

Inspection report
Hill House School
Independent special school
DfES ref no: 850/6031

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 6 - 9 February 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Hill House is a small co-educational independent school which provides 52 week per year residential special care and education for pupils aged 11 to 19 years who have severe autism, learning difficulties and challenging behaviour. The school is one of seven schools and colleges run by Cambian Education Services. It recruits pupils primarily from across the South of England and the Channel Islands. At the time of the inspection the school had 16 boys and 6 girls all of whom were full-time residents at the school.

The prospectus states that, *"in order for students to achieve we offer a structured, broad, balanced waking day curriculum within a calm, consistent and purposeful environment. We aim to provide experiences and teach skills that will enable our students to develop as much independence as possible and prepare them to live happily within the community"*.

Summary of main findings

Hill House School provides outstanding education and care for all its pupils in line with its strong ethos and purpose. The curriculum is designed effectively and provides many opportunities for pupils to develop their personal and social skills and acquire independent living skills through the 24-hour curriculum. The school develops beneficial links with the local community. The very high quality of teaching caters effectively for the individual needs of each pupil. It ensures that pupils have the opportunity to develop their understanding through clearly structured and well designed lessons. Pupils' progress is carefully monitored and regularly reviewed. The school places a strong emphasis on ensuring the welfare, health and safety of all pupils and staff. In particular it has a sophisticated and effective approach to behaviour support. All adults, including the teaching, care, cleaning and maintenance staff provide an outstanding level of service, education and care to the pupils. The school maintains strong links with parents and ensures that they remain fully informed about activities at the school and the pupils' progress and developments.

What the school does well:

- it offers a high quality, relevant, structured curriculum which caters fully for the differentiated needs of individual pupils;
- it provides very high quality and outstandingly well structured teaching;

- it has well developed strategies to communicate with pupils and is adept at managing their challenging behaviour;
- it ensures a seamless link between the educational and care settings through close liaison between the respective staff teams;
- it is strongly committed to generating a well-trained, committed staff team that demonstrate outstanding professionalism;
- it has a strong ethos and purpose which is clearly communicated to parents and is central to the strong commitment and dedicated approach of all staff.

Next Steps

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

- continue with its initial plans to update the teaching accommodation.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The school provides a high quality curriculum which focuses very strongly on pupils' priority needs. It includes literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology and most other subjects of the National Curriculum, including religious education. As pupils go through the school there is an increasing emphasis on vocational subjects which are delivered primarily through practical activities. The Post-16 curriculum focuses particularly on independent living skills which help equip pupils very successfully for the next stage of their life beyond school. These achievements are accredited through the Awards Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) transition challenges towards independence. Recent additions of additional music and drama to the timetable have extended creative opportunities.

The school makes very good arrangements to use community facilities for activities such as swimming in a nearby leisure centre and concerts and services in a local church. Links with other schools and a local further education college provide opportunities for other sporting activities. All pupils start their day with a walk in the school's extensive grounds. They have numerous opportunities through an impressive enrichment programme to exercise and explore the wider community and experience new activities.

The curriculum incorporates all aspects of personal, social and health education (PSHE), citizenship and work-related activities, such as mini enterprise, very effectively. PSHE and citizenship also covers aspects of sex education and relationships education, drugs and alcohol awareness and teaches pupils about their rights and responsibilities.

The school has developed good links with the local Connexions service. It fulfils the requirements detailed in each pupil's statement of special educational need, through exemplary expertise in meeting the specific individual needs of its pupils. It also provides high quality therapeutic and medical provision where required. It advocates strongly for pupils at the time of transfer to adult settings.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching at the school is very high. The majority of lessons observed during the inspection were good or outstanding. The school has developed a common structure which all teachers follow when planning and delivering the curriculum. All lessons are underpinned by a strong focus on the acquisition of life skills and promotion of appropriate behaviour. Lessons always begin with the teacher introducing the activities and structure of the lesson and establishing a learning goal for each pupil. They end with an evaluation of the activities that have been completed. These include a review of the level of enjoyment experienced by the pupil, consideration of pupils' progress against their individual learning goals and a celebration of the work and behaviour of each pupil. This standardised approach

ensures that pupils have the opportunity to address the challenges posed by the learning activities within a routine lesson format with which they are comfortable.

