

Witherslack Hall School

Inspection report for residential special school

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| Inspector | Anne Bannister |
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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| Outstanding: | this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality |
| Good: | this aspect of the provision is strong |
| Satisfactory: | this aspect of the provision is sound |
| Inadequate: | this aspect of the provision is not good enough |

Service information

Brief description of the service

Witherslack Hall School is situated in a rural location in the southern Lake District, not far from Kendal. Witherslack has operated as a residential special school for over 30 years. There are extensive, well-maintained grounds, with clearly designated boundaries. The school is a member of the Witherslack Group of Schools, which is registered and approved by the Department for Children, Schools and Families for up to 72 pupils aged between 11 and 19 years who have special educational needs related to emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. The school's aim is to develop 'resilience' and self-esteem so that pupils improve their behaviour and attitudes to learning and can be successful. There are 53 young people currently on roll, including seven day pupils who live in homes managed by the Witherslack Group. The boarding facilities are split into eight living units. Two of these are cottages in the grounds which provide independent units for older pupils. The school offers post-16 provision with a specific programme designed to meet the needs of young adults.

Summary

This was a joint inspection of education and social care. The social care judgement is that the care of the young people is outstanding overall; the care of the boys meets National Minimum standards (NMS) and exceeds a significant number of them. The main social care judgements on the outcomes for pupils are included in this report. This inspection was also carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, in order to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school. The quality of education provided at Witherslack Hall School is outstanding. The school meets all the regulations for education. The school is particularly successful at helping the pupils to improve their behaviour and their attitudes to learning. As a result, the boys make good progress, enjoy their education and gain qualifications and skills which are useful for their future. The school has made good progress since the last inspection of education in 2001. The full report on education gives further detail and is available on the Ofsted website.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no recommendations made following the July 2006 inspection. However, the school has continued with its programme of refurbishment and re-decoration. There have been new kitchens and bathrooms fitted in some living areas. The school's quality assurance system has continued to develop with feedback being sought by from placing authorities, parents and carers.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The school employ a qualified nurse who has responsibility for ensuring young people's health needs are addressed. Each young person resident has an individual health plan in place that covers all areas required by Standard 14 of the Residential Special Schools National Minimum Standards. These records indicate that young people's assessed health needs are appropriately addressed, and that specialist support and advice is sought where necessary. Young people

receive a medical check annually and the dentist and optician visit the school twice per year. An established procedure is in place for administration and storage of medication, and staff have recently updated their in house training in safe handling of medication. Each living area has appropriate storage for young people's medicines, in order to promote a more homely environment. There are stringent weekly checks of medicines administered. Appropriate permissions to administer first aid, seek medical advice and issue both prescribed and non-prescribed medication are on all young people's files. If risk assessments allow young people may administer their own medication. However, at time of inspection only young people with inhalers managed their own medication. This practice will need to be further developed in order to prepare the post 16 group more effectively for independent living. All staff are trained in the use of first aid and their training was updated in August 2007. The school employ the services of various health specialists who provide advice, support and training for staff. They also provide individual support and counselling to young people. Both discussion with staff and viewing of displays in living areas indicate, that staff work with young people to help them understand the effects on their health of smoking, alcohol and drug misuse. Young people living at the school are provided with a nutritionally balanced and varied diet. The catering manager is providing appropriate menus to meet young people's individual dietary needs. Special diets are catered for and there is always a choice at meal times. Young people's views are taken into account when planning menus. Mealtimes are pleasant social occasions where appropriate social conversation and behaviours are encouraged. Young people living in the semi independent units are supported and encouraged to plan, budget, shop and prepare their own meals. All staff and pupils involved in food preparation have received training in basic food hygiene preparation. These actions show young people are encouraged to develop a healthy lifestyle and that they receive a varied and nutritionally balanced diet.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The staff team are highly committed to ensuring that young people in their care are protected from harm. The home has suitable policies on privacy and confidentiality. Staff show a respect for young people's privacy and the importance of maintaining confidentiality is key to the good practice displayed by staff. This means young people's main files, have to be signed for and are only viewed on a need to know basis to ensure confidential information is secure. Relationships between staff and young people were good and created a supportive and nurturing atmosphere in which young people feel comfortable. Arrangements for complaints and dealing with bullying are handled well and ensure that young people feel listened to and protected. Young people indicated that bullying is not tolerated in the school and several boys stated that 'if you tell staff they deal with it'. They also indicated that they feel they rarely need to use the formal complaints system as they are able to raise things informally with staff and feel issues are dealt with. All staff spoken to had a good understanding of child protection procedures, and a rolling programme of child protection training for all staff had been put into place to ensure that they had, and maintained, the skills to protect young people from abuse. The school is diligent in maintaining detailed records of any incidents made under child protection guidelines and ensures notifications are made to appropriate authorities. These actions showed the school had appropriate practices, policies and procedures in place to protect young people from abuse. There is a clear and comprehensive behaviour management policy, which is consistently used by all staff. Positive behaviours are seen to be praised as a matter of routine, unacceptable behaviour is calmly challenged and staff skills at diverting young people into positive activities were observed. The school implemented Behavioural, Emotional,

