

Acorn School

Little Oak, Knowstone, South Molton, Devon EX36 4SA

Inspection dates

4–6 October 2016

Overall effectiveness	Good
Effectiveness of leadership and management	Good
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Good
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Good
Outcomes for pupils	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Inadequate

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Senior leaders and staff have established a calm and caring ethos. Pupils are well looked after and nurtured in a safe and secure environment.
- The teaching of reading, writing and literacy is consistently good. This enables pupils to progress well and apply their skills across the wider curriculum. There could be more consistent challenge in mathematics.
- Staff act as excellent role models so that pupils adopt positive attitudes to learning, which in turn encourages them to attend school. Attendance and behaviour are improving as school leaders persevere with patience to help pupils to overcome difficulties in their lives.
- Leaders have improved the quality of teaching and assessment so that they match the individual needs of pupils more precisely. Assessment is used well by teachers to plan lessons and next steps for pupils, building on their previous knowledge.
- Personal, social, health and emotional (PSHE) development lessons develop pupils' self-esteem, and their understanding of the importance of positive relationships and how to keep safe. Pupils appreciate the fact that the school is teaching them to be safe.
- The broad and balanced curriculum promotes pupils' personal development well, including their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.
- Pupils are well prepared for examinations and for transition to the next stage of their education. Individual help with careers advice and guidance, including on vocational courses and apprenticeships, provides pupils with options for further training and education.
- Governors and senior leaders have ensured that all of the independent school standards are met. Each governor has a designated area of responsibility. This enables the governors to challenge and support leaders effectively to secure further school improvement.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve pupils' progress in mathematics by ensuring that the level of challenge is consistently matched to their individual starting points.
- Continue to strive to improve pupils' attendance.
- Extend teachers' understanding of effective behaviour management techniques, to include some training in behavioural therapy.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to observe effective practice in other schools.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher has established a positive culture of high expectations. She has been successful in appointing teaching staff who have the experience, qualifications and resilience to work in this setting.
- Teaching is strong and has benefited from the newly revised programme of monitoring and observation of lessons. Teachers are given regular feedback on areas for development and opportunities for further training. Staff confirm that this is helpful. However, they have little opportunity for training to extend their expertise in the use of behavioural therapies to help pupils overcome their difficulties.
- In their exemplary relationships, staff provide excellent role models for pupils. Staff demonstrate great strengths in their patience and resilience to help pupils persevere and overcome barriers to learning.
- The curriculum is adapted effectively to meet pupils' individual needs and includes a range of subjects that cover the required areas of learning. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is fostered well through the efforts made by staff. The topics they cover help pupils to become more emotionally stable. This helps the pupils to learn and prepares them for the next stage of their education.
- Leaders strive to help pupils to persevere and overcome difficulties so that they do not miss valuable learning time. On occasions, setbacks in pupils' emotional well-being result in spikes in absence, but overall attendance of individual pupils is improving over time.
- Provision for pupils to gain an understanding of equality and diversity is good. Pupils are taught to respect others in line with the Equality Act 2010 and in particular with regard to protected characteristics. As a result, bullying is rare, reflecting the culture of increasing acceptance and tolerance of each other that is encouraged by ongoing teaching and discussion with pupils.
- Pupils are prepared well for life in modern Britain through effective personal, social, health and emotional (PSHE) development and citizenship lessons. A range of appropriate topics helps them to make informed decisions and choices for their well-being and safety.
- No partisan views are tolerated. Staff work hard to teach pupils the dangers of extremism and to protect them from radicalisation.
- Pupils have specialist external and impartial careers guidance for a range of vocational and academic courses and apprenticeships. When they are ready, they are enabled to make informed choices for the next stage of their education and transition to mainstream schools. Pupils in recent cohorts have moved to colleges near to their homes and are pursuing courses of study in areas such as construction and carpentry.

Governance

- The chair and members of the governing body are recently appointed and their priority is to improve and sustain high-quality educational provision.
- Governors have an accurate view of the school's strengths. Procedures have been monitored carefully so that high standards have been established and maintained. Staff are well supported in their work so that pupils overcome most of their difficulties and begin to thrive.