Staff are adept at managing the transition of pupils at the beginning and end of each teaching block between the domestic and classroom environment and employ a number of effective strategies to support pupils in making that transition.

When communicating with pupils staff use a blend of speech, signing and paper-based symbols skilfully to provide the most effective form of communication with each pupil. At the beginning of each day teachers ensure that pupils understand the daily activities through the use of interactive visual timetables. After each activity pupils are encouraged to refer back to the timetable and monitor their progress through the highly structured routines.

All lessons are designed very carefully to maintain the interest and attention of pupils. They incorporate a broad range of succinct, focused and achievable tasks and activities and are always conducted at a brisk pace. Teachers use a very wide variety of teaching aids and resources which are prepared in advance of the lesson effectively. Staff are particularly skilful at managing the relatively unpredictable nature and behaviour of the pupils, for example if they become distressed or wish to leave the classroom. They frequently adapt the teaching activities, or respond to pupils' actions or behaviour in a way that results in minimum disruption to the learning activities of other pupils.

All academic and care staff are familiar with the individual needs and abilities of each pupil. They work together well to support them in achieving their respective learning goals and extending their skills, abilities and understanding. For the younger pupils in class 1 the teacher introduces them to the format and routines of the school methodically. The older pupils clearly show that they have acquired a significantly higher level of autonomy and understanding in the more challenging activities that they undertake.

Assessment strategies are rigorous and detailed. Teachers maintain comprehensive records of pupils' progress. There are regular formal progress reviews which are used to help design the ongoing individual education plan for each pupil.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The school promotes the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils very effectively. These four areas permeate the life of the school, helping pupils to understand themselves better and improve their self-esteem and self-confidence. Through its structured approach to personal development, the school is highly successful at increasing pupils' awareness of acceptable behaviour in all situations. As a result, pupils become much more able to control their emotions and behaviour and learn to live successfully in the school and wider community.

Pupils' social development is also supported effectively through regular participation in activities such as the tuck shop, where they can practice turn taking and sharing. The residential setting provides many opportunities for pupils to experience social activities in the wider community. These include, for example the Gateway Club, where they learn the more challenging skills of fitting in with new routines, changes of perspective and flexibility. Pupils are helped to become more self-aware through the school council and a host of carefully provided opportunities to express preferences.

The characteristics of autism make it difficult for pupils to understand abstract concepts, but moments of reflection during assemblies, quiet moments in lessons, out in the grounds, or listening to music, provide good opportunities for pupils to develop a basic level of spiritual sensitivity. The creative arts curriculum, visits to places of worship, celebration of religious festivals and working with an artist in residence contribute well to pupils developing understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school places a strong emphasis on the welfare, health and safety of pupils, staff and visitors. Pupils receive a very high level of care in both the educational and residential settings from experienced and committed staff. The adult to pupil ratio is very high and all are aware of the individual needs of each pupil. There are detailed and thorough processes in place to ensure effective handover between care team shifts, as well as close liaison between care teams and educational staff. Visitors who come in contact with pupils are issued with clear guidance and a briefing about the behavioural characteristics of each pupil and how best to respond.

There is a comprehensive range of written policies including those for fire safety, First Aid, health and safety, child protection and behaviour support. Appropriate policies and procedures are also in place regarding the control and issue of medication. Policies and procedures are implemented consistently and underpinned by regular audits on such aspects as fire alarm systems and fire evacuations. The school has a particularly rigorous approach to risk assessments which staff complete prior to a wide variety of pupil's events, in particular off-site activities, to help ensure the safety of pupils and staff. There are ample qualified first-aiders available at all times. Admission and attendance registers are kept as required.

The school has a very detailed policy regarding behaviour support. It strongly promotes an approach which focuses on empathy and understanding, reflecting the school's overarching philosophy of positive practice. This is underpinned by a nationally accepted model of crisis intervention and prevention. All staff are very well trained in the role of the multidisciplinary team, verbal and non-verbal calming techniques and strategies for management and intervention. Detailed records are maintained if any physical intervention is used to manage a situation.

