

North East Centre for Autism - Aycliffe School

Address: Cedar Drive, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, DL5 6UN

Unique reference number (URN): 139329

Inspection report: 9 June 2026

Exceptional	
Strong standard	
Expected standard	
Needs attention	
Urgent improvement	

Safeguarding standards met

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, pupils are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect schools for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- **Met:** The school has an open and positive culture of safeguarding. All legal requirements are met.
- **Not met:** The school has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.
- **Insufficient evidence:** Inspectors were unable to gather sufficient evidence to judge whether safeguarding standards are met.

Expected standard

Achievement

Expected standard 

From their varied and individual starting points, pupils typically achieve well. Their progress towards sensory and regulation targets is particularly noteworthy. Students in the sixth form who access qualifications such as functional skills achieve well. This is especially the case in phonics and reading.

There is a clear focus on developing pupils' communication skills. Pupils in the sensory pathway make suitable progress in their ability to make choices and express themselves. Others develop their understanding well through the use of printed signs and symbols. Some respond particularly well to sign language.

Many pupils make considerable progress in gaining the knowledge and strategies to manage their emotions and develop their social skills. The focus on independent living and on personal, social and health education helps pupils to learn important life skills that prepare them well for their futures. Most pupils have firm, realistic plans for their next steps and go on to appropriate destinations.

Attendance and behaviour

Expected standard 

Leaders discuss how each individual pupil is doing at school once per week, every week. Much of the support given links to the 'step plan'. This brings together pupils' needs and the progress they are making. Leaders want to 'see the person, build trust, alter the environment if needed, and then further personalise any planning'. By doing so, they consider how pupils are responding to adults and each other. Leaders then tweak plans to ensure that pupils focus well in class and act with kindness. They are highly successful in doing so. As a result, pupils are typically friendly, warm and thoughtful to each other. Bullying and unkind words are rare. Pupils know to accept each other no matter any differences they see. If ever pupils lose self-control, procedures are in place to help them stay safe.

Pupils attend school regularly and often. Leaders work hard to help pupils and families understand the importance of attending school. Where needed, leaders provide tailored support to help pupils to attend. They take a robust and systematic approach. Pupils' individual circumstances are managed sensitively and consistently through their 'step plan'. This includes those who are in care or supported by social services.

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard 

Pupils are typically taught in a pathway according to their needs. The sensory and communication pathway helps pupils to develop their understanding of the world around them. It prepares them well for life after school. The education pathway helps pupils to develop their basic skills. This includes reading and mathematics. Phonics is well delivered. Leaders' focus on communication is bearing fruit.

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the curriculum and the quality of teaching. Teaching is typically purposeful. Staff know individual pupils' needs and targets. They help pupils, often on a one-to-one basis, to make suitable progress. Staff are particularly effective at helping pupils to stay focused. 'Regulation time' is used well to this end.

Sport, forest school and community education all form part of the curriculum for some pupils. Some pupils access qualifications. All pupils are helped to prepare for adulthood during their time at school. This includes travel training, for example.

The curriculum is broad and logically ordered. The precise next steps for pupils are clear in the sensory and communication pathway. Leaders are working to replicate this in the education pathway. They know that time is not always used as effectively as it could be here, too.

Inclusion

Expected standard 

The school supports pupils who have an education, health and care plan for special educational needs and/or disabilities. All pupils have a diagnosis of autism. Many have other needs, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Pupils do well because the school addresses their needs effectively. Staff swiftly help to reduce the barriers pupils face. Adults think carefully about how they interact with individual pupils in classrooms and around the school site. They know pupils well and quickly adjust support if needed. Staff show a deep understanding of pupils' nonverbal indications of wants and needs. This includes for students in the sixth form.

Leaders monitor pupils' progress closely, reviewing the impact of interventions and adapting provision when needed. Leaders work well with families to help pupils to feel welcome and valued.

Leaders maintain very effective partnerships with external agencies. They work well with social workers, multi-agency panels and local authorities, for example. Transitions in and out of school are managed carefully. Children in care and those known (or previously known) to social services are well supported. The individual approach taken by leaders supports each pupil to overcome barriers to their learning and/or wellbeing. This includes barriers such as economic disadvantage.

Leadership and governance

Expected standard 

Since the previous inspection, there have been changes to the senior leadership team. The proprietor has ensured that the principal and her team have the resources they need to have a positive impact on the pupils in their care. The proprietor has suitable checks in place to ensure that the independent school standards are met. For example, the appropriate checks are made on adults who work in the school. Risk assessments are detailed and purposeful for the school and its activities. In addition, the school complies with Schedule 10 of the Equality Act. There is capacity to continue to improve the school. An example of this is the positive developments in the sensory and communication pathway.

Leaders ensure that professional learning is coherent and well considered. Recent training on communication has been well received by staff. Staff report being supported by leaders in relation to workload. Leaders work effectively with parents. The flow of communication helps both families and staff at school to support pupils.

Leaders know what is going well at school and what needs further attention. Since the previous inspection, a new headteacher has been appointed and a new director of education is in place. There is a sense of passion and urgency to ensure pupils receive the best possible education. Those responsible for governance have a detailed knowledge of the outcomes pupils achieve. They are less knowledgeable about exactly where strengths are in the quality of teaching at the school.

