

Meath School

Meath School, Brox Road, Ottershaw, Chertsey, Surrey KT16 0LF
Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Meath School is a day and residential non-maintained special primary school. It fosters an integrated model of support that includes education, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and residential care. It currently provides 56 places to pupils irrespective of gender, aged 4 to 11 years, whose primary needs arise from severe and complex speech, language and communication difficulties.

The school offers its residential service and an extended school day programme to pupils. Up to 15 pupils stay overnight at any one time, each sleeping over between one and four nights a week, as agreed with their parents.

The school is owned and managed by the children's communication charity ICan. It is situated in grounds of 9 acres in the village of Ottershaw in Surrey. The residential accommodation is on the first floor of the main school building.

Inspection dates: 7 to 9 November 2017

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

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

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: 11 January 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- Leaders and managers are constantly developing the service that is provided for children, learning from significant incidents and researching new methods and tools to improve assessments and interventions. The school is making important advances in the use of technology to assist children and their families.
- The large majority of children enjoy the experience of living in the residential provision; all greatly benefit from the wider experiences it gives them and the increased skills they gain. Their life chances improve as a result.
- The residential provision is staffed by workers who bring a wealth of experience to the role and retain a commitment to developing their skills and learning new techniques to support children.
- Colleagues from elsewhere in the school assist the residential staff, who themselves have other roles in the education or therapy provision, on a regular basis. This is instrumental in creating a particularly well-integrated and consistent approach across the school.

The residential special school's areas for development are:

- The school has not kept records to demonstrate that fire prevention checks and tests, such those for extinguishers, have been regularly conducted. A certificate to demonstrate that electrical wiring has been checked by a qualified electrician could not be produced.
- The school has not conducted written annual reviews of the residential provision, including an internal assessment of compliance with the national minimum standards.

What does the residential special school need to do to improve?

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standard(s) for residential special schools:

- 13.8 The records specified in Appendix 2 are maintained and monitored by the school and action taken as appropriate. Specifically, those for fire precaution tests.
- 20.4 The head teacher (or school equivalent), governing body, trustees, partnership, or organisation responsible for carrying on the school carries out, and records in writing, once each year: a review of the operation and resourcing of the school's welfare provision for boarding pupils, in relation to:
 - its Statement of Purpose;
 - its staffing policy;
 - the placement plans for individual children; and
 - an internal assessment of its compliance with these standards.

Where appropriate such a report may be incorporated within a review of the whole school.

Recommendations

- The school should obtain and retain for inspection a certificate of electrical safety every five years.
- Logs of a sanction or use of reasonable force should include a record of when it is decided it would not be in the child's best interests to be asked for their views (and why) or when they have been asked but have declined.
- Where a former employee (paid or volunteer) remains living in the same premises as children (for example, in the household of a member of staff) a written agreement should be drawn up that specifies the terms of their accommodation, even though they are known to the school.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The process for children to begin 'sleepovers' at the residential setting is tailored to the circumstances of each individual child, but always includes: a discussion with the family support worker, who is a qualified social worker; assessments; the provision of a welcome book, and the opportunity for parents and children to visit the accommodation. For many children, their first experience of staying at the school is the excellent holiday club, which is frequently the stimulus for them wanting to sleep over during term time.

It is easy to see the attraction of the provision for children. They are able to enjoy activities, both on and off site, which they might not have the chance to join in with elsewhere. Children can socialise with friends when other opportunities are limited, and they learn skills that help them to increase their independence. This is all in an environment that is made to be fun and safe by the staff who look after them.

Opportunities to make peer relationships are instrumental in helping children to enjoy interacting with others. One child enthusiastically signed more than once that she and a peer were friends, demonstrating how important this was to her.

Children are well engaged in projects, some devised by themselves and others organised by staff. They are encouraged to follow their own interests, such as singing or finding out about countries of the world, but they also join in group activities such as football training or games in the woodland area. These games and activities are sometimes structured by staff to create an environment where skills are practised, and they are sometimes child-led, promoting the use of imagination and cooperation. The facilitation of such learning is excellent.

One parent commented on how her child had become more independent, partly because of trying new experiences in the woodland area, saying, 'Going on the zip-wire added to her confidence to do things for herself.' The same mother said that her daughter 'finds physical things difficult, like putting on socks or showering independently, so using standard techniques and a consistent approach helps her.'

