

Witherslack Hall School

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	Terry McKenzie
Social care inspector	Len Hird

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

The inspection of boarding provision was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 having regard to the national minimum standards for boarding schools in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and the government of the quality and standard of the service provided.³

Information about the school

Witherslack Hall School is an independent special school with boarding located in the building and grounds of a former country estate in an isolated part of South Cumbria. Operating since 1973 as part of the Witherslack Group of schools it currently caters for boys aged from 11 to 19 years. At the present time 48 students attend of whom 35 are boarders. All have a statement of special educational needs in respect of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. The education provision was last inspected by Ofsted in November 2007 and the last inspection of boarding occurred in January 2010.

Witherslack Hall aims to raise the standards of achievement of students and enable them to develop into socially and emotionally capable adults who have the skills for lifelong learning and employment.

Evaluation of the school

Witherslack Hall fully meets its aims, meets all of the requirements for registration and provides outstanding education and boarding for students. Behaviour is outstanding and from their starting points upon entry students make outstanding progress in their learning and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. All gain qualifications that help them to move to the next stages of their lives. These achievements are possible because of the outstanding nature of the curriculum that provides great opportunities for all to succeed, and by the outstanding teaching and assessment. The rigorous safeguarding arrangements meet all of the requirements and contribute to the outstanding welfare, health and safety of students. Since the last inspection the school has maintained its very high standards and the degree of progress that students make has improved.

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

³ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2000/ukpga_20000014_en_1

Quality of education

The curriculum is outstanding. In addition to including the statutory areas of learning it provides a huge range of opportunities that are unique to each student. These are supported by the high quality on-site resources such as practical rooms and workshops. The school has developed remarkable outdoor areas for learning that include environmental opportunities and a forest school. For example, the mathematics learned in classrooms and the construction skills acquired in the workshops are put to good use outside where students learn how to construct buildings and structures. Thus, they can begin to understand the purpose of their theoretical learning.

The school have achieved the Eco School Green Flag which reflects the importance placed on the environment and sustainability by the pupils and staff. The curriculum emphasises the development of basic skills for all age groups. All make great strides in literacy and numeracy and they learn to make effective use of new technology in lessons.

Students who stay on beyond the age of 16 are provided with tailor-made courses that match their interests and abilities. Provision for post-16 education takes place off-site with trusted providers. Consequently, post-16 students have opportunities to access courses and training at levels appropriate to their abilities and interests. The school employs a specialist careers adviser who liaises with all Connexions agencies in students' home areas. Consequently, upon leaving school, students can be confident that their local Connexions advisers know them and something about their strengths and qualifications. This facility adds enormously to students' good prospects for employment, training or further education when they return to their home areas.

The quality of teaching and assessment are outstanding. The outstanding teaching is highly effective in enabling all groups of students to make outstanding progress because they are confident in their subject knowledge. Teachers provide high-quality learning experiences for students that are very well matched to levels of ability. This is achieved through close attention to the assessments that are undertaken regularly throughout the school. Furthermore, staff know the students very well indeed and they quickly and accurately identify their strengths and weaknesses during lessons.

Senior staff use the assessment data to great effect in order to identify any groups or individuals that are lagging behind or making better-than-expected progress. Through analysing the data accurately senior leaders set accurate targets for students so that they know how to improve. However, teachers do not always set accurate personalised lesson targets to encourage students to make even more progress in their learning. Teachers are ably supported by highly effective classroom assistants who are well-directed and contribute to the excellent working relationships between students and staff. Furthermore, the excellent relationships between education and boarding staff are exemplified through the care staff working alongside teaching assistants in the classroom. This helps the care staff to

understand the education that boarders are receiving and encourages them to assist boarders with completing homework and finishing GCSE coursework. Additionally, education and boarding staff work cooperatively on behalf of students in devising the highly effective joint care and education plans that are in place for all students.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The quality of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is outstanding. Students very much enjoy coming to school and this is demonstrated through their consistent and improved attendance and their outstanding behaviour. They display very positive attitudes towards staff and to each other. Visitors are treated with great respect, for example, by students holding doors open for them and by asking if help is required.

