

# 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 150 students aged from 3 to 18 years. At the time of the inspection, 17 children were staying at the residential provision for up to 4 nights a week.

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

The residential provision is overseen by 2 co-headteachers.

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

### Inspection dates: 3 to 5 March 2026

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected      good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers      good

The residential special school provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

**Date of previous inspection:** 30 September 2024

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good**

Children enjoy their time in the residential provision and make good progress during their stays. Most children continue to stay in residence for many years, which reflects the positive relationships and sense of stability they experience. The residential environment provides children with a wide range of opportunities that support their learning, development and wellbeing.

Children enjoy spending time with one another and develop positive relationships and friendships. They are encouraged to play together and take part in group activities, which promotes inclusion and supports them to learn and grow in a nurturing environment. New children are warmly welcomed into residence, helping to reduce anxiety or feelings of being overwhelmed. Children develop empathy and show respect and kindness towards one another.

Children enjoy a wide range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. Activities such as football, swimming and underwater hockey support children's physical health as well as their enjoyment. Children also take part in trips to the local town, where they enjoy shopping and going out for meals or treats. They are consulted about the activities on offer and have opportunities to relax in the residential provision, where many enjoy arts and crafts or playing games together. Children's artwork is proudly displayed at the entrance to the residential area, helping to create a welcoming and homely environment.

Children have consistently good school attendance. They make steady educational progress from their starting points and can talk about their journey and future goals. Children enjoy learning and want to be in school. Many are able to catch up and work at an age-appropriate level. For some, this represents important progress given the trauma and poor experiences they have had in the past.

Parents, in the main, are positive about the school and the experiences their children have. Most parents report helpful communication from the school and recognise the positive difference it makes. However, some parents expressed concerns about food provision and recent changes to the allocated time for homework. These views reflect the feedback shared during the inspection.

Children are well prepared for their futures. They receive effective support to develop their independence skills, including learning how to prepare and cook meals and how to manage money. One parent commented that the work undertaken supports children as they grow up. One child has recently moved into a semi-independent flat, where they continue to develop their skills in preparation for adulthood while also maintaining access to ongoing education. Leaders recognise the importance of extending post-16 residential support and are committed to developing this aspect of the provision to address identified gaps.

Systems are in place for children to share their views and wishes; however, these are not yet fully embedded in practice. The independent listener and residential governor are both new to their roles and have not yet established strong links with the children. Most children said that it felt pointless sharing ideas or suggestions because they did not see changes as a result. This included repeated dissatisfaction about food, the use of mobile phones, and arrangements for free time in the community.

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

Children have positive relationships with the staff team and feel able to confide in them when they are worried or upset. All staff are deaf, and some previously attended the school themselves. They use their lived experience to support children and to strengthen their sense of identity as a deaf community. Staff also provide opportunities for children to connect with the wider deaf community, including attending a deaf theatre performance. As a result, children develop a sense of belonging and increasing confidence. One parent reflected their child's experience in a poem and said: 'Never forget the place where you learned to be free.'

Staff make effective use of the safeguarding system to report any concerns about children or practice within the wider school. There is good oversight of this system, and leaders take prompt and appropriate action when concerns arise. Relevant agencies are informed promptly, and the correct procedures are consistently followed. Senior leaders also make good use of records to identify the help and support that children need.

Promoting positive behaviour through a single approach across the school and residential provision provides consistency. The pastoral team works closely with staff to develop and contribute to children's behaviour support plans. Staff receive training on applying equitable consequences and ensuring consistent communication across both settings. The expectation is clear that behaviour should be addressed in a measured and proportionate way, as any good parent would.

Children do not go missing, are not physically held and do not smoke or use alcohol. Staff are alert to the risks associated with vaping and engage children in discussions to raise awareness and encourage safer choices. Staff also understand children who may have self-harmed in the past. They respond appropriately to changes in children's presentation and adapt support when needed, including increasing supervision and making bedrooms safer.

Bullying is challenged, and staff provide children with guidance and support to help them understand how to treat others. Children who are affected by bullying receive reassurance and comfort from staff. On one occasion, a child was negatively impacted by bullying. However, the prompt and coordinated support provided to the child and their family helped rebuild their confidence and trust in the residential provision. Children may have disagreements and natural conflicts, but these are resolved quickly. Children say that they soon make up with one another.

Medication systems are not effective. The process does not promote children's privacy and presents risks of cross-contamination. Staff are not fully aware of their roles and responsibilities when preparing and administering medication. Records also lack sufficient detail. As a result, one child did not receive their prescribed medication.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The residential provision is overseen by 2 experienced co-headteachers. They are supported by a lead residential support worker who coordinates the day-to-day running of the residence. Their approaches complement one another, and they work very well together.

The co-headteachers have worked in the school for many years and know the children very well. They talk about the children in detail and with confidence. They both have a good understanding of children's needs and how best to support them. Headteachers continue to work collaboratively with family members, social workers and other professionals, and they attend meetings that relate to the children.

Staff are proud of their roles and of the progress that children make. They can readily describe how the residential experience benefits children and the added value it provides. All staff receive regular supervision and a detailed annual appraisal. They are also clear that they do not need to wait for formal supervision if they require support, as a member of the leadership team is always available.

External scrutiny of children's experiences is provided by an independent person who visits the residential provision regularly. These visits are strengthened by the independent person observing practice and speaking with children, family members and staff. This enables them to form a well-informed view of the quality of the service and to raise standards of help and care provided to children.

Leaders have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development in the residential provision. This includes ongoing redecoration of the environment and continual review of improvement priorities through the school improvement plan.

Records do not always contain all relevant information, and some appendices are difficult to navigate. As a result, it is not always possible to understand the actions taken, for example whether parents were notified following an incident. Leaders informed Ofsted of their intention to introduce a new recording system across the school and residential provision to improve clarity and oversight.

## **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 standards for residential special schools:

- Ensure medication is safely and securely stored and accurate records are kept of its administration. Prescribed medicines are given only to the children to whom they are prescribed. Staff are suitably trained to administer a child's medication as appropriate. Children allowed to self-medicate are assessed as sufficiently responsible to do so. Where applicable, schools have regard to statutory guidance. (Residential special schools: national minimum standards 12.8)
- Ensure children are actively encouraged to contribute their views to the operation of residential provision. There should be clear and easily accessible systems for children to provide their views and raise concerns. Children's views are considered in decisions about the running of the school and residential provision and children are provided with feedback about their expressed views. Children are not penalised for raising a concern in good faith. (Residential special schools: national minimum standards 18.1)

### **Point for improvement**

- School leaders should ensure that every child has an accurate, eligible, permanent record of their history and progress which can be read by the child and parents/carers at any time.

### **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**

Claire Webster, Social Care Inspector

Carol Jagger, Social Care Inspector

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