

West Heath School

The New School at West Heath, Ashgrove Road, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 1SR
Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

This is an independent co-educational residential special school situated in Kent. The school provides places for day and boarding pupils between the ages of 11 and 19 years. The school offers residential placements Monday to Thursday during term time. Pupils have emotional and social communication difficulties. The school has eight boarding houses located within the grounds of the school. At the time of the inspection, there were 22 residential pupils.

Inspection dates: 5 to 7 December 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The residential special school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of previous inspection: 14 March 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- The time given to establishing trusting and nurturing relationships between staff and students has a significant and positive impact on young people's self-image. They form strong attachments to staff and see themselves as able to learn and achieve.
- Students make significant progress in terms of their health, education, and emotional, social and psychological well-being. Their current life experiences and future life chances improve as a result of attending the school and benefiting from boarding.
- Leaders and managers are most ambitious for students and the service provided by the school. This translates into current improvements, such as building a youth club, and development plans, for instance the electronic gathering of evidence to show student attainments. This ambitious approach also translates into aspirations for the future, such as plans to create an accredited diploma course for practitioners within the school and elsewhere.

The residential special school's areas for development are:

- Managers and staff have not utilised local authority care plans and children looked after's review minutes to prepare their own assessments and plans for boarding to ensure that these are taken into account. Liaison with placing authorities has not been sufficiently strong.
- The school's monitoring of student welfare is normally reliably robust, but staff have not identified and acted on exceptions to usual circumstances, such as ensuring that a student who does not board for the full week participates in emergency evacuation drills.
- Staff do not systematically or routinely record evidence of students' progress within boarding.

What does the residential special school need to do to improve?

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standards for residential special schools:

- 12.6 A written record is kept of major sanctions and the use of any reasonable force. Records include the information in Appendix 2 (use of reasonable force). The record is made within 24 hours and is legible. Children are encouraged to have their views recorded in the records.
- 21.1 The school produces a written placement plan, agreed as far as is practicable with the child, the child's parents/carers and any placing authority for the child, unless the information is held elsewhere such as in the child's statement of special educational needs or education, health and care plan. The placement plan identifies the needs of that child that the school should meet and specifies how the school will care for the child and promote their welfare on a day-to-day basis. Where significant changes are made to the placement plan, there is appropriate consultation. Where applicable, the plan is consistent with the care plan of the placing authority for any child placed by a local authority.

This is in regard to ensuring that placing authority care plans and review minutes are available to staff and are taken into account when they are drawing up assessments and plans for boarding.

Recommendations

- Improve the availability of facilities for personal study for students whose bedrooms do not have desks provided in them.
- Make sure that all medication is safely and securely stored and that appropriate action is taken when the temperature is recorded as being above 25 degrees centigrade.
- Ensure that all students who stay in the boarding provision participate in emergency evacuation drills.
- The school should retain evidence that references for employees have been verified.
- Ensure that risk assessments demonstrate that the potential impact on existing boarders of a student being admitted to the residential provision or transferred between houses has been considered, and that plans to address any identified issues are made.
- Records of key-work sessions should demonstrate that the student's views have been sought and taken into account

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Students make progress across all areas of their development and many make remarkable advances in their educational achievements, social relations and/or psychological well-being.

The boarding provision makes a significant contribution to this in a number of ways: through providing enriching experiences – ‘things I can’t do anywhere else’, as one student remarked – and through providing opportunities to form new ways of interacting with others and receive feedback from staff on this, and to develop new life skills, from cooking to managing health issues.

The majority of students enjoy the boarding experience, although some thought their bedrooms were too small and others that their mattresses were uncomfortable. Most bedrooms do not have space for a desk for students to undertake private study and for others their mattresses were uncomfortable. During the inspection, the head of care agreed to address this feedback. Students personalise their rooms if they wish, contribute ideas and help to purchase soft furnishings.

A rich variety of activities are available for students to participate in, such as: pampering sessions and games evenings in houses; trips to international football games and the theatre off site; and after-school activities, including a textile club and a successful pantomime production. One actor spoke of how staff had helped her to manage anxieties better and demonstrated her increasing confidence by a star performance.