Students are well-prepared by the school for moving on to the next stages of their lives. They learn basic skills and gain qualifications that count towards college placements in further education and many acquire vocational awards that open doors to training placements when they leave school. Last year no students left without being qualified to move on to further education, training or employment.

Students contribute very well to the life of the school and wider community. For example, they become members of the school council, act as peer mentors and 'buddies' to new boys. Strong links have been forged with the local village so that local people have come to respect the work that students do, for example, in helping the elderly. Further understanding and tolerance of the way that other people live comes from engagement with work experience and college courses. With the help of care and education staff students enjoy holidays, trips and visits to other places. These help to reinforce their learning about different cultures and the wider world that takes place throughout the curriculum. Students learn about right and wrong, including from the excellent role-modelling of the staff. They demonstrate high moral standards and respect the code of conduct of the school.

Spiritual education is not neglected, for example at the time of the inspection students attended an assembly in which the visiting speaker was a local priest. Students also learn about different religions and cultural practices through celebrating feast days from around the world in their lessons and in boarding. The Behavioural, Emotional, Social Therapy (BEST) programme operates through education and care. It successfully aims to improve students' self-esteem and emotional literacy. Thus, students make great strides in their social and personal development. Further, very good cooperation between boarding and school is evidenced by the joint training that is undertaken, such as in physical handling, and by the high levels of communication between all staff that is insisted upon by the senior managers. Students learn about the public institutions and services of England through citizenship and by undertaking trips and visits to appropriate places that include the Houses of Parliament.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The welfare, health and safety of students are outstanding. Procedures for the safeguarding of students are robust and highly effective. The designated child protection officers have undertaken training to the required levels and beyond. Exceptional procedures are in place to ensure that all staff have a clear understanding of safeguarding and child protection procedures. These include regular training updates that are shared by boarding and education staff, and the production of 'safeguarding' handbooks for all staff. Students are made aware of designated safeguarding persons by their key workers and through notices posted in public places in the school and residences. The required policies are well written, refer to the latest government guidance and cross-refer to each other where appropriate. All policies and procedures associated are reviewed annually by the proprietor.

Students are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles through having choices over the very wide range of physical and sporting activities that are offered. Some take a great pride in their efforts to compete against other schools in sports events whilst others prefer to undertake more solitary activities such as fishing and using the gymnasium. This extensive programme of outdoor education helps students to remain stress-free. Staff work hard with students to ensure that healthy menus are produced for meals at midday and throughout the boarding provision.

Students report that they feel very safe in school and this view is supported by parents and carers. Whilst they claim that bullying and harassment are almost non-existent students are keen to express their confidence in staff to deal with any issues that might arise. Students support each other through systems such as 'buddying', peer mentoring and by appointing anti-bullying representatives. Relationships with external agencies help students to maintain high levels of attendance whilst the school nurse helps students stay safe and healthy through focussed programmes in personal, social and health education. Witherslack Hall fully fulfils its duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

All of the regulations are met with regard to the school and boarding through the undertaking of all required checks on staff and the maintenance of a fully compliant single central register.

Premises of and accommodation at the school

Witherslack Hall provides an environment for extremely effective learning to take place. All areas of the premises ensure the safety of students and the building is suitable for students with learning difficulties. The teaching areas are of high quality and include well-designed classrooms and a laboratory equipped with apparatus for students to undertake practical work in science. There are computer suites, workshops and extensive vocational areas. The outdoor learning areas include

agricultural plots and the forest school. There are designated areas for outdoor play that encourage students to practise their climbing and balancing skills and there is plenty of room for organised games to take place.

Provision of information

The school maintains a set of brochures that provide clear, accurate and up-to-date information to students and to current and prospective parents and carers. Full details are provided of how to obtain school policies and the good-quality information provided includes details relevant to boarders and prospective boarders.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school maintains a clear and comprehensive complaints procedure that complies with all of the requirements. The complaints policy fully meets the national minimum standards for boarding schools.

Effectiveness of the boarding provision

The quality of residential provision at Witherslack Hall is outstanding. Highly effective management systems are in place to ensure that all aspects of young people's welfare are promoted.

