

Acorn School

Independent school standard inspection report

DfE registration number	894/6006
Unique Reference Number (URN)	134301
Inspection number	385171
Inspection dates	22–23 November 2011
Reporting inspector	David Young

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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 by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, 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.^{1, 2}

Information about the school

Acorn School is an independent day special school based in Hollinswood, Telford, which opened in 2003. It is owned by Bryn Melyn Care Limited, a specialist provider of therapeutic childcare, and students live in the company's children's homes. Vocational courses are also taught at the Gateway site near Wem in North Shropshire, which is part of the company's Smallbrook School. Acorn School is registered for up to 15 boys and girls aged from 11 to 19 years who have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). Seven students aged 16 to 18 years are currently on roll at the school and all have statements of special educational needs. Most students have been excluded from their previous schools and all have failed to attend schools at some time previously, sometimes for several years. In many cases, in addition to their challenging behaviour and social and emotional needs, students have learning difficulties. The school's last inspection was in 2008.

The school seeks to provide 'a broad, balanced and alternative learning provision that provides flexible learning opportunities' for students to 'grow and develop in confidence, raise their self-esteem and motivation towards learning, and re-engage in a positive manner with crucial education opportunities.'

Evaluation of the school

Acorn School provides a good quality of education based on policies and procedures which are fully integrated with Bryn Melyn's care provision. The flexibility of the curriculum to respond to individual needs is a major strength and this combines with good quality teaching to ensure that students make good progress in their learning and personal development. Arrangements for safeguarding students are secure and the school works effectively with the children's homes to implement outstanding arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of students. The school has made good progress since its last inspection and now meets all the regulations for registration as an independent school.

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents.

² www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents.

Quality of education

The school's curriculum is good and draws on a wide range of accredited courses which are carefully selected to meet the learning needs of individual students. The work of the school effectively extends the education provided for Key Stage 3 and 4 students at Smallbrook School, and since September 2011 the focus has been on the provision of education for post-16 students at Acorn. Both schools make excellent use of the developing facilities for vocational courses at the Gateway Vocational Training and Educational Centre. At the heart of the curriculum offer is an expanding range of nationally recognised qualifications designed to enable students to progress into further education or employment. Students are currently working towards individually chosen, appropriate qualifications in motor vehicle maintenance, horticulture, food technology, active leisure and fitness, and small animal care. Refurbishment of the Gateway site is in progress in order to expand the range of options and courses available. The vocational curriculum is underpinned with an excellent range of accredited opportunities for students to improve their personal development and readiness to move on to the next stage of their education or employment. The breadth of vocational opportunities is expanding to respond to individual requirements but as yet it is not extensive.

Each student is provided with suitable teaching in English, mathematics, and personal, social and health education (PSHE). 'Preparation for working life', and 'life and living' courses, ensure that students receive good careers advice and work through a range of activities relevant to independent living in the future. All students have access to appropriate learning in art and design, music and information and communication technology (ICT), both as discrete subjects and integrated effectively across the curriculum. Physical education and outdoor activities contribute to the health and fitness of students. Where appropriate to the needs of individual students, part-time courses are provided at local further education colleges, together with work experience placements in occupations such as animal care and grounds maintenance. Decisions about the appropriateness of individual curriculum pathways are managed sensitively and flexibly, taking account of students' readiness to integrate into larger communities. Visitors to the school and opportunities to experience the world beyond the school include a visiting artist and a potter, external displays of students' art work, a beach day, and a visit to the Paralympics in Manchester.

The quality of teaching and assessment is good. Teachers plan effectively, deriving their lesson content from various accredited courses, including entry level certificates, Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) bronze and silver awards, Level 1 and 2 certificates and GCSE. The majority of teaching is organised on a one-to-one basis and ensures that work is pitched at the appropriate level for the individual student. Care workers from the students' homes are often continuously present in school and make an effective contribution to the development of relationships and support within the classrooms. Teachers are experienced at increasing the level of challenge and aiming for higher level accreditations when students demonstrate their readiness to move on. Relationships between students and staff are excellent and provide a secure basis for students to