Personal development and wellbeing

Expected standard 

Personal development is at the heart of the curriculum. The annual events calendar is key as important dates and celebrations are highlighted across the year. These include the International Day of Democracy, Roald Dahl Day, Recycle Week and World Mental Health Day. The calendar includes a focus on different religious traditions, charity events and what it means to be a good British citizen. World Autism Awareness Day has a clear focus. These dates are celebrated through classroom teaching, competitions and visits. Through these events, pupils learn what it is to be British and the importance of including and valuing everyone. The school is an inclusive and welcoming place, and pupils play their part in this.

The personal, social and health education curriculum covers all statutory requirements and is adapted for the school's individual context. Pupils also learn about relationships and sex education in a way that is appropriate for them. Pupils explore risks they may face within their communities, such as online safety. Leaders enrich personal development through partnerships with external agencies.

Other experiences enrich the curriculum. These include artistic, sporting and cultural events. Examples include work experience with alpacas, playing djembes and learning about double-decker buses. These are not chosen randomly; leaders actively try to stimulate the interests of everyone. Pupils can be part of the school council to develop leadership skills.

By the time pupils leave school, or when students leave the sixth form, they are well prepared for their next steps. In the curriculum, there is a clear focus on developing independence. For example, travel training is an important feature. Careers education is a strength. Students leave sixth form with appropriate plans for the future.

Leaders and staff are compassionate. Pastoral care is their number one priority. Pupils are safe and secure here.

Post 16 provision

Expected standard 

Each student in sixth form is treated as an individual. The post-16 offer is tailored to each individual's needs. Many sixth-form students follow the education pathway. They access qualifications in English and mathematics. Some follow courses such as digital basics or independent living qualifications. There is a particular emphasis on preparation for adulthood, independence and community participation.

Leaders think deeply about how to help students prepare for life after school. For example, when learning about the Second World War, students develop empathy for those affected. They use new vocabulary linked to this when writing poems. Personal, social and health education has a high priority. Students learn how to keep themselves safe online and what healthy relationships are. They develop well socially and are increasingly able to control their emotions.

In lessons, teachers question students well. They check what students can remember and help them develop their knowledge. Students are happy and feel safe.

The careers programme is impressive. Students learn about different jobs and have opportunities to engage with employers. They take part in work experience. Several work on the local farm and enjoy learning about alpacas. Students leave sixth form with secure plans for the future.

What it's like to be a pupil at this school

This is a school that puts the needs of pupils at the centre of everything that it does. All pupils have a diagnosis of autism. They all have an education, health and care plan. Pupils are known as individuals. Staff understand what interests pupils. They know what helps pupils to remain calm and focused. Staff help when pupils are unable to control their emotions. Staff's knowledge of the needs of pupils helps them to overcome any barriers they have.

Leaders help staff to prepare pupils effectively for life after school. The personal development programme is highly effective. Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe, both online and outside of school. The annual events calendar ensures that pupils know what it is like to live in modern Britain. Cultural festivals, national events such as VE Day and a focus on local and national charities all form part of the annual cycle. Pupils enjoy these events.

Pupils achieve well. Teaching is effective. Pupils, including those in the sixth form, are placed in a pathway best suited to their needs. These include the sensory and communication pathway and the education pathway.

Students in the sixth form who are able to access qualifications achieve well in them. The curriculum includes travel training, dealing with money and how to socialise with others. All pupils are supported effectively with their next steps after school. The careers programme is tailored to each individual pupil's needs and interests. The majority of pupils leave with firm plans for their future.

Pupils are kept safe at school. They attend school often and regularly. Any unkind words are often not meant as such. Staff always deal with any issues between pupils sensitively. School is a tolerant and happy place.

Next steps

- Those responsible for governance use quantitative data to help them challenge and support the school. They should ensure that they also have a suitable understanding of the quality of teaching and the curriculum so that their challenge can be even more precise and impactful.
 - The knowledge and skills that pupils develop in the 'sensory and communication pathway' is clearly mapped out, sequenced and precise. Leaders should replicate this precision within the 'education pathway' so that staff can help pupils make progress more rapidly, including in English and mathematics.
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About this inspection

The name of the chair of the proprietor body is Dr Rakesh Chopra.

The fees currently charged are £61,183 to £140,832 annually.

The email address for the school is aycliffeschool@ne-as.org.uk.

Inspectors carried out this standard inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, and checked the school's compliance with the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

Following our renewed inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMIs.

Inspectors spoke with the principal, other senior leaders including the director of education, the chair of the proprietor body and the chief executive during the inspection. Inspectors also spoke with pupils, staff and parents and carers.

All pupils have an education, health and care plan. Pupils have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Some have additional diagnoses, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school does not use alternative provision.

The school has had a change of principal and director of education since the last inspection.

Principal: Tracey Clements

Independent school standards

Independent school standards are either met or not met for each category.

1. Quality of education provided

Standards met

All standards have been met.

2. Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Standards met

All standards have been met.

3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

Standards met

All standards have been met.

4. Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

Standards met

All standards have been met.

5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

Standards met

All standards have been met.

6. Provision of information

Standards met

All standards have been met.

7. Manner in which complaints are handled

Standards met

All standards have been met.

All standards have been met.

Lead inspector:

Michael Wardle, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspector:

Richard Wakefield, His Majesty's Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

This data was available to the inspector at the time of the inspection.

 This data is from 9 June 2026

Total pupils

70

School capacity

84

Pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

70

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

0

Exceptional

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other schools can learn from it.

Strong standard

The school reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard

The school is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement

The school needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

Insufficient evidence

Inspectors were unable to gather reliable enough evidence to grade an evaluation area. This is rare and normally only happens if there are no pupils on roll at the school.

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