

# Inspection of an outstanding school: The Dales School

Cowpen Road, Blyth, Northumberland NE24 4RE

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Inspection dates:

31 January and 1 February 2024

## Outcome

The Dales School continues to be an outstanding school.

## What is it like to attend this school?

Staff care for and provide for pupils very well. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). They learn an ambitious curriculum that precisely meets their needs. Pupils become confident communicators. In turn, this supports them to establish trusting relationships with adults and other pupils. This makes for a happy, productive school in which pupils are safe and flourish. They make considerable progress academically and socially.

Pupils become very enthusiastic learners. Adults know what sparks each pupil's interests and motivates them to learn. Staff use this knowledge to teach pupils important life skills. Pupils show admirable resilience as they complete more complex learning activities. Pupils love stories. They become more fluent readers. Pupils enjoy their time spent in the school's reading train carriage.

Pupils get well-judged help to manage their emotions and behaviour. Attentive staff enthusiastically reward pupils' positive conduct. Staff also calm pupils who become anxious or distressed. Over time, pupils learn to regulate their own behaviour and become less reliant on adult support.

Pupils' learning extends beyond classroom and school boundaries. Well-chosen visits and enrichment activities bring learning to life. Pupils gain courage and confidence through activities such as climbing and horse riding.

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

The school has grown significantly since the previous inspection. It now educates pupils on two school sites. Leaders and staff provide exceptionally well for pupils. The school's 'woven curriculum' provides pupils with the right balance of academic challenge and therapeutic support for complex, behavioural and sensory needs. From the start of early years, learning is underpinned by an unrelenting focus on communication, literacy and pupils' personal development.

As pupils join the school, leaders gather plenty of information about their needs. Leaders use this knowledge to pinpoint the most appropriate curriculum and teaching approach for each pupil. This information and expert guidance from speech and language therapists and occupational therapists are set out in each pupil's personalised learning plan (PLP). Staff make expert use of these PLPs to teach the curriculum consistently well. Adults make thoughtful use of assessment to tweak the curriculum in response each pupil's needs. This helps pupils make significant progress from their individual starting points.

Communication and literacy are central to each pupil's curriculum. Staff teach these aspects expertly, often subtly and one small step at a time. They choose resources that help pupils practise familiar and new forms of communication. This approach helps pupils remember what they study and fully engage in learning. Pupils develop the enthusiasm and confidence to access more complex and wide-ranging learning.

Storytelling and reading play an important part in daily life. Pupils and staff like a good story. They make enthusiastic use of the books on hand in classrooms and in the impressive reading carriage. Phonics is taught very well. Pupils get plenty of practice choosing and reading books. Pupils who are able to do so become motivated and fluent readers.

Skilled staff weave support for pupils' personal development into learning activities. From the start of early years, pupils are helped to work alongside adults and each other. They do so with growing maturity, often sharing in each other's successes. Staff tailor the impressive personal, social, health, citizenship and economic education (PSHCE) programme to the needs of each pupil. Pupils develop strategies to recognise and manage their own emotions. They also learn what makes for positive friendships. Pupils understand the importance of kindness and the value of being supportive and helpful. Parents speak of the transformational effect this has on their children's attitudes and behaviour.

Staff have a detailed understanding of each pupil's complex needs and the triggers that may cause them to become agitated or upset. Skilled staff set out clear routines and boundaries for pupils' conduct. When incidents occur, staff manage pupils' behaviour in a firm, positive manner. This helps pupils to focus on their learning.

Part of leaders', including governors', vision is to equip staff with the knowledge to carry out their jobs to the highest standard. Leaders take account of staff views and also ensure that they receive high-quality training. The school provides extremely well for staff's well-being.

Parents are exceptionally positive about the education and care their children receive. One parent's comment that 'the school has changed mine and my son's life for the better' is reflective of the sentiments of many others. Parents speak of how their children are 'raring to go to school'. Pupils' attendance is high.

## Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

## Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be outstanding in October 2013.

## 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.

## Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	122388
<b>Local authority</b>	Northumberland
<b>Inspection number</b>	10297336
<b>Type of school</b>	Special
<b>School category</b>	Community special
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	4 to 11
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	193
<b>Appropriate authority</b>	The governing body
<b>Chair of governing body</b>	Ann Jolley
<b>Headteacher</b>	Dr Sue Fisher
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.thedales.northumberland.sch.uk">www.thedales.northumberland.sch.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	18 September 2018, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

## Information about this school

- The current headteacher took up their post shortly after the previous inspection.
- The school provides education for pupils on two sites. The Ashington site opened in 2019.
- The school provides specialist education for pupils with specific learning difficulties, hearing impairment, visual impairment and autism. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- Many pupils join the school mid-way through their primary education, and at times other than the start of the school year.
- The school makes no use of alternative provision.

## Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- 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.

- Inspectors visited both of the school's sites.
- Inspectors held several meetings with the headteacher and other senior staff during the course of this inspection.
- Inspectors also met with several groups of teaching and support staff.
- In total, across two meetings, the lead inspector met with seven members of the local governing body, including the chair of the local governing body.
- The lead inspector met with a representative of Northumberland local authority.
- Deep dives were carried out in these subjects: communication/literacy, PSHCE, and art and design. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with curriculum leaders, visited a sample of lessons alongside school leaders, spoke with teachers, spoke with some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils about their learning and about their views on behaviour and the wider experiences they receive at school.
- Inspectors observed pupils' behaviour across the duration of the inspection.
- To check the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors checked the single central record of pre-appointment checks, looked at safeguarding documentation, and spoke with staff, pupils, parents, governors and a representative from Northumberland local authority.
- Inspectors reviewed the parental responses received through the Ofsted online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View, including free-text responses. The lead inspector held discussions with a small number of parents.
- Inspectors considered the responses received through Ofsted's staff and pupil questionnaires. Inspectors took account of the school's analysis of its own surveys of staff opinion.

## **Inspection team**

John Lucas, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Paul Barton

Ofsted Inspector

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