

Pontville School

Black Moss Lane, Ormskirk, Lancashire L39 4TW

Inspection dates

5–7 July 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

Sixth form provision

Outstanding

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Outstanding

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The headteacher provides dynamic leadership and drives a culture of excellence for all. Pupils flourish and make exemplary progress.
- All leaders are passionate and care deeply about pupils and learners. They use highly effective systems to ensure that all pupils get the best-quality support and education.
- Pupils are expertly supported with a wide and varied range of specialist therapy. Consequently, pupils overcome barriers to their learning and often excel.
- The Witherslack Group is highly skilled and knowledgeable about the school. Its members are committed to providing exemplary support. As a result, leaders have high aspirations and a thirst for continual school improvement.
- Leaders ensure that pupils are expertly safeguarded. There is a strong culture of vigilance across the school. Pupils are rigorously protected and cared for by all staff. The school is a safe haven.
- A wide range of high-quality facilities within the school enable outstanding learning and achievement.
- The curriculum is tailored to match pupils' aspirations and interests. It is enriched with extensive extra-curricular opportunities to rebuild pupils' social and communication skills, self-esteem and confidence.
- Motivated and caring staff use expertly crafted, individualised learning plans which support pupils' diverse needs. Consequently, pupils are highly engaged in their learning. They have very positive attitudes.
- A large number of pupils and learners gain grades beyond those that are expected of them. Many make rapid improvements in their emotional, social and communication skills. They are well equipped for their next steps in learning.
- The sixth form is skilfully managed to ensure that all learners achieve, aspire and excel. The curriculum is sculpted around the needs of learners. They are very well informed about their next steps in education, employment or training.
- Personal, social and health education is carefully crafted. All pupils are expertly supported to develop an excellent understanding of life in modern Britain.
- All staff build exemplary relationships with pupils and model respect and strong values. Consequently, pupils feel part of the school family and have a strong desire to achieve.
- High-quality professional development is used to increase staff skills. However, some school support assistants are not highly effective in supporting literacy and numeracy in the classroom. As a result, opportunities to extend pupils' progress are sometimes missed.

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?

- Enhance the effectiveness of school support assistants by providing high-quality training in numeracy and literacy, so they are even more highly equipped to support pupils in lessons.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management is outstanding

- The headteacher provides dynamic leadership and drives a strong vision across the school, building a culture of excellence for all. She is passionate about ensuring that all pupils flourish under her care, and she inspires excellence and ambition in her senior leaders. No pupil is left behind in her quest for excellence.
- The headteacher has bonded the leadership team together and uses their skills to inspire excellence and high ambition across the school. Senior leaders provide a clear vision and direction for staff, pupils and learners. They bravely seek creative approaches to curriculum design to ensure that they cater for all pupils' strengths.
- All leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring that pupils achieve to the best of their ability. Leaders are quick to identify any areas of underperformance and deal with these effectively. Cohesive teamworking ensures that 'no pupil is overlooked'.
- Middle leaders and subject specialists pursue excellence. They are highly skilled and knowledgeable. They drive high expectations within their subject areas and build an ethos of collective responsibility. They use their strong subject knowledge to plan and prepare for curriculum development and change. All staff feel fully accountable for the progress of all pupils. They conduct frequent and accurate checks on teachers' assessment of pupils' work to ensure that they have an accurate picture of achievement. They lead their teams resolutely and monitor the quality of teaching rigorously. Strong and frequent quality assurance within and beyond the provision takes place to secure accurate predictions of pupils' outcomes.
- Leaders across the school and at all levels have 'an eye for detail' and use highly effective systems to secure consistency across the school. Systems and processes are understood and used well by all staff to drive further improvements. Leaders use these systems successfully to identify underachievement and provide appropriate support to accelerate pupils' progress.
- The school's self-evaluation is accurate and is closely linked to its improvement planning. Effective partnerships have been forged with other schools within and beyond the Witherslack Group to verify the accuracy of leaders' judgements and teachers' assessments.
- The curriculum is balanced and provides a range of opportunities for pupils. It is designed to meet the needs of each individual pupil. Pupils are assessed on entry and their prior learning and aspirations are established. Leaders tailor the curriculum to meet pupils' needs. The school endeavours to focus on pupils' strengths and interests to enable all pupils to achieve according to their potential.
- Personal, social and health education is carefully crafted. All pupils are expertly supported and developed through the curriculum but also through assemblies. For example, pupils were able to understand the rule of law and discuss the European referendum. Consequently, pupils have an excellent understanding of life in modern Britain. Pupils also receive lessons on sexual consent, and drugs and alcohol.
- Specialist therapy support is built into pupils' timetables to provide expert individual support and remove barriers to learning. As a result, pupils are able to make sense of issues affecting their lives and are more able to remove barriers preventing academic progress.
- Leaders and managers promote equality of opportunity well, and ensure that sexual orientation is well understood and discussed in lessons. Teachers ensure that stereotypes are challenged and discussed. Discrimination and intolerance are not accepted.
- Leaders and managers cater effectively for the imbalance of gender within the school. The use of an innovative girls' group provides a successful platform to deliver sensitive information about female development in a caring and well-structured manner.
- The school meets all the requirements in relation to the premises. There are plenty of high-quality external areas for play and relaxation on site.
- Senior leaders are effective in developing the skills of middle leaders. A rolling programme of professional development is in place across the school including high-quality external training opportunities. However, school support assistants are not highly effective in supporting literacy and numeracy in the classroom. Consequently, opportunities to extend pupils' progress even further are sometimes missed.

