

Witherslack Hall School

Witherslack Hall, Witherslack, GRANGE-OVER-SANDS, Cumbria, LA11 6SD

Inspection dates	06/02/2013 to 08/02/2013	
Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Outcomes for residential pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of residential provision and care	Outstanding	1
Residential pupils' safety	Adequate	3
Leadership and management of the residential provision	Adequate	3

Summary of key findings

The residential provision is good because

- The overall effectiveness of the school is judged as good, although outcomes for residential pupils and quality of care are judged outstanding. Young people have positive relationships with the care staff team.
- Residential pupils make outstanding progress in their educational, personal and social development.
- Weaknesses in safeguarding practice since the previous inspection have been effectively addressed by the organisation. The new head teacher and new designated safeguarding officer are ensuring that robust procedures are implemented to promote residential pupil's safety and welfare.
- There are some weaknesses in the records the school maintain when residential pupils are reported missing
- Residential pupils feel safe and well supported. Bullying, including cyber bullying and homophobia is not identified as an issue for young people who feel staff take immediate and effective action to resolve any issues if they arise.
- The views of residential pupils, their parents and placing authorities are positive. The school ensures that residential pupil's views are sought and taken into account when considering ways of improving the boarding experience.
- Residential provision is managed in a way that promotes the best interest of pupils and provides them with access to a varied programme of activities and events which promote their self confidence, self esteem and increases their self confidence. The school has made good progress and now meets all the national minimum standards for residential special schools. The issues identified for further improvement reflects good childcare practice.

Compliance with the national minimum standards for residential special schools

The school meets the national minimum standards for residential special schools

Information about this inspection

The school was contacted on the morning of day one by the lead inspector to announce the inspection. The inspection took place over three days with feedback provided on the afternoon of day three. During the inspection records and documentation were examined and interviews took place with the residential pupils, head of care, head teacher, staff and safeguarding advisors. Residential pupils were also spoken to and observed on their units over two nights.

Inspection team

Anne Bannister	Lead social care inspector
Gillian Walters	Social care inspector

Full report

Information about this school

The school is an independent residential special school with up to 72 pupils aged between 10 and 19 years who have special educational needs related to emotional, behavioural and social difficulties. There are 22 pupils currently living in the school's residential provision and 22 day pupils. 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 27 September 2011.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- review the records maintained of instances when young people are reported missing so that it is clear that young people are given the opportunity to speak to someone external of the school about the reasons they were absent
- ensure that a chronological record is maintained of all safeguarding referrals that includes any action the school may take once the local authority have completed their investigation
- ensure that sanctions and rewards for behaviour are clear, reasonable and fair and are understood by all staff and children

Inspection judgements

Outcomes for residential pupils

Outstanding

A judgement of outstanding is made to reflect the excellent outcomes achieved by residential pupils in all key areas of their development. Residential pupils benefit from positive and constructive relationships with care staff. They value their relationships with staff, who several residential pupils told inspectors 'genuinely care for us and want the best for us'. Residential pupils are helped to express their wishes, feelings and worries in constructive ways. As a result from the time of their admission residential pupils make significant and continuous improvements in their education, health, emotional development, relationships and personal safety. Residential pupils are positive about the care they receive. They say that 'All staff will help you if you have any issues but keyworkers spend a lot of time with you helping you to sort things out and move forward' and 'key workers are brilliant.'

Residential pupils show an increasing in maturity and understanding of right and wrong. They are observed to challenge each other's behaviours in a productive manner. For example, in group discussion the residential pupils prompted one another to take turns in speaking so inspectors could hear everyone's opinion and they also reminded each other to 'stay on task'. This additional guidance was well received from other peers who modified their conversations in line with the advice given.

Residential pupils are observed to be sensitive to each other's needs. They are increasingly tolerant of one another. For example, in discussion with them about shared bedrooms, residential pupils showed empathy by acknowledging there are times when they are aware and respond positively to their roommates request for some time alone.

Residential pupils are increasing in confidence as they have opportunities to volunteer to take on in additional responsibilities. A 'buddy' system enables residential pupils who are well established in the school to act as mentors for new pupils. This has positive effects for all parties with new pupils indicating that the buddy system helps them to settle and understand the schools routines. For the 'buddies' it promotes feelings of self-confidence, self-worth and self-esteem.