Staff have not systematically gathered information about the progress students make, but there is a wealth of other evidence, such as case studies, the observations of family members, staff and other professionals, and, most notably, the comments of young people themselves. One said the school had helped her to ‘turn things around’, explaining, ‘I used to have an attitude that got me into trouble but I can manage my feelings and behaviour better... I don’t think I would have achieved so much if I didn’t board.’ Another said that boarding had helped her to become more independent and she wanted to do more for herself at home as a result. She added, ‘I’ve been able to be successful at college due to the support I’ve had.’

The high quality of individualised care provided by staff has been instrumental in the progress students make. A number of students and parents identified people such as key workers and house managers as being especially influential. The development of trusting relationships between students and staff is a key factor in the success of the residential provision.

Admission to boarding has been a smooth process for young people and families, once funding has been agreed. Staff have organised taster visits and introductory overnight stays before placements have started but the process has mostly been

swift, which has pleased parents who have often been searching for the right provision, or have arrived at a point in family life when boarding is a timely intervention.

One parent commented that her son's admission had been 'declined initially as the group was not compatible. Although I was disappointed it was the right decision.' This demonstrates the thought given to matching students when they first arrive, just as it is when they move houses for different reasons. However, this careful consideration is not recorded.

For some young people, the opportunity to board has prevented family or placement breakdown; for others, it has removed them from dangerous environments, and given them an alternative path in life. It has also had a significant impact on young people's engagement and achievement in education. One parent said, 'If my son had to get himself to school every day, it would not happen, but the fact that he is on site means he is happier and does not have the stress of making the transition, so he is learning more.'

Staff help students to manage health conditions better than they would otherwise, and they arrange treatment that has not previously been available, such as orthodontic work. This is undertaken with the permission and often the involvement of parents. Smoking, though, has been stubbornly resistant to reduction, despite various strategies the nurse and other staff have employed to help students see its negative health and financial impact. Managers have not found a way of countering peer pressure in school or, in some cases, parental acquiescence while young people are at home.

Students gain valuable life skills as they progress through boarding, moving to houses that support semi- and then greater independence, as they grow older. This includes shopping, cleaning, budgeting, travel, and how to approach people they come across. Some students are helped to obtain, or obtain for themselves, part-time jobs.

Staff spoke of success in helping students to make the transition into adulthood, including helping them move to their next place of accommodation. One described the assistance given to a young person, saying, 'Children's services may have identified a place, but we bought furniture, helped him move in and spent time to familiarise him with local shops and transport links. We did the first food shop.' This was recounted with some pride in the care shown and in the student's progress, exemplifying the practical and emotional support provided.

One parent spoke of the overall support provided by the school, saying, 'They have been marvellous! I don't know what I would do without them – they have been more than I expected.'

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Students report being safe while in boarding. The campus has an unfenced perimeter but young people like the openness this affords. Buildings are accessed by a master key and entrances are monitored by CCTV; this, together with the presence of waking-night staff, means that young people feel protected. There are very few incidents of intruders entering the grounds or of students absconding.

CCTV is used in corridors of boarding houses to deter unwanted behaviour, or provide evidence in the event of an allegation being made. In some houses, because the likelihood of this kind of behaviour is extremely low, managers have not kept under review the need to operate cameras. This is potentially a missed opportunity to ensure that such practice continues to meet the needs of boarders, whose behaviour may change over time.

Some outside groups use facilities such as the gym and the swimming pool. These are well vetted and procedures are in place to avoid users having unsupervised contact with young people. The school hosts weddings, but this is only when students are off site.

The site of the construction of a new youth club is secured by high fencing and builders do not require access to the areas students use, but a specific risk assessment has not been drawn up to systematically consider potential hazards.

The monitoring of health and safety and actions taken to maintain the school building and grounds are robust and timely. Staff undertake fire safety checks at required intervals and conduct emergency evacuation drills in residential time. However, the fact that a part-time boarder had not been present for any of these since being in his current house had been overlooked.

Sampled records of the administration of medication indicate that staff have conducted this faultlessly since the last inspection. A single error in the counting of tablet numbers was identified at the next stock check; however, high temperatures in a medicine cabinet recorded in one house did not lead to precautionary measures being taken to ensure that medication was unaffected by the heat.

The school follows safer recruitment procedures; however, files did not contain evidence that references had been verified. There is no evidence that those received were not genuine, but not verifying references leaves a possibility that individuals could falsify references and that this might not be discovered.

The board of trustees takes its monitoring of students' safety very seriously and the lead for safeguarding regularly visits the boarding provision, in addition to the independent visitor. Monitoring reports are comprehensive, making pertinent recommendations. The visitor produces student versions of her reports, which allow students to see that trustees consider issues they have raised and that they have concern for students' well-being.

