

Acorn Park School

Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Banham, Norwich, Norfolk, NR16 2HU

Inspection dates

12 February 2021

Overall outcome

The school does not meet all of the independent school standards that were checked during this inspection

Main inspection findings

Part 1. Quality of education provided

Paragraph 2(1), 2(1)(a), 2(1)(b), 2(1)(b)(i)

- In the standard inspection in February 2020, the quality of the curriculum was weak. Leaders had given little thought to how pupils progressed through their learning from their starting points. Pupils completed disconnected tasks and activities and reading was not prioritised. The quality of teaching was not good enough.
- Since starting in September 2020, new leaders have carefully considered what pupils will learn. There has been a full review of the curriculum and programmes of study. Leaders have chosen and recently implemented a more ambitious and systematic approach to the curriculum for all pupils. The teaching of reading has been given a higher priority.
- There is now a formal and semi-formal curriculum pathway for pupils to follow. In each pathway, the schemes of work are designed carefully so pupils have the opportunity to learn and achieve well across subjects. There are clear links in learning plans to each pupil's education, health and care (EHC) plan with individual targets broken down into smaller steps.
- Pupils studying the formal curriculum have more choice in what they study than was previously the case. The focus is on providing for and improving pupils' independent life skills alongside studying for recognised qualifications, including some GCSE subjects.
- Leaders now check pupils' starting points and have a better understanding of what pupils know and can do. Teachers are increasingly using the information from these checks, together with pupils' EHC plans to build a programme of learning linked to pupils' individual needs. This is in the early stages but is an improvement from the previous standard inspection.
- Leaders have introduced a published reading scheme to help pupils develop their knowledge and skills. Pupils have opportunities to participate in quizzes so that they can check on their own understanding and see the progress they are making.

- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are now met.
- *Paragraph 3, 3(a), 3(c), 3(d), 3(e), 3(g), 3(h)*
- Leaders have reorganised the school facilities. All classes are now based in one central building. Pupils follow either a formal or semi-formal study programme. There is a suitably planned and appropriate curriculum for pupils to learn and make progress.
- Since the previous inspection, owing to a period of planned restructuring, a number of staff left the school. Staffing is now more stable. School records demonstrate that fewer education staff left Acorn Park in the autumn term 2020 than has been the case for some time.
- Staff appreciate the training they receive centrally from the proprietor body and in-house from the new senior leadership team. They are positive about the leadership and curriculum changes which have occurred. Staff show care for pupils. Warm and professional relationships are evident in classes.
- There is a new therapeutic team employed to provide support and interventions to pupils. Therapeutic provision is planned and currently being implemented in line with the Department for Education (DfE) guidance for the third national lockdown in England, which began in January 2021. This is an improvement on the lack of provision seen in the standard inspection.
- Staff have recently started to use a range of assessments to check pupils' understanding and the progress that pupils are making. The assessment system is linked closely to the curriculum. The system is new, and leaders still need to demonstrate that pupils make the best progress possible over time.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are now met.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Paragraph 7, 7(a), 7(b)

- The safeguarding policy reflects the latest statutory guidance and is posted on the school's website.
- Newly appointed staff receive training about safeguarding pupils as part of their induction, including child protection training. All staff receive regular and relevant training through whole-staff training days. They understand and carry out their safeguarding responsibilities.
- There is a designated safeguarding team in place. At the previous inspection, safeguarding processes were in place and records maintained. This has remained the case.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard remain met.

Paragraph 9, 9(b)

- In the previous inspection, some staff did not apply the behaviour policy consistently well.

- There is a relevant behaviour policy in place, and it is published on the website. New staff receive training on the school's new approach to behaviour during their induction period. They are clear about leaders' expectations of behaviour management. All of the classes observed were orderly. Leaders monitor pupils' behaviour closely to check for consistency of approach.
- Staff are appropriately trained to be able to deal with any cases of positive handling and restraint. School records demonstrate that the need for restraint continues to diminish over time.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are now met.

Paragraph 11

- There is an appropriate health and safety policy in place. The maintenance team check and maintain the condition of the site well.
- Pupils learn in a bright, colourful and friendly environment. Refurbishments have been carried out to a high standard. Leaders ensure that the health and safety of pupils is properly considered.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are met.

