

Bowden House School

Bowden House School, Firle Road, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 2JB

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

Bowden House School is a residential special school supporting children between the ages of nine and 18 who have a range of complex social, emotional and mental health difficulties. There are currently 30 children on the school roll. There were 16 children staying in the residential houses at the time of the inspection.

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

Inspection dates: 24 to 26 September 2024

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The residential special school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of previous inspection: 7 November 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Staff support children to make excellent progress from their individual starting points. This includes academic progress, such as achieving positive exam results and supporting their future careers, and progress in their social and emotional development. Staff support children to learn vital social skills, such as how to develop relationships and make friendships, how to sit at a table and share a meal with friends and how to better understand their feelings and emotions. The staff have a trauma-informed approach that supports a culture built on love, support and ambition for every child.

Staff maintain high-quality records that capture important information about each individual child. These records build a comprehensive picture of their needs and the progress that they make.

There is a consistent, passionate and dedicated staff team. Staff often go above and beyond to ensure that children feel loved and cared for and are safe. The staff remain in contact with children during the school holidays and provide activities and emotional support to maintain those important links and relationships.

Staff develop excellent relationships with the children in their care. Children, who in many cases have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences, flourish in an environment where they feel valued and loved.

Transitions are meticulously planned so that children build positive relationships with key people before they arrive at the school. This includes visits to the school, overnight stays and staff visiting them at home. This helps children to settle into their new routines when they first arrive. The older children are given additional responsibilities and are supported to develop their independence skills as they move up through the house groups. Some children choose to stay longer and attend college in the local area, while still having the support and guidance of the staff.

The children are provided with a healthy balanced diet. Staff have recently redesigned the dining room, which provides a warm and homely place for children to enjoy their meals. The catering staff take time to get to know the children's likes and dislikes, spend time with them during meals and develop the menu in response to children's views. Research-informed practice about nutrition has led to innovative changes in how children view their health and dietary needs.

The children enjoy a wide range of activities. For example, a group of children recently visited Paris to watch some of the Olympic games. There is a variety of activities for children to enjoy each evening, but this is also balanced with time relaxing or pursuing individual hobbies and interests.

Children benefit from a well-maintained and beautifully presented accommodation that they clearly value and look after. The staff have succeeded in creating a warm and homely environment that children enjoy.

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

Senior leaders ensure that any concerns regarding children are escalated appropriately and thoroughly investigated following consultation with the relevant professionals and parents. Safeguarding practice is strong throughout the provision. Every academic year starts with staff development sessions, which helps to ensure that they continue to have the required skills and competence to keep children safe.

Staff are aware of children's vulnerabilities and proactively support children to learn how to keep themselves safer, drawing on the support of other experts when required. For example, an exploitation specialist visited the children and staff to educate them further about the risks of being exploited. Leaders are planning to extend this work further to include individual mentoring for children who may be at risk of exploitation.

The staff role model positive behaviour. They use a trauma-informed approach to understand children's emotions and explore what causes them to react in times of difficulty. This enables the staff to build trusting relationships with children, who feel safe, nurtured and cared for. For many children, their relationships with staff have had a significant positive impact on their behaviour, including helping to support a reduction in the need for physical restraint.

The single central register contains all the necessary information to demonstrate that staff are suitably vetted and safe to provide support to children.

A small team of skilled and dedicated maintenance staff ensures that the homes are presented to a very high standard. Meticulous and comprehensive records of all routine health and safety testing and monitoring are in place. As a result, children live in high-quality and safe accommodation.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The senior leadership team is ambitious and has a clear vision for continuous development. Leaders work in collaboration with children, staff, professionals, families and carers to ensure that children receive excellent care, nurture and opportunities. They are invested in the children and the outcomes that they achieve. They want every child to thrive, and they do exceptionally well in achieving this for almost all children.

Leaders and managers create ambitious plans for continuous improvement. They recognise and celebrate what staff do well while setting targets that encourage them to strive for excellence.

There is good collaboration and communication across the different staff teams. Each child has a mentor at school and a key worker in their house, with both sharing daily handovers. Feedback from parents and carers is exceptionally complimentary. Comments include, 'it is an amazing place', 'staff are passionate about what they do', 'they listen and have my child's best interests at heart', and 'it is a very special place.'

Leaders ensure that staff have access to comprehensive and relevant training for their roles. Staff receive timely and effective supervision from trained senior staff. All staff who were spoken to praised the quality of support from senior staff. One staff member said, 'We are provided with high-quality, regular training and reflective spaces, which encourage us to really think about our individual approach to each child and how we can best support them.'

Governance arrangements are effective and ensure that there is an additional layer of support and oversight. The headteacher provides a report to the governing body and has recently changed the structure of this to tell the story of the school and residential provision as a whole. Regular visits are carried out by a lead governor who considers the quality of care, support and management oversight arrangements. Following an extensive and careful selection process, an independent person is currently being appointed to provide an additional layer of support for children who wish to speak to someone independent about their care and experiences.

What does the residential special school need to do to improve?

Point for improvement

- The school should identify at least one person other than a parent, outside the staff and those responsible for the leadership and governance of the school, who children may contact directly about personal problems or concerns at the school. This person may be known as the 'independent person'. Children know who this person is, know how to contact them and feel comfortable talking to them. The person is easily accessible at all reasonable times, visits regularly (at least monthly), and knows the children.

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: SC050152

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Neil Wells

Type of school: Residential Special School

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Inspectors

Sara Stoker, Social Care Inspector

Peter Jackson, Social Care Inspector

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