

# Witherslack Hall School

Welfare inspection report for a residential special school

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<b>Inspector</b>	Monica Farrimond

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<b>School address</b>	Witherslack Hall, Witherslack, GRANGE-OVER-SANDS, Cumbria, LA11 6SD
<b>Telephone number</b>	01539 552 397
<b>Email</b>	admin@whs.uk.com
<b>Headteacher</b>	Ms Tina McIntosh

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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

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W: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



## **Purpose and scope of the inspection**

This inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools, in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided.<sup>1,2</sup>

## **Information about the school**

The school is an independent residential special school with up to 72 pupils aged between 11 and 19 years who have special educational needs related to emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. There are 28 pupils currently living in the school's residential provision. The boarding facility is 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. The residential provision was last inspected on 1 December 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents).

<sup>2</sup> [www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools).

## Inspection judgements

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>outstanding</b>
Outcomes for residential pupils	outstanding
Quality of residential provision and care	outstanding
Residential pupils' safety	outstanding
Leadership and management of the residential provision	outstanding

## Overall effectiveness

The key findings of the residential inspection are as follows.

- The standard of care is outstanding and promotes positive relationships between pupils and adults.
- The service has substantial strengths and where areas for improvement emerge the management team recognises and manages them well.
- Pupils make outstanding progress in their educational, personal, social and cultural development.
- Pupils grow in confidence and develop exceptional independence skills.
- All national minimum standards are met and the residential experience is an area of excellence.

## **Outcomes for residential pupils**

Outcomes for pupils are outstanding. Individual support is given to each pupil according to their carefully assessed emotional, physical and educational needs. Staff support and assist young people to develop their own individuality and identity. Extensive work is carried out by the staff in every area of the pupils' lives to help the pupils achieve their full potential. The pupils are encouraged to develop socially acceptable behaviour. Exemplary attitudes and good manners are evident when speaking with, or spending time with the pupils. They are encouraged to be tolerant of each other and respect differing views, beliefs, and sexual orientation. Consequently the pupils develop self-confidence, respect, and understanding of the differences in different cultures and beliefs for adults and their peers.

Pupils are supported to contribute to the operation of the school. Young people's views are actively and regularly sought and listened to, over decisions affecting their daily lives. There is an active school council, anti-bullying forum, house meetings, fortnightly key worker sessions, and annual pupil surveys, covering the happiness and satisfaction of the pupils. These meetings take place regularly and pupils feel that what they say is important and that staff listen and take notice of their wishes and feelings. This helps to promote self-esteem and confidence amongst the pupils; changes made following the pupil's input, include the monitored introduction of social networking sites on the internet, an increase in favourite activities and a change to the reward and sanction system. Pupils voice their pride in the school and are able to compare their behaviour and attitudes from when they were admitted to the school, to their current behaviour, and outstanding progress that has been made in all areas of their lives.

There are outstanding procedures in place to prepare pupils for their transition to independence. They are actively encouraged throughout their residential experience, to help with jobs around the residential provision, take part in cookery classes and wash and iron their own clothes. As they progress through the school, the independence training extends to living in one of two boarding houses which are totally self-sufficient and the training extends to budgeting, shopping, menu planning, life skills and learning how to plan a journey and travel independently. This ensures that on leaving the school, pupils are confident, knowledgeable, and able to use these skills to make the transition to independence a happy and successful experience.

Excellent practices, policies and procedures are in place to ensure pupils' health needs are very well met. Individual health care plans, that cover all required areas, are compiled for and together with, each pupil. This ensures that the pupils are taught about health issues and further prepares them for independent living when they leave school. The school has formed excellent working links with local health professionals. Detailed records are kept of all health appointments for pupils, if they refuse to attend any such appointment, and of any significant illnesses, accidents or injuries they may have. Subject to risk assessment, pupils may see health professionals on their own if they wish. They are very positive in their comments about how staff look after them if they do not feel well. Confidential information is

handled sensitively and only shared on a "need to know" basis, in the best interests of the pupils. The school is a non-smoking environment, which supports the healthy lifestyle advice, and is proactive in helping young people to stop smoking. Suitably signed medical consent forms, covering all required areas, are obtained for all pupils and any with specific health needs are provided with good individual support and help. Pupils are assisted and supported to address their personal hygiene needs.