- Each governor has a specific area of responsibility. Regular meetings with school leaders prioritise and address areas for development.
- Governors know the school well and have taken time to understand what is needed to bring about sustained improvements in the quality of the provision.
- The governors hold the headteacher to account for the achievements of pupils and to maintain the high quality of teaching. Reporting to the governors is regular and informative.
- The governing body ensures that finances are used suitably to maintain the appropriate number of staff and to ensure that they have the appropriate resources for their work.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school has an up-to-date safeguarding policy, which is reviewed as required to ensure that the school meets the statutory requirements for safeguarding in line with guidance from the Secretary of State. The policy is published on the school's website and is available as hard copy in school or on request.
- The designated safeguarding lead and a deputy are trained to the appropriate levels. All staff are trained appropriately and are kept up to date and informed of the latest guidance and requirements in all aspects of safeguarding.
- Leaders and staff are highly vigilant and aware of their responsibility to safeguard pupils. Staff know the procedures to follow in the event of any concerns raised by a pupil or a member of staff. There is a strong safeguarding culture promoted by all.
- Effective procedures on e-safety, on how to keep safe and on protecting pupils from any extremism or radicalisation are taught well through the curriculum.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching staff have high expectations and plan lessons well to match the needs of individual pupils. Teachers demonstrate high levels of experience and are adept at encouraging pupils so that they engage well in their learning.
- On arrival, thorough initial assessment identifies pupils' starting points in literacy and numeracy and the areas they need to work on to catch up. Information on pupils' progress from assessments is used to plan effective teaching and to develop next steps for learning. Cross-curricular assessment of progress is used well to plan lessons that build on previous knowledge so that pupils see links between subjects and extend their learning further. This has resulted in improvements in pupils' attitudes to learning and their overall achievement.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan and all are disadvantaged. The school provides appropriately for their academic needs. Assessment information is used carefully to assess pupils' starting points and to tailor teaching to individual needs so that pupils make good progress. Regular, ongoing assessment is shared with pupils and new targets are set so that they know how they are progressing and to give them encouragement to persevere with their learning.
- Pupils are taught in one-to-one sessions or in small groups. Supportive and trusting relationships help pupils to build confidence in themselves and their ability to learn.

- Evidence from pupils' records is clear that when pupils are reluctant to work because of emotional upsets or fear of failure, teachers are patient and encouraging and reinforce learning. They adapt the lesson or allow pupils to take a short break to diffuse any tensions. On occasion, teachers do not have the range of techniques needed to help pupils sustain good behaviour, so pupils' progress slows.
- Teachers use resources well to provide real examples and help pupils to engage practically in their work. In science and cookery, for example, pupils wear the appropriate safety equipment and an effective range of resources is used well. In English, teachers help pupils write in detail, using complex sentences.
- Pupils' work is regularly assessed and monitored. Teachers meet regularly and discuss and share information so that the teaching across the curriculum collectively supports the learning of individual pupils.
- Pupils receive constructive feedback no matter how small the effort or progress made. This is communicated verbally and recorded in their progress books so that it can inform teachers in planning pupils' next steps in learning.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- Leaders monitor pupils' behaviour rigorously. Clear procedures to reduce emotional and behavioural disruption are included in pupils' behaviour management plans. Pupils' records show that, over time, incidents generally reduce in number and severity.
- When pupils join the school, their self-confidence and self-esteem are very low, reflecting negative experiences in previous schools or placements.
- An analysis of pupils' emotional well-being and behavioural patterns provides staff with a clear starting point as they introduce pupils to the routines and expectations of the school.
- Staff seek to develop a deeper understanding of each pupil's needs, with an emphasis on building trust and reducing anxiety and fear of failure.
- Pupils say that the approach taken by the school builds their confidence and makes them feel safe so that they can enjoy school.
- The persistence of staff in supporting pupils' personal development helps to promote their academic achievement, enabling them to make good and often rapid progress over time. For example, in food technology, pupils were proud to have created a dish successfully and shared it with staff and visiting guests.
- Pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem improve and evidence from discussions and their work shows that pupils sustain long periods of effective learning and positive outcomes.
- Pupils learn to stay safe through the positive work that they undertake in PSHE and citizenship lessons.
- The school works particularly hard so that pupils understand issues such as exploitative relationships, and know how to stay safe on the internet, including from cyber-bullying.
- Bullying in school is rare. Pupils have an increasing understanding of equality and diversity and are prepared to accept each other and those who are different because staff insist gently and consistently on a culture of respect at all times.

