

Vranch House School

Pinhoe Road, Exeter, EX4 8AD

Inspection dates 7–9 July 2015

Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Leadership and management	Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Achievement of pupils	Good	2
Early years provision	Outstanding	1

Summary of key findings

This is a good school.

- All staff value pupils as individuals so that they become confident and enthusiastic learners.
- All pupils achieve well over time, particularly in communication, literacy and numeracy, because of good teaching and the strong teamwork between education and therapy staff.
- The headteacher and the management team provide classroom staff with strong supportive leadership that helps them to continue improving their performance and the pupils' achievement. This means that the school has continued to improve well since the last inspection.
- The school complies fully with all the independent school standards.
- Pupils love coming to school because of their close relationships with staff and the exciting range of learning activities on offer.
- Staff are very committed to pupils' well-being and take every opportunity to promote pupils' personal development so that behaviour is outstanding.
- Safety arrangements are excellent and pupils feel safe in school.
- Provision for the early years is outstanding, so that children make an excellent start to their school career. Leadership and management at all levels, including governance, are good. Governors are challenging and supportive of the school.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Some teachers do not plan and provide activities that are challenging enough for all pupils.
- Classroom staff do not always use all forms of communication, especially signing, gestures and other helpful cues, when speaking to pupils. This limits their understanding and, thus, their progress.
- School staff do not promote pupils' individual learning goals consistently throughout the day, particularly their communication skills.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets schedule 1 of The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out with one day's notice.
- The inspector observed the impact of teaching in five lessons or parts of lessons, visiting all staff. All visits were joint observations with the headteacher.
- All of the relevant school documents and policies were scrutinised to check for compliance with the independent school standards. These included the school's prospectus, information about students' progress, the school's own evaluation of its work, and the students' workbooks. Records relating to behaviour, attendance, and safeguarding were also scrutinised.
- Discussions were held with the Chief Executive of the Trust, the Chair of Governors, headteacher, staff, parents and the pupils.
- The inspector listened to some pupils reading.
- There were too few responses to Ofsted's online parent survey for the inspector to consider.
- The inspector took account of questionnaire responses from 25 members of staff.

