

# Cornfields School

207 Hythe Road, Ashford TN24 8PL

**Inspection date**

21 February 2024

**Overall outcome**

**The school does not meet all of the independent school standards that were checked during this inspection**

## Main inspection findings

### Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

#### *Paragraph 7 to 7(b) and 32(1)(c)*

- Safeguarding arrangements in the school are fit for purpose. Feedback from recent external audits is guiding the development of leaders' work appropriately.
- The written child protection and safeguarding policy is published on the school's website, alongside other relevant policies such as on safer recruitment, whistle-blowing, online safety and procedures for addressing allegations against staff. Policies are in line with relevant legislation, such as Keeping Children Safe in Education. Very recent changes to senior personnel and roles meant that the designated safeguarding lead was not named correctly in the policy at the start of the inspection. This has subsequently been updated.
- The newly appointed headteacher is identified as the school's designated safeguarding lead (DSL). He is suitably trained and knowledgeable about what this role entails. A number of other senior staff are trained to support him with this aspect of his work. This includes the chair of the proprietor body who, in her role as executive headteacher, is providing ongoing operational support to the school's day-to-day safeguarding work. Two governors have completed the same training, to help them to better understand the DSL role and to support their evaluation of the work being undertaken.
- Relevant leaders are suitably trained in safer recruitment. They understand the checks that need to be made to ensure that adults are safe to work at the school. These checks are recorded clearly on the school's single central record, which is fit for purpose. Recruitment checks are currently being overseen by the executive headteacher, while the newly appointed headteacher becomes established in his role. As a result, the headteacher's knowledge of the checks that have been undertaken is currently quite limited. His own details were not fully entered on the single central record when it was checked during the inspection, because he was listed as agency staff. Consequently, there was no record of a check having been made on his suitability to lead and manage an independent school. Nevertheless, the executive

headteacher was alert to the headteacher not having been declared as unsuitable under this check.

- Staff and governors are suitably knowledgeable about their safeguarding roles. Safeguarding training forms part of new staff induction, with the expectation that staff read and understand Keeping Children Safe in Education. Leaders revisit relevant aspects of safeguarding training over the course of the year, including via use of online training and quizzes to help ensure that staff sustain their knowledge and confidence. Despite some recent turbulence in senior leadership, staff are clear about what to do and who to talk to if they are concerned about a pupil. Twice-daily briefings help keep staff abreast of relevant information about individual pupils and any risks or concerns that have come to light, helping them to act in pupils' best interests.
- Systems for reporting and recording concerns are fit for purpose. Leaders have plans to enhance them further, through investment in a data management system that is intended to bring safeguarding and behaviour records together. In the meantime, existing systems are understood and used appropriately by permanently employed staff. Anyone working temporarily in the school is supported to report any concerns that may arise. Detailed chronologies capture the big picture for each pupil, showing where school leaders have acted promptly and effectively in response to emerging risks or concerns.

#### *Paragraphs 9 to 9(c) and 14*

- There is a written behaviour policy available to view on the school's website. Published in September 2023, it outlines roles and responsibilities linked to promoting positive behaviour. It describes staff as being trained in behaviour management and de-escalation techniques. The policy is fit for purpose and linked to relevant guidance.
- During the inspection, these practices were seen in action. Relationships between staff and pupils were warm and reassuring. When needed, pupils responded well to gentle reminders from staff about how to conduct themselves. Classrooms and corridors were calm and orderly. Levels of staff supervision were appropriate for the number of pupils on site. However, survey responses reflected that some staff do not feel sufficiently supported by leaders in managing more challenging pupil behaviour.
- The executive headteacher keeps a careful record of behaviour incidents, compiling a wide range of information from school leaders into an operational report. This report shows very few instances of bullying, homophobia or harmful sexual behaviours, which are dealt with appropriately. Suspensions from school are similarly low.
- Over time, the number of instances where staff use positive handling to manage pupils' behaviour is low. After an increase in September 2023, these instances have declined again. Staff receive annual training on how to use restraint, with an emphasis on avoidance and de-escalation where possible. Reporting of incidents is appropriate, with recent changes to practice reflecting feedback from external audits of existing routines.

#### *Paragraphs 11, 13 and 16*

- The operations director, who is also a proprietor, has responsibility for health and safety in the school. Although the operations director is currently absent from school, routines remain in place for ensuring that health and safety requirements are met.

Buildings are adequately maintained and monitored, although the headteacher was not aware of the arrangements for this. Some of these checks and maintenance are reported to take place in the evenings when the school site is empty. Experts are brought in as appropriate to carry out periodic tests, for example on water quality and electrical equipment.

- The headteacher takes day-to-day responsibility for health and safety arrangements in school. This is a relatively new part of his work and, consequently, is not fully defined. Nevertheless, the headteacher is alert to potential risks and keeps an appropriate oversight of the school site. Mechanisms are in place for reporting and addressing aspects of site maintenance as they emerge.
- Arrangements for administering first aid are fit for purpose. A relatively large number of staff are trained as first aiders. Procedures for dealing with incidents and accidents are laid out clearly in the written first-aid policy. Instances of first aid are documented appropriately in the bound accident book.
- The written risk assessment policy meets requirements and is implemented effectively. Written risk assessments are appropriately in place for pupils, activities and the school site. This shows that leaders give due consideration to potential risks and how they can be managed and minimised.
- The standards checked in this part of the independent school standards were found to be met.

## Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

### *Paragraph 34(1) to 34(1)(c)*

- Leadership structures have changed since the last inspection. Both proprietors have deliberately reduced their day-to-day involvement in the running of the school and are currently not on site during the school day when pupils and staff are present. The chair of the proprietor body, in her role as executive headteacher, remains heavily involved in the operational running of the school.
- Attempts have been made to develop the school's wider leadership capacity in recent weeks, through the introduction of a headteacher post. An initial interim appointee was in place for a short period of time prior to the inspection.
- The current headteacher joined the school in a different role at the end of January. He brings useful knowledge and experience from previous similar roles in other independent schools. However, he had only been headteacher for a few days at the time of the inspection. His post was made substantive on the day of the inspection. Consequently, he is in the early stages of establishing his understanding of the extent to which the school meets the independent school standards. His oversight of operational aspects, such as around how health and safety requirements are being met, is limited by his time in post. For example, he required support in order to provide some documents and information requested during the inspection.
- The proprietor and governors make appropriate use of external experts to support their understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have well-considered plans to strengthen current senior leadership capacity and plan for the

future. However, at the time of the inspection, these plans were in the very early stages of being implemented.

- Leaders have ensured that pupils' well-being is promoted successfully. Independent school standards relating to safeguarding, behaviour and risk assessments were found to be met at this inspection. The proprietor has sought external advice to strengthen some aspects of the school's work in light of the changing context, such as around health and safety in the absence of the operations director. Leaders have also responded to the findings from recent safeguarding audits, adapting policies and practice as a result.
- Some of the standards in this part were found to be unmet.

## **Compliance with regulatory requirements**

The school does not meet the requirements of the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements that were checked during this inspection, as set out in the annex of this report. Not all of the standards and associated requirements were checked during this inspection.

## School details

Unique reference number	146521
DfE registration number	886/6152
Inspection number	10332128

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Special school
School status	Independent special school
Age range of pupils	7 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	50
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Keefields Ltd
Chair	Mary McKeeman
Headteacher	Greg Higson (headteacher) Mary McKeeman (executive headteacher)
Annual fees (day pupils)	£37,500
Telephone number	01233 877 046
Website	<a href="https://www.cornfields.kent.sch.uk">https://www.cornfields.kent.sch.uk</a>
Email address	Office@cornfields.kent.sch.uk
Dates of previous standard inspection	15 to 17 March 2022

## Information about this school

- Cornfields School had its last standard inspection in March 2022, when it was judged to be outstanding. It has not received any additional inspections since then.
- All pupils at Cornfields are placed there by a local authority, which funds the place. Pupils all have education, health and care plans for social, emotional and mental health needs. Many have had a period of absence from education before joining the school.
- The school operates from a single site. The sister school, Belle Vue, is registered and inspected separately.

- Cornfields is owned and operated by Keefields Limited. The chair of the proprietor body is also the school's executive headteacher. She is currently working away from the school site, providing strategic and operational support.
- The other proprietor is also an employee, undertaking the role of operations director.
- The headteacher joined the school in late January 2024, initially on a temporary basis and in a different role. His employment as headteacher was made permanent on the day of the inspection.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The inspector was aware during the inspection that a serious incident that occurred at the setting since the previous inspection is under investigation by the appropriate authorities. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate incidents of this kind, actions taken by the provider in response to the incident were considered alongside the other evidence available at the time of the inspection to inform the inspector's judgements.

## Information about this inspection

- This emergency inspection was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) because of concerns raised with the Department about the safety and well-being of pupils and the leadership of the school.
- The inspection was carried out with no notice and lasted one day.
- The inspection was carried out at the same time that an emergency inspection was undertaken at the other school run by the proprietor body, Belle Vue School. Parts of these inspections were conducted jointly by the inspectors with the proprietor and a governor. The purpose was to reduce the burden of inspection activity for these school leaders. The aspects to explore were the same at both schools.
- The inspection focused on two parts of the independent school standards: those about the welfare, health and safety of pupils and those about the quality of leadership and management of the school.
- The inspector met with the headteacher to discuss aspects of welfare, health and safety, and leadership and management. She toured the school with the headteacher, talking to pupils and adults. She also visited two classrooms at lunchtime and talked to teachers without the headteacher being present. She examined a range of relevant documents provided by school leaders that are available on the school website. Alongside the inspector carrying out the inspection at Belle Vue School, she spoke with the proprietor, a representative of the governing body, an independent educational consultant and representatives of Kent local authority. She took account of five responses to the Ofsted staff survey.
- The inspector considered a wide range of documentation provided by the school after the on-site visit.

## Inspection team

Kathryn Moles, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector



## **Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements**

**The school does not meet the following independent school standards**

### **Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools**

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school–
  - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
  - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently.

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