■ The governance of the school

- The governance within the Witherslack Group is highly supportive and committed to the development of the school. Governors play a clear role in the construction of the development plan and have a clear vision for the future development of the school.
 - The regional education director has immersed herself in the life of the school. She visits weekly and has her fingers on the pulse of developments across the school. She has a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development.
 - The Witherslack Group recognises that the school and teachers are high performing but thirst for continued improvement. Directors have high aspirations for staff and pupils alike, and are not afraid to challenge and hold leaders to account for pupils' achievement, welfare and safety.
 - The Witherslack Group ensures that a culture of high performance continues to thrive across the school. It monitors the climate and culture of the school with annual staff surveys. Directors are responsive to feedback, and keenly analyse results and implement development plans in their quest to improve the positive climate even further.
 - The Witherslack Group monitors performance management well and provides incentives for high-performing staff. It recognises that staff across the school often 'go the extra mile' to secure pupils' achievements. It values the commitment of the school staff and keenly oversees teachers' performance to ensure that performance awards related to pay are thoroughly checked and reviewed.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. There is a strong culture of vigilance among staff across all areas of the school. Leaders work hard to protect pupils from child sexual exploitation and radicalisation, and ensure that staff are meticulously kept up to date with crucial information and high-quality training. As a result, staff are alert and knowledgeable on how to protect pupils in their care.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding

- Teachers know their pupils extremely well and use highly individualised learning plans with rich and diverse activities. These plans engage and interest pupils and meet their academic needs, so that they want to learn. Teachers adapt and respond quickly to pupils' individual needs to ensure that learning continues in the classroom. They use detailed behaviour plans well to ensure that learning is not disrupted. Staff use their effective training to ensure that behaviour is not a barrier to learning.
- Teachers use a range of approaches to help pupils learn, maintain their interest in learning and build their communication skills. Leaders ensure that teachers develop pupils' communication skills by ensuring that a weekly focus is captured in all lessons and activities, enhancing pupils' development. Pupils learn about the world they live in through a range of visits. For example, pupils explore the issues of going on a day trip through a unit of work linked to Willy Russell's 'Our day out'. These activities are carefully planned to further develop pupils' social and communication skills.
- Staff across the school work hard, earn trust and form very positive relationships with pupils. This allows pupils to feel secure and valued, building their confidence and self-esteem. Pupils feel valued as unique individuals and staff seize every opportunity to celebrate their small steps in development. The recently implemented rewards system is already valued by pupils and contributes to their attitudes to learning.
- Communication is central to the school's work. It is seamless and integral across all aspects of the school's work. Leaders, alongside the speech and language team, are keen to develop and boost pupils' skills through a tightly planned social communication curriculum, delivered by staff across the school day.
- Leaders ensure that communication home is personalised and well structured to provide concise information about progress, attendance and areas for improvement. Leaders ensure that their doors are always open and react to parents' wishes for home-school communication. Parents who spoke to inspectors have a strong appreciation of the school's work and one parent commented, 'The school are working hard to give my child the best opportunities.'
- Staff follow the school's marking policy consistently and this is impacting strongly on pupils' understanding and development. Pupils take pride in their work and teachers ensure that they are well supported with feedback to improve.
- Some pupils in key stage 3 and key stage 4 attend the Cumberland School Vocational Learning Centre

to complete courses in construction and mechanics for part of the week. Leaders use effective, well-established systems to check and monitor learners' academic achievements, and also their personal development and welfare.

