

Heathlands School

Heathlands School for Deaf Children, Heathlands Drive, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL3 5AY

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Heathlands School is a school and residential provision which caters for deaf children. It provides education for 149 students aged from three to 18 years. At the time of the inspection, 19 children were staying at the residential provision for up to four nights a week.

The accommodation is in a two-storey building linked to the main school.

The residential provision is overseen by two co-headteachers.

The inspectors only inspected the social care provision at this school.

Inspection dates: 30 September to 2 October 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The residential special school provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 5 December 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

At the time of this inspection, 19 children were staying in residence. Inspectors spent time with all the children over two evenings. This included individual discussions with nine children and participation in group activities. Children enjoy their time in residence and have many positive experiences. They said that staying in residence has enabled them to make friends and have fun.

Children are supported by motivated residential staff who understand their individual needs. Staff are highly skilled in British Sign Language. Most staff are deaf and have personal insight and empathy for the children's lived experiences. Staff are excellent role models for children and develop nurturing relationships with them.

Children make significant academic progress from their starting points. School leaders closely monitor children's learning outcomes. Highly effective communication between residential staff and education staff ensures that there is a unified approach to children's learning. Residential staff provide support to children through well-planned education and daily homework sessions. This is particularly notable as many children have not had positive educational experiences before attending the school.

Staff provide high-quality support for children to make good progress with developing their life skills. They confidently use a research-based programme to support and monitor children's skills. This includes children taking responsibility for tasks such as cooking, recycling and cleaning. Assessment and support are provided for children, when appropriate, to help them learn skills in managing finances, shopping, using public transport and accessing community facilities independently. As a result, children's confidence and self-determination greatly improve in these areas.

Children have access to a wide range of activities that support their talents, interests and enjoyment. A good variety of sporting activities and links with youth clubs are available and well attended by children. Interesting recreational opportunities keep children stimulated and occupied.

Children who are new to residence receive a planned and warm welcome. An effective mentoring system between children is supported. Children's placement plans are regularly updated in response to their individual needs and preferences.

Children contribute to their plans and review these with staff. However, there are occasions when children have raised individual concerns about their experiences in residence. Staff have taken action to respond to these concerns. However, improvement is needed to ensure that this action is documented.

School leaders have considered children's wider views in relation to their time in residence well. They review children's surveys and ensure that these influence development plans to support continuous improvement of the provision. A new

independent person has been appointed, who has visited regularly. The children feel confident and comfortable to speak to the independent visitor and value this resource.

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

Children say that they feel safe. Staff have an in-depth understanding of children's needs and previous experiences. School leaders have provided comprehensive training to staff in line with new statutory guidance. Staff are well informed to respond to risk indicators for children.

Staff have a good knowledge of the wider contextual issues that children with additional vulnerabilities may face. Designated safeguarding leads are appropriately trained. School leaders ensure that regular and thorough safeguarding meetings take place to review emerging concerns. This supports a good safeguarding culture across the school.

Staff work closely with school pastoral leads. All staff have recently attended a bespoke training session to improve the quality of therapeutic and restorative conversations with children. Staff are empathetic to children's past experiences and are skilled in de-escalation techniques when responding to children's emotions. As a result, children's behaviour is very good and there are very few incidents of concern.

Generally, the children get along well. On the few occasions when there has been conflict, staff have responded quickly and supported children to resolve their differences amicably. Staff ensure that children are helped to understand the impact of their actions.

On one occasion, school leaders have referred information to the local authority designated officer (LADO) later than they should have. During this time, school leaders ensured that protective measures were in place for the child. School leaders have ensured that other allegations against staff have been managed appropriately. Referrals have been made as required and thorough investigations have taken place to explore concerns.

There is suitable fire safety equipment that is adapted to the needs of deaf children. Staff have received fire safety training, and individual evacuation plans are devised with children. However, school leaders have not ensured that fire drills are carried out at the required frequency. Additionally, three fire doors did not self-close. This was rectified during the inspection.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The residence is currently being overseen by two co-headteachers. They provide confident leadership and are well respected by children and staff. School leaders have a comprehensive understanding of children's needs. They are ambitious for

children, advocate for them well and direct a constructive and child-centred approach.

Staff feel well supported by school leaders and have ample opportunities to reflect on their practice and develop their skills. This includes staff's access to high-quality training, annual appraisals and regular supervision sessions.

School leaders continue to review the quality of support provided. A comprehensive development plan is in place. As a result, actions such as strengthening the current management arrangements in residence have been carried out. A new head of residence has been appointed and is due to start their post in November 2024.

Families are generally positive about the overall experiences of children and the quality of care provided by staff. Communication is variable, some families feel this could be improved. School leaders are receptive to this feedback.

School governors maintain good oversight. They visit children regularly, spend time with them and seek their views. External monitoring by the independent visitor provides another level of scrutiny. School leaders quickly respond to any recommendations made by the visitor. However, families' views are not obtained or considered during these visits. This means that important information could be missed.

School leaders have taken action to address the unmet standard and point for improvement raised at the last inspection. One unmet standard and three points for improvement have been raised at this inspection.

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 for residential special schools:

- Ensure that fire drills are regularly (at least once per term) carried out in residential time. At least one fire drill should be carried out overnight per year unless the school has assessed that this would be detrimental to children's welfare. (Residential special schools: national minimum standards 15.3)

Points for improvement

- School leaders should ensure that when children raise concerns, clear and documented action is taken in response.
- School leaders should ensure that external monitoring by the independent visitor includes family consultations.
- School leaders should ensure that a written referral to the LADO is made in line with local authority procedures when allegations are raised against staff.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC056396

Headteachers: Lesley Reeves Costi / Sarah Shields

Type of school: Residential special school

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Inspectors

Mark Anderton, Social Care Inspector

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