and Social Therapeutic (BEST) educational programme with all pupils in September 2006. All staff, including support staff, have received training to enable them to work with young people in a manner that assists them in handling situations so that the outcome for young people is more positive. All staff spoken to felt that this system offered young people an alternative way to handle their emotions and behaviours more positively and in a manner more sociably acceptable and has resulted in a consistency in approach across the full staff team. Staff are extremely skilled at identifying and recognising triggers that result in a physical intervention and work as a whole staff team to assist young people in identifying a more positive manner in dealing with situations. Records of incidents of physical intervention are maintained each month and there has been over a 50% reduction in its usage over the past two years. Incidents this month are on line to be in single figures. This is to the credit of the whole staff team and indicates the success of the behaviour management policies implemented in the school. The school notifies all relevant agencies and carers of significant incidents which effect the wellbeing of young people. Evidence and observation show that the school has a very responsible attitude towards health and safety matters. The home has risk assessments in place for all aspects of the safety of the premises and grounds. There are also risk assessments relating to young people's behaviours and planned activities they undertake. These risk assessments are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure young people's continued safety. Visitors are welcomed into the school once they have satisfied staff of their identity and the purpose of their visit, and have signed the visitors book. All fire drills, fire alarm tests and fire safety equipment checks are up to date. All gas and electrical appliances receive an annual check. Annual safety checks on cold water storage tanks are carried out. These actions show the school is committed to ensuring young people live in a safe and secure environment. There is a thorough selection and vetting of all staff working at the home prior to employment that meets the requirements of Standard 27 of the residential special schools National Minimum Standards. All required pre-employment checks are carried out and staff recruitment records are well maintained. These actions show the school take suitable measures to ensure staff employed are suitable to be working with young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Education is provided on site and through links to the local colleges. Staff have established good links with the colleges, and ensure that they act quickly to support young people if any difficulties arise. All young people have Individual Care and Education Plans (ICEP's) in place. These are comprehensive and include detailed educational targets for each young person. Plans are regularly reviewed and ensure monitoring of each young person's educational progress. The residential contribution to education is well established and is a particular strength of the school. Teaching and care staff work together to identify ways of encouraging each young person's educational and social achievements. Care staff give active practical support to young people during the school day. In addition they also support young people by continuing to develop their literacy and numeracy skills outside school hours. This close liaison between teaching and care staff throughout the 24 hour curriculum ensures young people's individual educational needs are well met. Young people have the opportunity to study for accredited educational qualifications. Social and life skills are recognised through the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE). Young people are very positive in the comments about the education they receive, one comment being made that 'this school has been the greatest thing that has happened in my life', another states 'you leave here with qualifications and the chance to make something positive of your life'. Young people are appreciative of the range and choice of

