

AUTISM ACCREDITATION PEER REVIEW



SERVICE REVIEWED: The Valley School

DATES OF REVIEW: 6 – 8 October 2015

TEAM MEMBERS: Team Coordinator: Jackie Macey Team Member: Sonia Colvill

OVERVIEW OF PROVISION

The Valley is a local authority maintained special school for young people aged 11-16 with global learning difficulties, ASD and speech and language difficulties. There are approximately 65 pupils with autism out of the total number on roll of 109. Nearly all of the students have some verbal ability and many show a good level of language development.

Students with autism are integrated into standard classes except for one Key Stage 3 group and one Key Stage 4 group who follow a primary model and a more autism specific approach. All the provision is on the same site with year 11 students attending the local college and other providers for a link course. Currently students move on to other settings at the end of Key Stage 4.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

Observations

The review team observed 19 sessions which included whole class lessons, small group activities, lunch and break times. Observation of transition times also took place.

Interviews and Discussions

During the review meetings were held with the Deputy Head Teacher, Assistant Head Teacher, Vice Chair of Governors, Speech and Language Therapist and Music Therapist. More informal discussions took place with teachers and support staff, learning partner with a leading role for Occupational Therapy and students.

Documentation

During the review the team was given access to a wide range of documentation, including:

- Policies
- Autism Handbook
- School Development Plan
- Planning
- Individual Learning Portraits
- Behaviour Restraint Book
- Hertfordshire STEPS Programme (Positive Behaviour Programme)
- Elklan Course Programme (Language Development)
- Social Stories
- Photographic evidence of themed activities such as productions and Arts Week activities
- Self Audit
- Training Audit
- Ofsted reports
- Website

KEY FINDINGS

Actions for development	Reasoning
<p>Specialist Standard 1: Teaching and Learning - Environment</p> <p>The review team suggest that many of the autistic students in the school would benefit from a lower arousal environment.</p>	<p>The school is aware that some autistic students find a low arousal environment to be calming and to support the maintenance of low levels of anxiety. There is evidence of this in that staff use the Sensory Audit for Schools as a tool for checking environments. Some variation in the management of low arousal environments was seen, e.g. corridors are calm areas free from display and painted in a consistent colour scheme, however some classrooms showed much less awareness of this practice. In some cases replacement furniture that has doors, rather than open plan shelving would be helpful.</p> <p>As part of this development the school may wish to redesign some classrooms so that clear areas are designated for social interaction, individual and whole class work. This approach was seen in the classrooms allocated to discrete autism groups but not for groups where students needs were more mixed.</p> <p>It should also be noted that any materials that could be considered a potential danger under health and safety guidance should be kept out of sight of all students.</p>
<p>Specialist Standard 4: Teaching and Learning - Methods</p> <p>The review team recommends an audit of how visual systems are used to support students with the possibility of some whole school training to agree and develop best practice for the school in this area.</p>	<p>The use of schedules to support students to understand and predict the events of the lesson, day or week showed some inconsistency across the school. Some classes used daily visual schedules with symbol and text and referred to 'Now and Next' schedules and this was seen to benefit students, however in some classes this was missing and students were not given a visual means of measuring their progress through a lesson or of predicting the tasks that they would be asked to complete during the lesson. Whilst verbal indicators were often used it is hard to know how well students have understood or retained these and a visual system has been shown to be more effective in reassuring students and supporting them to manage their anxiety and understand their progression.</p> <p>The review team assessed that labelling of resources was not particularly extensive in many environments. It was judged that further use of labelling would extend students' opportunities to develop their independence skills.</p> <p>Many staff work well to produce instruction sheets for tasks using text and symbols and a range of these differentiated learning tools were seen.</p>

The following areas were also identified as examples of what the service does well.