Residential pupils increase in self-confidence as they engage in a wide range of self-chosen challenging and rewarding activities. This is made possible by the commitment of the care staff team to developing residential pupil's interests and hobbies. They have opportunities to engage in a wide range of activities such horse riding, fishing, mountain biking and abseiling which help them develop skills and interests while also improving their self-confidence and sense of achievement. Residential pupils engage in fundraising activities in the local community and with an annually chosen charity. Such opportunities ensure pupils look at the needs of the wider community and promote moral and social development.

Developing independence skills is a particular strength of the school. Social development planning begins from admission taking into account residential pupils age and abilities and working towards transition to independence. Residential pupils are supported to develop social skills, independent living skills, problem solving abilities and to develop emotional well-being and the ability to think independently. Each pupil's individuality and uniqueness is celebrated and their strengths built upon in order that they develop self-confidence and self-esteem. Residential pupil's opinions, both as individuals and as a group, are routinely sought and taken into account when developing all aspects of the care provided. This encourages them to take responsibility for decisions which affect their lives and their well-being.

Residential pupils are actively involved in keeping themselves fit and healthy. They have an excellent understanding of the importance of eating five pieces of fruit and vegetables each day

and the need to limit their intake of sweets. They have the knowledge to make positive choices about the type of diet and exercise which will promote their physical health and wellbeing.

A strong multi-disciplinary partnership developed by school means residential pupil's are able to gain the knowledge, skills, values and attributes they require to keep them safe and better prepared for further education and adulthood. These partnerships cover all elements of health, education and safeguarding

Quality of residential provision and care

Outstanding

A considerable amount of hard work, time and effort goes into ensuring communication between all staff is of a high quality. There is effective sharing of information between all the departments within school, including: speech and language therapists; school nurse; children and adolescent mental health workers; teaching and support staff. This supports the 24-hour curriculum for residential pupils. Effective sharing of information enables staff to provide continuity and support to residential pupils and ensures they are well informed about each young person's emotional, physical and social needs. Consequently, care staff are able to react and adapt swiftly to pupils ever changing needs.

Residential pupils enjoy positive relationships with staff which are built upon mutual trust, honesty and respect. Residential pupils are confident to talk about issues that are concerning or worrying them. Consequently, care staff have been able to assist residential pupils in addressing issues for example in school, meaning they were more able to engage with their education. A parent spoken to indicated that their child was only fully engaged with his education programme because of the exceptional support provided by the care staff team. Residential pupils say 'all staff want the best for us and help us to achieve this by encouraging us to look at different ways of handling situations.' They talk positively about the new head teacher and the head of care who they feel listen to them and explain why some things may not be possible at this time.

Individual care and education plans are detailed and while reflecting the uniqueness of each residential pupil they do not comprehensively reflect the very individualised care residential pupils receive. The school are aware of this and are in the process of reviewing the content of the plans to ensure that they fully demonstrate the very individual care young people receive. The detail of health, social and emotional needs is effectively captured, providing clear direction within the plans for improving outcomes. Residential pupils are actively encouraged to participate in the development of the plans and the decisions being made about them. Consequently, residential pupils' voices are equally respected throughout all aspects of their care. Care staff are highly motivated to get the best outcomes for young people and routinely reflect on issues such as 'Are strategies in place working? If not what else can we try?' They will continue to adapt their practice until their intervention and support is enabling young people to positively achieve.

Residential pupils enjoy good health and their health needs are positively promoted. Very detailed health plans ensure individual needs are assessed and met. All residential pupils are registered with community-based health services to access day-to-day health support. Specialist interventions are arranged and frequent liaison with key professionals ensures identified needs are well supported. This includes therapists, child and adolescent mental health team and specialist nurses to support their individual needs such as diabetes. Residential pupils take an active role in addressing their own health care needs, with some recognising potential triggers to their health and taking appropriate action, such as requesting a review of their medication. Residential pupils are confident to talk to staff when feeling unwell as they know staff will look after them. Residential pupils are aware of health the issues that may impact on their health and well-being, such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse. This means they are able to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

