

Inspection of Oakwood Learning Centre

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

Inspection dates: 4 to 6 July 2023

Overall effectiveness

Outstanding

The quality of education

Outstanding

Behaviour and attitudes

Outstanding

Personal development

Outstanding

Leadership and management

Outstanding

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Outstanding

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

This is a school where pupils thrive. Pupils enjoy school. Pupils attend very well. Pupils' behaviour is positive. Pupils are safe. Bullying hardly ever happens. Staff listen to pupils. Pupils are confident that staff will sort out any problems they may have.

Leaders are ambitious for pupils. Pupils study a wide range of subjects. Pupils get a lot of individual support. Many pupils have missed a lot of school before coming to Oakwood Learning Centre. Staff quickly establish a very thorough understanding of what each pupil knows and can do. Every pupil has a detailed individual support plan. Staff implement these plans extremely well. Pupils quickly become confident learners.

Pupils enjoy a very wide range of trips and activities outside of school. These activities broaden pupils' interests and build on their talents. For example, some pupils have lessons in golf, ice skating and diving. Pupils can also learn how to play an instrument or sing to an audience. Older pupils have the chance to experience different jobs and vocational courses.

All pupils arrive at this school having faced a lot of disruption to their learning. Oakwood Learning Centre is a peaceful place where pupils are successful.

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

Leaders have established a truly aspirational curriculum. Pupils follow the national curriculum. Pupils have the chance to take many qualifications. All teachers have strong subject knowledge. There are highly effective plans in place for all subjects. Learning plans are detailed and well sequenced. Staff revisit key learning regularly and with an increasing level of challenge. Staff constantly check pupils' understanding. Staff skilfully adapt lessons to meet the needs of pupils. Staff make sure pupils get the most out of every lesson.

The teaching of reading is strong. Many pupils who join the school are still at the early stage of reading. These pupils learn phonics. Trained staff deliver the school's phonics programme very well. Pupils quickly become independent readers. Leaders support pupils to read widely. All staff contribute to a love of reading. There are small libraries in every classroom. The books in these libraries are themed to match the subject being taught in that classroom.

Pupils are proud of their school and behave well. All pupils at Oakwood Learning Centre have a range of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). There are times when pupils can get upset or struggle to manage their emotions. When this happens, staff support pupils quickly and confidently. There is no disruption to lessons.

The personal development of pupils is at the heart of everything the school does. Staff regularly remind pupils what it means to be a responsible citizen. Pupils have the opportunity to help others through charity events. Older pupils train to become anti-bullying ambassadors. There is a thriving school council. Pupils learn how to put across their views and listen to others.

All teachers support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in their subject lessons. In humanities, pupils learn about different cultures and beliefs. During sports day, for example, pupils represent different countries. In advance of sports day, pupils share what they have learned about the countries they are representing.

There is a well-planned personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme. In PSHE lessons, pupils learn about themselves and others. Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe and healthy. Pupils follow a relationships and sex education programme that meets statutory guidance.

Pupils are very well prepared for further education, training or employment. All pupils learn about different jobs. Older pupils follow an accredited course in employability. Pupils receive up-to-date careers guidance from an independent careers adviser.

The proprietor's vision is that pupils will achieve life-changing outcomes. All staff share this vision. Staff have a very thorough understanding of what each pupil needs to be able to learn well. Pupils are well supported by education psychologists and specialist therapists.

The proprietor ensures that all the independent school standards are met. There are very robust processes in place to monitor health and safety, safeguarding and quality of education. The school's building, outdoor spaces and safety equipment are maintained to a high standard. The proprietor values and promotes equality, diversity and inclusion. All school policies and protocols are in line with the Equality Act 2010.

The proprietor knows the school well. The headteacher provides detailed reports to the proprietor at regular school board meetings. The members of the school board are experienced and knowledgeable. They offer a high degree of support and challenge to school leaders.

The proprietor monitors the well-being of staff and pupils. Staff receive highly effective training. Staff appreciate the many opportunities they have for professional development. Leaders are considerate of staff workload.

Leaders have established extremely strong lines of communication between home and school. Parents and carers speak very highly of the school. One parent said: 'This is a wonderful school. Before this school, our child was not getting any education. Now our child is flourishing.'

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders ensure there is effective communication about the needs of, and potential risks to, pupils. Staff build very positive relationships with pupils. Pupils know who to go to if they are worried about anything.

The proprietor ensures that robust checks are completed on any adult before they work, or volunteer, at the school. Staff receive regular training in child protection and safeguarding. Staff are clear about what to do if they have any safeguarding concerns about a child or adult. The school's safeguarding policy is compliant with current government guidance and is published on the school's website.

The designated safeguarding lead (DSL) is very knowledgeable. He has enhanced training for his role. The DSL is quick to refer to external agencies to get pupils the help they need. The headteacher and proprietor maintain highly effective oversight of all safeguarding referrals.

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 information from Ofsted Parent View 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.

School details

Unique reference number	141954
DfE registration number	841/6007
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10267673
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	None
Proprietor	Witherslack Group
Chair	Richard Wilkins
Headteacher	Alister Sidgwick
Annual fees (day pupils)	£87,621 to £98,585
Telephone number	01388 437139
Website	www.witherslackgroup.co.uk
Email address	oakwood@witherslackgroup.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	13 to 15 November 2018

Information about this school

- Oakwood Learning Centre accepts up to 15 pupils aged between eight and 18 years. Pupils attending the school at the time of the inspection were between the ages of nine and 16 years.
- The school opened to pupils in March 2015. The school's first key stage 2 pupils joined in September 2017.
- The school caters for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. Pupils may also have a diagnosis of autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- Most pupils who attend the school have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan). However, it is not a requirement for admission to have an EHC plan.
- All pupils who join the school have struggled to settle in their previous settings. The school aims to provide pupils with an environment where they feel safe and are able to engage in learning.
- The school was last inspected in November 2018 when it was judged to be outstanding in all aspects.
- The school uses two alternative education provisions. One is Bishop Auckland College, a registered college of further education. The other is Right Trax, an unregistered alternative provision.
- The governance of the school takes the form of a school board chaired by a director from the Witherslack Group.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors 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.

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

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.

- This inspection was carried out with one day's notice.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders and the proprietor. They also met with a range of other staff.
- Inspectors undertook a tour of the school and visited the classrooms, social areas and other facilities. They checked the school buildings and grounds against the independent school standards.

- Inspectors did deep dives into English (including reading), mathematics, physical education and PSHE. The deep dive for each subject included a meeting with curriculum leaders and a review of subject documents and plans. The deep dive also involved lesson visits, meetings with pupils and scrutiny of pupils' work.
- Inspectors looked at the curriculum plans of all other subjects and met with subject leaders from science and humanities.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour around the school throughout the day, including breaktimes and in lessons. Inspectors spoke to pupils about their experience of the school.
- Inspectors scrutinised school documents and the arrangements to safeguard pupils. This included checking the school's safeguarding systems and the single central record of staff recruitment checks, meeting with the DSL and speaking with staff and pupils about safeguarding. The lead inspector spoke to the local authority designated officer.
- Inspectors considered responses to Ofsted Parent View and surveys completed by staff and pupils. Inspectors spoke to representatives of the local authorities who commission places at the school.

Inspection team

Patricia Head, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

Suzette Garland-Grimes

Ofsted Inspector

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