

Sycamore House School

Independent school inspection report

DCSF registration number	873/6046
Unique Reference Number (URN)	135784
URN for social care	SC379357
Inspection number	344417
Inspection dates	2 – 3 February 2010
Reporting inspector	George Derby

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A¹ of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005², 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

Sycamore House is a very small residential special school, located in a children's home in rural Norfolk. It opened in November 2008 and is registered for pupils with severe behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. There are places for up to three pupils. Currently, there is just one Year 11 pupil on roll who joined the school two weeks ago. Another, a Year 9 pupil, has just left having been in the school for over 10 months. During the course of the past year other pupils have been placed at the school, but only for a very short time and often for just a few days.

The school aims to provide a safe and secure environment in which pupils can be stabilised, assessed and provided with an appropriate curriculum, tailored to meet their individual needs.

The home was last inspected by a social care inspector in June 2009. A full report on the boarding is available in the social care section of the Ofsted website. This is the school's first inspection and it was a single inspection of the educational provision.

Evaluation of the school

Sycamore House provides a satisfactory quality of education. It recognises that as a new school it has some weaknesses in the curriculum and that there is work needed to develop its assessment procedures further. Nevertheless, the teaching, assessment and the curriculum offered are satisfactory. A key strength is the encouraging approach that staff have in engaging pupils in education and the flexible approach to meeting their needs. This leads to good improvements in aspects of their personal development, in helping them to believe in themselves and improving their self-confidence. The safeguarding of pupils' welfare is satisfactory, but there are a few regulations not met and the school's practice is better than its documentation. Overall, though, most regulations are met.

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

Quality of education

The quality of education is satisfactory, as is the curriculum. A curriculum policy is in place, although it is not a fully accurate summary of the curriculum provided. Similarly, some other subject policies are out of date. Changes to the school's programme of work have been made since the school was registered and the policies do not reflect these modifications.

At Key Stage 3, virtually all subjects of the National Curriculum are provided, appropriately modified and matched to the pupils' needs and abilities. These are planned from national schemes of work, with long-term and medium-term planning in place for most subjects. Good emphasis has been placed on personal, social and health education (PSHE), together with citizenship and careers work to help pupils with their personal skills and development and help them understand the world around them. However, a modern foreign language is not taught; physical education is not fully planned or assessed and not related to a scheme of work, showing how pupils' skills will be built up over time. Pupils' statements of special educational needs identify that the full National Curriculum should be taught.

At Key Stage 4, the school tailors the curriculum to the pupils' strengths, interests and abilities. However, it does not have full Year 11 planning for some subjects and it is, currently, extending planning from another of the company's schools to provide a relevant curriculum; this does have the positive effect of aiding pupils' continuity of learning. Pupils clearly have a voice in the choices offered. At the core of what is provided is English, mathematics, and PSHE, citizenship and careers education with programmes which are clearly relevant to what pupils need to learn for the future. In addition, Year 11 pupils undertake a relevant Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) life skills course, as well as one in the home. This does help to link home and school, although there is a great deal of overlap and duplication in what is covered. The use of computers is taught through other subjects and physical education is taught by residential support staff, and has the weaknesses mentioned previously. At present, there are no scientific opportunities on offer in Key Stage 4, although this is a requirement of the regulations. The school states that it will provide this later in the year. Although the school does not offer vocational opportunities itself, it uses a reasonable range of external providers to provide these, including courses at local colleges and work-related learning centres. There are appropriate links with Connexions for careers advice and work experience arrangements.

The pupils' work examined during the inspection shows a sound depth of learning has taken place in most areas over the past year, and that literacy and numeracy skills have developed well. An appropriate focus has been on these basic skills, which is especially important as literacy is a major barrier to pupils' learning. Moreover, the work shows that pupils' application to their work has improved well. They have benefitted from the marking of work which clearly shows what they do well and where they need to improve. Learning in information and communication technology

(ICT) has been less successful and the school is now looking to ensure this is integrated better in other subjects. However, the planning does not yet show how pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding will be built up over time through this approach. For pupils with statements of special educational needs, there is not yet enough educational liaison with local authorities in ensuring that maximum information is received, or support from the company's special educational needs coordinator is provided to ensure that the requirements of statements are fully met.

Teaching and assessment are satisfactory. Questioning, to find out what a pupil knows in a lesson, is a key strength. Although systems are clearly in place to record pupils' progress and identify the National Curriculum levels pupils are working at, some aspects of assessment are not yet sufficiently refined to measure the small steps that pupils make. The school has suitable plans in place to address this. Lessons are well structured though, so the steps of learning are well defined. Another strength of the teaching is the thorough planning of activities and the staff's research into areas which are not necessarily their specialism. As a result, pupils can be provided with a breadth and depth of opportunity. There is also a clear focus on helping pupils understand the relevance of what they are learning by showing that learning in one subject has a bearing on learning in others.