activities available to them, both within the school and in the local community. Young people spoke of continued links they have with the local community in attending local cadet groups and sports clubs. The school has developed positive links with the local village, being involved in the organisation of a community table tennis group and undertaking gardening work in communal areas. All young people are also enrolled on the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Activities organised during care hours are linked into curriculum being taught in school. This ensures that young people do not see education as a separate activity confined to attendance at school or college, but something that can be enjoyed as part of a pattern of daily life. Activity planning sheets compiled by care staff are linked to assessing the positive outcomes for young people. All young people receive individual support in line with their assessed needs. Young people also have access to the services of the various specialist professionals. Staff spoken with said they receive training on any specific skills needed to meet individual young people's needs. Practice observed indicates that the staff team have considerable skills in addressing the individual needs of the young people in their care. These actions indicate that young people receive consistent individual support, and that their educational and leisure needs are very well met.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people's views, and those of their parents and carers, and placing authorities are sought regularly and taken in to account on any issues that are likely to affect young people's daily lives and their future. The school hold weekly residential unit meetings and regular school council meetings. All young people had regular meetings with their key worker. Since the last inspection the way in which key worker sessions are held has been revised and staff have received training to help them ensure that key worker sessions include a review of young people's assessed needs. These meetings are well documented and show how individually identified needs and targets are being addressed. Three questionnaires were returned from placing authorities, all spoke highly of the way in which the school keep them informed of issues relating to young people's welfare and education. Young people are encouraged to maintain contact in line with their placement plans, and staff give practical support in making this possible. Staff in the home work closely with some of the young people's families, and feedback from a parental questionnaire the school sent out was extremely positive about the significant developments that have been achieved since young people's admission. From observation of practice and viewing of relevant documentation and records, staff have formed good working relationships with young people. Relationships between staff and young people are based on mutual respect and understanding. There are clear professional and personal boundaries which help maintain a safe and consistent environment for young people. Young people spoken to are positive in their comments about the care staff that work with them and the care they receive. This shows young people accommodated are generally happy with the care they receive at the school. There is a detailed admission process, which enables the school to assess whether they are able to address young people's needs and to put in place an initial placement plan. This process aims to ensure that no young person is inappropriately placed in the school. Young people told the inspectors that they had visited the school before admission, and had been informed about which residential unit they were to be accommodated in. They said they were given relevant information about the school, and were provided with a copy of the school's young people's handbook. The booklet sets out relevant information on the school's policies, procedures, rules and boundaries. All young people spoken to felt that they had been made to feel very welcome when they moved into their unit and that they are allocated a buddy