- The small class sizes allow teachers and school support assistants to target individual support for pupils, so that areas of uncertainty are clarified and misconceptions tackled. Teachers carefully use probing questions to deepen pupils' understanding even further. School support assistants are highly skilled and work in close collaboration with teachers to ensure that pupils receive first-rate support and achieve well. However, leaders recognise that there is a need to enhance and deepen the school support assistants' understanding of literacy and numeracy so they can effectively support pupils' learning even further across the curriculum.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

is outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding. The school is a safe haven for pupils. Care and support are exemplary. Motivated and caring staff understand the barriers to pupils' learning through the use of highly detailed and effective personal support plans. This ensures that pupils receive tailored care, and appropriate strategies and support to promote their specific developmental requirements from all staff.
- A wide and varied range of therapy enables pupils to flourish and significantly improve their social, communication and behavioural skills during their time at the school. Trained staff counsel and guide pupils, and a team of well-qualified specialists and consultants are on hand to provide support. Pupils make excellent progress as a result of the highly effective collaborative working between care, therapy and education staff.
- First-class arrangements are in place to ensure that all those involved in working with pupils are aware of their needs and the support they receive. At all levels there is seamless communication contributing to information about the pupil. Leaders ensure that the annual review process for education, health and care plans is tremendously detailed, shared and understood by all stakeholders, and implemented effectively.
- Despite pupils' social and communication barriers, pupils work well together and no form of discrimination is tolerated. There is a very clear 'family' feel to the school. Pupils support each other and work well together in their groups. Community success is well promoted and celebrated to build connections across the school. For example, the recently formed school football team is highly valued and celebrated by staff and pupils across the school.
- Leaders use the school council as a platform to communicate and check plans and ideas with pupils. They wear their school badge with pride. This is because their role is taken seriously across the school and their opinions are valued by leaders.
- Pupils report that bullying is rare and dealt with swiftly on the occasions when it occurs. The school monitors bullying diligently and incidents are extremely unusual. Leaders constantly review how they promote British values across the school to ensure that opportunities to promote tolerance are not missed.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding. All pupils and staff have high expectations of behaviour. Staff build strong relationships with pupils: Disruption in lessons is rare. Any deviation from these high standards is effectively and calmly addressed. Staff are nurturing and responsive to pupils' needs.
- Staff provide consistent, positive interactions with pupils and develop warm, trusting relationships. They understand each pupil's unique and specific needs. As a result, pupils make leaps in their welfare, development and achievements.
- Pupils' attendance is high. They feel safe and are happy at school.
- Pupils are well behaved, show respect and enjoy spending time with staff and other pupils. Pupils enjoy the rich choice of structured lunchtime activities including caring for chickens, reading in the library or using the well-equipped games room. The school accommodates pupils' choice very well and as a result all pupils are fully engaged and enjoying their learning.

Outcomes for pupils are outstanding

- From their starting points, the majority of pupils make outstanding progress. Most pupils leave the school with a range of accreditation to support their next steps in education, training or employment.
- Teachers track pupils' progress with regular and appropriate assessments. They swiftly and accurately identify pupils who are falling behind, and delve and analyse reasons why. They take immediate and appropriate action using solutions that match pupils' unique needs. Consequently, virtually no pupils fall behind in their learning.
- Leaders ensure that reading is well organised across the school. Pupils follow reading support programmes which are effectively tracked and monitored. Pupils make strong progress.
- Key stage 2 standard assessment results show that pupils make significant progress from their starting points.
- The large majority of pupils who complete qualifications gain higher grades than might be predicted on the basis of national comparative data. Many pupils undergo a complete transformation and make rapid development in their emotional, social and communication skills. The school ensures that pupils are equipped with the right tools for future success.
- There are no significant differences in the achievement of different groups of pupils. However, information provided by the school shows that pupils who have attended the school for an extended time soar in achievement.
- Maths and English achievement is very strong over time and is continuing to improve. Leaders have recognised that science is not as strong but evidence seen by inspectors shows that this has now improved across the school. Pupils' learning has been rapidly strengthened with the addition of a new specialist teacher, who is driving dramatic improvements in delivery and sharpening pupils' understanding of science. Achievement in science is now strong.
- The abilities of the most able pupils are recognised and they are encouraged to build a love for learning. Pupils are placed on appropriate level examination courses and are well supported academically and emotionally. Staff have high aspirations for pupils. They significantly contribute to their development and ensure that they are appropriately challenged.