Staff and managers rigorously deal with matters of bullying; students are aware of what constitutes bullying behaviour and how to report it. One student commented on the resolution of an incident she was subject to; such outcomes give young people confidence that staff will confront bullying. The school's approach is to address underlying causes of anti-social behaviour, including the perpetrator's past, providing positive relationships and enriching experiences, in addition to encouraging positive interactions. Consequently, incidents of behaviour requiring sanctions or even physical interventions have decreased significantly for particular boarders.

Staff dynamically assess problematic behaviour. This includes analysing the impact on other students, defusing difficult situations when possible and using the least amount of force required to prevent injury or serious damage of property. Given the nature of the difficulties faced by students, this is a complex area, and it is commendable that staff were able to articulate the approach extremely well, demonstrating their understanding and skill.

Records show that staff do not use physical intervention to maintain good order; however, the school's 'positive handling' policy does not make clear that this is not a reason to restrain a student in the residential setting. Although reintegration meetings do enable a student to contribute to a review of their positive behaviour plan, the meetings do not necessarily address their view of the event that triggered it. This is not recorded in the incident log either, which is also true of sanctions records.

Staff are aware of the procedures they should follow in the event of identifying a student going missing or of a safeguarding concern. This includes how to report an issue that implicates a line manager or where staff believe designated safeguarding leads are not addressing the matter appropriately. This ensures that action is taken promptly and that students' safety is made a priority.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The school has a comprehensive development plan and there is considerable evidence of the continuous improvement of the boarding provision. Current advances include the piloting of journals that collate photographs and memorabilia to show student progress and experiences. A new youth club is being constructed to extend the facilities available to boarders. School council minutes demonstrate that students have been involved in deciding what amenities will be available once it opens. This is one example of the ways the school takes into account the opinions of young people.

Managers are aware that the evidencing of students' progress is a weakness, particularly in terms of how young people meet targets. Research undertaken by managers has identified a specifically designed app that enables staff to capture this electronically and share it across the school, including boarding. Plans to introduce the system are well advanced. This demonstrates the purposefulness of managers in making decisions and taking action to address known shortfalls.

Key-work-session recording has been reformatted to improve its structure, but has not promoted the capturing of students' views or the making and reviewing of actions.

Staff vacancies have been a significant issue for the school and this led to the employment of agency workers to ensure that sufficient staff were available. However, a recruitment drive has improved the situation in boarding. New staff report that managers and colleagues support them well and that their induction training meets their learning needs. Continuing development opportunities are excellent, with courses that address the specific requirements of students at the school, many of which are bespoke, as well as mandatory training.

The head of therapeutic services has recently produced a guide to social, emotional and mental health disorders during adolescence. This draws on her knowledge and research to provide all staff with basic information about different diagnoses, the particular difficulties such disorders present young people with and strategies that can be used to assist them. It is also an opportunity to benefit workers in other settings.

Managers plan to develop staff training further to offer a diploma-level course that will provide an accredited qualification and an opportunity for other organisations to access the course.

Relationships with other agencies and families are positive and create an environment in which they work collaboratively to meet students' needs. Managers and staff incorporate education, health and care plans into their work with students, for example in how individual learning plans lead to targets set in boarding. However, the school has not fully embraced the additional level of communication and joined up planning required when a local authority looks after children. Care plans and children looked after review minutes have not been readily available to ensure that the school's own assessments and plans align with them. These, in turn, have not consistently been shared with social workers.

Managers and staff promote equality and diversity within boarding, for example providing additional funding for particular diets and making alternative cleaning products and medication available to accord with ethical choices made by students.

Leaders and managers have created an ethos in the school that values young people's strengths. Most often, students arrive with a series of education placement breakdowns and perceived failings, but as one member of staff commented, 'What we do is help children view themselves and their potential futures differently.'

Mentoring, coaching and improved life experiences, particularly in boarding, help students to develop skills to manage the issues and problems in their lives. By ensuring that staff are given the time to nurture students, through which young

people come to regard themselves as valued and capable, leaders and managers have created an approach that allows many young people to flourish as never before.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the school knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.

Residential special school details

Social care unique reference number: SC024063

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Mr James Nunns

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Inspector

Chris Peel, social care inspector



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