

INSPECTION REPORT

**INSPECTION CARRIED OUT ACCORDING TO SECTION 162A
OF THE EDUCATION ACT 2002**

REPORT REFERENCE NUMBER: SIS/162A/2006-7/05

Name of school:	Sceptre School
DfES number: FOCUS number:	820/6019 308
Inspection team::	Lead Inspector: Mrs Eileen McAndrew Supporting Inspector: Dr Roy Long Lay Inspector: Mr Doug Siderfin
Dates of inspection:	26 February – 1 March 2007

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SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of the school:	Sceptre
Address of the school:	Ridgeway Avenue DUNSTABLE Bedfordshire LU5 4QL
Telephone number:	01582 665676
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Proprietor:	Sceptre Education Trust
Name of CEO:	Mr Simon Wells
Name of senior teacher:	Mrs Carol Bradley
DfES number:	820/6019
Focus number:	308
Type of school:	Independent school affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust
Age range of pupils:	11 – 17
Gender of pupils:	Male and female
Number on roll (Full time)	Boys: 44 Girls: 62
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	None
Type of inspection:	Section 162 (A) Inspection
Inspection team:	
Lead Inspector:	Mrs Eileen McAndrew
Supporting Inspector:	Dr. Roy Long Mr Derek Coe (one day only)
Lay inspector:	Mr Doug Siderfin
Dates of inspection:	26 February to 1 March 2007
Date of issue of this report:	11 April 2007
Report reference number:	SIS/162A/2006-7/05

PART A: INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the School Inspection Service in accordance with Section 162(A) (1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, and it follows the inspection framework laid down by the Service and the Focus Learning Trust (FLT) and agreed with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). It was conducted by independent professional inspectors who looked at all aspects of the school's provision as required by the current regulations. The professional inspectors were accompanied by a trained lay inspector who looked at agreed aspects of the regulations. The lay inspector also evaluated both the Trustees' stewardship of resources and the ethos of the school and reported on these in an internal report to the Focus Learning Trust. His findings are summarised in Section C of this document, but this section is not a statutory part of the inspection process.

Information about the school

Sceptre Education Trust is an independent secondary day school for girls and boys aged 11 - 17. It is situated in an urban location in Dunstable near Luton. The school is maintained by the Sceptre Education Trust and provides full-time education for pupils from Brethren families throughout Bedfordshire and beyond. It is a school with a distinctive religious (Christian) character and is affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust.

The school was originally established as a tuition centre for pupils who were otherwise being taught at home, but it was provisionally registered as an independent school in August 2003. It was subsequently visited on two occasions by inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and was finally registered on 10 March 2005. The school has twice amalgamated with other Brethren schools, the most recent amalgamation being only six months ago.

Admission is non-selective. At the time of the inspection there were 106 pupils on roll (44 boys and 62 girls), of whom 21 (7 boys and 14 girls) were in Year 12. No pupil has a statement of special educational need.

Summary of main findings

The school has had a difficult six months since its amalgamation. Staff recruitment has been a continuing difficulty, adversely affecting the quality of education. Nonetheless, the school has managed to maintain some of the strengths identified in previous inspection visits from OFSTED. The Trustees and senior teacher have established the amalgamated school on its new site, and put in place a sound curriculum including one for students in Year 12. The majority of teaching is good, pupils are effective learners, and as a result, make good progress. Marking and assessment are unsatisfactory with no uniform practice to ensure that pupils consistently receive timely feedback on their work. Similarly, overall planning is less effective because it is not sufficiently informed by effective assessment.

Pupils feel safe and cared for and enjoy coming to school. Their behaviour is mostly very good and they cooperate effectively with staff and one another. The welfare, health and safety of pupils is a high priority and the school achieves its aim: *'To provide a safe, caring and enjoyable environment in which all individuals are valued, and positive achievements are celebrated'*.

NOTE ON THE TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS REPORT

Throughout this report the word 'pupil' is used to describe young people in years 7 to 11. The word 'student' is used to describe those studying in year 12 and beyond.