Specific areas of strength	Reasoning
<p>Specialist Standard 2: Teaching and Learning – Programme/Curriculum and Activity Content</p> <p>The school works well to ensure that all students are offered curriculum experiences that enrich, motivate and extend their learning.</p>	<p>The staff at The Valley School have been creative in their development of the curriculum and this benefits all students.</p> <p>The school puts on frequent themed days such as Circus Day or weeks such as Arts Week or Sports Week. Arts Week involved activities lead by outside specialists such as a graffiti artist and joint activities with students from other local schools. This enrichment of the curriculum is seen to support flexibility and generalisation for students as well as offering some new social experiences within a familiar environment.</p> <p>Recently the whole school was able to visit a theatre to see a performance together, this involved a number of challenging aspects for many students a represents a significant achievement for the students and the school.</p> <p>In addition the school has enhanced daily curriculum opportunities by developing a horticulture area, having a range of animals in school (chickens, guinea pigs, a rabbit and a dog). In the playground is a range of outdoor gym and Music equipment.</p> <p>During lunch breaks a wide variety of clubs are on offer such as: Messy Play, Quiet Lego, Football, Band Club, Drama and Animal Club. An area where students could just relax in a calm environment and not choose any particular activity was also available. The majority of students appeared to be involved in an activity and well supported during the lunch break.</p>
<p>Specialist Standard 3: Teaching and Learning: Activity Organisation and Resources</p> <p>The review team were impressed by the very high number of lessons observed that involved a hands on approach to learning where students were actively participating in engaging practical activities. Learning is well supported by staff modelling and setting tasks at a level where students are able to be successful.</p>	<p>During the review the team observed students learning form practical tasks set in Music, Performing Arts, Maths, Science, Independent Living Skills, PE as well as other lessons. Where written recording was relevant to the task it was carefully chosen, e.g. the use of white boards to write and show in a Maths lesson, here corrections could be easily made and the lack of permanence supported students to feel confident to participate. In an English lesson just a missing word was recorded and options for these were discussed within the class prior to the student choosing what they would write. In a Music lesson students could choose a happy or sad card to express how they felt about a piece of Music.</p> <p>An active Science lesson was delivered for a group of students with high needs, here all of the Scientific aspects of the lesson, such as considering ‘fair testing’ were covered and not minimised due to the students’ limitations.</p>
<p>Core Standard 7: Individual Plans</p>	

Individual Learning Portraits (ILPs) are relevant, succinct documents that reflect the student's input and are written in the first person. These documents give an immediate overview of a student's main needs and allow intervention to be supportive from the outset. The review team judge these documents to be a particular strength of the school and to reflect the underlying positive approach that exists to accepting students' needs and supporting their learning and development.

The school produces an Individual Learning Portrait for each student. These are single page clearly written documents, headings include:

- What I want you to know about me.
- What I find difficult
- What you can do to help me
- What I intend to do to help myself

Reading an ILP conveys an immediate insight into a student's world and would be of great value to a member of staff who was new to working with the student.

In producing the documents staff need to listen to the experiences and wishes of the student and consider their own understanding of how they can be supported and this is a valuable exercise.

FAMILY QUESTIONNAIRE SCORES

SCORES					
Number of Questionnaires sent out (information provided by the service):					79
Number of Questionnaires returned:					16
Number of sections not scored (figures only reflect sections scored):					1
	VERY UNHAPPY	UNHAPPY	SATISFIED	HAPPY	VERY HAPPY
Contact	0	3	1	3	9
Support	1	1		5	9
Advice	0	2	2	3	9
Involvement	0	1	2	3	9
TOTALS	1	7	5	14	36
PERCENTAGES	2%	11%	8%	22%	57%

79% of the responses recorded were graded as 'happy' or 'very happy'. The majority of questionnaires were returned with gradings but not written comments, a selection of those that were made are given below:

- The school has adapted to my child's needs very well. The Valley have listened and are trying.
- I have never had a problem contacting The Valley School and I have always found them to be very helpful.
- My son really enjoys school.
- My child's school doesn't always communicate any issues arising until a later date at which point it's too late to address this with my child.
- Not all teachers are aware of his individual needs.
- I feel completely relaxed when Xxxxx goes to school as I know he is in a happy and safe environment.
- There are lots of opportunities to go in to school and see our child's achievements and join in lessons.
- Our child has flourished since he has been at the Valley.
- Have struggled to get them to understand his autism and his anxiety levels, the school welfare officer has been very supportive.

