Inspection of North East Centre for Autism – Aycliffe School

Cedar Drive, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham DL5 6UN

Inspection dates:	6 to 8 June 2023

Overall effectiveness	**Good**
The quality of education	**Good**
Behaviour and attitudes	**Outstanding**
Personal development	**Good**
Leadership and management	**Good**
Sixth-form provision	**Good**
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good
Does the school meet the independent school standards?	**Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

There is a calm, caring atmosphere in this nurturing school. From the moment pupils arrive at school in the morning, staff warmly welcome them. Well-established routines help pupils to feel safe. Careful thought has been given to the learning environment. Pupils have specifically designed spaces and appropriate resources to meet their individual needs well.

Pupils are closely supervised and supported well by highly skilled staff. Behaviour is excellent. There are very high expectations. Staff deal with any inappropriate behaviour and bullying swiftly and effectively. They support pupils to understand and manage their emotions and behaviour exceptionally well. Relationships between staff and pupils are very positive. Staff listen to pupils. They help them to overcome barriers to learning.

The curriculum is well considered. There is a strong focus on preparing pupils for adulthood and developing their independence. Pupils are supported to communicate through a variety of means. Those with significant sensory needs are well supported to access their learning in ways that are comfortable for them. Pupils like taking part in activities within the community. Older pupils take part in work experience. Post-16 students enjoy running the school's tuck shop to raise money for trips to places of interest.

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

Teachers assess pupils' needs thoroughly when they arrive at the school. The information from these assessments is used to create individual support plans for pupils. These plans encompass strategies for pupils' learning, personal development and behaviour. Teachers make sure that learning is linked to each pupil's education, health and care plan outcomes. They carefully tailor the support and type of provision to best suit pupils' needs.

The curriculum is broad and ambitious. It is divided into different pathways with the aim of 'equipping pupils to fulfil their potential in life'. Pupils experience learning in small group and sometimes one-to-one situations. Those with sensory needs learn to use a variety of resources to support their learning. Classroom environments are adapted to help pupils to feel comfortable and to reduce their anxiety. Sensory rooms and breakout spaces are available for pupils when needed, to help them to feel calm and be ready to learn. Skilled staff support pupils with limited verbal communication skills well. They use signs, symbols and pictures to help them to communicate effectively.

The knowledge and skills that pupils need to learn are clearly sequenced. Curriculum content is matched to pupils' cognitive and sensory needs. Staff have good knowledge of the subjects they teach. They use creative approaches to help pupils to engage in lessons and to understand. For example, in a science investigation into hydroponics the teacher used visual images to help pupils to understand what the

experiment should look like. In personal, social and health education (PSHE), students in the post-16 provision discussed the different connotations of the word 'pride', before moving on to discuss gender identity and their understanding of the LGBTQ+ community.

Reading is high priority for the school. Topics of learning are often linked to texts. Pupils can talk about books they enjoy. They study a range of different literacy genres. Effective phonics teaching helps pupils to read books suitable for their ability. When pupils struggle to learn to read, staff provide extra reading and phonics support. Pupils particularly enjoy using an online reading tool where they can earn tokens. They like spending these tokens in the school's book vending machine.

Pupils often join the school after negative experiences in their previous schools. Some have missed long periods of education. Staff work hard to engage pupils in learning and meet their needs. Pupils develop strong, trusting relationships with staff. They develop very positive attitudes towards school. Over time, their attendance improves significantly. Where possible, staff make learning relevant to 'real life' circumstances. This makes it meaningful for pupils. They can use and apply their mathematics while shopping in the local community. They develop their understanding of different religions by visiting places of worship.

Leaders are aspirational for what pupils can achieve. The school is expanding the curriculum courses further to offer more subjects and GCSE courses. However, subject leaders do not have sufficient oversite of their subject areas. This makes it difficult for them to support further improvements to the quality of education.

The curriculum to support pupils' personal development is at the heart of the school's work. The PSHE curriculum provides a structured approach to pupils' learning about a variety of relevant topics. They learn to celebrate diversity. They receive appropriate relationships, sex and health education. They learn about good mental and physical health. Post-16 students discuss issues linked to their personal development. These include the importance of talking for men's mental health. Members of the school council promote awareness of issues of global significance, such as reducing single-use plastic for the good of the environment. Pupils enjoy trips such as visits to the sculpture park, theatre and museums.

Leaders provide pupils, including post-16 students, with careers guidance. They receive independent advice to help them to make informed decisions. Pupils can practise for job interviews and learn enterprise skills. They are well prepared for their next steps.

Staff enjoy working at the school. Most feel well supported by leaders in terms of their workload and well-being. They feel that staff work together well for the benefit of pupils.

Members of the proprietorial board have a comprehensive understanding of the school. They ensure that all the independent school standards are met. Appropriate policies and procedures to ensure the health, welfare and safety of pupils are in

place. Frequent health and safety checks ensure pupils are kept safe, including when pupils take part in activities within the community. There is a suitable accessibility plan for the school. The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Staff receive pertinent training to safeguard pupils. They identify promptly those pupils who need help and may be at risk of harm. Leaders work tenaciously with external agencies to get pupils the help and support they need. Pupils learn about risks to their safety. They learn the importance of online safety and staying safe within the community. Staff support them to understand risks and consequences. Pupils know who to turn to when they need help. Leaders know how vulnerable pupils are. They work proactively with social workers, families and local authorities to keep pupils safe.

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

- Subject leaders do not have sufficient opportunities to monitor the effectiveness of their subject areas. This limits their ability to make strategic decisions about how to improve the quality of education further. Leaders should ensure that subject leaders can monitor the quality of education effectively, to support further improvements in teaching and learning.

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	139329
DfE registration number	840/6013
Local authority	Durham
Inspection number	10267664
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	52
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	12
Number of part-time pupils	1
Proprietor	North East Autism Society
Chair	Dr Rakesh Chopra
Principal	Kirsty Carr
Annual fees (day pupils)	£30,252 to £99,662
Telephone number	01325 328090
Website	http://www.ne-as.org.uk
Email address	aycliffeschool@ne-as.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	5–7 March 2019

Information about this school

- There are currently no early years children attending the school.
- A new principal and vice principal and several staff have joined the school since the last inspection. A new chair of the proprietorial board was appointed in May 2023.
- The school does not use any alternative providers.
- A material change inspection took place in March 2020 to increase the number of pupils to 84. The material change was 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.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- Inspectors held meetings with the principal, the vice principal, the safeguarding and pastoral officer, the chair of trustees and some curriculum leaders. They met with some members of staff and some pupils.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives into English, mathematics, science and PSHE. Inspectors looked at curriculum plans, visited lessons, spoke to teaching staff and spoke to some pupils about their learning. Inspectors also looked at samples of pupils' work and individual support plans.
- Inspectors spoke to leaders about the curriculum in some other subjects, including history, geography and preparation for adulthood.
- Inspectors spoke with leaders and staff about the school's approach to safeguarding pupils in school. Inspectors checked the single central record and reviewed records relating to behaviour, attendance and safeguarding. Checks were made on staff training and safeguarding procedures. Inspectors checked the implementation of risk assessment and health and safety policies, including the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's surveys for parents and carers, pupils and staff. Inspectors also spoke with some parents by telephone.

Inspection team

Stephanie Innes-Taylor, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
David Milligan	His Majesty's Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: http://eepurl.com/iTrDn.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2023