What the school does well:

- it maintains a good quality of teaching;
- it provides a good quality environment to support teaching and learning;
- it fosters good behaviour and co-operation amongst pupils;
- it ensures a consistently high level of pastoral care, welfare and safety; and
- it contributes significantly to pupils' and students' development as responsible and mature young people.

What the school must do to comply with the regulations:

- it must put a framework in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and ensure that information from such assessment is utilised to plan teaching so that pupils can make progress.

What the school must do to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002

The school complies with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2002.

Next steps

Although not a requirement, the school might like to consider the following suggestions as central to developing its provision:

- introduce procedures to support and monitor teaching and learning regularly;
- consider the setting arrangements to ensure the most appropriate match to pupils' needs;
- map provision for personal, social and health education to ensure all essential elements are included;
- track more precisely provision for multi-cultural development to support pupils' understanding and appreciation of the achievements of other cultures; and

- review the content of the curriculum in Year 12, and thoroughly explore the range of possible courses before establishing Year 13. The views of students and parents should be taken into account as far as possible.

Distribution of this report

This report is being sent to the chief education officer (CEO) and senior teacher of the school. The CEO is asked to ensure that copies are made available to parents of all pupils and students. In addition, it is being sent to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills through the Independent Schools Registration Team of the DfES, to the Trustees of the FLT and to its Regional Trustee, to members of the School Inspection Service (SIS) team and to members of Her Majesty's Inspectorate at OFSTED charged with monitoring how the SIS conducts its inspections. The FLT has established a website upon which this and other similar inspection reports will be placed. Details can be found at the end of the report.

PART B: COMPLIANCE WITH REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

Sceptre School provides its pupils and students with a curriculum which is broad and balanced and which meets the requirements of the current regulations. However, serious problems with staffing during the six months before the inspection have meant that it has recently been less effective in delivering the curriculum. The recruitment of qualified staff for some key subject areas must be a priority for the Trustees.

As an independent school, Sceptre is not required to follow the National Curriculum (NC), but it seeks to follow it as far as it can. The curriculum is outlined in a thoughtfully produced school prospectus which is updated each academic year. This contains clear statements about its curriculum, as well as statements about the ethos, aims and mission of the school on which the curriculum is based. Further details of the school's curriculum policy are available on request. The prospectus also indicates the school's policies for the education of children who may have special needs, and for the education of those who are able, talented and gifted. However, individual planning by teachers does not take sufficiently into account the needs of the latter.

The school makes sound use of the FLT Curriculum Support Manual, and has developed schemes of work for the subjects of the curriculum. However, the schemes of work vary considerably in their usefulness as working documents for teachers: some are far too detailed and prescriptive, whereas others are too vague to be of real use.

All pupils study a balanced common core of English, mathematics, science, geography, history, French, technology, music, physical education and Bible Study. In addition, all pupils except those in Year 11, who have technical drawing, have lessons to develop typing skills. In Key Stage 3 the technology includes art, but the provision for pupils' and students' aesthetic experience is not wide and needs to be broadened. The extensive programme of individual instrumental teaching effectively enhances the curriculum in music.

The post-16 course is designed for students in Year 12, but plans are in hand to extend the school provision to include Year 13. The present one year course is the BTEC National course, with options in AS level accounts, French, and English, as well as courses in typewriting and core skills. All of these courses are managed by a local further education college, although the students are on the roll of Sceptre School. However, the levels of interaction between the school and the college are low and there is no monitoring of the courses by the school. A number of students registered dissatisfaction with some aspects of the provision. Although Year 12 students are expecting to stay into the new Year 13, no decisions have yet been made about the content of their course. The school needs to give urgent attention to this and make carefully thought-out decisions about these matters as soon as possible. The Trustees are reminded that extension of the school's provision for an extra year constitutes a material change to the school, for which permission needs to be obtained from the DfES.

