

Heart of the Forest Community Special School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	134190
Local Authority	Gloucestershire
Inspection number	294116
Inspection date	16 May 2007
Reporting inspector	Julia Coop

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School	57
6th form	13
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Jane Bunyan
Headteacher	Howard Jones
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Speech House Coleford GL16 7EJ
Telephone number	01594 822175
Fax number	01594 826472

Age group	3–19
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Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two Additional Inspectors.

Description of the school

This is a school for pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD), profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and Complex Needs (including autistic spectrum disorders [ASD]). There are a few older pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). All pupils have a statement of special educational needs. The school serves a socially mixed area and a high proportion of pupils are looked after by a number of different local authorities. All pupils come from White British backgrounds. The school opened in September 2005 in temporary split-site accommodation, following the closure of two other special schools. It moved into its present purpose-built accommodation in February 2006. The school is rapidly expanding and the post-16 department has trebled in size since it opened.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

This is an excellent school that has gone from strength to strength since it opened. The views of parents, echoed in statements such as 'It is everything we are looking for' and 'The staff have achieved the impossible', indicate the strength of support for the school, following a period of uncertainty within the community. This is down to outstanding leadership and management and the dedication and hard work of all of the staff. The inspirational leadership of the headteacher has brought about dramatic school development. Starting from scratch, the school has already established a comprehensive and exceptionally good curriculum that is very carefully adapted to meet the individualised needs of all of the pupils, together with high quality teaching and exceptional care, guidance and support. Parents are right to consider that their children 'make very good progress'. The exemplary care, alongside very effective relationships with therapists, colleges, the wider community and careers officers, ensures that all families and pupils, including the most vulnerable, are very well supported and prepared for life beyond Heart of the Forest.

Relationships between staff and pupils throughout the school are extremely caring and supportive. Lessons are fun and pupils thoroughly enjoy learning in this stimulating purpose-built environment. As a result, although standards are exceptionally low because of the pupils' complex needs, their achievements, personal development and well-being are excellent. Provision in the Foundation Stage is very good and from there across all year groups, all pupils, including those with the most complex learning needs and disabilities and those looked after by local authorities, thrive in this highly effective learning environment. The pupils are extremely proud of their school and the older learning mentors take great delight in being role models for the school and their younger friends, developing very good inter-personal skills that will stand them in very good stead for the future.

The headteacher's commitment and drive have ensured that staff morale is high. All the school strives to achieve is underpinned by a strong commitment to ensuring that the needs of each individual child are at the heart of everything it does. The school has a crystal-clear understanding of what it has achieved and knows what it still needs to do. It knows that the systems for the monitoring of teaching and learning are still being refined and are not yet formal enough to ensure that best practice is continually developed and enhanced at a time of rapid growth. The school has harnessed links with outside agencies extremely well. Governors are highly effective at supporting and challenging a school that is continually seeking to develop even further. Consequently, the school is very well placed to continue its development.

Effectiveness and efficiency of the sixth form

Grade: 1

All students, but especially those with complex physical and learning needs, are provided with outstanding post-16 provision. Students' achievement is excellent because of the outstanding teaching they receive. The curriculum is exceptionally well matched to students' needs and abilities and is consistently reinforced through work on key skills and through modules such as performing arts. It continues to promote essential basic skills whilst introducing a wide range of work-related learning and experience, which leads to the gaining of qualifications and increasing levels of independence. As a result of this and the very good care, guidance and support they receive, alongside many opportunities to gain accreditations, they develop

independent living skills, including skills to work in the community. They grow in confidence, enjoy learning and leave as sensible, caring young adults.

What the school should do to improve further

Formalise the monitoring of teaching and learning to ensure that best practice is developed and enhanced as the school expands.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

As a result of their significant and complex learning needs, pupils' standards are exceptionally low. However, because of the excellent care and support they receive and very carefully adapted teaching and curriculum experiences, pupils' achievements are excellent. Children in the Foundation Stage make exceptional progress, particularly in their social and communication skills, because of the expertise and dedication of the staff. As they move through the school, all groups, irrespective of the severity of their learning difficulties and disabilities and including those looked after by the local authority, make very good gains in reaching their overall individual targets. Pupils with PMLD and SLD make very good progress in developing their self-awareness and sensory perception, many becoming much more responsive and able to use signing and verbal expressions to communicate.

Pupils who move onto National Curriculum levels go on to gain success in a wide range of nationally accredited awards. The most able students succeed in gaining GCSEs in art and Entry Level qualifications in subjects such as science. Other students, including those in the post-16 department, gain excellent accreditation through the 'Towards Independence' courses of the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). Older students undertook all of the catering for the visit by the Princess Royal and show very good skills in film making and business enterprise initiatives. Parents comment that because staff are supportive and each child is treated individually, they are able to 'reach their potential'.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Pupils' personal development is a central focus of the school's work and this has a very effective impact on their spiritual, social, moral and cultural development, which is excellent. All staff are very good role models with very high expectations of behaviour. Very well-established routines provide very clear boundaries. As a result, pupils understand what is expected of them, feel extremely safe and do not get anxious if someone displays challenging behaviour because of their learning disability. Older, more able pupils know the Green Cross Code and say that since they have been at the school they 'know how to behave much better'. The need for healthy living is very well understood. Older pupils designed healthy lunchbox leaflets for their parents and although they 'look forward to chips on Friday', also know that they must eat lots of fruit and vegetables and 'stay off fatty food'. Pupils' great enjoyment of learning is very much in evidence around the school and in lessons, where lots of giggles and smiles are the norm. Pupils were enthralled watching the blue tit chicks hatch on the CCTV and especially like art lessons. As a result, attendance is good, considering the impact that serious medical conditions can have. The student mentors enable pupils to make an important contribution to

school and community life. They take pride in their additional responsibilities, such as helping in the office, looking after younger pupils on the bus, or running the tuck shop. Consequently, pupils show tolerance and understanding of others and an exceptional community spirit.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