Paragraph 14

- Teaching staff are suitably qualified and experienced to carry out their roles. Fewer agency staff are being used. This is a significant improvement and is starting to provide reassurance for pupils and parents.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in this paragraph of the standard are met.

■ *Paragraph 16, 16(a), 16(b)*

- There are many examples of how leaders are identifying and managing risks. Pupils have appropriate and detailed individual behaviour or risk assessment plans to help them regulate their actions and emotions throughout the day.
- There is a risk assessment to mitigate the dangers associated with the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Risks have been appropriately identified and leaders have acted in line with the guidance from Public Health England.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are met.

Part 5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

Paragraph 25

- Since the previous inspection, new leaders have reorganised and refurbished the school building. The school, administration and residential buildings are located in a large number of houses and other buildings that are set in 30 acres of grounds.
- The school building is now situated in the main quadrant. This has been carefully designed to provide a safe and secure area for pupils. There is a playground for younger

pupils. All lessons now take place in the central building. The classrooms, corridors and other administration areas have been refurbished to a high standard.

- Leaders are in the process of upgrading the residential accommodation for boarding pupils. This will help students in the sixth form who live on site to gain independent living skills.
- The electronic gates ensure that entry into the school and pupils' residential areas is safe and secure. The houses outside these gates are used for staff housing and for families who visit. There is adequate space between the school buildings and the main road and leaders have ensured that risks are suitably mitigated.
- Leaders have ensured that the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are met.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

Paragraph 34(1), 34(1)(a), 34(1)(b)

- This independent school standard was not met at the standard inspection in February 2020. This was because the school had not been well led and managed and had been in decline. The many changes in leadership and staff had been unsettling for pupils, parents and staff. Interim leadership was in place at that time.
- New leaders have the necessary skills and expertise to lead the school forward. They have quickly implemented a new curriculum which aims to meet the needs of pupils well. Senior leaders understand what needs to be done to improve the school and are taking the necessary actions.
- In their first term, senior leaders have made great strides to change and eradicate deep-seated inadequacies. Their actions have been well considered and with the best interests of pupils in mind. The head of service has a clear improvement plan which is being implemented at pace to improve the quality of education that pupils receive.
- Many parents and carers are positive about the changes at Acorn Park. In a recent parental questionnaire, respondents were almost overwhelmingly positive about the care, safety and teaching their children are now receiving. However, there are a minority of parents who express concerns. Leaders, governors and local authorities are aware of these parental concerns.
- Middle leadership has been strengthened. There are now two deputy headteachers in place who have the necessary skills and abilities to lead their areas of responsibility. Leaders are in the process of recruiting a leader for mathematics to ensure that this core subject is suitably led and managed.
- The proprietorial body and governing body provide challenge and support through their regular meetings. They hold school leaders to account for the key performance indicators which have been set in the action plan. The members of the proprietorial body and governors have a realistic view of what is working well and what still needs to be better.
- Many of the processes and procedures which leaders have introduced for the curriculum and management of the school are very recent. Leaders, governors and the proprietorial body have not checked and reviewed the quality and sustainability of the recent

improvements made over time. They recognise that more evidence is required to demonstrate that all standards are effectively and consistently met.

- Leaders have not ensured that all the requirements contained in these paragraphs of the standard are met.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school does not meet the requirements of the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements that were checked during this inspection, as set out in the annex of this report. This included the standards and requirements that the school was judged to not comply with at the previous inspection. Not all of the standards and associated requirements were checked during this inspection.

School details

Unique reference number	135066
DfE registration number	926/6152
Inspection number	10177560

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	Independent
School status	Independent special school
Age range of pupils	6 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	84
Number of part-time pupils	2
Proprietor	Options First Group
Chair	Nick Simpson
Head of Service	Peter Marshall
Headteacher	Mrs Philippa Whipp
Annual fees (day pupils)	£62,500
Telephone number	01953 888656
Website	www.acornpark.org.uk
Email address	admin@acornparkschool.co.uk
Date of previous standard inspection	25–27 February 2020

Information about this school

- The interim leadership in place at the time of the standard inspection are no longer in post.
- A new permanent head of service was appointed and began employment in September 2020.

