

Oakwood Learning Centre

New Biggin Lane, Heighington, Darlington, County Durham, DL2 2UH

Inspection dates

26–28 January 2016

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Teaching, learning and assessment are outstanding. Teachers use the school's assessment framework very effectively to plan lessons, check pupils' progress and set targets.
- Teaching responds to pupils' individual needs and results in outstanding progress.
- Pupils have made outstanding progress in a very short time. They have significantly exceeded expected progress for those with similar starting points. They could achieve even more by paying better attention to the teachers' marking and feedback to help them improve their work.
- Personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding. Pupils make significant gains from a very low starting point in their self-esteem and self-confidence. In turn, this helps them to re-engage with learning and make outstanding progress.
- Leaders and managers have successfully provided a pathway to positive educational and social outcomes for pupils who joined the centre with challenging behaviour and educational underachievement.
- Pupils say that they feel safe and know how to report concerns. They practise democracy and they are key contributors to the positive atmosphere in the centre.
- Leaders have a clear understanding of the quality of teaching in the centre through regular performance monitoring. The quality of teaching has a significant impact on pupils' outcomes.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

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

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that all pupils make even more rapid progress in all subjects by responding to the teachers' marking, as advised.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- Leaders and managers have ensured that all the independent school standards are met.
- The proprietor, governors, leaders and managers in the school successfully share and promote high ambitions which are clearly visible in the daily life of the school.
- Leaders know the school's strengths and areas for development. In building on the outstanding progress in all areas just two terms since the centre was established, they are ambitious to see continued high standards over a longer period.
- Pupils appreciate leaders' work, too. Pupils are encouraged to leave comments in allocated spaces on displays. On one mini-whiteboard in the leaders' area, one pupil had written: 'Keep working hard! You are very good at your jobs.'
- The commitment of the headteacher is at the heart of the school's success. He has an unswerving belief in the pupils' capacity to achieve, both personally and academically. This belief is shared by the staff team and reflected in so much of the centre's success.
- Leaders have a clear understanding of the quality of teaching in the centre through regular performance monitoring. The school's programme of continuing professional development is welcomed and appreciated by staff, and supports them well in improving their skills.
- Pupils' outstanding achievement is the result of outstanding teaching, which provides the individual support essential to re-engage them with education.
- The curriculum successfully supports pupils' understanding of British values and citizenship. Pupils practise their own democracy by electing representatives to the pupils' council, and they understand and respect the different cultures and faiths in the community.
- The curriculum is broad and balanced, and fully covers all of the required areas of learning in the independent school standards. The school's commitment to discovery through the use of construction kits provides valuable extension to the curriculum, and enables pupils' creative skills to be seen.
- Leaders ensure the quality of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through the centre's programme of personal, social and health education (PSHE). Pupils respond well to school rules, understanding the reason for 'laws' in any community. They have the opportunity to respond to ideas by using comment boxes in displays around the school.
- The school makes provision for pupils to have a range of experiences which lead to understanding and respect for other cultures and faiths. They understand how individuals acquire a nationality by considering a range of influences.
- Pupils often arrive at the centre with low self-confidence and self-esteem. Their progress in these areas in a relatively short time is truly remarkable and a testimony to the ethos of the centre.
- The purpose-built premises provide an outstanding learning environment, with space for active learning and excellent resources.
- Leaders and managers are committed to ensuring that pupils reject extremism. They also ensure that a balanced view is presented in all its activities.
- **The governance of the school**
 - Leaders and managers in the centre are challenged and held to account by governors. The link director, as the Chair of Governors, pays regular formal and informal visits and takes an active interest in the school's success. The role of governors is fully integrated into the leadership and management of the school.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school meets all of the requirements set out in the latest version of *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (July 2015).
- A current safeguarding policy, which meets statutory requirements, is provided on the school's website.
- All staff are trained above the minimum level in child protection procedures and senior leaders are qualified safeguarding trainers.
- The proprietor has ensured that the single central register of the checks made on the suitability of adults to work with pupils fully meets requirements.
- All interview panels include at least one person trained in safer recruitment procedures.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Teaching is outstanding. Teachers have a deep knowledge of their subjects and of the individual learning needs of their pupils.
- Teachers' planning is detailed and is based on a strong awareness of the prior achievement of all the pupils. It follows the centre's schemes of work and medium-term planning, and ensures a sequence of learning activities suited to pupils' needs.
- Teachers ensure that individual pupils demonstrate gains in knowledge and skills by providing adequate time for practising and embedding new learning. They ask good open questions and respond to the questions pupils are encouraged to ask.
- The curriculum provides high-quality opportunities for pupils to develop literacy and numeracy skills. Vocabulary specific to a particular subject or task is explained. Measuring skills and time intervals in food technology are examples of the use of numeracy skills.
- The school presents its curriculum as an 'open-ended challenge' because pupils rarely conform to the relationship between their age and school year. A wide range of external accreditation is available.
- Teachers use praise and encouragement effectively to develop pupils' self-confidence. As a result, pupils are rapidly developing increased levels of concentration and commitment to learning.
- Teaching assistants and care assistants provide valuable support, being available to help and yet recognising the pupils' self-esteem and the need to manage their own learning.
- Pupils who have been disengaged from education are rapidly re-focused and take pride in their achievements. The school has successfully re-engaged them in a culture of learning.
- Teachers praise pupils' achievements and help them to improve. Marking of a very high standard is seen in English books. Pupils and the teacher create a dialogue, asking and responding to questions or suggestions. However, this is not always the case in other subjects.
- Parents and carers receive regular reports on pupils' progress. They attend annual reviews of education, health and care plans. There is close cooperation between the pupils' homes and the centre because school staff foster good communication.
- The centre has worked with the proprietor's group of schools to develop a framework for assessment without levels which is used to track pupils' progress and set aspirational targets. This begins when a pupil's prior achievement is assessed on entry to the centre. This framework identifies gaps in learning, analyses the effect of periods out of education, uses standardised tests and groups pupils according to their levels of attainment rather than their age. It generates planning for pupils to learn effectively in response to their own current needs and prior achievement.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare are outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Attendance is very high. In the two terms since the centre opened, very few school days have been lost.
- The school provides a safe environment in which pupils with previous low self-confidence and self-esteem make rapid and sustained progress. They recognise their former shortcomings and display a determination to succeed. Pupils who have not felt safe at other times in their lives confirm that they now feel safe at Oakwood.
- The adults in the centre demonstrate confidence in pupils' capacity to improve their personal and academic outcomes and this level of belief can be clearly seen throughout the centre. Pupils and adults work together solving problems and sharing in learning.
- One pupil's parents said, 'We feel involved in her life again.'
- Two of the current pupils have already secured places in colleges to continue their studies next year.
- Pupils engage with their local community by raising funds for local charities at their Christmas fayre, supporting the local church and will soon begin a community project with Sunderland Football Club.
- The pupils engaged in a full week of remembrance in November, welcoming visitors and making commemorative displays.
- Pupils benefit from effective therapeutic support which focuses on 'who (s)he is'. Therapists believe that behaviour is only a symptom and assess all aspects of a pupil's experience.