OBSERVATION SCORES

Topic	Not Met	Partially Met	Majority Met	Fully Met
Social understanding and Communication	0	2	7	10
Flexibility of Thought	0	0	4	15
Sensory Issues	0	1	7	11
Behaviour Support	0	0	4	15
TOTAL	0	3	22	51
PERCENTAGE	0%	4%	29%	67%

FINDINGS FROM OBSERVATIONS

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Social Understanding and Communication	<p>The school has a mix of MLD students with global delay and students on the autistic spectrum. The vast majority of students are verbal. Most students have an understanding of simple verbal communication and instructions from adults and are able to respond verbally. Some of this is in short phrases or formulaic.</p> <p>The school has 4 days of speech and language input from a speech and language therapist (SALT) and a speech and language therapy assistant. The therapists have a focus of "in class support" and focusing on functional skills. One to one support is offered where needed and the student then may be taken out of the class to the therapy room. Working with senior staff the therapists have identified key training to support the staff to develop their skills to support students' language and communication development. The first training need identified as use of blank 1 – 4 questioning. The therapy assistant helps to produce useful visual systems including incident forms that break down questions into manageable chunks for the students and recording of events, and 'now and next' symbol sheets. The school has iPads and a few students have access to the "Grid 2" programme. New iPads are due to be in classes shortly. Other training such as Elklan to aid language building is expected to be offered to some staff in the near future by the SALT.</p> <p>In classes staff were observed modifying both verbal and written instructions to enable clearer understanding. In a lesson chunking was observed where a learning objective was broken down into small parts and each part not written up on a 'now and next' board until the time that part of the lesson took place.</p>

	<p>In lessons students regularly had their name used before an instruction was given and recognition of achievement was evident.</p> <p>Active engagement in conversation with each other was encouraged. In some lessons students were encouraged to pick a co-worker, choose a friend and ask a friend to help them. This approach was included on the lesson plans. Students were asked to explain something to another student or model something for other students. Questions related to the task were frequently observed and time allowed for processing and responses.</p> <p>Visual symbols were evident in some lessons and particularly effective in trampolining for body positions and names. The use of feelings fans was very effective in whole class listening and Music activities. In a Performing Arts lesson emotions were explored through body language with other students having to identify the feeling portrayed, this activity was supported by visual symbols.</p> <p>Lessons observed contained a lot of practical activities where the activity was modelled, the language modelled and questions related to the activity used to reinforce the language, including subject specific words.</p> <p>The school has a Music Therapist one day a week who has an agenda to develop social skills and negotiating skills in different groups that have been identified. One group will be a majority autistic lower ability Year 7 group, who often work in 3 smaller groups to develop group cohesion in a bigger class group. Another group will be a girls group, as they are very much in the minority. As well as individual sessions the therapist will offer a drop in session for a lunch club.</p>
<p>Flexibility of Thought</p>	<p>The school has a strong ethos of adapting to meet student's needs and has been successful in devising programmes which have allowed students who have been unsuccessful in previous schools to take time to develop positive approaches to school. Sometimes the starting point has been through a special interest or through a calm and consistent response to behavioural challenges, staff show perseverance and skill in ensuring that The Valley School is able to meet the needs of a wide range of students. Staff understanding of students' difficulties and how these can impact on their participation are key to their success. Students who are supported in quite a nurturing environment within the school have a timetable for the times they are able to spend in larger groups and programmes are in place to gradually extend these.</p> <p>The Valley School supports students to experience a wide range of different experiences beyond the regular curriculum, this allows students to 'risk take' and extend their usual behaviours within a safe environment where they are supported by familiar staff. Students sometimes take part in whole school activities such as everyone attending a performance at a London Theatre. This approach is seen by the review team as supporting generalisation, flexibility and the development of independence.</p> <p>Students who have been identified as needing a high level of support and protection were observed to be supported to make guided choices about what to cook, buy ingredients in the community and work together to cook various items. This extended task offered many opportunities for problem solving and making choices. Once the cooking is finished items are sold to staff and the money is saved towards an event such as a meal out. The students learn some important planning and money skills and the activity has a clear and meaningful purpose.</p>