## Quality of residential provision and care



The quality of the residential provision and care for the pupils is outstanding. There are excellent pastoral arrangements to support all pupils' academic and educational progress. The pastoral support starts prior to admission. There are no emergency admissions to the school, and when ever possible, the identified key worker for each pupil makes a home visit prior to admission. This is very much appreciated by the pupils. They say they are made to feel welcome by someone who is already a familiar face to them and their families, and helps them feel a little less frightened and homesick. Following admission, there is a robust, comprehensive written induction process which covers all aspects of boarding life. This ensures that pupils are clear about what is expected of them, and what they should expect from the school and the staff, and thus they settle more easily. There is an effective system in place where boarders are formally given a peer mentor as a 'buddy', to help them settle in and avoid homesickness. The peer mentoring system is outstanding and carefully overseen by staff. There is a comprehensive ten hour training system in place for the mentors. This ensures that the mentors know what to do if they are told sensitive information by a pupil. They may be the first person the pupil turns to if they have a problem, and the school ensures that they know what to do if the information relates to safeguarding or bullying.

Boarding and academic staff work effectively together and have consistently high aspirations for all pupils. They are fully committed to ensuring the pupils have the best opportunities and achieve their full potential. The enthusiasm and zeal of the staff is shared by the pupils who are very proud of their achievements. The quality of pupils' placement plans are outstanding, and rigorously implemented. The pupils are involved in writing their own plans. This ensures that both staff and pupils know what goals are to be met, and needs are identified. Each plan covers all individual needs and what steps are to be taken to address them appropriately. Access to support agencies , for example educational psychologist, school counsellor, ensures that staff receive the correct guidance to maximise the potential of the pupils. Individual key work sessions are consistently carried out with pupils and both their participation and progression is well documented. This ensures that a pupil's progress is monitored and identifies key issues that may be affecting the progress. This process also has the benefit of keeping other people informed of a pupil's progress, for example, parents, social workers and assists in external monitoring of the school success in meeting the needs of the pupils.

The individual support for each pupil is outstanding, and this is reflected in happy, confident pupils who are proud of their school. The pupils thrive in a stable, nurturing and supportive environment, which helps them develop their personal growth towards maturity. Staff demonstrate a clear commitment to the pupils and this is evident in the excellent relationships they have established. Pupils and staff enjoy appropriate banter and are clearly relaxed in each others company. Both staff and pupils enjoy taking part in extra curricular activities. These are wide ranging and cover all pupils' capabilities, whether they enjoy physical activities or less strenuous opportunities. Activities enjoyed by the pupils include football, running, fishing, (including all night fishing), mountain climbing, camping, survival skills in a local

forest and vehicle maintenance. The pupils are also encouraged to earn extra pocket money by doing jobs around the school, for example litter picking. These activities encourage the pupils to take part in a healthy lifestyle and use diverse skills, that extends their confidence and knowledge in areas that they would not ordinarily have the opportunity to take part in. The pupils appreciate these opportunities and the fact that the staff will go the "extra mile" in order to encourage them to take part in these activities.

Residential staff ensure that the pupils' health requirements are well met. The medical centre is managed by a qualified nurse who offers an excellent service to pupils who are ill, or who need medical advice. The school is proactive when addressing issues relating to drugs, alcohol, or issues relating to sexual behaviour and health. The ethos of the school promotes education relating to these issues, which enables open, honest discussions and positive outcomes. Pupils are regularly offered guidance on the effects of smoking, drug use and sexual health. Pupils say this advice is very good and greatly appreciated. Pupils confirm satisfaction with how health and well-being is managed. Medication storage, administration and recording of both household and prescribed medication are good. All staff are suitably trained in first aid and have attended specialist training to support pupils with specific medical needs. This ensures that pupils' well-being is promoted and urgent health needs can be identified and appropriate action taken.