The school enthusiastically follows good practice guidance from healthy schools and has considerably improved upon the diet of some residential pupils. Residential pupils confirm, they have access to a wide range of fruit, healthy snacks and drinks. In some houses young people are able to plan their own menus and prepare their own evening meals. Meal times on these houses are homely, social occasions that enable residential pupils to discuss the day's events and plan their evening activities. Other residential pupils eat all main meals in the main school dining room and enjoy the opportunity to share mealtimes with a larger group of peers. Residential pupils are also very appreciative of the opportunities to eat in local restaurants as part of some of the planned evening activities. They happily regale visitors with tales about the visit, what they have eaten, why some pupils or staff were impressed with the restaurant and where they have chosen to go to next. These occasions all promote young people's social skills, self-confidence and self-esteem and provide excellent opportunities for personal development.

Excellent systems are in place which enable residential pupils to keep in contact with their families and people who are important to them. Parents are extremely pleased with the care provided. They say the difference in their child since coming here is 'phenomenal'. This has had not only a positive effect upon the residential pupils but their families as a whole. This is because they are much more settled and able to deal with challenging situations in a more productive manner. Parents comment on the excellent communication systems in place between them and the school. They say staff are always there for them and keep them fully informed of their child's progress and any issues that may arise. This actively promotes effective partnership working and provides consistency for residential pupils.

The accommodation effectively meets the residential pupils varying needs. Residential pupils have either their own bedrooms or share with one other pupil. Many of the rooms are highly personalised with posters of pupils favourite football teams, pop stars and films. The internal premises are very well maintained and residential pupils take pride in helping to maintain their houses. The school grounds are extensive and provide excellent opportunities for residential pupils to access additional resources, such as the adventure play ground or the sunken garden, which pupils say they use if they want a quiet space to themselves to reflect on issues.

Residential pupils' safety

Adequate

A judgement of adequate is made to reflect some significant historical deficits in the school's safeguarding practice that have occurred since the last inspection. Senior managers failed to correctly implement stringent safeguarding practice and did not adequately promote the safety and welfare of all young people in their care. These deficits have all been fully addressed by senior managers within the organisation. A new head teacher and designated safeguarding officer are now in post and are fully aware of the expectations and responsibilities of their roles. Staff receive training to update their knowledge and have a full understanding of safeguarding policies, procedures and the actions they should take, if an incident arises. Staff are now working effectively with the safeguarding agencies to promote young people's safety and welfare.

Residential pupils say they feel safe living in the school. Bullying is not identified as an issue, and pupils are confident that if it does occur staff deal with the issue and make it clear that any form of intimidation is not acceptable. All residential pupils spoken to feel that if they are unhappy about some aspect of their care staff will always try to resolve the issue informally. Residential pupils are aware of how they can make a formal complaint but feel they rarely need to do. On the occasions residential pupils have formally complained records are signed to confirm that they are happy with the outcome of the investigation. Displays around the school and in residential accommodation advise residential pupils of a range of agencies can contact if they have any concerns about staff practice in either care or education.

Clear, comprehensive behaviour management strategies are in place to support individual

residential pupil's needs. This enables residential pupils to consider the consequences of their actions and the impact upon themselves and others. This supports their ability to cope with their emotions and challenging situations. Staff use of de-escalation techniques is highly effective. The strong relationships formed between staff and residential pupils, underpinned with appropriate and well-timed humour, is used positively by staff as a tool to reduce tension and unrest. This effectively reduces the need for physical interventions within the care provision and provides residential pupils with the opportunities to reflect and consider more proactive ways of dealing with the situation. Residential pupils are aware of the school rules and possible consequences to inappropriate behaviour. They say staff are 'fair' and help them to look at things in a different way. Rewards, target setting and incentives work well as they are meaningful to residential pupils because they are fully consulted and agree to them. As a result residential pupils are able to achieve better outcomes with regards to managing their behaviour. Very few sanctions are given and residential pupils confirmed that staff use of sanctions is fair. The schools policy indicates that senior staff will review the effectiveness of sanctions in promoting positive changes in young people's behaviours. However, this practice is not currently being implemented to ensure that all staff are consistent in their use of sanctions. Some records gave cause for concern because of confusing and inappropriate language being used to describe events. For example, a residential pupil was described as being 'defiant towards making his bed'. The sanction given aimed to ' help him reflect on his attitude towards his bed space'.