- The interim deputy headteacher was appointed as permanent head of school in December 2020.
- The proprietorial body is the Outcomes First Group.
- All pupils at the school have an EHC plan. Most pupils have a primary diagnosis of autism. Many have comorbidities.
- Admission to the school is via local authority placement.
- To date, since the school opened in 2005, Ofsted has conducted nine inspections, and evaluated three action plans:
 - 17 July 2006, a standard inspection when overall effectiveness of the school was judged to be good
 - 7 July 2009, a 'light touch' inspection when school was judged to remain good
 - 13 May 2010, an emergency inspection when independent school standards were not met
 - 19 May 2011, an emergency inspection when independent school standards were not met
 - 3 October 2012, a standard integrated inspection when overall effectiveness was judged to be satisfactory
 - 24 June 2014, an emergency inspection when independent school standards were not met
 - 21 October 2014, an evaluation of an action plan, which was deemed to be acceptable
 - 5 February 2015, a progress monitoring inspection when independent school standards were met
 - 26 April 2016, a standard inspection when overall effectiveness was judged to require improvement
 - 27 July 2016, an evaluation of an action plan which was deemed to be acceptable
 - 9 May 2018, a standard inspection when overall effectiveness was judged to be good
 - 25 February 2020, a standard inspection where the overall effectiveness was judged to be inadequate
 - 20 October 2020, an evaluation of an action plan which was deemed to not be acceptable.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out at the request of the registration authority for independent schools. The purpose of the inspection was to monitor the progress the school has made in meeting the independent school standards and other requirements that it was judged to not comply with at its previous inspection.
- This inspection was commissioned by the DfE during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- This was the first monitoring inspection since the standard inspection in February 2020 when the school was judged inadequate.
- The inspection was conducted with no notice and by two inspectors to minimise the amount of time spent on the premises.
- While on site, we followed the risk assessment measures put in place by leaders due to COVID-19.
- We held meetings with the head of service, the heads of school and other senior leaders. We spoke with the chair of governors and a representative of the proprietor body to evaluate action plans and the improvements made since the last inspection.
- We spoke with staff and had phone conversations with representatives from two local authorities.
- We scrutinised a wide range of documents, including school policies, curriculum information, documents regarding behaviour of pupils, recruitment and employment checks on staff, and assessment information, to determine the progress that has been made since the previous inspection.
- The school website was checked.

Inspection team

Kim Hall, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Fyfe Johnston

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school does not meet the following independent school standards

Standards that were not met at the previous inspection and remain un-met at this inspection

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school–
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

The school now meets the following requirements of the independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if–
 - 2(1)(a) the proprietor ensures that a written policy on the curriculum, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, which provides for the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2) is drawn up and implemented effectively; and
 - 2(1)(b) the written policy, plans and schemes of work–
 - 2(1)(b)(i) take account the ages, aptitudes and needs of all pupils, including those pupils with an EHC plan.
- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school–
 - 3(a) enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught;
 - 3(c) involves well-planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time
 - 3(d) shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons;
 - 3(e) demonstrates good knowledge and understanding of the subject matter being taught;
 - 3(g) demonstrates that a framework is in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and use information from that assessment to plan teaching so that pupils can progress;
 - 3(h) utilises effective strategies for managing behaviour and encouraging all pupils to act responsibly.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 9 The standard is met if the proprietor promotes good behaviour amongst pupils by ensuring that–
 - 9(b) the policy is implemented effectively.

Part 8. Leadership and management

- 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

Standards checked which were met at the previous inspection. These standards remain met.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety

- 7 The standard is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 7(a) arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and
 - 7(b) such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
- 11 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that relevant health and safety laws are complied with by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written health and safety policy.
- 14 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that pupils are properly supervised through the appropriate deployment of school staff.
- 16 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that–
 - 16(a) the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk assessment policy; and
 - 16(b) appropriate action is taken to reduce risks that are identified.

Part 5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 25 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the school premises and the accommodation and facilities provided therein are maintained to a standard such that, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety and welfare of pupils are ensured.

Part 6. Provision of information

- 32(1)(c) particulars of the arrangements for meeting the standard contained in paragraph 7 are published on the school's internet website or, where no website exists, are provided to parents on request.

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