

Inspection of Avocet House

The Old Vicarage, School Lane, Heckingham, Norfolk NR14 6QP

Inspection dates: 5 to 7 November 2024

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Outstanding**

Personal development **Outstanding**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Good

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

Avocet House is not just a school. It is a home and a family that transforms lives. Pupils join the school having suffered significant trauma and negative experiences of education. They quickly learn that the adults in the school and care home share the highest aspiration for every pupil. The school constructs individualised learning programmes that engage pupils' interests. Expert teachers provide learning experiences that reignite pupils' enthusiasm for learning. Pupils respond to the renewed belief that adults have in them. They work hard and, generally, learn well.

Pupils behave well. They understand the high expectations that adults have. They benefit from the consistency of approach from all adults. They are polite and respectful. Pupils develop deep and meaningful friendships. They build positive and trusting relationships with staff. They are proud of their school.

Pupils value the broad and varied opportunities to explore new interests. They enthusiastically take up activities such as powerboating or crewing on a tall ship. Many pupils enjoy the responsibilities they take on through work experience placements. They relish how these help develop their social and teamwork skills. They are proud to contribute to the wider community.

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

The school's curriculum is rooted in the proprietor's vision. Every pupil accesses a learning programme with 'no limits'. The school carefully identifies pupils' starting points. Ambitious end goals are set. This is used to define the key knowledge pupils need in order to achieve these goals.

The school has set out the logical order that pupils should learn important information. This helps pupils use what they already know when learning new content. To ensure pupils can successfully access the full curriculum, the school has focused on ensuring that pupils have a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. These areas are well established and pupils' learning is strong. However, this means pupils' opportunity to access the wider curriculum has been limited. Although the school has planned the full curriculum entitlement, pupils' learning in some subjects is less secure.

Teaching is generally precise and accurate. Explanations are simple. This helps pupils generally understand what they have been taught. Adults routinely check to test how well pupils have understood. This means gaps and misconceptions are quickly spotted. These are immediately addressed by careful adaptations. On the whole, the activities that teachers give to pupils help secure and embed the knowledge they have learned.

The school recognises the importance of reading. Some pupils are reluctant readers. Staff carefully and compassionately address this to support and encourage these pupils to read. Staff ensure that all pupils read to someone or are read to every day.

This contributes towards most pupils being able to read well. However, the curriculum for pupils who need support with early reading is less well defined. This means that the teaching of phonics does not always match the carefully selected book resources the school has chosen. Consequently, these pupils cannot make progress towards confident and fluent reading as rapidly as they should.

Strong, warm and positive relationships permeate the school. Pupils are well cared for and show high levels of empathy towards one another. They generally manage their feelings and emotions well. If pupils begin to struggle, they are expertly supported by staff. Pupils enjoy success in learning. This is something that they have not experienced in the past. They are proud of their own achievements and those of others. Pupils crave the reward tokens on offer. As a result, pupils have developed an extremely positive attitude to learning.

The personal development programme is exemplary. It is woven into every aspect of the school. The school's personal, social and health education curriculum is excellent. It provides pupils with the important information they need to engage with and be successful in the community. Pupils learn about aspects such as finance in the classroom. This learning is then brought to life. Pupils complete everyday tasks, such as shopping for food or opening a bank account.

The range of wider opportunities is rich and plentiful. School and care staff listen to and consider the interests of pupils. This means the opportunities offered nurture existing talents, while piquing new interests. The careers education is very well established. Pupils enjoy weekly sessions with the careers lead. Pupils access a broad range of information and advice that help them consider their futures beyond school.

All staff understand the vision for the school. They share the proprietor's relentless determination to provide nothing less than the best care and education for every pupil. External consultants help leaders ensure that the quality of the school's work is maintained. They support and guide the school to develop and improve. This means the directors have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development.

The school has gone through a period of transition of leadership. The proprietor and directors have ensured that any turbulence during this transition has been sensitively and expertly managed. Leaders ensure that the independent school standards are fully met.

The school meets the requirements of schedule 10 of the Equalities Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and proprietor)

- The school has not implemented a structured and rigorous programme to teach phonics to those pupils who need it. This means that the development of the fluency and confidence of the weakest readers is not as rapid as it should be. The school should ensure that there is a structured programme of phonics teaching that compliments the range of reading resources it uses.

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	134978
DfE registration number	926/6419
Local authority	Norfolk
Inspection number	10342052
Type of school	Other Independent Special School
School category	Independent special school
Age range of pupils	8 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	8
Proprietor	Jon Lees
Headteacher	Phil Hinchliffe (Principal) Alan Waldron (Acting Head of Education)
Annual fees	£444,050
Telephone number	01508 549320
Website	www.specialisteducation.co.uk/our-childrens-homes-schools/avocet-house
Email address	avocet.house@specialisteducation.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	21 to 23 September 2021

Information about this school

- Avocet House is part of Specialist Education Services group. It is a small independent special school that is registered for 10 pupils between eight and 18 years of age.
- A single proprietor provides governance of the school.
- The acting head of education took up his position in November 2024.
- All pupils have an education, health and care plan relating to their social, emotional and mental health needs.
- The school uses one registered and four unregistered providers of alternative provision.
- There are currently no pupils in the school's sixth-form provision. Therefore, no judgement has been given.

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.
- The standard inspection was carried out at the request of the Department for Education.
- 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 leaders, including the principal and acting head of education. The lead inspector met with the proprietor, the managing director and operations director.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, design technology and personal social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to staff, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To further inspect the curriculum, inspectors reviewed curriculum documentation and spoke to leaders about other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the 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.

- Inspectors spoke to pupils informally in class and around the school at breaktimes. Inspectors also spoke formally with groups of pupils to seek their views about the school.
- Inspectors scrutinised a range of school documents, including the school's own self-evaluation and improvement plans, school policies, child protection and safeguarding information, curriculum plans, attendance and admissions registers.

Inspection team

Dave Gibson, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Nathan Lowe

His Majesty's Inspector

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