There are many outstanding features of teaching that contribute to pupils' great enjoyment of learning and their excellent personal and academic progress. Lessons are planned in great detail and matched very carefully to each pupil's individual learning needs. Outstanding relationships between adults and pupils, together with lots of praise, humour and celebrations of achievement, help all pupils to feel safe and highly valued. Teachers provide stimulating and motivating activities, such as visits and games that extend learning in highly relevant ways. They model and demonstrate activities very well and have established a strong partnership with the teaching assistants, therapists and other specialists. This interesting learning environment, together with very effective use of signing, visual aids, sensory development resources and information and communication technology, enables pupils to use all of their senses to access learning in highly appropriate ways and to excel. Older and more able pupils say that the teachers are 'friendly, make lessons fun and help us if we get stuck' and recognise that since they have been at this school they 'have learned a lot more'.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

Personal, social and health education stands at the heart of the outstanding curriculum. Around this is built an excellent range of subjects and experiences, which far exceed statutory requirements and prepare pupils very well for adult life. There is a strong focus on promoting basic literacy, numeracy and computer skills and the recently introduced specialist curriculum extends the learning opportunities for pupils with the most severe and complex needs exceptionally well. Other subjects are certainly not neglected, and this allows pupils to achieve additional success. The standard of artwork around the school is astonishing and many pupils have achieved GCSE passes. Live theatre and music are extensively used to enrich the curriculum and to increase pupils' social contact. A wide range of educational trips frequently takes learning out of the classroom, while additional clubs and activities such as kwik cricket and football offer pupils opportunities to enjoy sport outside the school day and work alongside mainstream pupils. The success of the curriculum contributes greatly to improving pupils' self-confidence and enables them to develop increased independence.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The exceptional care, guidance and support pupils receive contribute enormously to their enjoyment of learning and their personal development. Educational, medical and therapeutic staff work very closely together to meet the needs of individual children, including those looked

after by local authorities. All pupils have highly relevant individual profiles and education plans that provide staff with a detailed picture of each pupil to aid the planning of relevant experiences. These contribute greatly to the pupils' very good all-round achievement. The vast majority of parents are very complimentary about the service the school provides. This is summed up by one parent, who stated that she was 'impressed with the care and commitment to the children, parents and carers'. All requirements for safeguarding pupils and ensuring that they are well protected are well met. The school is a very secure place in which pupils can relax and thrive. Individual pupils who could cause a threat to others because of their complex needs have very clear plans that outline how best they can be managed. Pupils report that this does not worry them at all. Very well-planned careers education and college links enable older pupils to experience a range of vocational options. The school provides very good opportunities for them to experience the world of work and they especially like working in catering or in the orchards.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Grade for sixth form: 1

The school has been on a dramatic journey of development. Inspirational leadership, along with excellent governance and teamwork, has enabled the school to establish detailed and highly relevant management procedures, policies and practices in a short time. The headteacher very quickly established what needed to be done and ensured that he set in motion a very clear school development programme so that the staff could hit the ground running and deliver a high quality of education. Senior managers and subject leaders have helped achieve this by taking a very supportive approach to staff development via informal lesson observations and feedback. It is testament to their commitment, high expectations and the high quality of professional development opportunities that the staff, many of whom were previously unfamiliar with working with PMLD pupils and within the curricular structure required for the primary age range, quickly gained in confidence and skills. The school's expertise and reputation for providing high quality education for PMLD and Reception children and post-16 students are growing. Staff numbers are increasing as the school is rapidly expanding, and the school now recognises that its current system for monitoring teaching and learning via lesson observations and brief oral feedback is not formal enough to ensure that its outstanding quality is maintained in the future.

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Annex A

Inspection judgements

<i>Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate</i>	School Overall	16-19
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Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1	1
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well-being?	1	1
The quality and standards in the Foundation Stage	1	NA
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	NA	NA

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and disabilities make progress	1	

Personal development and well-being

How good is the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1	
The behaviour of learners	1	
The attendance of learners	2	
How well learners enjoy their education	1	
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1	
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1	
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1	
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1	

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of the learners' needs?	1	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1	1

¹ Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Annex A

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1	
How effectively performance is monitored, evaluated and improved to meet challenging targets	2	
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination tackled so that all learners achieve as well as they can	1	
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1	
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1	
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No	
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No	

Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection

16 May 2007

Dear Pupils,

Inspection of Heart of the Forest, Coleford, Gloucestershire GL16 7EJ

We very much enjoyed our time with you and would like to thank you for helping us to find out about your school. Yours is an outstanding school. We were very impressed because:

You really enjoy being at school, love learning and feel very safe. The curriculum and teaching are outstanding and help you learn very well. The school cares and looks after you very well and helps you become responsible young people. The student mentors are very good ambassadors for the school and work very hard. We were very impressed with your artwork, which makes your school look very nice. You should be very proud of it. Everyone has worked very hard to make your school an excellent place to learn.

We are excited about how your school is developing. We have asked the school to keep a closer check on your lessons so that they can make sure you continue to learn really well as the school becomes larger.

We hope you will go on working hard and enjoying all the wonderful activities that help you learn. We wish you all good luck for the future. It was a real pleasure to meet you all.

With best wishes

Julia Coop (Lead inspector)