

Deaf Academy

The Deaf Academy, 1 Douglas Avenue, Exmouth, Devon EX8 2AU

Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

This is a non-maintained special school for deaf children. Most students have at least one additional physical, learning, social, emotional, mental health or medical difficulty. The residential provision provides accommodation for up to 37 students. At the time of this inspection, 17 children were staying in the residential provision.

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

Staff and children refer to 'flats' and the 'residential' provision; therefore, this report uses that terminology.

Inspection dates: 13 to 15 January 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: 14 January 2025

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Most children enjoy staying at the flats. They have positive and trusting relationships with staff, which helps them feel safe and comfortable. Staff encourage children to participate in a range of activities, including swimming, seasonal parties and outdoor pursuits. Children are encouraged to build friendships and access their community; a real focus is placed on inclusion. As a result, children develop a strong sense of identity, belonging and togetherness.

Children are making good progress from their starting points. Staff help children to identify achievable goals so that the support provided is informed by children's individual needs and aspirations. Staff help children to develop the important life skills that they will need in adulthood. As a result, children learn to budget, cook meals and use public transport safely and confidently. Children's achievements are recognised and celebrated through award ceremonies and regular newsletters.

Children and their families receive holistic care and support. Staff help them to identify and engage with internal and external services, ensuring that their needs are well understood and met. Children can continue to benefit from ongoing care and education into early adulthood. When they move out of the flats, leaders and managers ensure that they have access to the support services they need.

Children have various opportunities to express their thoughts, views and wishes. They explain that they get along well with staff and can share their feelings and worries with them. Some staff act as positive deaf role models for children. However, children are not always provided with the tools they need to communicate effectively. For example, one child did not have access to their electronic communication device, and staff had not taken sufficient action to get it for them or offer a suitable alternative method of communication.

The flats are well maintained and furnished. Children have access to plenty of books, games and DVDs. The environments feel warm and homely, and they are personalised to reflect children's individual interests, preferences and identities. The flats are designed to promote communication, and there are inviting communal spaces where children can spend time together. However, an unintended consequence of the open-plan design of the flats is that it can sometimes be difficult for children to have private conversations outside of their bedrooms with staff, family members or other visitors.

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

Staff encourage children to express themselves safely. As a result, no children have run away from the residential provision, and staff have not needed to use restraint. When children harm themselves, staff respond in a nurturing and kind way, helping them to explore their worries and anxieties in healthier ways. Children are given

strategies to help them express their thoughts and feelings safely, rather than acting them out.

Staff help children to stay safe online. Appropriate parental restrictions are in place, alongside a focus on building trusting relationships with staff so that children feel able to report any concerns arising from their online activity. This helps children to develop the skills they need to use the internet and social media safely. Staff also provide support and guidance to children's families so that they can promote children's online safety when they are at home.

Staff support children in developing positive relationships with each other. When disagreements occur, staff help children to resolve their conflicts and repair their relationships. However, one child's behaviour towards another has raised serious concerns. In line with the wishes of the children and their families, a restorative approach was taken to help the children to repair their relationships and establish clear boundaries. This approach was not successful and resulted in one child deciding to no longer stay at the flats and withdrawing from their education.

The academic curriculum supports children in developing an understanding of healthy sexual and non-sexual relationships. However, opportunities for residential staff to provide a direct and robust response to the concerns that were raised have not been taken. Leaders, managers, and staff are confident in the open culture and zero-tolerance approach towards addressing harmful relationships between children. However, in a few cases these protective factors could not be robustly demonstrated.

Safer recruitment procedures are followed so that leaders and managers can determine that staff are suitable to work with children. Appropriate health and safety arrangements are in place to ensure that children's safety is prioritised. Although the risks associated with young adults living alongside children in the flats are considered, there are no agreed contingency plans and procedures should these risks change.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the previous inspection, leaders and managers have been proactive in challenging external professionals and advocating for children and families when support arrangements have been insufficient. This has resulted in positive outcomes and increased support being made available when needed.

Senior leaders are involved in and contribute to the running of the residential provision. Regular audits provide a helpful in-depth review and analysis of important issues, promoting reflection, learning and development. There is a clear strategic direction, with a focus on what it is like for children to stay at the residential provision.

Leaders and managers are aware of the strengths of the residential provision and most of the areas for development. There is a clear commitment to the children and

the quality of care they receive. Leaders, managers and staff have high aspirations for children and are dedicated to helping them fulfil their potential.

Staff enjoy their roles. They have a sound understanding of children's needs and feel well supported by leaders and managers. Staff are helped to develop the skills and experience they require to meet children's individual needs. When training needs are identified for staff, appropriate support and learning opportunities are provided. The staff team is diverse, with varying levels of British Sign Language competence. All staff can sign to some extent and are encouraged to actively develop their skills.

The complaints procedure is clear and accessible. Formal processes are followed, and complaints can be made in a range of ways to suit the complainant's needs. Leaders and managers seek to resolve concerns before they escalate. However, when this is not possible, leaders and managers work with children and their families to find satisfactory resolutions. Some parents have raised concerns about how other children's behaviour affects their own children. Leaders and managers continue to explore these issues.

Leaders, managers and staff are proud of the service they offer children and their families. Children's plans help staff understand children's needs, although they do not always reflect the holistic care and support staff provide. Systems for oversight and monitoring are not always effective. As a result, there are missed opportunities to promote a culture of continuous improvement.

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(s) for residential special schools:

- There is clear leadership and management of the practice and development of residential and care provision in the school. Leaders ensure that there is a mutually supportive and reinforcing approach, between (i) the educational provision and (ii) the residential provision, which is centred around the child. Individuals working in each aspect of provision should be able to challenge each other where necessary. The school should have processes in place to ensure that this is the case. (Residential special schools: national minimum standards 2.5)

Points for improvement

- School leaders should ensure that staff meet children's communication needs effectively. Individual communication methods should be prioritised and readily available for children to use.
- School leaders should promote a zero-tolerance approach when addressing harmful relationships between children. School leaders should be clear that harmful relationships between children may still be happening, even if unreported. Therefore, a culture of openness should promote children's welfare, and robust action should be taken when concerns are identified.
- School leaders should ensure that monitoring and oversight systems are used effectively to promote continuous improvement to the care that is provided to children and ensure that children are kept safe.

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: SC022216

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Sylvan Dewing

Type of school: Residential special school

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Inspectors

Martin Brown, Social Care Inspector

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