Sixth form provision is outstanding

- The sixth form provision is outstanding. Leaders use their extensive knowledge of learners' needs to ensure that they carefully design a curriculum package that secures appropriate skills and development. As a result, all types of learners are able to achieve, aspire and excel.
- The study programme is skilfully managed. Leaders carefully ensure that learners study personalised learning programmes that help them progress to their chosen career, employment or apprenticeship. All learners access impartial careers advice and guidance provided by a highly qualified specialist. This ensures that learners make well-informed choices about their next steps in education, employment or training.
- Therapists are sensitively used to support learners in developing and improving independent living skills and job-seeking skills. A carefully crafted programme builds learners' skills, such as being able to self-organise by using timetables and diaries effectively.
- The school's sixth form provision is tailored to meet the needs of individual learners. Learners receive excellent guidance in their choices for post-16 provision and are encouraged to pursue challenging courses. Leaders engage a range of providers to benefit learners. Consequently, learners are very well supported. They were able to articulate their next steps, dreams and ambitions to inspectors.
- The '16+ centre' is a calm and inclusive environment and supports learners who access Southport College for level 1, 2 and 3 courses. Attendance is exceptionally high and reflects the appropriateness of the provision. The centre staff ensure that learners flourish on their college courses by providing further tuition and guidance. Learners are also able to practise their independence skills by accessing kitchen and home-living facilities within the centre. Staff meticulously coordinate a variety of programmes to boost and enrich learners' post-16 experience, including organising opportunities for learners to complete the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. There is a clear balance of support and independence. As a

result, learners' outcomes are strong at post-16.

- Leaders expertly communicate with all providers, ensuring that pupils are safe and that the school's high standards are maintained. Consequently, pupils' attendance, behaviour and welfare are exemplary. They are well supported and highly successful.
- Enrichment activities and external work experience are expertly planned and clearly focused around learners' career aspirations. For example, some pupils complete work placements and develop employability skills at retail outlets and animal sanctuaries, all woven closely to their final destinations. Leaders ensure that learners can access the world of work successfully.
- The most able learners are very well prepared for their future destinations. They frequently secure places at colleges. Others move on to apprenticeships or go directly into employment with training provision.
- Information provided to inspectors shows that learners leave with an abundance of awards and accreditations that link to their next steps and future learning. The number and quality of accreditations gained by learners have dramatically increased since the last inspection. Learners follow appropriate level 1, 2 and 3 qualifications, and develop their employability and life skills. Post-16 success is secure across a wide range of courses.

School details

Unique reference number	133540
Inspection number	10008865
DfE registration number	888/6050

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 day and residential school for pupils with social and communication difficulties
School status	Independent residential special school
Age range of pupils	5–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	89
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	15
Number of part time pupils	0
Proprietor	Witherslack Group
Chair	Jude Jones
Headteacher	Justine Sims
Annual fees (day pupils)	£47,970–£79,167
Telephone number	01695 578734
Website	www.witherslackgroup.co.uk/pontville-school
Email address	pontville@witherslackgroup.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	12–14 March 2013

Information about this school

- Pontville School is part of the Witherslack group of schools. It opened in 1910 and is located on the outskirts of Ormskirk.
- The school provides day places and boarding for boys and girls with social communication difficulties and moderate learning difficulties, including autistic spectrum continuum disorders. It is registered for pupils aged from five to 19 but ages on entry vary and not all pupils stay until they are 19 years.
- All pupils have a statement of educational needs or an education, health and care plan, and are placed in the school and funded by their local authority. Most pupils attend daily. Seven pupils board in the residential provision.
- The school employs speech and language therapists, an educational psychologist, occupational therapists and mental health practitioners.
- The school meets requirements on the publication of specified information on its website.

Information about this inspection

- Meetings were held with the headteacher and deputy headteachers, middle leaders, directors and other members of staff.
- Telephone calls were made to Southport College and the Cumberland School Vocational Learning Centre with whom the school works in partnership in providing off-site teaching and learning opportunities for pupils.
- Inspectors observed learning in a wide range of lessons across all year groups. A large number of lessons were jointly observed with the headteacher and senior leaders.
- Inspectors engaged in a detailed analysis of pupils' work in books and files.
- Inspectors observed pupils' conduct and behaviour as they arrived and departed the school, and during break and lunchtimes as well as in lessons. Inspectors spoke to the school council to gather their views of the school.
- The inspection team observed the school's work, scrutinised data about pupils' achievement, behaviour and attendance, looked at documents used by leaders to check the school's work and viewed records relating to the monitoring of teaching.
- The lead inspector took into account parents' responses provided by the school (due to a low response on Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View) and also spoke to two parents. Questionnaires returned by 66 members of staff were also considered.

Inspection team

Dawn Platt, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Catherine Parkinson

Ofsted Inspector

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