The food is of outstanding quality. Salad and fruit and a selection of drinks are available at every meal and pupils are given choices at mealtimes. Mealtimes are seen as social events that help pupils' with differing communication difficulties improve their social interactions. The school's kitchens have recently been awarded the top five star rating by the environmental health authority. Menus are designed with nutritional factors and government guidelines taken into account. Meals are varied, healthy and nutritionally balanced and include favourite food preferences of the pupils. Meetings have taken place recently between pupils and the catering staff in an effort to look at alternative favourite food, which has resulted in pupils writing suggested favourite meals on a chart. All suggestions are considered by the catering manageress and provided when practicable. The catering manageress ensures boys' birthdays are celebrated. Special themed meals support work on looking at cultural diversity. Pupils expressed their full satisfaction with the quality and quantity of meals. Special dietary needs can be catered for as required.

The quality of the residential accommodation, premises and facilities are outstanding. The accommodation is decorated, furnished and maintained to a high standard. The extensive grounds are well maintained, with spacious play and sport areas and a large garden, where hens and rabbits are kept. Vegetables are planted and grown in this area by the pupils, and used by the catering staff when ever possible in pupils' meals. This encourages the pupils to take an interest and pride in their gardening achievements and also encourages a sense of responsibility in caring for the animals. Security and safety of the premises and pupils are paramount, and there are clear boundaries round the school with signs to say private property and discourage

unauthorised visitors. The school operate a scanning key entry system to external doors and CCTV is in operation on external areas of the grounds and entry drive into the school. All staff and pupils are aware of the need to challenge any person on the premises without a visitors' badge, to ensure the welfare of the pupils.

Pupils stay in touch with their families through the internet and they also have free and private access to telephones in the boarding house. The pupils are happy with these arrangements.

## **Residential pupils' safety**

The school's arrangements for ensuring that pupils in their care are safe and protected from harm are outstanding. Systems and training are in place, which aim to protect pupils and to ensure their welfare is promoted. The robust recruitment of staff is in accordance with the relevant regulations and this information is maintained on the single central record. The recruitment files contain comprehensive information. Protecting children has high priority and all staff responsible for recruitment are trained in safe recruiting practice. Staff recruitment checks are robust, including enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks, references, qualifications, application forms and records of the interview. This ensures that the backgrounds of staff working with the pupils have been rigorously checked to make sure they are safe to work with children.

Pupils say they are living in a safe and protective environment, which helped to make them settle into the school quickly and feel happy. They could each identify at least four members of staff they would approach if they had worries or concerns. This means that the information provided to the pupils about safeguarding, is understood and well presented. Detailed risk assessments are produced to highlight concerns and vulnerability of the pupils at the school. Pupils also say that staff always have time to listen to any concerns and they feel they can approach any member of staff, including the designated safeguarding staff (there are two members of staff identified on posters throughout the school, with their photographs) and the headteacher. Thus, pupils feel comfortable to approach staff at all levels throughout the school and said they would be taken seriously. There are detailed anti-bullying and complaints policies and procedures in place for use by pupils, parents and staff. The school takes a zero tolerance approach towards bullying in all of its forms, including racism, homophobic and cyber bullying. The school has also introduced an anti-bullying council, which meets regularly and bullying is consistently highlighted throughout a pupil's stay at the school. This ensures that this issue is given a very high profile, as a subject to be taken seriously and immediately addressed. Pupils say that rarely there are very low levels of bullying occurring and if there are any incidents of bullying happening it is quickly dealt with by staff to keep them feeling safe.

Pupils' welfare is safeguarded very well. The school has comprehensive policies, procedures and guidance to deal with child protection concerns. All staff have been trained in safeguarding procedures and demonstrate a good understanding of the action needed to protect pupils from abuse. This ensures that staff work consistently in relation to all aspects of safeguarding and there are clear lines of accountability. Any potential safeguarding issues that have arisen since the previous inspection have been managed appropriately with the guidance and procedures being followed. The school's designated person for safeguarding and child protection matters has developed significant links with the local authority safeguarding officer. Outstanding provision is made for the guidance and training of staff in all aspects of safeguarding including safer recruitment. Staff's knowledge is regularly updated through refresher safeguarding training, underpinned by sound safeguarding policies, procedures and guidance on action they should take if an incident arises. Policy and procedural

guidance has been established that is consistent with local safeguarding team protocols. Training and refresher training is on going for every member of staff at the school, ensuring it is given a high priority and staff are continually reminded of the procedures and practise involved in reporting concerns, including the "whistle blowing policy".

