

Inspection of Ancora House School

Countess of Chester Health Park, Liverpool Road, Chester, Cheshire CH2 1BQ

Inspection dates: 11 and 12 May 2023

Overall effectiveness	Outstanding
The quality of education	Outstanding
Behaviour and attitudes	Outstanding
Personal development	Outstanding
Leadership and management	Outstanding
Sixth-form provision	Outstanding
Previous inspection grade	Outstanding

Until November 2020, the school was exempt from routine inspection because it was judged as outstanding at its previous inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The school has not been inspected since November 2015.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils who attend Ancora House School currently experience significant mental and physical health challenges. The vast majority of pupils have had considerable amounts of time out of mainstream education. In this school, pupils receive the care, kindness, support and nurture that they need to allow them to heal and build their trust and confidence in education again. Parents and carers could not praise the school enough. They said that the school has given their children hope and a belief in their future. They also reported that the school has changed their children's lives.

The calm, happy and friendly atmosphere in the school is infectious. Pupils feel safe. They are accepted for who they are, and they have the time and space to begin to make the small steps of progress towards recovery. Every tiny improvement is celebrated and recognised. Over time, pupils reach leaders' high aspirations for their achievement. They make considerable improvements in their academic achievement and personal development.

Staff are very sensitive to the emotional, mental health and personal needs of pupils. They know pupils very well, and they work closely with clinical staff and parents to keep pupils safe. The positive and respectful school culture ensures that pupils behave well. However, sometimes pupils do fall out. When this happens, staff support pupils sensitively to ensure that any bullying or disagreements are resolved successfully. Staff also support pupils to understand and accept different opinions.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have designed a broad, rich and highly ambitious curriculum that meets pupils' individual needs. The curriculum is carefully designed to recognise the huge impact that pupils' health needs have had on their ability to learn in the past. On admission to the school, leaders work with other professionals, parents and pupils to gather as much information as they can, which then informs each pupil's personalised curriculum.

Teachers are skilled in their craft and have high expectations for all pupils. They ignite the spark of interest that inspires and captures pupils' imaginations, interests and talents. Teachers work with sensitivity, and shape the curriculum to help pupils learn the right content at the right time. Over time, pupils' confidence returns, and they thrive and excel in their learning.

Teachers use assessment strategies well to allow them to identify any gaps in pupils' learning. Teachers ensure that their choice of activities helps to close any gaps in pupils' knowledge so that they can take the next step in learning.

Reading is a priority in school. A wide range of books are available, alongside quiet spaces for pupils to relax and enjoy reading. Teachers link stories, poetry and art to

deepen pupils' love for literature and the arts. Any pupils who need additional support with reading get the help that they need to become confident, fluent readers.

Students in the sixth form achieve highly. Their personalised curriculum ensures that students can continue to study for their A levels or college subjects. Students can study a range of subjects, including academic subjects, and many gain qualifications to support their independence and employability skills, including in The Prince's Trust, art and outdoor education.

Staff harness students' interests and talents. They support students to access work experience or volunteering opportunities. This has led to some students finding their passion and future career choice, including in photography and marine biology.

The curriculum to promote pupils' personal development is exceptional. The support that pupils receive, alongside a well-thought-through programme of learning, is the foundation of the personal, social, health and economic education curriculum. The personal and academic curriculums work seamlessly together to remove barriers to learning. This allows pupils to flourish and succeed.

Pupils develop the social skills that enable them to work together with respect and acceptance. Pupils have the space and time to focus on their own personal development. Additionally, staff's observations and knowledge of each pupil make a significant contribution to the clinician's work and to the eventual successful transition of each pupil to their next stage in education.

Pupils have often experienced extreme trauma prior to being admitted to the school. Staff quickly establish warm and trusting relationships with pupils. Over time, pupils' attitudes to learning, and their behaviour, improve considerably.

Pupils learn about a wide range of careers and future opportunities in education, training or employment. Ex-pupils visit the school to talk about their experiences in work and higher education. Pupils visit different colleges and employers to widen their options and aspirations for their future.

Leaders work with a range of professionals to ensure pupils' health, education and care needs are met. Leaders also ensure that when pupils are ready to return to their mainstream school, college or training provider, they have an effective transition plan in place to support the move.

Leaders meet every morning with hospital professionals to keep all staff up to date with pupils' welfare and readiness for learning. Leaders also prioritise staff's well-being, as they recognise the emotional challenges around working with vulnerable pupils. The vast majority of staff love working in the school and feel that their workload is manageable.

Governors know the school well. They are passionate and committed to providing the best care and education for the pupils at the school. They challenge leaders and the local authority to ensure that pupils have the best possible outcomes.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and staff work in partnership with clinical staff to keep pupils safe. The close working relationship with clinicians in the hospital ensures that all professionals have a forensic knowledge of each pupil. The safety of pupils is the highest priority in school. Leaders also work with external professionals, including the local authority, to secure the help needed for pupils and families.

Leaders ensure that staff have the right skills and expertise to support the needs of the pupils. Staff are very well trained.

Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe, including online and in the community.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route.

School details

Unique reference number	134766
Local authority	Cheshire West and Chester
Inspection number	10255933
Type of school	Secondary pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	47
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	6
Appropriate authority	Local authority
Chair of governing body	
Headteacher	Sian Thomas
Website	http://ancorahouseschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	10 November 2015, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- Since the previous inspection, the school has expanded. There is now an additional site. The original site, Ancora House School, is based at Ancora House, an adolescent mental health inpatient unit, on the Countess of Chester Health Park. It provides education for inpatients at the unit. The community site is based at Castle Park House, Castle Park, Frodsham. It is commissioned to provide education for young people who, for a range of reasons, are currently unable to access their home school.
- The vast majority of pupils are dual rolled with a mainstream school or college.
- Leaders do not make use of alternative provision.
- The school provides for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Some of the pupils who attend have an education, health and care plan for social, emotional and mental health needs.

- The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 7 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior leaders, subject leaders and governors, including the chair of governors. The lead inspector spoke with two representatives from the local authority and a clinical representative from the hospital.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in mathematics, science and personal, social and health education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with subject leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also spoke to leaders about, and looked at examples of pupils' work in, some other subjects.
- During the inspection, inspectors reviewed a range of documentation, including that related to safeguarding. They also spoke with leaders, staff, parents and pupils about safeguarding.
- Inspectors spoke to leaders, staff, pupils and parents about reading, behaviour and personal development. They also reviewed a range of documentation relating to behaviour, personal development and reading.
- Inspectors took account of the views of parents expressed through Ofsted Parent View. They also considered responses to Ofsted's online survey for staff and pupils.

Inspection team

Julie Bather, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Sue Eastwood

His Majesty's Inspector

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