

Oakwood Learning Centre

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

Inspection dates

13–15 November 2018

| Overall effectiveness | Outstanding |
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| 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 | Outstanding |

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- Teachers work exceptionally well with therapeutic staff to identify and meet the emotional needs of pupils. This promotes outstanding progress in pupils' personal development.
- Pupils' behaviour improves dramatically after arriving at the school. They quickly learn to re-engage in learning.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school and attendance is high.
- Pupils' individual learning needs are met well and they make excellent progress across a wide range of subjects, particularly in key stages 3 and 4.
- Pupils in key stage 2 make good and outstanding progress. However, it is not as consistently strong as it is in the rest of the school, particularly in phonics.
- All adults have excellent relationships with pupils.
- Adults set aspirational targets for pupils.
- Senior leaders and governors complete extensive monitoring of teaching and learning. They act immediately on any weaknesses that are identified.
- The proprietor has ensured that all the independent school standards are met and policies and procedures are implemented effectively.
- Adults' assessment of pupils' progress is rigorous and used well to plan learning.
- The curriculum is planned highly effectively around pupils' needs.
- Enrichment activities are extensive and match pupils' individual needs and aspirations very well.

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 the quality of teaching and learning in key stage 2, particularly in phonics, is as consistently strong as it is in key stage 3 and 4.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- Senior leaders ensure that their school is a safe place where pupils feel happy, safe and want to return to learning, thus supporting them to reach their full potential. This vision is enthusiastically shared by all adults. Pupils' outcomes show that this vision has been achieved extremely well.
- The thorough evaluation of all aspects of school life by senior leaders gives them a very accurate picture of the school's strengths and areas for improvement.
- Staff feel extremely well supported by senior leaders. There are regular opportunities for continual professional development and ongoing training is excellent. All staff have access to 24-hour counselling support. This enables them to do their jobs well. One teacher said 'I have a lot of confidence in the senior leadership of this school. I have always been supported and guided well and this has made me more confident in my role.' These views are expressed by many other staff.
- Senior leaders monitor all aspects of teaching and learning rigorously. They quickly pick up on any weaknesses and immediately address them. Actions taken include providing further resources for pupils, additional training for adults and adapting learning activities. This enables the quality of teaching to be consistently good and outstanding and underpins the very strong progress pupils make.
- Senior leaders have ensured that all teaching staff work closely with therapeutic staff, the local authority, and parents and carers to ensure that everybody is well informed about the needs of the pupils. This information is used extremely well to shape personalised learning and care for every pupil.
- Leaders work well with other schools in the Witherslack Group and with other outstanding schools to share expertise. Among other things, this helps teachers establish that assessment judgements are correct. They also share good practice. This has particularly helped in meeting the needs of the newer primary pupils.
- Teachers and senior leaders ensure that the curriculum is planned to meet the needs of every pupil, so that they want to engage in education again. For example, an interest in scuba diving led to certification, which then enabled pupils to specialise in underwater photography in GCSE Art.
- Pupils develop their understanding of British values through a well-planned personal, social and health education curriculum. In addition, pupils have considered the effects of drugs and alcohol on their bodies and held passionate debates about issues such as prejudice.
- Teachers have ensured that pupils gain a good understanding of different beliefs through the religious education curriculum, assemblies and visits; for example, to the local cathedral.
- Pupils learn well about different cultures as they study artists such as Cézanne and Seurat and visit sites such as the local 'China Town'.

- Leaders and managers are passionate about pupils wanting to learn and follow their interests to support this goal. For example, some pupils have become more motivated to learn after participating in orienteering or hair and beauty therapy.

Governance

- Governors have a range of different skills and knowledge of different educational settings which they use to support school improvement further.
- Governors are extremely well informed about every aspect of school life. They challenge the school through the analysis of highly detailed information to ensure that the school is providing the best education and care for pupils.
- Governors also use information supplied by senior leaders to ensure that the school is kept very well-resourced, so that it is able to meet the individual needs of pupils exceptionally well.
- The governors have ensured that all aspects of health and safety, including risk assessments, are exceptionally thorough to ensure pupils' well-being. They ensure that the safeguarding policy meets current government requirements and is published on the school's website.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Safeguarding records are detailed and extremely well organised.
- The designated safeguarding lead (DSL), along with governors, ensures that policies are well-written and reflect the outstanding practice that takes place in the school.
- The DSL, who is also the pastoral manager, liaises exceptionally well with other professionals to ensure that pupils' emotional and safeguarding needs are met and understood by all those who need to know.
- The DSL takes great care to ensure that protocols are understood by everyone by regularly questioning adults and pupils. Any misunderstandings or concerns are immediately addressed through actions such as further training.
- Senior leaders and governors ensure that training is regular and thorough for both adults and pupils. For example, both adults and pupils have taken part in first aid training. A training event is also planned to help educate staff about 'county lines'; this visitor will also speak to pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- Teachers help pupils to reach aspirational targets, as they ensure that teaching and the curriculum are adapted to meet very individual needs.
- Teachers and teaching assistants quickly build excellent relationships with pupils. Consequently, pupils build resilience and confidence in their own abilities.
- Teachers plan the curriculum so that pupils are excited and want to learn. For example, in key stage 2, adults created a 'crime scene' in a classroom, which led to pupils improving their English and mathematics as they measured footprints and wrote police reports.