A staff member commented that, 'Children want independence and we support them.' For some children, this results in steady incremental improvement and for others it helps them to make significant steps forward. This includes better self-care skills such as dressing, washing and brushing teeth. Some parents report that these skills have transferred to routines at home, one giving the example of her son being able to run a bath for himself, while others have been surprised at the things their children will do in the residential setting that they have not been able to do elsewhere.

When children struggle in the residential setting or at home, the team around the child – the school, therapy, family support and residential staff – works together to

address the issues. This team liaises well with families to analyse what is going wrong and what might help. Visual prompts have often been found to assist children, for example 'dressing sequence charts' and 'now and next sequences'. These are shared with parents. Children benefit enormously from such attention that is devoted to their development.

Difficulties with communication lead some children to become frustrated at being unable to say what they mean, or to them becoming insular, particularly in their play. Staff develop strategies to address these particular issues and have had some remarkable success. One child who came to the residential setting with very limited speech and repeatedly played the same game by himself has been helped to communicate using words and signs. He can now engage in sustained play activities with his peers. He reverts to familiar patterns of behaviour, but staff keep encouraging him to interact, demonstrating their constant observation of children and their persistence to achieve goals.

The family support worker assists families to make decisions about where children move on to when they reach secondary school age, and residential staff prepare children well. This may include increasing overnight stays or sleeping in a single bedroom to match that of the new provision. Engagement with a leavers' group and visits by former pupils form part of the preparation, and final days are marked by, among other things, the presentation of leavers' books and a special ceremony. Children are therefore as thoroughly equipped emotionally and practically for the change as possible. However, none of this has been recorded on children's files.

The residential accommodation is not particularly suited to its role, being sited up a flight of stairs and having narrow corridors, but it is benefiting from the refurbishment of a bathroom. This, and other remedial work, is carried out when pupils are not resident. Children choose the paint for the walls nearest to their beds, resulting in some vibrant colour schemes, and the shared spaces are full of examples of children's work and displays of information aimed at their age group. This makes for a particularly child-friendly environment.

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

Staff focus on assisting children to gain daily living skills, setting targets to achieve specific goals. These targets are set after consultation with therapists and parents. Assessments are undertaken with families at the point of admission and are then repeated at regular intervals in order to measure the progress made.

Leaders and managers plan to broaden this excellent work to incorporate wider personal development. The residential services manager has researched available resources and plans are well advanced to implement the chosen scheme.

Complaints have been raised about a method and a particular event in which staff have attempted to manage children's behaviour in the school. Leaders and managers have exhaustively investigated these complaints and acknowledge that lessons can be learned; they have taken effective steps to implement the required changes,

particularly the use of a 'safe space' in the school. This is a room where staff may take children, away from their peers, when their behaviour is otherwise likely to be a danger to themselves or others. The removal of the door to this room ensures that it is not a restrictive measure and a new behaviour policy includes it as a strategy to assist children rather than a sanction. Records of significant incidents demonstrate that on the few occasions when the room has been used during residential time, the child involved has chosen to go to the safe space to calm. Other interventions, such as sitting on a beanbag for 'time out' and the use of sensory equipment, have been successful with the large majority of children.

Staff impose relatively few sanctions. The use of reasonable force in residential time is rare and involves only a small minority of children. The log includes what children say during these incidents but not their retrospective views about what happened. It might not always have been appropriate to ask a child to think about the event once it is over, or children might decline to comment, but this has not been fully recorded.

Staff help children to understand their own feelings and begin to manage them by identifying their state of mind. This is achieved by classifying the states as coloured zones indicating different levels of arousal, which some children can identify for themselves. This leads to conversations about how best to return to a state of equilibrium.

The qualified nurse holds clear, contemporaneous health records in respect of each child, which contain an explanation of the reason for any medication along with possible side effects. Parents give consent for medical treatment and good communication with them ensures that they are informed about their child's health and well-being. Staff are trained in the administering of medication and first aid. Medication, including controlled drugs, is stored securely, with effective monitoring and oversight by the nurse.