In line with disability discrimination legislation, the school has an action plan in place to promote improvements in the accessibility of its premises.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

In accordance with the regulations all staff have been subject to satisfactory clearance with the Criminal Records Bureau at the appropriate level and for new staff the school carries out checks on identity, previous employment history, medical fitness and qualifications prior to confirmation of their appointment.

Academic and care staff demonstrate a high level of pride, professionalism and commitment to the school. There is close liaison between educational and care staff and timely input from other staff such as medical practitioners and educational psychologists. The leadership and management of the school are highly effective in helping ensure the high quality of provision and level of expertise of staff. In particular, over the past few years, staffing ratios have been increased and staff turnover has been reduced. This ensures that the school has a rich knowledge and experience base and negligible reliance on the use of agency staff and then only for occasional domestic purposes, with none for child contact purposes. There is a strong commitment to the support and development of staff who benefit from regular access to training and development and also have access to counselling support if required. In conjunction with the continuous professional development available, there are good career progression opportunities for staff within the school. Staff highly value the school's approach to maintaining and promoting the status and professionalism associated with their respective roles.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The premises and accommodation provide an environment that is conducive to high achievement, mutual respect and encouragement of maturity and independence. Considering its age and character, the main building is maintained at a high level of presentation and kept impressively clean. Pupils' single occupancy bedrooms and the communal lounges in the residential element of the building are homely and welcoming, decorated and furnished to a high quality.

The classrooms and other educational accommodation provide light and airy spaces and good facilities for teaching and the social aspects of the curriculum. There is some specialist accommodation for soft play and therapies, but most subjects are taught in general multi-purpose spaces. The three classrooms in the main school area are fit for purpose, but they are showing signs of age, particularly the state of roofs. The independent unit and college space for older pupils is of a good quality. There are provisional plans in place to improve the accommodation overall, so that a

full range of vocational and practical courses can be offered on site and space provided for the whole school community to meet together.

Very effective and imaginative use is made of the outside spaces for aspects of physical education and recreation and leisure. For example, the recently completed sensory garden, which pupils helped to construct, provides a relaxing and attractive addition to the facilities.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The school communicates clearly and comprehensively with parents and other key stakeholders. The prospectus provides appropriate contact details and an accurate introduction to the school. In particular there is clear information on the strong ethos, values, aims and objectives that are central to the school's purpose. There is also a concise overview of the curriculum, the school's approach to teaching and learning, care, welfare and support, the importance of external links and health and safety.

The school also has a very detailed portfolio of policies and procedures which are available to parents and other stakeholders if requested. These comprehensively cover the full spectrum of topics related to the educational, behavioural and social development of pupils, as well as more generic issues, for example the school's approach to equal opportunities, health and safety and staff development.

Both care and teaching staff maintain very detailed daily written records of individual pupils' progress and behaviour. These are used to inform weekly update reports on the academic, social and personal development of each pupil which are sent to parents who also receive informative school newsletters periodically. Every few months the school also produces detailed reviews which comprehensively report on medical issues, educational, behavioural and social development of each pupil.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The school has a comprehensive complaints policy which fully meets the requirements of the regulations. The policy allows for a complaint to be made and considered on an informal basis initially, with the scope for initiating appropriate formal procedures if required. Parents are aware of the policy and have access to it on request.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Hill House School
DfES Number:	850/6031
Type of school:	Special: therapeutic school working with children with severe autism, learning difficulties and challenging behaviour
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	11 – 19 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 16 Girls: 6 Total: 22
Number of boarders:	Boys: 16 Girls: 6 Total: 22
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 15 Girls: 5 Total: 20
Annual fees (boarders):	£234,377
Address of school:	Rope Hill Boldre Lymington Hampshire SO41 8NE
Telephone number:	01590 672147
Fax number:	01590 670535
Email address:	hillhouse@cambianguroup.com
Headteacher:	Miss J. G. Wright
Proprietor:	Cambian Autism Services, Ltd.
Reporting Inspector:	Peter Nelson (HMI)
Date of inspection:	6 - 9 February 2006

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