- Pupils' individual needs are met extremely well through highly individualised tasks and questioning by adults. Both teachers and teaching assistants are skilled at questioning pupils to extend their learning.
- Adults give valuable feedback throughout lessons to help pupils know how they can improve their work.
- Teachers are skilled at promoting and modelling key vocabulary, particularly in science and computing.
- Therapeutic staff contribute exceptionally well to pupils' learning, as they guide and support teaching staff in activities that help pupils learn.
- Teaching assistants work exceptionally well alongside teaching staff to manage pupils' behaviour, so that their learning is not disrupted.
- Expectations of literacy and mathematics are high across all subjects. Teachers insist that standards are consistently met.
- For younger pupils who need to improve their phonetical knowledge, the teaching of phonics is not as strong as it could be.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Pupils' personal development is exceptional, as all staff work tirelessly to meet the changing emotional and academic needs of pupils.
- Pupils quickly find that they feel safe and are able to tackle situations they previously would have found daunting. For example, pupils have started college courses and willingly speak to visitors about their work.
- Pupils say they feel safe. They are knowledgeable and have a good understanding about how to keep themselves safe.
- Adults organise a range of activities, including, for example, rock climbing, which help build pupils' self-confidence.
- Older pupils talk openly about how their emotional well-being has improved, and how this has helped them in being able to feel confident enough to want to learn again.
- Older pupils take part in a range of activities, including studying accredited employability units. All pupils now receive regular impartial guidance from a careers adviser.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding as a result of the sustained and exceptional improvement that the school achieves.
- Disruption to learning is low, as adults manage pupils' behaviour extremely well. Time spent out of learning dramatically reduces as pupils settle quickly and understand the boundaries that adults set.

- Pupils enjoy coming to school and their attendance is very high.
- Following often lengthy periods of time out of education, pupils swiftly improve their learning behaviours and begin to enjoy learning again.
- Each pupil has a written positive behaviour strategy, which meets their individual needs and supports them, and staff, in maintaining and improving their behaviours.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Due to lengthy periods of time spent out of education, pupils generally enter the school with low starting points. However, they make outstanding progress across all subjects. Some pupils reach levels of attainment which are at or above those of other pupils of the same age nationally by the time they leave the school.
- The youngest pupils complete accredited courses in 'planning, and preparing and making afternoon tea', while older pupils excel in courses such as 'writing a film review' and 'first aid and safety awareness'.
- All pupils who leave the school at the end of key stage 4 achieve either functional skills qualifications and/or GCSEs.
- Very few pupils remain at the school to study A-level qualifications. However, those who have done so in the past have achieved as many as three A levels, and then progressed into higher education.
- Pupils achieve well when completing courses in health and social care and employability skills at alternative providers.
- Pupils' re-engagement in learning, the range of qualifications they achieve, and their improved personal development prepare them well for the next stage of their education or employment.
- Primary pupils do not make the same consistently outstanding progress as secondary pupils. New teaching strategies, resources and courses have been introduced to meet the needs of these younger pupils and have improved the progress they now make.

School details

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| Unique reference number | 141954 |
| DfE registration number | 841/6007 |
| Inspection number | 10055381 |

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 | Other independent special school |
| School category | Independent school |
| Age range of pupils | 8 to 18 |
| Gender of pupils | Mixed |
| Number of pupils on the school roll | 14 |
| Number of part-time pupils | 0 |
| Proprietor | The Witherslack Group |
| Chair | Kevin Dyson |
| Headteacher | Alister Sidgwick |
| Annual fees (day pupils) | £75,690 |
| Telephone number | 01388 437139 |
| Website | http://witherslackgroup.co.uk |
| Email address | oakwood@witherslackgroup.co.uk |
| Date of previous inspection | 26–28 January 2016 |

Information about this school

- Oakwood Learning Centre accepts up to 14 pupils aged between 8 and 18 years with complex social and emotional needs. Pupils attending the school at the time of the inspection were between the ages of 10 and 16 years.
- The school's first key stage 2 pupils joined in September 2017.
- All pupils currently attending have an education, health and care plan.
- Pupils have previously disengaged from education and the school aims to provide pupils with an environment where they feel safe and are willing to engage in learning again.

- The school was last inspected in January 2016 when it was judged to be outstanding in all aspects.
- The school uses Bishop Auckland College and Right Trax as alternative education providers.
- The governance of the school takes the format of a board of directors from the Witherslack Group.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection was carried out over two and a half days by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors.
- The inspector held meetings throughout the inspection with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher and the pastoral manager. The inspector met with directors of the Witherslack Group and with the company's school improvement officer.
- The inspector spoke with approximately half of the pupils both informally and formally about their work and their well-being. The inspector also heard pupils read. The work in all pupils' books was considered across all subjects.
- The inspector spoke to two representatives from placing local authorities.
- Two responses to Parent View were received; not enough to show the results of this questionnaire. One parent and carer responded to the Ofsted online text service. Twenty-two responses to the staff questionnaire were received. All these views were considered.
- The inspector toured the school's buildings inside and out to check whether the relevant independent school standards were met and that pupils' welfare is taken into account.
- A range of documentation was examined by the inspector, including policies, the record of safeguarding checks and other safeguarding documentation. All documentation relating to the independent school standards was studied and its implementation and effectiveness considered.

Inspection team

Jo Sharpe, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

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