Inspection team

Mick Megee, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Vbranch House School is an independent day school for boys and girls aged two to 12 years of age. The school is owned and operated by a registered charity, directed and managed by a board of trustees. It opened in 1961.
- Since the last inspection, a new headteacher has been in post for 18 months.
- The school provides education for pupils with physical difficulties and/or severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties. Half of the children have a visual impairment. There are no pupils looked after by a local authority.
- There are 12 pupils eligible for pupil premium funding. The local authority subsumes this funding in the fees paid.
- All pupils have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.
- There are currently 24 pupils on the school roll, aged between three and 11 years of age. There are 10 children in the early years, nine of whom attend part time. The school has not applied for or been granted exemption from the learning and development requirements of the early years. This provision consists of both Nursery and Reception.
- The school does not use any off-site training. Of the pupils on roll, 12 attend the school part time because they have shared placements in local mainstream pre-schools or primary schools.
- No pupils are in the care of their local authority and two speak English as an additional language.
- The school was last inspected in May 2012, when its quality of education was judged to be good.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- In order to raise pupils' achievement further, the school should make sure that teachers:
 - plan and provide activities that are challenging for all pupils
 - use all forms of communication, especially signing, when speaking to children
 - emphasise and promote pupils' individual learning goals, particularly in communication, whenever possible throughout the day.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- Good leadership and management have created a happy school in which teaching is good. The impact of leaders is realised in the excellent provision for children in the early years and in the outstanding behaviour and safety.
- Staff at all levels share the headteacher's enthusiasm and dedication to seeing that the pupils make fast progress from sometimes low starting points. She works very closely with others in the management team and with governors to make sure that everyone combines forces to maximise achievement.
- This high quality teamwork is exemplified in the way in which education and therapy staff work very closely together in the classroom so that little learning time is lost. This was a recommendation from the last inspection.
- There are no middle managers, but responsibilities are distributed according to the strengths and expertise of each staff member.
- There is strong leadership of teaching, particularly in the early years provision. The headteacher frequently carries out lesson observations and learning walks to ensure that staff are doing their best to bring about rapid learning and growth. She accurately spots weaker practice and, together with the staff concerned, agrees upon strategies on how to bring about improvement.
- The management team makes sure that staff morale is high at all times through strong personal support and relevant professional development activities. The trustees place a strong emphasis on improving staff through training, providing a good number of opportunities for staff to develop their skills consistent with their needs and those of the school.
- The harmony within the workforce is reflected in the very positive responses from staff in their questionnaire. It is clearly evident to parents, who told the inspector, 'Speak to anyone. They will all tell you how happy they are to be working at Vbranch House.'
- The headteacher and staff ensure that the school is kept in good order and pupils are provided with many good resources, including new technology to assist their communication, so that they develop the skills they will need throughout their lives, such as literacy and numeracy. The trustees try very hard to make the finances stretch to cover the increasing demand for expensive technological and physical equipment, although parents say that there is sometimes a shortage of some essential equipment in the school, such as individual standing frames.
- The school provides a good range of well organised and suitable learning activities which excite the pupils' interest and enable pupils to make good progress. These are built around whole school themes, such as Space and Knights, Kings and Castles.
- The headteacher sees to it that parents are told of these themes well in advance so that they can join in at home. One parent said, 'They were doing a project on Space so I was taking my son out at night to have a look at the stars so that he would understand what the teachers were talking about.'
- The school organises an individual programme of learning, sensory and therapeutic activities customised around each pupil, according to their needs and capabilities. These activities are enhanced by memorable experiences away from the school, such as adventurous activities in abseiling and canoeing.
- The management team, governors and staff have a good understanding of how well they are doing and of what requires improvement. Leaders admit that there is still some work to do, for example in improving outcomes for pupils, before leadership and management can be evaluated as outstanding.
- The management team provides very good opportunities for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, particularly with regard to making arrangements for pupils to learn in local mainstream schools. As a result, behaviour and personal development are outstanding.
- The excellent inclusion arrangements are a good example of how well the school promotes equality of opportunity and ensures that there is no discrimination.
- The school helps pupils to gain an appropriate understanding of British values such as democracy and acceptance of the rule of law in many subjects, and through the serious way in which pupils undertake events such as the elections to the school council.
- The management team and governors prepare pupils very well for life in modern Britain. Pupils learn to value and respect members of all communities through local visits and visitors, as well as through subjects such as history, geography, art and food technology. Parents from different backgrounds bring in food and sweets, for example from Poland and Hungary. Staff make sure that pupils are not exposed to extremist views, through implementing the policies that the school has developed.
- The management team and trustees have strong personal and professional relationships with other agencies based on the school campus, such as health and therapy staff. There are frequent contacts and exchanges of information with the local advisory teacher service, and the multi-sensory service for pupils with visual difficulties. There are particularly close links with staff from all the schools involved in the

inclusion arrangements.