Support staff are very encouraging and work alongside pupils themselves, taking part in the learning and acting as positive role models. This helps pupils to see that others can make mistakes and reduces the negative feelings they can have when work gets hard. Relationships are good and work productivity increases because pupils are willing to please adults. What pupils are to do in a lesson is made clear, although what they are to actually learn is sometimes expressed in less precise terms. This also makes assessment of learning more difficult, at times. Opportunities are taken to assess progress at the end of a lesson, although these are occasionally brief. Pupil self-assessment occurs from time to time, but this is inconsistent. Pupils are generally managed satisfactorily. Expectations are made clear and incentive systems previously used have worked well to improve pupils' behaviour. However, at present, boundaries and consequences are not specifically defined enough, especially for example, when trying to reduce unwanted language.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. Pupils are positive about what the school is doing for them. Staff have a good awareness on how to promote pupils' personal development and lesson plans adequately identify the contribution that the class work will make to this area. The home and school have a positive effect on pupils' attitudes and the pupils' work shows their greater cooperation and involvement over time. This has had positive effect on how they feel about themselves and in getting them ready for the next, more 'independent', placement. Pupils have generally responded adequately to the personal targets they have been given. There is evidence that past incentive and award systems have had

a positive effect on their understanding of doing the 'right thing' and on improving their behaviour, although there is not one in place in school, at present. Behaviour and attendance are satisfactory. Pupils are encouraged to have a voice and contribute in school and the weekly home meetings and to take part in community activity. Relationships with adults are positive. There are less opportunities for pupils to develop skills in working with others in lessons, though, as there are few times when there is more than one pupil in the school. Pupils gain a reasonable understanding of life in a multi-cultural society through the work covered in religious education and citizenship, and through planned cultural events in the home.

Welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The provision for pupils' welfare, health and safety is satisfactory overall. The life skills programme makes a strong contribution to getting pupils ready for the next stage of their lives and focuses well on them keeping healthy and staying safe. Pupils are safeguarded by thorough procedures and policies, which are managed by the care staff and are in line with the requirements of the local safeguarding children's board. They are also highly supervised. There is a clear anti-bullying policy and effective practice. A suitable number of trained first aiders and policy is in place and there is a good range of risk assessments, including for fire, to minimise health and safety risks. A clear behaviour policy is evident and pupils are generally provided with incentive rewards for good behaviour. The systems for managing pupils' behaviour and restraint are generally effective. However, the school's child protection policy is well out of date although the practice is sound. Staff are appropriately trained, though. The home's manager is the designated safeguarding person for the school. Advanced training in child protection and working with the local authority has recently been undertaken with additional training planned for May 2010. Pupils' health plans are in the process of being updated but, currently, lack effective measures to support smoking cessation. At present, pupils are allowed to smoke during the school day. The school's attendance and admission registers are up to date, although the admission register lacks all of the required information about the pupils' last school attended.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

All regulations except one are met. A full summary of the necessary recruitment and vetting checks that are made on staff and proprietors is contained in the single central register. However, a very small number of staff records show that references do not always contain all the information required and, on occasion, gaps in a person's employment history are not always fully recorded.

School's premises and accommodation

The accommodation enables pupils to learn effectively and virtually all regulations are met. The accommodation is suitably furnished and a good standard of decoration

and maintenance is evident. However, the rear entrance to the building is unsightly because of cigarette butts littering the floor.

The school's classroom is located to the side of the main house where the pupils live. It is suitable for up to three pupils. Occasionally, it gets very hot and airless. A spacious, well laid out kitchen area in the main house is used for food technology and generally for life skills work. There is a large garden serving as a recreation area; however, the pond does not have a secure perimeter fence. The risk to pupils is low because of high levels of supervision; however, damage to the fence has existed for some time and the life-saving buoyancy aids are not accessible as they are floating in the water.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

Nearly all regulations are met. However, in the information that goes to parents, carers and local authorities, it is not clear who the headteacher actually is and there is no reference to the educational and welfare provision for pupils who speak English as an additional language. There are detailed monthly school and boarding reports on pupils' progress which generally give a good overview of the improvements made. However, occasionally, the school reports mention what a pupil has covered in a subject rather than what they have learned.

Procedures for handling complaints

All the regulations are met. No complaints have been received in the last 12 months.

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.³

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

- ensure that the curriculum policy is an accurate summary of the curriculum provided and that schemes of work are provided for all subjects and are implemented effectively (paragraph 1(2))
- where pupils have a statement of special educational needs, ensure that the education provided fulfils its requirements (paragraph 1(2)(e)).

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031910.htm

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

- ensure that the school's safeguarding policy represents the school's practice and is reviewed annually and that recruitment procedures are fully followed in compliance with DCSF guidance Safeguarding children and safer recruitment in education (DCSF-04217-2006)⁴ (paragraph 3(2)(b))
- ensure that the school has full regard for pupils' health and safety in line with DCSF guidance Health and Safety: responsibilities and powers (DCSF 0803/2001) (paragraph 3(4))
- complete the admission register in accordance with the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006⁵ ensuring that it contains information about a pupil's last school attended (paragraph 3(9)).

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of suitability of proprietor and staff (standard 4) and must:

- prior to the confirmation of the appointment of all staff ensure that all references contain the necessary information and that any gaps in employment history are fully explored (paragraph 4(2)(a)).

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

- provide a safe outside area for pupil's recreation (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:

- provide particulars of the name of headteacher (paragraph 6(2)(a))
- provide particulars of educational and welfare provision for pupils who speak English is an additional language (paragraph 6(3)(b)).

What the school could do to improve further

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

- refine assessment procedures, so that the small steps of progress that some pupils make in their academic and personal development can be measured.

⁴ <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Final%206836-SafeGuard.Chd%20bkmk.pdf>

⁵ www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2006/20061751.htm

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	Sycamore House		
DCSF number	873/6046		
Unique reference number (URN)	135784		
Type of school	Special		
Status	Independent		
Date school opened	November 2008		
Age range of pupils	11-16		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Number of boarders	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Annual fees (boarders)	£215,160		
Fax number	01536 712994		
Email address	rburrows@castlehomes.co.uk		
Headteacher	Marion Paige		
Proprietor	CastleCare Ltd		
Reporting inspector	George Derby		
Dates of inspection	2-3 February 2010		