	<p>In an English lesson small groups of students were given the task of deciding between themselves who should take which role in a small play. Similarly in a Maths lesson students were invited to choose a partner to work with. The Valley School has a large site with many specialist rooms and varied environments including specified outdoor areas which have been well developed for: animal care, horticulture, outside Music and Gym.</p> <p>The school offers a wide range of lunch clubs where students might try different activities and be supported to gain new experiences, e.g. Animal Club, Band Club, Football, Drama, Lego, messy play, as well as being able to choose an indoor space to simply relax.</p> <p>In conclusion the review team judged the school to be able to make appropriate judgements as to how to extend student choices but also recognised the importance of balancing this with high levels of consistency and familiarity when supporting students.</p>
Sensory Issues	<p>The school has a large classroom which has been developed to meet a range of sensory needs. There is a screened area which is equipped as a sensory room with lighting, projectors and sensory equipment, in addition there is space where Occupational Therapy (OT) Programmes can be delivered, a comfortable relaxation area and a small teaching area which is used in various ways. This comfortable environment is also used during lunch times for students who choose this as an option.</p> <p>The school has an Occupational Therapist for one day per week and a full time member of staff who delivers some OT programmes works with pupils in the sensory area and has an overview of sensory approaches within the school. The review team judged this facility to be of high value for autistic students and one that is well used by the school.</p> <p>There was evidence of an understanding of the impact that sensory issues have on many students in each classroom. The use of ear defenders was common place, several students used postural cushions and classrooms were equipped with boxes of 'fiddle' items. Where students had chosen to wear ear defenders they were reminded that these needed to be removed during listening activities, students were able to comply with this expectation. Several students were also seen to wear weighted jackets and one was observed to ask for one of these. In one or two classroom there were screened sensory or calming areas. One large room designed for students who are not able to function optimally in larger groups had a very relaxing feel as well as the presence of a small dog who was reported to have a calming effect for some students. This classroom also had direct access to an outside area.</p> <p>The school is built with particularly large windows and blinds were used in many rooms in order to minimise outside distractions.</p> <p>The school has recently employed a Music Therapist for one day per week, in discussion she was able to explain how she was aware of the different sensory profiles that autistic students may display, in particular noise sensitivity.</p> <p>Students are assessed for the impact of using coloured overlays to make text easier to access and two students have 'Irlen' glasses which have specifically coloured lenses and are reported to have a positive impact on student behaviour and anxiety levels.</p>

	<p>The school has a growing understanding of the impact that sensory issues can have on individual students but would benefit from further training to ensure that all staff have a sound understanding in this area. Over time practice could be developed to include times where sensory circuits and routines are offered as part of the daily timetable. Once the school feels its sensory practice is fully developed it may wish to document this within a policy.</p>
Behaviour Support	<p>The Valley school has a calm and purposeful atmosphere. There is an expectation for students to self-manage their own behaviours by everyone being aware of the positive behaviour guidelines in place that are used consistently by the staff across the school.</p> <p>The school uses the Hertfordshire STEPS programme to support behaviour in school in an individualised positive way. A senior staff member is trained in the delivery of the programme and updates training as required according to the recommendations.</p> <p>The school has a behaviour policy and restraint policy. Restraint is rarely used. The restraint book was seen. Pupil portraits are readily accessible to staff in the classes and effectively provide information that helps staff and visitors' understanding of the students, so, staff approach the students with prior knowledge.</p> <p>Minor uncooperative behaviour was observed to be positively managed e.g. with a "thank you" for returning to class, giving choices and allowing the student to start again. Staff then quietly helped the student to restart work. The school has several areas that students can go to as safe areas. The key area that the school uses to support students who have difficulty in managing in class is "The Hub". This is staffed by three members of staff. Students are able to access this according to their independent learning plans and to their needs on the day. A few students, including one with very challenging behaviour, remain in The Hub for the most of their school day. The expectation is for most students in The Hub to go to lessons with their class group for parts of the day. These students have individual time tables that are regularly reviewed.</p> <p>Staff are contacted to track and redirect students to the desired place, mainly by the SLT team or the Hub team. In classes students are reminded of the reward system they are on, they are guided back to task and reminded of reward for compliance with the agreed system.</p> <p>Seating in large classrooms was arranged so there was plenty of space between small groups of students, with groups mainly supported by a learning partner (support staff) to remain on task, and explain, when needed. When required students were reminded of the rules and the reward system for staying on task. A reward system of signatures, that was familiar to students, was used as a reminder to stay on task.</p> <p>Teachers stopped lessons briefly when they thought it was needed to bring a student back to the expected behaviour requirement, to re-establish rules and when deemed necessary the student was taken a short distance away to help make choices together with the learning partner. This demonstrated the positive behaviour system of STEPS the school uses.</p>

CONCLUSION

The Valley School has a calm and happy learning environment where staff have worked well to develop their autism practice and build effective relationships with students. This ongoing work includes a strong commitment to future autism training for the whole staff group.

The school offers all students a rich curriculum which includes an emphasis on the Arts and skills for life such as enterprise activities and independent living skills. Amongst the school population are some students with more complex needs who are unable to be successful in regular class groups. The school has designed individual programmes for these students which have been effective and over time allowed them to integrate more fully into the school.