Resident students are encouraged by staff to eat healthily and to have an active lifestyle. The school has recently achieved the Healthy Schools' Award in recognition of the steps it has taken to develop a healthy eating culture. Menus are well-planned by the cook in conjunction with the young people and there are several different choices of food available each day. Young people commented, 'The food is very good and there is always a good choice and plenty of it and if you do not like something there is always something else to choose from'. As part of the important process of preparing for independence young people are encouraged to purchase ingredients from local shops and to prepare and cook meals in their houses. The school's personal, social, health and citizenship education provides excellent support and advice on all health matters, particularly through the initiative on emotional literacy. There are very good working partnerships with both the local and specialist health services including the clinical supervision of the school's registered nurse. Excellent procedures are in place for the management, administration, monitoring and disposal of medication. All staff undertake training in the administration of first aid. For the staff who administer medication, the school's registered nurse provides instruction in its safe handling and administration.

Young people confirm they feel very safe at the school and are understanding of each other. The anti-bullying and complaints policies and procedures are robust in content as well as in practice. Young people, parents and social workers are able to access easily-understood pamphlets detailing how concerns or complaints will be addressed. Comprehensive systems are in place to monitor, record, and prevent risks to health and safety at the school. Regular recorded fire drills and practices are held at different times and young people confirm this. Members of staff are fully

conversant with the relevant policies and reporting procedures regarding safeguarding and child protection. The school nurse and the acting head of care are the designated persons with overall responsibility for all safeguarding matters including training. Safe recruitment practice is undertaken and information about this is maintained securely.

The staff team work closely together to ensure that young people are given the high levels of help and support required. Residential provision makes available a wide range of resources such as computers to assist young people in attaining good levels of academic success and having life enhancing experiences. Young people confirm they work well together and they are treated equably by a very popular staff team.

Young people are actively encouraged to take part in the daily running of the residencies and can influence decisions made within the school and boarding through the school council. The 'open door' policy in operation encourages young people to speak to staff about any matter. Boarders can easily access advice or support through a visiting independent listener or via ChildLine. There are telephones in the residential houses for young people to keep in contact with their family and friends. Consistently high levels of support are given to the young people by a vibrant and very stable staff team.

The residential accommodation is well cared for, decorated to a high standard and well maintained. The shared and individual bedrooms are well decorated and personalised by the young people to a very pleasing standard. There are very good levels of security and privacy, including for the bathing.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The school has comprehensive policies and procedures in place for addressing equality and diversity. Young people are encouraged to be extremely helpful towards each other and this was demonstrated by the friendly working relationships between day students who join with the resident students in the residencies at lunchtimes. All of the young people indicated they are treated with understanding, respect and dignity by the staff. The school provides a statement of its boarding principles and practices for parents, young people and staff. The organisation and management of the residential houses creates a safe, non-discriminatory and extremely caring environment for young people to live in. There are comprehensive recording systems and up-to-date risk assessments in place to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of boarders. The excellent staffing levels meet the needs of residential students.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

The school meets the national minimum standards for boarding schools and the associated regulations.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- encourage students to make even more progress during lessons by ensuring that teachers plan better individualised lesson targets.

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education	✓			
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils	✓			
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs	✓			
How well pupils make progress in their learning	✓			

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils	✓			
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The quality of boarding provision

Effectiveness of boarding provision	✓			
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School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Special		
Date school opened	January 1973		
Age range of pupils	11-19		
Gender of pupils	Boys		
Number on roll (full-time pupils)	Boys: 48	Girls: 0	Total: 48
Number on roll (part-time pupils)	Boys: 0	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of boarders	Boys: 35	Girls: 0	Total: 35
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 48	Girls: 0	Total: 48
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 22	Girls: 0	Total: 22
Annual fees (day pupils)	£47,358		
Annual fees (boarders)	£68,202		
Address of school	Witherslack Grange over Sands Cumbria LA11 6SD		
Telephone number	01539 552397		
Email address	admin@whs.uk.com		
Headteacher	Ms T McIntosh		
Proprietor	Mr J Bowers		