Residential pupils benefit from good health and safety arrangements at the school. A senior member of staff is responsible for health and safety matters which support a safe school environment. The school has appropriate assessments relating to managing risks and promoting the welfare of pupils and staff. These include risk assessments for pupils who might go missing, the building, school grounds, fire and various activities undertaken by the pupils. Residential pupils are given support and advice on a range of matters relating to keeping themselves safe. This includes road safety; an awareness of stranger danger and cyber bullying. Pupils enjoy visits from local police community support officers who help them to develop positive relationships with people in a position of trust.

Residential pupils are protected from harm as recruitment and selection procedures are robust. All staff are interviewed and undertake appropriate vetting procedures such as Criminal Records Bureau checks. No one is allowed to commence working at the school until all their checks are back and they have been deemed suitable. Effective systems are in place to ascertain visitor' identification and information is sourced from regular contractors to the school to ensure they have undertaken the appropriate checks on their staff. All visitors to the school are appropriately supervised while on the premises.

Leadership and management of the residential provision Adequate

A judgement of adequate is given, although there is much strength in the current management of the residential provision within the school. This judgment reflects the areas of concern identified about some of the school's safeguarding practice since the previous inspection. The deficits in practice identified had a potential impact on pupils safety and wellbeing. Senior managers within the organisation have now taken effective steps to rectify the identified weaknesses and to ensure that staff practice fully promotes the safety and wellbeing of all pupils.

The school is effectively and professionally managed by the senior managers. This provides clear vision and values for the residential provision, resulting in a cohesive approach to driving forward improvement. This is supported by monitoring visits by a company representative to check on records, assess the physical condition of the buildings and talk to residential pupils and staff about their experiences. The company's commitment to providing a high quality of care to each residential pupil is commendable. This has a very positive effect upon residential pupils and is evident from the excellent progress they are making.

There are systems in place to ensure that residential pupils influence developments in the service. Their voice is heard through school council meetings, house meetings, and keyworker sessions and through surveys regularly undertaken by the management team. Residential 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. However, there is some evidence that since the last inspection young people's complaints have not always been rigorously pursued, involving the Local Authority Designated Officer as required in a timely manner. Although the situation has improved in recent months, this has meant that young people's concerns have not always been clearly identified or addressed.

The new head teacher and head of care are committed to the sustained improvement in the quality of care. This is evident in actions that have been taken to restore confidence in the senior management team and to address identified areas of weakness. Management place a strong emphasis on providing a flexible and inclusive service that meets the diverse needs of the pupils and their families. The head teacher has a clear and realistic understanding of the strengths of the service and the areas for further development. He was initially employed on an interim basis and has recently successfully secured the permanent post of head teacher. In light of this the development plan is currently being updated to set out how he intends to progress the service provided.

There are always sufficient staff on duty to meet the needs of the residential pupils. As a result, residential pupils feel valued and supported and are able to engage in activities of their choice. The care staff fulfil their responsibilities in a manner that treats residential pupils with dignity, respect and sensitivity. All care staff receive on-going training to ensure they hold all required skills and knowledge necessary to meet residential pupils' diverse needs. Regular supervision and team meetings take place, providing staff with opportunities to discuss their practice and review their performance. This level of support ensures staff provide high quality care and that residential pupils' well-being remains their focus.

All required policies and procedures are in place and known by those required to implement them. Records that are required to be maintained are comprehensively completed and stored securely.

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	A school which provides an exceptional quality of care and significantly exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 2	Good	A school which provides a high quality of care that exceeds minimum requirements.
Grade 3	Adequate	A school which meets minimum requirements but needs to improve the quality of care it provides.
Grade 4	Inadequate	A school where minimum requirements are not met and the quality of care has serious weaknesses.

School details

Unique reference number	112452
Social care unique reference number	SC040063
DfE registration number	909/6027

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.

Type of school	
Number of boarders on roll	22
Gender of boarders	Boys
Age range of boarders	10 to 19
Headteacher	Mr Graham Steele
Date of previous boarding inspection	27/09/2011
Telephone number	01539 552 397
Email address	admin@whs.uk.com

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