- Parents are welcomed in the school to give and receive information, to see their children in lessons and therapy sessions. They say that they are supported exceptionally well through regular family coffee mornings on Saturdays, monthly family events, the regular newsletter and the daily diary.
- Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, with very good taster experiences at secondary schools. The management team has a 'belt and braces' approach to these moves in order to ensure success.
- The preparations for the move to secondary school begins early in Year 4. Families receive support and guidance over the next two years, including visiting a number of possible schools, before making the choice they are happy with. Pupils are prepared for the eventual move through a very effective programme called New Beginnings and Moving On.
- The school's arrangements for safeguarding meet all requirements and are effective. The safeguarding policy available in school is fully compliant with statutory guidance. However, the policy available on the charities website does not contain recently revised guidance. The management team makes sure that the school is up to date and compliant with the independent school standards through scrupulous checks, sometimes made by an external consultant.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The governors and trustees together provide good governance to the school and hold it to account well. Trustees and governors are challenging and helpful friends for the school and play an effective role in its work.
 - They have a wide range of skills and pertinent expertise that they make good use of in planning for the school's future. Discussions with various members reveal their absolute commitment to doing the very best for the children in the school and their families.
 - Governors make regular visits to the school and are provided with regular, user-friendly updates on staff and pupils' performance from the headteacher.
 - They have a good understanding of the quality of teaching and pupils' achievements, safeguarding and rewards for good teachers related to how well they are performing and what needs to be done to improve further.
 - The governors and trustees provide the school with well-considered guidance. Decisions relating to staffing, accommodation and finance are made wisely. The school provides good value for money in the light of pupils' good achievement and outstanding personal development.
 - All of the independent school regulations with regard to leadership and management are met.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding, and the school meets all the related regulations. From the day they join the school, pupils' interactions with each other and staff, their interest in learning and their ability to make decisions start to improve. This is because of the specialist teaching and therapeutic support they receive and the speedy improvement in their ability to communicate.
- Many of the pupils arrive at the school lacking in confidence, because their complex difficulties mean that they have experienced little success in their lives so far. The high expectations of the staff mean that pupils' self-belief and confidence are built up rapidly.
- Classrooms and the playground are peaceful and calm places to learn and socialise. This ethos plays a very strong part in the good academic progress that pupils make.
- Staff have received excellent training in managing pupils' behaviour. If pupils are experiencing persistent difficulties in learning or are becoming upset frequently, school staff and parents get together and agree on ways of reducing these incidents. All staff effectively implement the agreed plans.
- Pupils indicate, and parents say, that they completely trust the adults to work with them with kindness, sensitivity and respect for them as individuals. This is a key feature in their very strong personal development.
- Parents express delight with the way that their children develop excellent attitudes towards learning and pleasure in attending school. As one parent typically said, 'My daughter is so happy at school. She leaves home with a smile on her face and comes home with one too. Exhausted but very happy.'
- Pupils are encouraged at every opportunity so that they feel valued and prepared to have a go at new experiences.
- Attendance and punctuality for the majority of pupils are very good, although a small number of pupils have to be away, sometimes for long periods, because of serious medical difficulties.

Safety

- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. The management team and trustees give the priority to preventing harm to the pupils.

- The school provides excellent levels of day-to-day supervision, including one-to-one and small group teaching so that pupils are kept safe at all times. The management team makes sure that the premises of the school are secure, with controlled access at all times.
- The school has excellent arrangements in place for the safe recruitment of staff and for ensuring effective safeguarding of pupils.
- Excellent training and regular review ensure that welfare, health, safety and safeguarding policies are all implemented very effectively.
- The management team carries out regular, routine checks on the premises, including all aspects of fire safety. These are recorded appropriately.
- The school communicates very well with the mainstream schools, which most of the pupils attend, to ensure that there are no gaps that might compromise pupils' safety.
- Assessment of risk is diligent and thorough. Assessments are carried out and reviewed regularly for all activities that the pupils undertake.
- Pupils say that they feel safe in school and bullying is not a problem. They have a clear understanding of the many different forms of bullying and of how to stay safe. They are confident about raising any issues with staff if they experience difficulties.
- All staff are very well trained in safeguarding to the level usually reserved for designated persons. Many staff are comprehensively trained and qualified to administer first aid.
- The school meets all regulatory requirements in relation to behaviour and safety.

The quality of teaching

is good

- Teaching in all subjects, including English and mathematics, is consistently good, and in the early years it is excellent. Teachers, therapists and health professionals work successfully as a team in the classroom in order to promote common goals in pupils' learning and well-being. Consequently, pupils make good progress and achieve well over their time in school.
- Teachers are skilful at making lessons interesting for pupils, such as by providing activities where the pupils can become physically involved. For example those who need to strengthen their hands, fingers and grip are given dough to manipulate. Handwriting is improved through music and movement lessons. Pupils say that these are the activities they like the most.
- The staff teach the skills that pupils will need in later life throughout the day and irrespective of whether the pupils are in the classroom. For example, teachers and therapists work together at lunchtimes to develop pupils' personal skills in eating and in going to the toilet.
- Classroom staff are often heard using friendly banter to encourage pupils and this good humour works well and keeps pupils motivated.
- Teachers and therapists manage pupils' behaviour extremely well, especially when it arises from physical or emotional discomfort. Rewards, such as celebration certificates, and star badges given out in assembly, are very effective. All pupils understand the system and look forward to receiving this tangible evidence of their achievement.
- Most of the time during the day, there is a good emphasis on developing basic skills in communicating, reading, writing and mathematics through using individual goals. At times, though, insufficient emphasis is given to improving pupils' progress in these basic skills, particularly in communication, and this holds the pupils back.
- When they speak to pupils, classroom staff use additional cues, such as objects of reference, signing and gestures, to help pupils understand and to make their meaning clear. Sometimes staff forget to do this so that pupils do not follow clearly what is being said and do not know what they have to do to be successful.
- Most teachers have high expectations of pupils and set challenging targets for all groups of pupils, including the most able. In a very few cases, expectations are too low and pupils find the work too easy and this restricts new learning.