to help show them how the unit runs. The school liaise with placing authorities and young people's parents and carers to ensure suitable plans are in place for young people leaving the home. Connexions visit school weekly to meet with young people. The school ensure young people's views are fully taken in to account when forming such plans and that young people are fully aware of the agreed contents of their individual leaving plans. Each young person's ICEP covers all areas required under Standard 17.5 of the residential special schools National Minimum Standards. The various documents used detail how young people's needs are to be addressed, and set targets to be achieved. The plans are regularly reviewed. Key workers address needs and targets to be met with young people at their fortnightly meetings. Each young persons file contains a detailed front sheet containing essential information. These actions show the school ensure young people have care and education plans in place, and the school take suitable measures to ensure they obtain essential information about young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are provided for adequately with a budget for leisure clothing that encourages them to purchase their own preference of leisure clothing and personal requisites. They are also able to bring their own clothing to school to wear outside class time. The school provide a weekly pocket money allowance for all young people who board. The amount of pocket money given is based on age and what grades the young person is own in the school's behaviour management grading system. Young people spoken to detailed the pocket money system to the inspectors, showing they fully understand the pocket money and reward systems. Records of all monies given to young people are suitably recorded. These actions show the school ensure young people's personal requisite needs are being met. There is a well developed leavers programme in place for young people preparing to leave the school. The programme tries to prepare young people for independent living and develop their life skills. The school liaise closely with parents, placing authorities and the connexions organisation in the formation of these programmes. The school have three semi independent living units for boys sited separately in the grounds. The leavers programme is designed to give young people accredited educational awards as well as develop life skills. Young people on the programme have the opportunity to open bank accounts, manage their own living budgets, purchase and prepare food for all their own meals and travel independently using public transport. Young people in these units are given a budget to purchase groceries, and are encouraged to prepare and cook their own meals. The school does an extremely good job, within the limits of the structure of the building, at ensuring living areas are very pleasant, comfortable and homely. The residential accommodation comprises of eight separate residential units, each with it's own facilities. Residential units are generally organised by the boarders chronological age. They are well furnished and decorated. Most young people are accommodated in 3-4 bedded rooms, although single rooms are available in some living areas. Bedroom doors do not have locks. The school has a rolling programme of refurbishment and redecoration in place and some units have had new kitchens and bathroom fitted since the last inspection. There are sufficient baths, showers and toilets for the young people. All bathrooms were lockable and ensured young people's privacy. The young people are very proud of their living areas and of the support and interest staff also take in ensuring a homely atmosphere.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The school is well-managed and efficiently run, providing a safe and stable environment for the young people living there. The head of care is well supported and supervised by the head teacher and provides clear management for the care staff team. The care staff team demonstrate an awareness of their roles and responsibilities that ensure young people's assessed needs are being met. The school provides comprehensive details about the education and care it provides. A user friendly guide for young people and a separate guide for parents and carers advise of what it is like to attend and live at the school. Senior managers and all other staff are very committed to providing high quality care for young people and are constantly monitoring and reviewing their practice to improve the service they were providing. All matters that relate to general school records were seen during the course of the inspection. Accurate records of young people and staff are maintained and significant or important events are rigorously recorded on young people's files. There is a competent and experienced care staff team, with a good range of experience. The skills of the staff team are well matched to caring for the young people who are accommodated in the school, where 87% of the staff team hold appropriate child care qualifications. The staff training programme includes a comprehensive induction. The induction process includes training from the educational psychologist and regular meetings with the personal development co-ordinator. New staff spoken to are very positive about the induction process, which they feel has enabled them to meet the needs of the young people in their care. All staff have a personal development plan, which is reviewed and updated as part of their annual performance appraisal. Staff are positive in their comments about the training provided, and state any specialist training required to ensure they could meet a young person's needs is provided. These actions show the school take suitable measures to ensure they have an appropriately qualified and trained care staff team. Regular staff meetings are held each week to ensure consistency in practice across the staff team. Duty rotas indicate that the number of staff on duty is sufficient to meet the needs of the young people and to support them in their activities, visits and appointments. All staff, including support staff receive formal supervision with a frequency that meets, and in many instances exceeds, the requirements. All staff with responsibility for supervising other staff have received appropriate training in supervision skills. Good systems are in place to allow monitoring of the frequency of supervision for each individual staff member. The school has an annual training plan that ensures that the staff team have the appropriate training to meet individual young people's assessed needs. Staff spoke very positively about the training available to them. Staff morale was high, resulting in an enthusiastic workforce who worked positively with young people to improve their quality of life. The school has extensive self-monitoring and review processes in place. The senior management team supports each other and their respective teams well, promoting high standards of care and a flexibility to change practice to ensure the needs of young people are addressed. This is a school that seeks feedback from staff annually, by using an independent company to undertake a staff survey and report back their findings. Action plans are produced to follow up issues arising from this survey. Records show that regular monitoring of the home and its operation is being carried out by the Head of Care, and through independent monitoring visits by the responsible individual. These visits form part of the quality assurance system of the home. When action points are identified they are followed up by the manager and progress monitored by the responsible individual. The school also annually consult parents and carers and placing authorities. This assists the school in assessing what they feel are their strengths and weaknesses. Senior management appraisal had incorporated feedback from the full staff team and promoted open communication between senior managers and their teams. Records show that regular monitoring of the school and its operation is also carried out through independent monitoring visits by the organisation. There is evidence that the school acted on any issues raised through

the extensive monitoring processes to achieve a healthy, safe and protective environment for young people.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

| Standard | Action | Due date |
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):