

Inspection of Elmbank Learning Centre

Viewly Hill Farm, Stockton-on-Tees TS20 1PQ

Inspection dates: 23–25 June 2021

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Outstanding**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Not previously inspected

Does the school meet the independent school standards? **Yes**

What is it like to attend this school?

Staff at this school go to exceptional lengths to support pupils in feeling safe and becoming more confident. The curriculum goes beyond meeting the academic needs of the pupils. Pupils speak enthusiastically about the wide range of activities they take part in, such as visiting police dog handlers, dancing, scuba-diving and hill walking. All pupils who responded to the Ofsted questionnaire responded positively.

Each pupil has a timetable of physical activities and lessons that are planned to meet their individual needs. This bespoke curriculum meets pupils' personal development needs exceptionally well. Pupils' attendance rates are exceptionally high. This represents a dramatic improvement on their previous school attendance.

Pupils quickly learn to trust staff. Their growing ability to become more confident, successful members of British society is obvious. Staff make links to pupils' personal circumstances to help them deal with any anxieties and past experiences they may have had.

Staff manage behaviour well. With guidance, pupils quickly learn strategies to manage their own behaviour. Pupils say that they feel safe and they know they can talk to adults they trust if they need to. They wear their uniform with pride.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders at all levels know this school well. They invest a great deal of time and resources into organising and providing a curriculum that matches pupils' individual needs. School staff, including therapeutic staff, work exceptionally well together to develop this personalised curriculum. Staff have access to a wealth of training since leaders recognise the importance of having a highly skilled workforce. However, communication between the school and pupils' home setting is not as effective as it could be. Occasionally, this means that pupils are not always well prepared for trips away from school, or staff are not clear about pupils' experiences in the other setting.

Many of the pupils who attend this school have had long periods of time, sometimes up to three years, out of school. Staff immediately find out about pupils' passions and interests, such as horse-riding or hair and beauty. They use this information to plan activities. Pupils quickly realise how capable they are and how they can apply their learning to academic subjects. Pupils make good progress in academic subjects. Three pupils have left the school since it opened, and all have gone on to attend further education provision.

Staff plan personal, social and health education lessons so that they meet pupils' individual needs. Discussions about relationships, gambling and crime help pupils with their own personal development. These discussions help build an understanding of British values and public institutions in England, for example, the police service. A calendar of cultural events is planned across the year. These events, such as visitors

and celebration days, help pupils gain some understanding of the different beliefs and cultures around the world and in England.

When pupils arrive at the school, staff find out what they know in English, mathematics and science. Staff then plan the curriculum for each pupil to build on this. Each step of pupils' learning is carefully planned and sequenced so that new knowledge is linked to prior knowledge. Each lesson starts with reinforcement of prior learning. Staff identify and help pupils with any gaps in learning that they may have. Leaders acknowledge that there are few discrete humanities lessons taught in school. However, if pupils choose to study these subjects, then they are available. Teachers' expertise and knowledge in other subjects are always available from other schools in the same company if required.

Most pupils who join the school have good reading skills. Occasionally, pupils join the school with gaps in their phonics knowledge. The teaching of phonics is not as effective as the teaching of other subjects in the school. Pupils' gaps in phonics knowledge are not consistently correctly identified. Phonics is not discretely taught to help close any gaps pupils may have. Although pupils read a wide variety of texts, these texts do not consistently match their reading ability. Therefore, pupils are sometimes reluctant to read. These pupils do not make the same strong progress in phonics as they do in other subjects.

Staff assess pupils' learning using a set of clear knowledge- and skills-based criteria. They ensure that pupils' knowledge is secure as they revisit and test pupils' understanding.

The directors of the Witherslack Group are regular visitors to the school. The pupils clearly enjoy their visits. These visits, as well as discussions with leaders and performance information, enable directors to get a clear picture of what is happening in school. There is a clear leadership structure, lines of responsibility are well-defined, and roles are carried out effectively. Therefore, all the independent school standards are consistently met.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The culture of safeguarding in this school is strong. Staff make detailed notes of any incidents that occur and take follow-up action as appropriate. Incident records are rigorously monitored. Staff at all levels know that they can turn to others for help and advice. Links with outside agencies are good. Leaders seek advice where needed and appropriate authorities are informed when required. All staff are trained well. Regular short briefing papers keep staff up to date with changes in legislation or guidance.

Detailed risk assessments make sure that protocols are carefully considered by staff. For example, when pupils are off site, rules such as those for seating arrangements in vehicles and having mobile phone numbers available are strictly followed.

Those responsible for health and safety ensure that documentation and procedures are well organised. The school buildings are well maintained. Appropriate checks are made on staff who work in the school, and safeguarding documentation is securely stored.

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and proprietor)

- The teaching of phonics for pupils who start the school unable to read well is not systematic or well sequenced. Gaps in pupils' phonics knowledge are not clearly and accurately identified. Reading material does match their reading ability. Therefore, pupils do not learn to read as quickly as they should and are sometimes reluctant to read. A more rigorous and sequential approach to the teaching of phonics needs to be adopted. Pupils' knowledge in phonics needs to be checked carefully, so that gaps are addressed quickly and pupils catch up.
- Communication between the school and the care home is not as good as it could be. Staff in the school and those in the care home do not have a good understanding of each others' roles. Staff do not have a clear picture of incidents that may have occurred in one setting and what may have provoked these incidents. Directors should carry out their plans to provide staff-shadowing opportunities and training. They should ensure that relationships and processes are developed, so that handover and associated documentation better support the needs of pupils.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use Ofsted Parent View information when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

If you are the provider and you are not happy with the inspection or the report, you can [complain to Ofsted](#).

School details

Unique reference number	146824
DfE registration number	808/6006
Local authority	Stockton-on-Tees
Inspection number	10192265
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	7–18
Gender of pupils	Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll	5
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Witherslack Group
Chair	Phil Jones
Headteacher	Alister Sidgwick
Annual fees (day pupils)	£79,475
Telephone number	01539 566081
Website	www.witherslackgroup.co.uk
Email address	admin@witherslackgroup.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- This small school is located in a rural setting in northern England.
- It can accept up to six pupils. All pupils have additional and/or identified needs. All pupils live in care homes operated by the Witherslack Group.
- The school was registered in August 2019 and this is its first full standard inspection.
- The school received a material change inspection in October 2020, when it increased the age range of pupils to 7–18 years (from 7–16 years).
- The school does not use any alternative providers.
- Pupils attended school throughout the pandemic.

Information about this inspection

We carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. We discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school, and have taken that into account in our evaluation.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- A complaint received concerning pupils' welfare, regarding communication between the school and the care home, was considered during the inspection.
- We met with all the class teachers, the designated safeguarding lead and the headteacher.
- As lead inspector, I met with a director representing the proprietorial body. I also met with the care-home manager and some of the care-home staff.
- We spoke to and observed pupils during lessons and in more informal discussions. We also looked at their books and spoke to teachers who taught reading, English, mathematics, science and personal, social and health education.
- I studied safeguarding documents, including the school's record of recruitment checks.
- I studied a number of policies, including health and safety and behaviour policies, to be able to consider how well these are implemented.

Inspection team

Jo Sharpe, lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Zoe Lightfoot

Her Majesty's Inspector

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