		
Dates of inspection	3–4 June 2009		