There have not been any recent incidents of pupils going missing from the school. However, residential staff understand how to implement the missing from school procedures if there were to be an episode.

The school has good systems in place for identifying and dealing with potential hazards which ensure the safety of pupils is maintained. Suitable safety checks take place regularly to ensure the premises are safe and secure. Risk assessments are in place which support safe practice throughout the school; these are regularly reviewed to ensure the measures in place continue to protect those that use the school site. All out-of-bounds areas are clearly marked and pupils spoken with are aware of these areas and the consequences of accessing them. A designated maintenance person ensures the ongoing safety of the environment; he is quick to respond to any potential hazard caused by breakages or wear and tear. There are good security systems in place which ensure no pupils are put at risk of unauthorised access to their boarding facilities. The school has excellent systems in place covering fire safety with regular fire alarm testing and checks on fire equipment. There are documented fire drills which take place during the day and night. There are no issues of concern for the safe evacuation of pupils, with the schools policies and procedures supporting good practice. The school promotes the protection of its pupils with robust procedures for risk assessments, central record keeping and monitoring of significant issues, ensuring the welfare of pupils is promoted. The systems being established are of a high standard, ensuring the pupils' welfare is safeguarded and promoted. All staff are trained in fire safety, food safety, first aid and health and safety. The school is well maintained and free from environmental hazards. Good procedures and assessments are in place to manage controlled risks to young people's welfare.

Throughout the duration of the inspection the pupils' behaviour and attitudes were exemplary. Interactions with staff are constructive and relationships present as mutually respectful. Staff are well trained in the management of young people's behaviour and in the school's prescribed method of physical control. The use of restraint is minimal and the school maintains a detailed record of all incidents when physical intervention is used. Staff are skilled in using distraction and diffusion techniques, thereby reducing the need for physical intervention.

Pupils said 'We hardly ever get restrained. Staff do it fairly and they do not hurt you,' and 'the staff only restrain you if you are going to hurt yourself or someone else.' Incidents of physical intervention are closely monitored by senior staff and analysed in detail to provide outstanding monitoring of the circumstances surrounding the

intervention; this ensures that patterns or trends in the pupils and staff involved are identified at an early stage and ensures that staff are fully accountable for their actions.

Policies and guidance in respect of helping pupils develop socially acceptable behaviour are comprehensive and known to staff. There are positive and proactive behaviour management strategies in place which are consistently applied and promoted through key worker sessions and house meetings. The pupils are proud to display good behaviour and critical of each other if negative behaviour is displayed. The staff know the pupils well and are able to give effective one to one support. The pupils respond to the high expectations of the staff. Sanctions used at the school, mainly consist of reparation or loss of an activity. Evaluation of sanctions imposed takes place, ensuring that the effectiveness of the sanctions is looked at, to ensure that good behaviour is promoted in the best way possible. The pupils feel the sanction system is fair.

## **Leadership and management of the residential provision**



The management and organisation of boarding is outstanding. An exceptional quality of service is provided. The school's statement of principles and practice provides an excellent range of information about life at the school, and is made available to placing authorities, pupils and their parents or carers. Boarding is organised and run in a consistent way to meet the needs of the differing ages and groups at the school. Routines and procedures are clear, well established and operate consistently to provide an orderly safe environment. Good levels of organisation are noted throughout the boarding operation. There are consistently high expectations among the staff, that they will provide the very best residential experience for the pupils.

The school is effectively and efficiently managed. The head of care is experienced and appropriately qualified. He ensures that time is available for all staff to attend training and they are encouraged to apply for all relevant training which will further their development. This ensures that staff are able to take advantage of the knowledge obtained on the training courses to promote the welfare of the pupils. Staff are provided with a good range of training, including mandatory courses in safeguarding, first aid, food hygiene, physical intervention, first aid, fire training and the administration of medication. This ensures there is knowledge and support at all levels throughout the staff group to ensure consistency and mutual support when caring for the pupils. All staff working at the school have a qualification in caring for children and young people, this ensures that staff's development is on-going and benefits the pupils in their care.