- Pupils have well-planned physical education lessons which challenge them and meet the requirements of the curriculum.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Behaviour is well managed by staff, who consistently implement behaviour management plans effectively. Staff support pupils extremely well.
- School records show that in the period after pupils have joined the school, they are often unwilling to comply with staff requests and are prone to emotional and behavioural outbursts.
- Staff work with patience and perseverance so that, over time, incidents reduce and behaviour improves. Pupils settle and begin to enjoy learning in the realisation that they are able to learn.
- Pupils settle into the school routines well and their attendance improves. The fear of failure and lack of confidence in their ability to learn diminish. Positive attitudes emerge, as evidenced in their perseverance to achieve in their work.
- For the majority of pupils, attendance has improved significantly. The attendance of pupils who have previously persisted in missing school is improving. There are clear procedures in place to eliminate risk from harm if any children go missing. Staff are stringent in following procedures for the safety of pupils at all times and in all circumstances.
- The school is focusing on developing further strategies to help improve behaviour and attendance.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils usually arrive with attainment well below that expected for their age in literacy and numeracy and often with large gaps in their knowledge and understanding. This is because they have been persistently absent from their previous school.
- Reflecting the school's emphasis on developing pupils' skills, they make steady gains in numeracy and literacy, including in reading, spelling and comprehension.
- In mathematics, pupils generally work well to problem solve, to make links with previous knowledge and to develop their reasoning well. Mathematical problems linked to real-life situations, budgeting and finances, for example, develop their skills to understand and use money well so that progress is good. On occasion, teaching does not provide sufficient challenge in mathematics and pupils' progress slows.
- Pupils make good progress in one-to-one teaching situations. With the praise and encouragement of the teacher, they demonstrate the confidence to ask questions and to discuss relevant ideas. Pupils are perceptive and astute in their comments.
- The most able pupils make good progress in subjects such as science and food technology, being eager to explore ideas, to experiment and to read and adapt recipes, for example.
- When they have established good routines of learning and are ready, those who are most able prepare for national examinations to suit their level of ability.

- Pupils who have taken public examinations have attained in line with others nationally who have the same starting points. Current pupils are preparing for examinations in functional skills, externally accredited awards and GCSE subjects. The work in pupils' folders and books shows good progress over time.
- Pupils' folders for PSHE development and citizenship and the classroom wall displays provide clear evidence of teaching to enhance pupils' personal and academic development, which continues to be good.
- Pupils are well prepared for the transition to their next stage of education, training or employment. They are given individual careers advice and guidance for a range of academic and vocational courses and apprenticeships. For example, pupils from the previous cohort are now in college and studying carpentry and construction.
- The most able pupils have been successful in achieving a place in local sixth-form colleges in Devon and Cornwall.

School details

Unique reference number	135773
DfE registration number	878/6061
Inspection number	10008888

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	3
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Phoenix Learning and Care
Chair	Jon Pain
Headteacher	Abigail Heard
Annual fees (day pupils)	£38,000
Telephone number	01271 859720
Website	http://phoenixlearningcare.co.uk/specialist-childrens-education-what-we-do/
Email address	acornschool@plcl.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	12 February 2013

Information about this school

- Acorn School is an independent, co-educational special school that is registered for boys and girls with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and for those who have autism spectrum disorder and special learning difficulties.
- The school opened in 2007 and is registered for seven pupils aged 11 to 16. There are currently three pupils on roll, all of whom attend full time. All have education, health and care plans.
- The school is owned by Phoenix Learning and Care, a registered company, and is set in a rural location in North Devon.

- The school makes use of additional facilities for physical education.
- The school is overseen by a board of governors, which includes a director of education. The current headteacher has been in post since September 2013. There are three qualified teachers and two teaching assistants. Specialists visit the school when required to provide one-to-one support for pupils as part of their individual education, health and care plans.
- The school aims to provide a warm and welcoming atmosphere where pupils can build trust and feel safe. Leaders aim to ensure that pupils have a consistent and personalised educational experience which helps them prepare for the next stage of their education.
- The school had its last standard inspection in February 2013. In July 2013, the school had a progress monitoring inspection. All of the independent school standards were met at the time of the progress monitoring inspection.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed five lessons and scrutinised samples of pupils' work in different subjects. Meetings and discussions were held with senior leaders and teaching staff and the inspector spoke with three members of the governing body, including the chair of the governing body.
- The inspector examined a number of school documents to check compliance with the independent school standards. These included the school's website, policies, information about pupils' progress and the school's evaluation of its own work.
- Records relating to attendance, behaviour and safeguarding were scrutinised.
- There were too few responses to the online Parent View survey for these to be analysed.
- The inspector took account of four staff questionnaire responses and spoke with pupils.

Inspection team

Flora Bean, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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