Elements of personal, social and health education (PSHE) occur within the curriculum, but it is not taught as a discrete subject, and this is an area which needs further thought and planning. A start has been made on recording where PSHE topics occur in other subjects, such as citizenship, but the school needs to build on these foundations and produce a more clearly focused scheme of work for the subject. At present, all pupils and students have a 15 minute per week tutor period, known as the Year Heads' Meeting, but these generally deal with routine matters of school administration.

The school offers constructive career guidance to its pupils and students, particularly those in Year 12, and arranges for pupils in Key Stage 4 to have a week of work experience in Year 10.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The overall quality of teaching is good, with two thirds of the lessons observed being good or better. About a third was satisfactory and a small number was unsatisfactory. These figures mask some significant strengths as well as some common weaknesses in the teaching observed.

The teachers' subject knowledge is generally good and the school makes effective use of the specialist strengths of individual teachers when considering their deployment. Teaching in English was consistently of a good and very good quality, characterised by teachers effectively encouraging pupils to apply what they know and to use their initiative to extend and enhance their learning. In Year 7 pupils used their creative and technological skills to build high quality dioramas of scenes from the *Wind in the Willows*. This increased their knowledge and appreciation of the narrative, drew out skills learned in other subjects, and rightly contributed to their sense of achievement. Teaching in a mathematics lesson was particularly effective because of the teacher's skilful exploration with pupils of their errors in problem solving, which he then used to ensure accurate learning. As a result of this and similarly good quality teaching, for example in technology and music, pupils are developing as effective learners, able to concentrate and apply themselves to the tasks they are given. This contributes significantly to their achievement and the good progress they make both in lessons and over time.

In the best lessons teachers make demands of the pupils which require them to think, concentrate, and make connections with what they have learned previously. In Year 12 for example, a lively and challenging debate made students think, argue a point of law and reflect critically in the light of each other's comments, resulting in very good progress. In English in Year 11, pupils were similarly faced by demanding work which required them to use their knowledge of the set text to frame questions for each other as though they were one of the characters. The pupils found it difficult, but rose to the challenge and achieved well. Similarly, in a technology lesson, pupils were achieving remarkable standards of craftsmanship in woodwork and metalwork, responding to the outstanding quality of the teaching. By contrast, in some other lessons teachers demand too little from the pupils by dictating notes or allowing completion of work which requires little thought or individual effort from the pupils. Such work also gives teachers little information about what individual pupils know and can do in the subject. In discussions, pupils spoke of the lack of enthusiasm which sometimes results from a prolonged diet of this kind, even when they like and enjoy the subject.

There are wide variations in the planning and approaches across the school and within and between subjects. Teachers' lesson planning almost always identifies objectives, but while these sometimes set out precisely what pupils will learn, they often simply list what pupils will do. Pupils are set in ability groups but within some classes there is still a wide range of capability, and planning often takes too little account of the differing needs of pupils.

Opportunities for pupils to work independently on particular aspects of their work which interest them are not much in evidence. All pupils, including those in Year 12, need to develop study skills and the ability to explore and investigate a topic and report back on it in their own way. Pupils' skills in this regard are underdeveloped. The school identifies pupils who are able, gifted or talented but it is rare to find reference to specific work planned for those pupils. In some lessons, they are set extension work after they have completed their class work. However, they need more demanding work to be regularly planned for them if they are to achieve at appropriately high levels.

The setting of homework is uneven. Some teachers set homework regularly and in the best practice this supports new learning or extends work covered in class. In other cases, homework is set rarely and some is unmarked. It would be sensible to agree a homework timetable and to share this with parents.

Pupils with special educational needs receive good learning and personal support. Assessment information is used effectively to plan work which is well matched to the pupils' needs, and they make good progress as a result.

Assessment and marking are unsatisfactory. Scrutiny of pupils' work revealed an unacceptably wide variation in practice and little evidence of general adherence to the school's marking policy. In extreme examples, pupils' work had not been marked over a lengthy period therefore giving them no guidance on the quality of their work or on their progress. Pupils spoke of the de-motivating effect of unmarked work or work which took a long time to be returned after marking.