- Pupils are well supervised during the day in free time, while eating lunch and at the end of the day. This supervision is caring and mutually respectful.
- Healthy eating is successfully promoted through food technology lessons. To underline the need to eat more vegetables, pupils made carrot cake. They described this as 'hiding the vegetables'. Such humour provides a clear illustration of how pupils' personal development has moved forward in a very short time.
- Pupils have good skills in information and communications technology (ICT) and are taught to understand and practise safety on line.
- All staff and some pupils are trained in first aid.
- Careers guidance is taught as part of the PSHE curriculum, concentrating on the development of personal skills. Impartial job-related advice is provided by visiting careers advisers.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Since arriving at the centre, pupils' behaviour has undergone rapid and sustained improvement. Pupils engage well with their learning, form good relationships with adults and other pupils and take a pride in their achievements.

Outcomes for pupils

are outstanding

- Pupils' outcomes are outstanding. From very low starting points, and often long-term disengagement from education, all pupils have significantly exceeded the expected progress in English, mathematics and science in the two terms since the centre opened.
- Pupils have also made outstanding progress and demonstrate good skills across the broader curriculum, especially in food technology and ICT. Work seen in pupils' books confirms this progress. They have also succeeded in a range of extension activities, such as music, rock-climbing, horse riding and boxing.
- One pupil said, 'I've caught up three years I missed.' A staff member said that pupils have 'achieved an incredible amount in just under a year'.
- Pupils also make outstanding progress in their personal development and are meeting the school's aims for the next stage in their lives. Pupils' capacity to discuss their learning with adults and each other has increased as their self-confidence grows. This has had a significant effect on their learning and progress.
- Pupils read for pleasure in the home and at school. At their request, the school has established a library of books chosen by the pupils themselves. Two pupils have already gained entry level and GCSE accreditation.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 141954 |
| Inspection number | 10008945 |
| DfE registration number | 841/6007 |

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.

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| Type of school | Independent special school |
| School status | Independent school |
| Age range of pupils | 8–18 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 9 |
| Number of part time pupils | 0 |
| Proprietor | Witherslack Group |
| Chair | Howard Tennant |
| Headteacher | John O'Neill |
| Annual fees (day pupils) | £63,435–£79,167 |
| Telephone number | 01388 437139 |
| Website | http://witherslackgroup.co.uk |
| Email address | john.o'neill@witherslackgroup.co.uk |
| Date of previous school inspection | Not previously inspected |

Information about this school

- Oakwood Learning Centre provides for up to 14 young people aged from eight to 18 years with complex educational needs and challenging behaviours.
- The learning centre admits pupils throughout the year and there are currently nine full-time pupils on roll. There are five male and four female pupils, all of whom are looked after by their local authorities, which fund all the placements. There are no pupils above compulsory school age.
- All pupils have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan to address their needs, which are mostly severe social and educational disengagement.
- Oakwood Learning Centre operates a unique model of therapy targeted to the needs of individual young people.
- The centre aims to 'provide learning programmes tailored to the needs of each pupil, to raise the standards of achievement for all, and enable pupils to develop into socially and emotionally responsible citizens with the skills for lifelong learning and employment'.
- This is the centre's first inspection since it was registered as an independent special school in January 2015. The centre admitted its first pupil in March 2015.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out with one day's notice.
- The inspector checked the school's compliance with the independent school standards, including scrutinising school policies, the single central record and other documentation.
- The inspector observed learning across a range of subjects and classes. In two of these observations, he was accompanied by the head of education.
- The inspector viewed the school's website.
- The inspector discussed the school's assessment records with senior leaders and scrutinised samples of pupils' work.
- The inspector spoke with teaching and support staff, pupils, the pastoral manager, the clinical director, the headteacher, the Chair of Governors and one pupil's parents. There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, to generate a report.
- The inspector analysed 13 staff questionnaires.

Inspection team

Peter McKenzie, Lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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