

Inspection of Ashbrooke School

Ashbrooke Road, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR2 7JA

Inspection dates: 23 to 25 September 2025

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Outstanding**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Outstanding

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

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are proud to attend Ashbrooke School. Many pupils have faced disruption to their learning prior to joining the school. Staff provide skilled support that helps pupils recognise their skills and interests. This helps pupils feel happy, safe and well cared for. Pupils know they have staff who want them to do well, both in and out of school.

The school is ambitious for its pupils. Pupils benefit from a curriculum that supports them to achieve recognised qualifications, such as GCSEs, where appropriate. Pupils rise to these expectations and achieve well.

Pupils typically learn in calm and focused classrooms. The school helps pupils to manage their emotions. Pupils know that staff will listen to them and understand how they are feeling.

The school provides a rich range of opportunities to support pupils' personal development. Carefully connected learning in the personal, social and health education (PSHE) curriculum enables pupils to understand themselves, their emotions and current affairs. Weekly 'pupil-led learning' helps to build resilience and broadens pupils' interests and talents. For example, pupils enjoy learning at the beach and in the forest as well as a wide sports offer. The school is highly effective in raising aspirations. It helps pupils make meaningful connections with local businesses. This helps pupils understand the world of work well.

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

The school ensures that all pupils access a broad curriculum. This offer ensures that pupils leave the school with appropriate qualifications across a range of subjects and areas of learning. It enables pupils to be successful in their next steps when they leave the school. In the majority of subjects, the school carefully considers the small steps that pupils need to know and learn to help them to connect their learning. The school makes sure pupils revisit learning regularly. For example, in mathematics, staff skilfully check pupils' understanding when simplifying equations in key stage 4 or comparing numbers in key stage 2. However, in a small number of subjects, the school's curriculum is less clear about the most important knowledge and skills pupils need to secure to support them to build on their prior learning.

Reading is a high priority across school. 'Book boost Mondays' inspire pupils to read a diverse range of books. Pupils read every day. Across the curriculum, the school expects pupils to read aloud from the different texts that they encounter. Pupils do so with confidence. Staff are effective at using strategies and language linked to the school's chosen phonics scheme. This helps pupils at the early stages of reading read with increasing fluency and confidence.

All pupils who attend have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school's work to support pupils with SEND is effective. Leaders and staff know

pupils' individual needs well. Alongside pastoral and clinical teams, the school uses a range of therapies and adaptations in class to support pupils. Pupils value this support.

In some curriculum areas, the school is precise in the way in which they support pupils with their learning. Leaders and staff use familiar language and scaffolding to help pupils demonstrate their understanding. This helps pupils talk clearly about what they are learning. It also helps them to explain their understanding. For example, in PSHE pupils articulate well why they disagree with some posts on social media linked to recent news events. In some areas of learning, however, the activities or structures used to support pupils are less effective.

Pupils' behaviour in and around school is positive. When behaviour does not match the school's high expectations the school reviews this promptly. Where needed, support plans and therapeutic work for pupils are adjusted. As a result, pupils are typically well focused during lessons. Some pupils struggled with regular attendance before joining this school. Leaders are effective in supporting families to improve pupils' attendance.

Pupils receive expert guidance and support as they move through school. The school carefully considers each transition pupils make during their time at the school. For example, leaders arrange for Year 6 pupils to have residential opportunities at the same time as secondary pupils undertake Duke of Edinburgh activities. This helps pupils transition into key stage 3 with success.

The school's careers offer is thoughtfully designed. Older pupils benefit from having mentors based in local businesses. Opportunities for work experience across the school's departments help pupils to understand jobs and careers that they might want to explore in their future. Each Friday, pupils learn about the career paths that different staff have followed to inspire their own career choices. The school also uses leadership roles and pupil voice to make a difference to school life. School council members make demonstrable changes to lunchtimes. Reading leaders raise the profile of reading across the school. Pupils are active in the local community, working alongside community groups in local parks.

The proprietor ensures that the independent school standards ('the standards') are met consistently. Appropriate policies are in place to keep pupils safe. The accessibility plan meets schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010. The school site and premises are well maintained. Pupils have generous indoor and outdoor space to both play and receive physical education.

Leaders and staff share the same vision for the pupils who attend the school. Adults focus of ensuring pupils can be the best that they can be. Along with the proprietor, leaders carefully consider staff well-being. Staff appreciate this approach. They are proud to be part of the school workforce.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

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

- In a small number of subjects, the key skills and knowledge pupils need to build their understanding over time are not sufficiently clear. This prevents pupils from having the opportunities to build and connect their learning effectively in these subjects. The school should ensure that these areas of the curriculum are sufficiently clear and sequenced so that pupils build and connect knowledge and skills over time.
- Sometimes, the pedagogical choices used in lessons are not well matched to the learning intentions of the curriculum. At times, this prevents pupils from learning as well as they could. The school should ensure that staff are well supported to consistently make effective choices when implementing the curriculum.

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	143532
DfE registration number	394/6000
Local authority	Sunderland
Inspection number	10391777
Type of school	Other Independent Special School
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	118
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Witherslack Group Ltd
Chair	Richard Wilkins
Headteacher	Clare Read
Annual fees (day pupils)	£66,864 - £111,057
Telephone number	01539 566081
Website	www.witherslackgroup.co.uk/our-locations/our-schools/ashbrooke-school/
Email address	ashbrooke@witherslackgroup.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	5 to 7 July 2022

Information about this school

- Ashbrooke School is an independent special school for pupils aged 5 to 19 years. It is part of the Witherslack Group. The school is located at Ashbrooke Road, Sunderland, Tyne and Wear SR2 7JA. The school is registered to admit 126 pupils.
- The school's most recent standard inspection was in July 2022 when it was judged to be outstanding. The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned additional emergency inspections in June 2023 and December 2024.
- The school educates pupils with SEND. Pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs. Many pupils have a diagnosis of autism and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Almost all pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The school receives referrals for pupils through consultations with a number of local authorities. Some pupils have not attended school for some time prior to being admitted to this school.
- There were no pupils on roll at the school in key stage 5 at the time of the inspection.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

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.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors met with representatives of the proprietary body, the school board, the headteacher and senior leaders. Inspectors also spoke with a representative from the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics, humanities and PSHE. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum plans, visited lessons, spoke to staff, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors listened to some pupils reading to a familiar adult. Inspectors also looked at pupils' written work in a range of other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and

considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.

- Inspectors reviewed the school's policies and documentation relating to pupils' welfare and to their education. They talked with staff and pupils about pupils' personal development and pupils' behaviour and attitudes. They observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school.
- Inspectors checked the school's compliance with the standards. As part of these checks, an inspector toured the school's premises accompanied by school leaders.
- Inspectors considered the views of parents and carers through responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. Inspectors also spoke directly with some parents by telephone. Inspectors considered the views of staff through meetings and Ofsted's staff survey. Inspectors considered the views of pupils through discussions held during the inspection.

Inspection team

Emily Stevens, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Mary Cook

His Majesty's Inspector

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