In some subjects, most notably English, marking is very good, giving pupils a clear sense of what makes their work good and what will improve it still further. In some subjects, work is marked very irregularly or ticked cursorily with no feedback on accuracy or quality. Such practice denies the pupils essential opportunities for reassurance or improvement and does not contribute to planning of work in the subject.

The school has rightly identified assessment as an area for improvement and has designed a system for tracking pupils' progress and achievement over time. Some good practice has been established and all pupils are tested on entry to establish a baseline from which to measure progress. These tests also help to identify those pupils who would benefit from learning support. All teachers carry out assessments but not at regular, agreed times during the year so the procedures are not consistent. In addition, other assessment information, such as the results of cognitive ability tests (CATS) and other tests are not yet readily available to all teachers. This aspect is increasingly important as the school uses the tests to predict outcomes for individual pupils at Key Stage 3 and at General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) level. Teachers need to be aware of the information gleaned from all assessments, the better to plan their future work.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

The school meets all but one of the requirements.

What does the school need to do in order to fully meet the requirements?

The school must put a framework in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and ensure that information from such assessment is utilised to plan teaching so that pupils can make progress (paragraph 1(3)(g)).

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

Sceptre School is an independent school with a special religious character, established and maintained by a Christian community with beliefs based on a distinctive interpretation of the Bible. It has a clear statement of its aims and purposes which reflect the principles of the supporting community and firmly commit the school to trying to ensure that these underpin its ethos and practice. The school is very successful in meeting these aims and produces pupils and students who are spiritually, morally, socially and culturally aware.

Pupils and students are notably self-confident and aware of their responsibilities to the wider community. The good pastoral system in the school, which plays a significant role in the personal development of the youngsters, now includes a programme of mentoring for pupils who may experience difficulties in learning or in social adjustment.

Within the school, pupils and students are expected to behave sensibly and with courtesy and consideration towards each other, and this is a significant feature of the school. A recently established School Council, whose members consist of a boy and a girl from each year group, gives opportunities to develop an understanding of the challenges of responsibility. Year 12 students are expected to take on specific responsibilities, including duties as monitors around the school, supervision of pupils on buses, and maintaining good displays in corridors and other public places.

Citizenship is effectively taught to all pupils, and in addition students in Year 12 have a lesson of current affairs each week. Pupils and students are thus not only given a broad insight into the public institutions and services in England, but into international organisations and relationships. The school also provides pupils and students with knowledge of the multi-faceted nature of contemporary British society. It does, however, need to be more assiduous in recording this element more precisely so as to demonstrate where and when this occurs across the subjects of the curriculum.

During the past year, all pupils and students have participated in an interesting range of visits outside school. Although some of these have been of a 'fun' nature, most have been clearly linked to different aspects of the school curriculum, contributing to pupils' wider knowledge and understanding. So, for instance, pupils have visited the Nottingham Galleries of Justice, the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre, the Thames Barrier, and Snowdonia. As part of a Year 12 BTEC assignment, three students organised a visit to the Derwent reservoirs in Derbyshire.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of pupils

The ethos of the school, its policies, the relationships between pupils and staff, and between pupils themselves, all strongly promote the welfare, health and safety of the pupils.

The school provides very clear guidance for staff in all aspects of welfare, health and safety. Extensive policies, procedures and arrangements for health and safety are specified and understood. Thorough risk assessments are carried out for all activities involving pupils. Fire safety is given a high priority. There are regular professional checks on fire-fighting equipment, and tests are carried out routinely. Electrical equipment is maintained well and checked regularly.

Accidents and incidents are recorded and kept securely. Records are specific and sufficiently detailed. There are good arrangements for pupils who may become ill. The school has clear First Aid procedures and several qualified First Aiders.

