

Little Acorns School

London Beach Farm, Ashford Road, St Michael's, Tenterden, Kent TN30 6SR

Inspection dates

6–8 November 2018

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The determined efforts of the headteacher, and the strong support provided by staff, has ensured that Little Acorns is a good school.
- The curriculum provides very well for pupils' learning needs. Lessons typically capture pupils' interests and keep them focused on tasks.
- There is a strong safeguarding culture at Little Acorns. Effective staff training ensures that everyone knows the actions to take to protect pupils from harm.
- Teaching is good. Highly positive relationships between staff and pupils shine throughout the school.
- Pupils' personal development and welfare are outstanding. For instance, additional learning opportunities support pupils' social, emotional and well-being requirements to a high standard.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding. Staff support pupils to attend well and help them to value the education they receive.
- Strong links are in place between the school and the children's home where pupils live. All staff promote pupils' well-being needs to a high standard.
- Pupils achieve well in a range of subjects. Work in pupils' books demonstrates that pupils have pride in their work.
- Governance has strengthened significantly. Governors carefully monitor pupils' achievements against their care plans. Rightly, governors are refining their work to improve their scrutiny of pupils' academic achievements.
- Systems to support staff members' ongoing professional development are not fully refined. This limits the headteacher's ability to develop further teaching and learning.
- Staff do not deliver the school's chosen phonics strategy well enough. Some staff do not have strong phonics subject knowledge.

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 leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - performance management systems are refined to improve teaching and learning further
 - governors use school information more effectively to hold leaders to account for pupils' academic progress and attainment.
- Improve teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - staff have the knowledge to teach phonics to a high standard.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The headteacher has been instrumental in leading sustained improvement at Little Acorns. She has worked tirelessly in planning for, and delivering, significant positive change to standards across the school. Her determined efforts, and those of her staff, enable pupils to receive a good education.
- There is a palpable, caring atmosphere at Little Acorns. The school's aims are delivered well and all staff strive to ensure that pupils are prepared to live 'a happy and fulfilled life'. All adults demonstrate a passion to ensure that pupils are treated with dignity, and feel safe, loved and respected.
- In return, pupils respond well to this nurturing environment. Pupils, through their words and interactions with staff, show that they feel secure and well cared for.
- The headteacher is forging good links with other special-education schools. Importantly, this is enabling her to check the accuracy of her evaluations of pupils' progress. This process adds important extra rigour to the school's improved assessment strategy.
- The headteacher has strengthened the school's assessment systems. She uses this information to monitor both the progress pupils make against their social and emotional targets and pupils' academic achievements. Critically, the headteacher also uses this information carefully to tailor classroom learning and individual interventions to pupils' needs.
- Staff training and professional development have improved greatly. For instance, one learning support assistant has recently completed training for a higher-level teaching-assistant qualification. Another is currently training to be a teacher. All staff demonstrate a keenness to improve further their own practice.
- Pupils who attend the school have a range of special educational needs and/or disabilities. Their needs are met very well. Staff use the well-written care plans to provide the different interventions and support pupils need to make good progress from their starting points.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced. The headteacher gives considerable care to ensure that the curriculum provides a rich variety of experiences for pupils. For instance, off-site trips are adapted to provide both educational enrichment and opportunities to develop pupils' independence and self-confidence. The curriculum has a positive impact in readying pupils for when they leave Little Acorns.
- Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is well established. This week, pupils visited the local war memorial and created their own 'lest we forget' medals of honour to commemorate the fallen soldiers of the First World War. These activities are carefully managed to take into account pupils' own circumstances and to ensure that pupils do not suffer any additional stress or anxiety.
- Currently, staff performance management and appraisal systems are not strong enough. This is because only a limited range of information is used to hold staff to account. As a result, the headteacher is not yet able to develop outstanding teaching at Little Acorns.

Governance

- Governance has improved since the previous inspection. The newly appointed chair of the advisory board visits the school frequently and closely monitors pupils' progress. Her evaluations are most effective when checking leaders' impact in improving outcomes against pupils' individual care plans. Members of the advisory board demonstrate high aspirations for all pupils to achieve highly.
- Governance is not yet fully effective in checking standards of education at the school. This is because members of the advisory board are still getting to grips with the new academic assessment information used at school. They are aware of this and are beginning to strengthen further their ability to use a broader range of information to hold leaders to account.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- Safeguarding has strengthened significantly at Little Acorns. This is because staff receive suitable and timely training to develop their skills in keeping children safe. For instance, learning support assistants demonstrate strong, contextual safeguarding knowledge regarding peer-to-peer abuse. They know the particular manner in which pupils at Little Acorns could be vulnerable to this type of risk. Staff ensure that a culture of vigilance now exists at school.
- Staff members' work with other care workers contributes well to ensuring that pupils are properly safeguarded. For instance, frequent communication between the school and the on-site children's home keeps everyone well informed of pupils' health and well-being. Additionally, designated safeguarding leaders across both provisions meet regularly to share relevant information. These strong links help keep children safe.
- Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe. For instance, internet-safety lessons are a prominent feature of the curriculum, and pupils receive the additional support they need to be safe online. Additionally, they learn good routines that support their personal safety. This was seen clearly when some pupils visited the local stables, instructing inspectors to 'keep back when the horses come out' and explaining that 'you must always wear a safety helmet when riding'.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Teaching is typically well organised. Learning is structured carefully to ensure that pupils make good progress from their individual starting points. When appropriate, pupils are provided with the breaks they need to sustain their focus over time. This time is put to good use to develop other areas of pupils' development, such as their social interaction skills. Learning time is rarely wasted.
- Teaching staff demonstrate good subject knowledge. They ask searching questions, both to gauge what pupils understand, and to deepen pupils' knowledge and understanding. Teaching is usually paced effectively, and provokes useful dialogue that helps pupils firmly embed their knowledge.
- The best examples of teaching are effective in tackling pupils' misconceptions. For

instance, in science pupils were discovering about air resistance by constructing parachutes for toy figures. Clear, concise explanations from the class teacher helped to demystify pupils' confusion over the role gravity plays in an object falling.