There have been no incidents of children going missing but staff are impressively well versed in how to act in such an event. Staff are aware of the provider's whistle-blowing policy and whom to approach if they have concerns. The provider has recently revised the safeguarding policy to make reporting procedures clearer. Staff know how to alert managers to any child protection issues. They are also clear about how to escalate concerns if such issues are about one of the designated safeguarding leads or if an issue were not being dealt with appropriately within the school.

Children are helped to understand safeguarding matters such as bullying and appropriate/inappropriate touch through visual displays, such as one based on the 'PANTS' campaign. These are used well to reinforce the messages.

Staff have held fire evacuation drills at different times to include residential time. The drills are repeated on different days to ensure that children who stay on different nights are included. Risk assessments are in place to assist children who need help in the event of an alarm being raised. This ensures that staff and children are prepared for such an eventuality.

The school has generally robust health and safety processes and repairs are carried out promptly, especially when damage such as broken glass is a danger to children. However, records have some significant omissions, particularly regarding visual checks and tests of fire extinguishers, fire doors and emergency lighting. It was also not possible to produce an electrical installation condition certificate during the inspection. It is therefore not possible to verify that appropriate checks have been conducted to ensure children's safety.

A former volunteer at the school continues to live in staff accommodation on site but has not been required to complete an agreement regarding the terms of his accommodation, particularly in relation to contact with children. Volunteers are subject to the same safer recruitment processes as paid staff, which are thoroughly applied.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers invest heavily in the development of the service by searching for the most effective methods of working. This is in terms of learning how best to work with particular children and in adopting techniques and strategies that continuously improve the quality of provision.

Team meetings are held on different days to ensure that all staff, including those working nights, are able to attend as frequently as possible. In addition, 'let's talk' sessions for staff focus on children's social and emotional progress. These sessions help staff to learn from each other and from outside speakers about particular approaches and to better understand how children respond to different interventions. This means that children benefit from staff knowing what works best for them and from developments in innovative practice.

The residential services manager has developed a rigorous approach to annual appraisals that focuses on staff members' contributions, their role and their professional development. All staff spoken to believe that supervision and appraisal support them to undertake their work. Professional staff are supervised by qualified personnel, either within or outside the school, and they register with the appropriate professional bodies. This is subject to scrutiny by managers.

Residential staff have all obtained the required level 3 qualification and have access to a wide range of training opportunities, both online and group learning courses. Managers and staff evaluate these for their effectiveness and training contributes to a team that is exceptionally skilled and knowledgeable.

A collaborative approach ensures that the expertise of staff in different roles is valued and that the child is the focus of all interventions. One member of staff said, 'We are here to train each other and to share best practice;' this encapsulates the ethos. An example is that therapists now occasionally join children at mealtimes, where they model communication for the residential staff.

Staff have harnessed technology as a tool to assess and intervene with children and

to evidence progress. A striking example is assisting the development of children's play, an area those with communication disorders can find difficult. Video recordings illustrate how targets for children to improve their social skills have been achieved, for instance turn taking and cooperation; children's ability to integrate, such as moving from individual to parallel play, and managing feelings, including disappointment and anxiety when things go wrong. The new abilities and increased confidence this inspires in children can be transferred to learning elsewhere. The detailed thought and skilled observation that is demonstrated in this work is impressive.

The adoption of an app to collate photographic or video evidence in which children can be tagged and their work commented on is an exciting development, especially as the body of material can be added to by staff across the school and used to analyse and track progress. In time, the school intends that parents will be able to access and contribute to this information. This is a significant and inventive development in collaborative working.

Programmes on adult/child interactions that include video recordings of parents with their children are reviewed by a therapist, a residential worker and the parent. These programmes, and workshops for families, are further examples of targeted help being provided to families. A mother commented, 'We have adjusted what we do and my son is coping a lot better by us doing what school is doing.' Another said, 'I'm just grateful for this provision; life would be a lot different without it.' This demonstrates the significant beneficial impact this work has beyond the school.

Parents spoken to commented on how valuable they find communication with staff, particularly regarding the targets they would like their children to achieve. Regular conversations, written accounts of children's time in the residential setting and the sharing of assessments and reports all contribute to exceptional interaction with parents. One said that 'feedback is above and beyond'.

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: SC013925

Headteacher/Teacher in charge: Janet Dunn

Type of school: Residential special school

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Inspectors

Chris Peel, social care inspector (lead)

Maria Lonergan (team member, 7 and 8 November 2017)



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