Pastoral care and welfare is good for all pupils. Staff know pupils well and response to individual needs is thoughtful and sustained. Relationships are good. Pupils are friendly and cooperate with one another and this contributes to the creation of one cohesive school community out of three former schools. There are good levels of adult supervision at all times.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school has robust procedures for the appointment of all staff who are subject to all appropriate checks, including with the Criminal Records Bureau, to ensure their suitability to work with children.

There are sufficient numbers of staff including seven full-time and eleven part-time teachers, of whom two are lecturers at the local college. All of the teachers are appropriately qualified in the subjects they teach. In addition to the professionally qualified teachers, members of the community support the school by teaching Bible Studies, current affairs, textiles and some citizenship.

The senior teacher is also the special needs coordinator and has a teaching commitment. She has chosen to relinquish the senior teacher post and become the Director of Studies as well as continuing her responsibility for SEN support. A new appointment for senior teacher is to be made. The Trustees should take this opportunity to write clear job descriptions, specifying responsibilities in consultation with the staff concerned.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. Suitability of the premises and accommodation

The school occupies purpose built premises in Dunstable, close to the M1 motorway, providing easy access for many of the pupils and students who come from a wide catchment area.

The premises were originally home to a special school maintained by the Local Education Authority, and they were purchased in the summer of 2005, refurbished, and now provide a very good environment for teaching and learning. There is good provision for teaching in areas of the curriculum which require specialist provision. Facilities outside are good, with separate hard surface play areas for boys and girls. Good use is made of a nearby sports field for boys' games.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents

The school's prospectus and accompanying information for parents are clear and well presented. Much of the documentation required to be available to parents is usefully sent with the prospectus.

Reports of a good and sometimes very good quality are sent out once yearly to parents. The school now intends to increase this to twice yearly. This may help to address the concerns of a significant number of parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire who were not satisfied with current information on their child's progress. Individual Education Plans are conscientiously written for pupils with special educational needs, and focus on manageable targets for each pupil.

The admissions register and the attendance registers are maintained in an exemplary manner.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's complaints procedure

The school has a comprehensive written complaints policy adopted from Focus Learning Trust. It is clear, fair and complies fully with requirements.

The school has had no complaints to date.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

PART C: THE QUALITY OF ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT

This section is not a requirement of the Education Act 2002. The Lay Inspector evaluated both the school ethos and the Trustees' stewardship of resources and produced an internal report for the Focus Learning Trust.

The ethos of the school is in keeping with the ethos of the supporting faith community. The trustees work hard to ensure that this is the case.

The trustees and senior teacher have had a difficult and demanding year. The speed at which changes have been implemented has resulted in communication being less effective than it should have been, with staff hearing of changes in structures or arrangements in an ad hoc or incidental way. This tends, unwittingly, to erode the trust which staff have in Trustees, leading them to conclude that their professional contribution to the development of the school is undervalued or not required. The staff nonetheless greatly appreciates the commitment, dedication and devotion of the Trustees. They want to play their part in contributing to the development of the school in the areas for which they have expertise and experience. For example, the courses offered in Years 12 and 13 need to be reviewed and teachers should be part of that professional debate.

The staff turnover has been very high and the turbulence has adversely affected teaching quality in some subjects, such as geography and physics. The issue of recruitment remains the most pressing matter to be addressed in the immediate future and will have a direct effect on the quality of education. Trustees should also be mindful of the concerns of parents, expressed clearly in their response to the pre-inspection questionnaires.

The senior teacher has remained in post to oversee the amalgamation and the settling of new pupils and staff, but during that time she has had too many different responsibilities. She has now chosen to specialise in learning support and will also take over the new post of Director of Studies. She and the new senior teacher will need time and support to work with Trustees in addressing these issues and those raised in this inspection.

The Trustees are intending to establish a primary department and hope to open this in September 2007. However, in the light of the tasks outlined in this report, the inspectors are of the opinion that the Trustees should review this decision and delay its implementation. Opening a primary department would be a major development and its implementation needs to be strongly managed and monitored so as to ensure that it has the best possible start. The lay inspector and the professional inspectors concur in this opinion.