

Inspection of Acorn Park School

Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Banham, Norwich, Norfolk NR16 2HU

Inspection dates: 3 to 5 December 2024

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

The quality of education

Outstanding

Behaviour and attitudes

Outstanding

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Outstanding

Early years provision

Outstanding

Sixth-form provision

Outstanding

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Acorn Park transforms the lives of pupils. Many pupils join the school with negative views of education. Passionate and kind staff help pupils to quickly turn these views around. Pupils love to learn. This raises their aspirations. Pupils want to be the best they can be. They are motivated to work hard in lessons and reach the high expectations staff have of them.

Pupils benefit from the clear behaviour routines established by staff. These ensure that pupils know what to expect. This helps children in the early years to quickly settle into the life of the school.

A comprehensive enrichment programme ignites new interests for pupils. Whether tending to the herbs in the polytunnel, or visiting the birthplace of Shakespeare, pupils engage exceptionally well in what the school provides for them.

Developing pupils' confidence and independence flow through all aspects of the school's work. During lunchtimes, pupils act responsibly when queueing and ordering their lunch in the busy dining hall. In English lessons, they gleefully step out of their comfort zone to take on the role of different characters when reading aloud. The school's razor-sharp focus on developing life skills sets pupils up incredibly well for their lives beyond the school.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Pupils attending Acorn Park have a wide range of complex needs related to their autism diagnosis. The school has carefully crafted a curriculum that runs from the early years through to its semi-formal, formal and sixth-form curriculums. The structured staff induction programme ensures that new staff quickly understand pupils' needs and how best to teach these curriculums. Rigorous monitoring from the proprietor enables leaders to provide staff with the additional training they may need to enhance their subject knowledge. Staff are experts and provide pupils with exceptional support. This enables pupils to thrive. High-quality training also helps staff to feel well supported. Staff value working at Acorn Park and are rightly proud members of the school community.

The school uses information on pupils' education, health and care plans (EHC plans) to identify the specific strategies to help pupils to achieve well. This includes strategies to support pupils' academic and social development. Staff break down targets in pupils' EHC plans into specific and measurable steps. Precise teaching helps pupils to manage their personal hygiene, including how to brush their teeth. This helps pupils to secure the important independent skills they need to keep themselves healthy and safe as they move towards adulthood.

Learning to communicate is a crucial part of the curriculum. Children in the Reception Year progress significantly in this aspect of learning, in a remarkable space of time. Expert staff use songs and rhymes to help children to begin to learn

the sounds that letters make. Children delight in repeating and applying these sounds during their play and learning activities. For example, when clambering across the pirate ship or building sandcastles in the sand tray. Staff use consistent approaches to help pupils to communicate their wants and needs. Pupils do this exceptionally well.

Reading is a crucial part of the school's work. Books, stories and a love of reading shine through the school environment. Pupils who need help with phonics get the effective support they need to become more confident readers. The focus on reading successfully re-engages pupils who were previously reluctant to read. Pupils enjoy choosing a new book from their classroom or the library. They also enjoy the high-quality texts they study in English lessons. All of this helps pupils to achieve a range of qualifications, including, where appropriate, GCSEs.

Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education is a central part of much of the school's work. There is a rigorous approach to how staff teach PSHE. The teaching of PSHE is underpinned by a clear focus on the specific and individual needs of pupils. The school works with parents to provide the bespoke curriculum pupils need to prepare them for their next stages. For example, students in the sixth form secure valuable work experience placements with outside employers. This builds on the significant in-house offer, such as working as baristas running the school café. This offer is transformative in helping students to be fully prepared for life when they leave Acorn Park.

A highlight of the week for many pupils is when they mix across classes on a Wednesday afternoon for 'Acorn Park Activities'. This rich and varied offer supports pupils to discover talents and interests they never knew existed. There is a buzz to the school site as pupils paint, learn how to code or crochet. Sixth-form students act as positive role models during these sessions by helping, for example, to teach younger pupils how to pass and tackle in rugby.

Most pupils join the school with significant barriers to regular attendance. The school has established a thorough and analytical approach to help break down these barriers. This helps pupils to attend school frequently. Across the school, pupils behave exceptionally well. Pupils learn to collaborate during lessons and when socialising during lunchtimes. Staff are skilled at providing the tailored support pupils need to manage their feelings and emotions. This helps pupils to engage positively with lessons and the many wider opportunities the school provides for them.

The proprietor and governing body know the school very well. They are highly effective at checking on the quality of education pupils receive. The proprietor seeks external expertise to identify where this quality could be further enhanced. Leaders act swiftly on recommendations made. This level of rigour extends to other areas of the school. Meticulous scrutiny of records related to behaviour and safeguarding enables the provider to offer support and challenge to leaders. The proprietor ensures that the school site is well maintained and that classrooms are conducive to learning. This secure monitoring ensures the school consistently meets the

independent school standards (the standards), including schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

School details

Unique reference number	135066
DfE registration number	926/6152
Local authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	10342054
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	145
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	17
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education Ltd
Chair	Richard Power
Headteacher	Peter Marshall (head of service)
Annual fees (day pupils)	£67,900 to £85,131
Telephone number	01953 888 656
Website	www.acornpark.org.uk
Email address	admin@acornpark.org.uk
Dates of previous inspection	8 to 10 March 2022

Information about this school

- Acorn Park is registered to admit up to 160 pupils between the ages of four and 19 years. The school has grown over recent years from 97 pupils on roll in 2022 to 145 pupils on roll at the time of this inspection.
- The school operates from Andrews Furlong, Mill Road, Banham, Norwich, Norfolk NR16 2HU.
- There is a governing body responsible for monitoring the performance of the school.
- There is a head of service and two heads of school. The heads of school took up post in January 2024. One oversees the formal curriculum, and one the semi-formal curriculum.
- All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities, an EHC plan and a diagnosis of autism.
- Many pupils have had significant periods of disruption to their formal education prior to joining the school.
- Pupils are referred to the school by their local authority.
- The school does not currently use any alternative provision.
- Ofsted conducted a standard inspection of the school in March 2022, and the school was judged to be good. The school met all the standards at this inspection.
- Ofsted conducted an emergency inspection of the school in July 2023 in response to concerns raised through qualifying complaints about the school. This inspection found the school met all the independent school standards that were checked during the inspection.
- Ofsted conducted additional inspections of the school in October 2022 and November 2023 to consider the school's requests to increase the number of pupils registered and lower the age range to four years of age. These changes were subsequently approved by the Department for Education.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors held meetings with representatives of the proprietor and governing body, the head of service, the heads of school, one of the special educational needs and/or disabilities coordinators, staff and a representative from a local authority that commissions places at the school.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, physical education and PSHE. Inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, considered curriculum information, visited lessons, reviewed evidence of work and spoke with pupils. The lead inspector also listened to some pupils read.
- Inspectors also looked at curriculum plans, reviewed evidence of work and spoke with pupils about some other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- To check compliance with the standards, inspectors spoke to leaders, staff and pupils. They visited classrooms and toured the school site, reviewed pupil information, school policies and records relating to a range of aspects of the school, such as behaviour and health and safety.
- Inspectors considered the responses to the online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for pupils. Inspectors also spoke with pupils throughout the inspection to gather their views.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's questionnaire for school staff. Inspectors also met with staff throughout the inspection to gather their views.

Inspection team

Michael Williams, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Hannah Stoten

His Majesty's Inspector

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