

Helen Allison School

Helen Allison School, Longfield Road, Meopham, Gravesend Kent DA13 0EW
Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

The National Autistic Society (NAS) provides Helen Allison School for children, irrespective of gender, on the autistic spectrum. Residential care is available for up to seven pupils aged five to 19 years of age. The residential building is in Gravesend, approximately five miles away from the school site. The school is registered for 77 pupils. Currently, five pupils stay on 38-week residential placements and two pupils stay under flexi-boarding arrangements.

Inspection dates: 6 to 8 March 2018

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

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

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: 22 November 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- The school continues to provide a very high standard of nurturing care to residential pupils who have an outstanding experience during their stays.
- Highly collaborative working between the senior management team, therapy, psychology, education and care staff supports pupils to make significant progress.
- Pupils benefit greatly from a 24-hour curriculum which is highly individualised and helps them to flourish.
- The safety of pupils is central. Staff protect pupils from risks such as online grooming and radicalisation exceptionally well.
- Strong leadership and management with high expectations drive the school's improvement and development.
- In areas such as integrating therapy, staff provide a cutting-edge countrywide lead to other schools for children who have autistic spectrum disorder.
- By sharing expertise with others, leaders promote a greater understanding of autistic spectrum disorder in the wider community, which benefits the pupils.
- Staff partnership working with parents and carers is a strength of this school. Parents regard the school highly and trust the staff to care for their children.
- Leaders and managers show commitment to continuously improving pupils' experiences and progress by implementing innovative ideas.
- A parent said that they value the school's 'very good communication' and appreciates that their child is 'very happy' in the school.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder receive support to make significant progress. The 24-hour curriculum inextricably links the school and the residential experience. Pupils receive an individual response to any changes in their behaviour from a multi-agency team. A member of staff said: 'Our strength is communication; knowledge of children is in the whole staff team.' The school's RAG-rating (red, amber, green) scheme is used to very good effect to communicate clearly when pupils have achieved, or when they may need more support to meet their targets.

Parents and carers describe excellent progress in their child's everyday behaviour, which benefits their well-being. For example, some children now eat a greater variety of foods, have better sleeping patterns or have reduced self-harming behaviour. Some pupils will now sit at a table and experience meals as social occasions, showing good manners such as waiting for others to finish eating before leaving the table.

Parents and carers give examples of their children increasingly learning to manage situations and to control their own anger. As a result, pupils are calmer and involved in fewer challenging incidents. Staff are skilled in de-escalating challenging behaviour. They are clear about using restraint only as a last resort. Some pupils have acquired self-sensory regulating behaviour, such as joint compression. This makes pupils more independent in managing their own sensory needs. Pupils benefit greatly from the school therapy dog, which they spend time with to reduce anxiety and improve their emotional well-being.

Pupils benefit from a very thorough assessment process, which can last for up to three months. Staff visit children in their school or at home, talk to families and professionals and gather information. An induction meeting enables further individual planning and risk assessment. This thorough process helps ensure that staff can meet pupil's needs and minimise their anxiety as they move into the residential provision.

Staff prepare pupils very well for changes in their lives, for example, by the use of social stories. Many pupils stay in touch with the staff when they leave. A manager said: 'Support and outreach goes on for as long as they want.'

Residential staff know the pupils very well. Pupils experience warm and affectionate relationships with them. A parent said: 'Staff are all so nice and kind to him.' Staff recognise that transitions can be very unsettling for pupils and support them very well to manage these, for example, with firm hugs when some arrive in the residence after school.

Residential staff seek and respect pupils' views. The student council is effective in presenting questions and suggestions to the senior management team. Staff consult

pupils about plans for their residential experience and they give feedback on their time there.

Pupils enjoy taking part in meaningful activities. Those who usually wish to engage only in electronic media now accept a more active lifestyle, with limited use of media. They play games, cook and do craft activities in the residence. Pupils have opportunities to go into the community and mix with others, for example, at a youth club. They learn to negotiate public transport and manage their spending in shops. They have enjoyed a trip away camping and doing outside activities for a few nights.

As well as being fun, such experiences develop pupils' confidence and independence skills. A parent said staff 'push him further than we do' and that their child 'would choose to stay rather than come home'. Pupils get opportunities for physical exercise, such as playing on exercise equipment in the park, climbing and bowling. However, in surveys, some pupils and parents said that they would like to do more physical activities.

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

Safeguarding pupils is a priority for the senior management team. For example, the principal conducts 'learning walks' and quizzes to help identify any areas of need or staff training. Weekly meetings on all aspects of safeguarding ensure that leaders and managers can react to current issues and source extra help for pupils if necessary. Staff are skilled at distinguishing between behaviour which is a result of a pupil's autistic spectrum disorder and that which could be a safeguarding matter, for example, those pupils who self-restrict their diet.