- Learning takes into consideration pupils' views and interests. Last term, pupils wanted to learn about dinosaurs. Teaching was planned around this topic, and pupils produced some wonderful work, notably some terrific pictures in art. Additionally, a visit to the Natural History Museum in London further enriched pupils' learning.
- Most-able pupils are challenged effectively. For example, in English they are given work based on conjunctions and clauses that is significantly more difficult. When planning for the most-able, teaching typically takes into account their higher levels of understanding.
- Teaching of phonics is not yet developed enough. Despite having appropriate resources, staff do not yet demonstrate the knowledge to deliver the school's chosen scheme well. Sometimes, for example, staff mispronounce the schemes' defined letters and sounds. This lack of consistency limits pupils' progress in phonics.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Staff are fastidious in tailoring high-quality provision to support pupils' emotional and social development. For instance, when working with horses at the local stables pupils learn about emotions and how others interpret emotional responses. One pupil remarked, 'be careful everyone, the horse is getting jittery', demonstrating he had understood correctly the horse's temperament, and how it might make the animal behave more erratically.
- Strong links and exceptionally close communication between the school and the children's home ensure that the looking after of pupils continues outside of school hours. For example, if a pupil is sick or unable to attend school, staff between the two settings work collaboratively to support them. Where appropriate, staff provide extra support to ensure that pupils do not miss out on important work or interventions while they are unable to attend school.
- Pupils are supported to maintain mutual respect between themselves and others. Staff are exemplary in modelling for pupils the behaviours and attitudes that are vital in developing effective interpersonal relationships and broader life-skills. As a result, pupils frequently contribute effectively to the school's calm, nurturing atmosphere.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Pupils' attendance is typically very strong. This is because of the excellent work of staff in promoting the importance of learning. One pupil, who was convalescing in the children's home due to illness, told the inspector: 'I can't wait to get back to school. My education is really important to me; I don't want to miss any more lessons than I have to.'
- Some pupils present highly challenging behaviours and extreme anxieties. These issues

are managed exceptionally well by the staff, who use pupils' care plans to respond appropriately to incidents of difficult behaviour as they arise. Pupils achieve well because staff deploy successful techniques to soothe their anxieties, de-escalate tensions, and manage any disruptive behaviour.

- Typically, pupils have very positive attitudes to learning. Well-structured lessons help pupils remain focused and engaged. They are confident and self-assured when asking questions and will mostly listen attentively to their peers' thoughts and ideas. Their books are often presented carefully and neatly, showing their pride in their work.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Throughout the school, pupils make strong progress in their social and emotional development. A wide range of high-quality interventions ensure that pupils develop the life-skills they need to lead successful and fulfilling lives.
- School information and work in exercise books shows that pupils make good progress in English and mathematics from their starting points. Pupils' writing demonstrates that most achieve well over time.
- Pupils learn well in science because lessons are adapted according to their needs. Frequently, activities are very practical, and these 'hands-on' tasks bring science to life for pupils. As a result, pupils' scientific understanding is developed well from their starting points.
- Pupils' physical development is good. Ample opportunities are provided for pupils to be fit and active. The yoga lessons are particularly effective in developing pupils' core strength, balance and coordination.
- In reading, pupils make good progress from their starting points. They are supported to read frequently from books that are appropriate to their ability. School records demonstrate that pupils read widely and often, both in school and in the children's home.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 131810 |
| DfE registration number | 886/6085 |
| Inspection number | 10054078 |

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.

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| Type of school | Other independent special school |
| School category | Independent school |
| Age range of pupils | 5 to 14 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 5 |
| Number of part-time pupils | 0 |
| Proprietor | Jawad Sheikh–Choice Lifestyles |
| Chair | Barbara Dansey |
| Headteacher | Alison Neal |
| Annual fees (day pupils) | £42,234 |
| Telephone number | 01233 850422 |
| Website | www.littleacorns@choicelifestyles.net |
| Email address | info@choicelifestyles.net |
| Date of previous inspection | 8–10 November 2016 |

Information about this school

- Little Acorns opened in 1999. It is a school that specialises in working with pupils who have severe behavioural, emotional and mental health issues. The school does not provide alternative provision.
- The school is owned by Choice Lifestyles and is registered to take pupils aged five to 14 years of age.
- There are currently five pupils on roll.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan.

- Pupils are taught in two classes: one for older pupils, and one for younger.
- The school was last inspected in November 2016 when the overall effectiveness was judged to be inadequate and a number of independent school standards were found to be unmet. Following two monitoring visits, in June and October 2017, these unmet standards had been addressed successfully. All independent school standards remain met.

Information about this inspection

- The lead inspector observed pupils' learning in a wide range of lessons across both classrooms. The lead inspector also scrutinised pupils' work in their books and folders.
- The lead inspector held meetings with the headteacher, with learning support staff, and with a representative of the proprietor.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's parent or staff surveys.
- The lead inspector spoke with pupils informally, during lessons and around school.
- A wide range of documentation was reviewed, including information available on the school's website, and records relating to pupils' attainment, progress, attendance and behaviour. Information on governance, including minutes of meetings, was also examined. The school's self-evaluation summary and school improvement plan were also scrutinised, along with records of the school's arrangements for keeping pupils safe.

Inspection team

Dom Cook, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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