The achievement of pupils

is good

- The achievement of pupils is good because teachers and therapists provide all-round support that is mostly matched well to pupils' personal and learning needs, including those who have sensory impairment or profound learning difficulties.
- The school's progress information, pupils' workbooks, and individual case studies all show that pupils achieve well over their time in school. Different groups, including disadvantaged pupils and those with visual impairment, achieve equally well, although achievement is stronger in the early years because of the excellent provision in that department.

- Most pupils start school with skills that are exceptionally low when compared with those of other pupils of their age in other schools. This is because of their complex physical and learning difficulties.
- Based on individual starting points, pupils' progress across year groups and in a wide range of subjects, including English and mathematics, is consistently good, and excellent in the early years. The most able pupils achieve well and in some cases achieve standards typical for their age. This is because activities and learning targets offer them a good challenge. Pupils who attend mainstream schools part time achieve as well as others.
- Parents appreciate the good opportunities the school offers to support their children's learning at home. Advance notice of the school's themes and regular workshops assist parents to carry on the good work done at school and to extend their children's experiences in order to maximise learning.
- Pupils develop well their communication, numeracy, reading and writing skills in different subjects. Where appropriate, pupils read aloud in lessons with confidence and understanding.
- The school meets the independent school standards relating to pupils' academic or personal development.

The early years provision

is outstanding

- The teacher in the early years systematically checks up on the effectiveness of the provision. She has developed excellent arrangements to record and analyse children's progress and achievements. The setting is exceptionally well led.
- The school's progress records show that almost all children make good progress from their starting points, and many make outstanding progress. All children are well prepared academically and emotionally for their move to the primary stage, whether this is at Vbranch House or in a local mainstream school.
- The school makes sure that, where appropriate, all children have regular opportunities to develop their awareness of phonics (the sounds letters make) so that they can quickly develop their early literacy skills.
- Children with complex difficulties and profound learning needs are carefully monitored so that they receive the support they need as they develop.
- The trustees and management team have developed excellent arrangements with medical and therapy professional services to make sure the early years provision receives relevant expert advice to help them provide customised support to individual children.
- The early years classroom provides a wide range and balance of learning opportunities. There are limitations in the physical environment that mean that some children are unable to move freely between indoor and outdoor activities. The school has well developed plans to rectify this over the next year. Nevertheless, regular outdoor play and learning enable children to develop movement skills and physical health exceptionally well.
- There are very strong relationships between staff members, parents and children. This means that children settle very quickly into school life. Children's behaviour is excellent. The children listen attentively and respond appropriately to questions and requests. They mix well and play together happily.
- Parents talk about the marvellous support they receive at the very beginning when their children join the school. They say they are amazed at how quickly their children settle into the school's routines.
- Therapy and teaching staff work extremely well together and this provides an excellent learning experience that helps children to develop knowledge and skills rapidly. This also enables children to build up their speaking and listening skills and to gain the confidence to speak in a group.
- All staff look after children especially well. Vigilance and supervision are given the highest priority. The staff check up daily on the premises and resources to ensure children's health and safety.
- Parents and carers are very positive about the quality and frequency of information that they receive about their children's learning, personal development and well-being.

What inspection judgements mean

School	
Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Non-association independent school inspection handbook* which is published on the Ofsted website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-association-independent-school-inspection-handbook.

School details

Unique reference number	113571
Inspection number	465376
DfE registration number	878/6007

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, 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.

Type of school	Independent special school
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	2–12 years of age
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	24
Number of part time pupils	12
Proprietor	Vbranch House
Chair	Julia Tolman-May
Headteacher	Viktoria Pavlics
Date of previous school inspection	23–24 May 2012
Annual fees (day pupils)	£17,000
Telephone number	01392 468333
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