The excellent range and depth of safeguarding training equips staff with the skills they need to keep pupils safe. Staff are very aware of the need to spot signs of abuse as pupils may not be able to express that something is wrong. The school promotes anti-radicalisation very well. Excellent collaboration between the staff and police has resulted in vulnerable pupils receiving the support they need.

Parents said that their children are safe and secure in school. For example, no pupils have gone missing from the school, residence or while on trips out, even though some have a propensity to run off. Robust risk management strategies help staff to keep pupils safe. A parent said that staff recognise that families need reassurance, as their children are so vulnerable. Parents and carers described 'excellent communication' with the staff.

Pupils have clear guidance in appropriate formats about who can help them should they have any worries. This includes people external to the school such as the independent visitor. Very good use is made of external speakers and training for pupils and staff. For example, the NSPCC delivered lessons on 'Speak out, stay safe' to pupils, and the police have delivered training on online grooming.

Leaders and managers understand that pupils are at risk outside of the school and residential setting. They disseminate information and training to parents and others in the community, for example, about protecting children from online abuse.

Leaders and managers are instrumental in raising the profile of people in society who have autistic spectrum disorder and in reducing prejudice towards them. They have trained the police and provide work experience to police officers to improve their understanding of these people. Staff have trained taxi drivers, shop staff, social workers and other charities on the needs of pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder. A large clothing chain consulted pupils on their specific needs regarding clothing. It incorporated their suggestions into a range of clothing suitable for people who have special needs.

Staff manage pupils' health needs and medication safely. Pupils may not be able to tell staff if they feel unwell or are in pain. Staff understand pupils' needs and behaviour very well and can interpret any changes which may suggest they are unwell. This, and close contact with families, helps to ensure that pupils receive the medical attention they need. Staff have been proactive in working with the NHS to ensure that long waiting times for treatment, which would be very difficult for pupils who have autistic spectrum disorder, can be successfully managed.

A very robust recruitment process helps to ensure that only suitable adults work with residential pupils. Staff are exemplary in contacting all the organisations a candidate has previously worked for, if this has involved children, for a reference.

Checks of the premises, such as for gas and fire safety, are thorough and timely. Pupils are fully involved in fire drills so that they know how to react in an emergency. Staff work with pupils individually about fire safety; they work in a sensitive way with those who are fearful of the alarm bell and create personal evacuation plans to assist some pupils.

An accessible complaints policy is available. No one has made a complaint regarding welfare in this period since the last full inspection. Staff work effectively with the local authority designated officer, referring any concerns as appropriate.

The best use is made of the residential building. For example, those pupils who require space alone from others are afforded this in the building. Staff carefully consider the impact a new admission may have on existing residents and are clear that 'needs have to fit'.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The senior management team ensures that all children make progress by providing an eclectic, personalised approach that is based on research. The team focuses on providing the communication methods, therapy and environment which best suits

each individual pupil. The residential service is integral to the school, and the head of care is part of the senior management team. Monitoring is very good; an independent person visits the residential pupils regularly and checks what goes on.

Staff regard the integrated therapy model as being extremely beneficial to residential pupils. Plans are in place to disseminate this practice to other schools provided by the NAS. All staff have access to a library of useful visual supports, which they can use with pupils. For example, a guide including photographs of each pupil helps children to understand their move to the residential service.

Staff show passion for their jobs and a firm commitment to the pupils. Apart from waking night staff, all care staff also work in the school so that they get to know the pupils really well. A parent said: 'Staff are very caring and very fond of my child.' Staff were very pleased to win the 'team of the year' across the NAS in 2017. A parent said: 'They've done a really great job; what they do we try to replicate.'

Pupils experience consistency as staff tend to stay in their posts, some for many years. This greatly benefits those pupils who have left the school as they remain in touch with staff, and one even returned for their favourite meal cooked by their previous key worker. An overlap of staff on each shift ensures that there is an effective handover of information about pupils' behaviour and needs. A member of staff described pupils' experience as, 'fantastic, based on their relationships with staff and the life skills they acquire to prepare them for life after school'.

Staff receive excellent training and support to work with pupils. One member of staff described their induction as, 'fantastic, and done swiftly'. Managers have recently changed staff supervision to make it a more reflective model of group supervision with the option of individual 1:1 time. It is hoped that this will be more useful to staff. Staff make good use of reflective journals to record items for discussion with managers.

Leaders and managers strongly advocate for the pupils. For example, they will challenge placing authorities about accessing the right provision for a child. They work very well to promote positive relationships when pupils are living away from their birth families. Parents and carers describe 'excellent communication' with the staff and value how they work with them to support their children.

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: SC024066

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Kim McDonnell

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Inspector

Jacqueline Graves, social care regulatory inspector



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