Staff at the school feel supported and valued, and this is reflected in an experienced stable staff group, with a supportive atmosphere and high staff moral. The school has a comprehensive development plan in place, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the school; the plan clearly targets areas for improvement; the school is continuously focusing on improving the outcomes for pupils in its care. This ensures that pupils are cared for by staff who are continually striving to improve their knowledge and understanding of their role.

Staffing levels are good, which ensures that the pupils are properly supervised and they are able to take part in individual key working sessions and activities. Staff demonstrate a clear determination to promote inclusion for the pupils and to encourage them to develop their individual skills. Rotas allow staff sufficient time to undertake individual work with the pupils, to attend regular team meetings and to complete necessary paperwork. Team meetings are used to look at practice issues and the needs of the pupils; this ensures that all staff are aware of any issues relating to pupils' behaviour and approach these issues in a consistent manner. All staff have regular supervision sessions with their line manager; this ensures that staff development and training needs are identified and promoted. The senior management team of the school and staff demonstrate a robust commitment to reviewing and improving the service that is offered to the pupils and their families. There is regular consultation/communication with parents, pupils and professionals from other agencies about the care that the pupils are given. Feedback from the consultation is consistently positive. Self evaluation within the school is of an

outstanding standard. Monitoring visits are underpinned by also incorporating comprehensive and robust monitoring systems for individual boarding houses, departments, individual and group staff practice as well as overall performance. The recommendations from the thorough monitoring of all aspects of the boarding provision, are used effectively to drive improvement. This ensures best practice and accountability is consistently maintained.

Pupils know how to complain and voice confidence that the staff will take their concerns seriously. Information is provided in the pupils' guide and the information is reinforced in pupils house meetings and key worker sessions. Pupils making a complaint are supported through key worker sessions affording them the opportunity to discuss the issue and record if they are satisfied with the outcome. Complaints are handled fairly and investigated thoroughly by the head of care or external nominated person. Information taken from pupils' surveys highlights that all pupils feel safe and confirm staff listen to them and take them seriously. There is an independent listener, who visits the school regularly and is known to all pupils. He is identified in the pupils' handbook as another person to whom the pupils can take concerns or complaints.

Information that is held on pupils is thorough, so that their needs can be met. All information that is sensitive is securely stored, so that confidentiality is maintained. Information is easily accessible to all staff, which helps to ensure that care is consistent and in line with the pupils care plan. Staff with boarding duties receive a very good induction and detailed job descriptions. Pupils receive outstanding support from staff who benefit from a well-established system for staff appraisal. There is written guidance on boarding policies and practice. These documents provide very clear guidance and highlight the philosophies laid down by the school.

Good communication with parents takes place and their comments are included in a consultation document. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. All staff have received training on such issues and good policies are in place that provide them with guidance and relevant information. Staff support and assist pupils to develop their own individuality and identity. Care planning documents contain sections specifically highlighting cultural, religious, racial or language needs, and referral documentation requires placing authorities to highlight any such needs. The school has good support systems and there is a wide range of policies in place covering equality of opportunities and the promoting non discriminatory practice.

## **National minimum standards**

The school meets the national minimum standards for residential special schools.

**What should the school do to improve further?**

**This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.**



27/09/2011

Dear Pupils

### **Inspection of Witherslack Hall School**

Children's summary:

Can I start by thanking you for all your help during the recent inspection at your boarding school. Thank you also for filling in the questionnaires, we found them very helpful. I was very impressed by the way that you care for one another and help to support younger pupils that are new to your school.

All the care staff do their best to care for you and keep you safe. You told me that there are some rules in the school but understand that they are there to keep you safe. I was really impressed that you had the confidence to talk to me so honestly and allowed me to share two very enjoyable meals with you. It is your confidence that helps you take part in the boarding council and make things change for the better.

I think that the school offers you an outstanding quality of boarding. I met the person that keeps the boarding section clean and she does a really good job. You also help her by keeping your rooms tidy and safe for others to use. I was also impressed that you offer to do extra jobs round the school, in order to earn extra spending money! The boarding areas, including sitting rooms and bedrooms are very homely and comfortable. I thought the garden areas were fantastic, with so much space for you to play sports, chill out or do some gardening! Thank you very much for making me feel so welcome.

Yours sincerely,

Monica Farrimond