develop their self-confidence and overcome the often severe barriers to learning which have hindered their previous learning. Teachers demonstrate patience and good humour to which the students respond with good concentration and perseverance. Much of the learning is appropriately based on visual resources and hands-on activities which provide students with the opportunity to complete a range of tasks which contribute to the achievement of valuable qualifications. Good account is taken of the requirements of students' statements of special educational needs through the use of generic targets in their individual education plans (IEP). High quality subject plans extend the IEP and provide specific targets for attention in the classroom. Insufficient use is made, however, of precise targets and shared strategies to enable all staff to contribute effectively to the development of literacy in other subjects, in a systematic way for each individual student. A number of the students have already achieved a variety of entry level certificates and, in some cases, are now working effectively towards higher qualifications at Levels 1 and 2, including GCSE.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Provision for students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. Strong relationships exist between the school and the students' homes, and all partners in the process work together to provide effective support to help students manage the challenges in their personal lives. Students respond respectfully to the requirements of the school and, while lapses occur, attendance is at least satisfactory and for the majority it is good. Students who responded to the inspection questionnaire state that they enjoy school and that the school helps them suitably prepare for the future. They demonstrate increasing ability to manage their behaviour and to establish secure relationships with adults; behaviour in the school is good. All the parents and carers who responded state that the school treats their children with respect, and that this meets their particular needs. Students appreciate the opportunity to work towards accreditation in their work and they demonstrate growing maturity in their attitudes towards the future. For some, the process of taking on responsibility is extremely challenging, but their moral and social development is greatly enhanced by the adult role models and the high expectations created. A strong emphasis on preparation for the future and understanding the demands of adult life in the community runs through all aspects of the curriculum. Students are provided with good opportunities to understand the role of public services in the community and they are encouraged to develop their cultural awareness through the expressive arts curriculum. Similarly, the school ensures that cultural diversity is celebrated through, for example, themes in PSHE and recipes introduced in food technology. Provision helps students to gain an appreciation and respect for their own and other cultures that promotes tolerance and harmony. Students make an active contribution to the life of the school by cooking lunches in their food lessons, through display of their art work and through collections for charity, including making gifts for the Christmas Fayre.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Arrangements for the welfare, health and safety of students are outstanding. All written policies present an integrated approach to managing the needs of students both in the school and in their homes. Procedures for safeguarding, including training of all staff in child protection and first aid, and procedures for the recruitment of staff, are implemented consistently. Policies for the management of behaviour, the prevention of bullying, and ensuring students' safety on trips out of school, are comprehensive and regularly reviewed. Staff training in all aspects of students' welfare, health and safety is updated regularly and effectively. All aspects of fire safety, including an up-to-date risk assessment and all of the required, regular checks on fire fighting equipment, are completed systematically. Good attention is given through the school's curriculum and its daily practices, to ensuring that students understand the benefits of healthy lifestyles. The school is an inclusive community which works very closely with the students' homes to support and challenge the most vulnerable who may take ill-advised risks from time to time; the health, safety and welfare of students do not cease at the end of the school day. The school has prepared a three-year accessibility plan which meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school has adopted systematic and comprehensive recruitment and vetting procedures to ensure the suitability of all staff and the proprietor. All of the required checks are recorded appropriately in the single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school premises and accommodation provide a safe and suitable environment for effective learning. Classrooms are of an appropriate size for the small teaching groups and are suitably furnished for the teaching of specialist subjects. The central dining room is used well as the hub of daily school life. The appropriately furnished common areas of the school provide a welcoming reception and meeting area for care staff as regular visitors to the school. The additional premises at the Gateway Centre provide excellent facilities to accommodate the increasing range of vocational courses on offer.

Provision of information

The school prospectus, suitably supported by the company's website, provides parents and carers with relevant and up-to-date information. Parents and carers are made aware of the availability of all of the required school policies. Information about students' attainment and their progress in their learning and personal development is regular, comprehensive and informative. Appropriate information about financial arrangements is submitted to placing local authorities as required and the school makes an extensive contribution to the reviews of students' statements and placement plans.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school has appropriate and fair procedures for the management of any complaints.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

What the school could do to improve further

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

- continue to expand the range of available, accredited vocational courses
- ensure that all staff have access to an agreed range of strategies to develop students' literacy across all subjects of the curriculum.

Inspection judgements

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

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Secondary day school for students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties		
Date school opened	19 August 2003		
Age range of students	11–19 years		
Gender of students	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 5	Girls: 1	Total: 6
Number on roll (part-time students)	Boys: 1	Girls: 0	Total: 1
Number of students with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 6	Girls: 1	Total: 7
Number of students who are looked after	Boys: 6	Girls: 1	Total: 7
Annual fees (day students)	£30,000		
Address of school	Dale Acre Way Hollinswood Telford TF3 2EP		
Telephone number	01952 200410		
Email address	jan.rogers@brynmelyncare.com		
Headteacher	Jan Rogers		
Proprietor	Steve Nevitt		

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



24 November 2011

Dear Students

Inspection of Acorn School, Telford, TF3 2EP

Thank you for your welcome when I visited your school. I enjoyed my visit, including my trip to the Gateway Vocational Centre. The inspection judged that Acorn School provides you with a good quality of education in an adult environment that feels much like a college. I was particularly pleased to see:

- that your questionnaires show that you recognise that teaching is good and that the staff care about you
- the way in which you show respect to the staff and work effectively together
- the way in which you concentrate on your work and make sure that practical activities are finished to a high standard
- the quality of your art and woodwork, and the efforts you put into your cooking, animal care and car mechanics
- the excellent range of subjects, underpinned by vocational courses, which are planned for you and which take account of your individual needs and interests
- the good progress you are making with your work and the number of certificates that you are achieving.

To bring about further improvement I have asked the proprietor and staff to continue to develop the Gateway Centre so that it will provide you with an even wider range of vocational courses. I have also asked them to make sure that everyone focuses on helping you to continue improving your reading and written work across all subjects. You can help to get the best out of Acorn by making sure your attendance is excellent and by continuing to prepare yourselves well for the future.

With all best wishes for the future,

Yours sincerely

David Young
Lead Inspector