

Inspection report
Pontville Residential School
Independent special school
DfES ref no: 888/6050

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 13 – 14 June 2006

Introduction

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002 as part of pilot inspection arrangements in order to advise the Secretary of State for Education and Skills about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Information about the school

Pontville opened in 1910 and was a non-maintained special school until it became part of the Witherslack Group of Schools in 2001 when it was registered as an independent residential special school. Pontville offers educational and care services for up to 75 pupils aged 11 to 19 years. All pupils have a statement of special educational need, mainly related to autistic spectrum disorder and social communication difficulties. A quarter of the 66 pupils on roll are in the care of local authorities. In September 2005, Witherslack Lodge, a unit for up to 12 pupils with complex learning difficulties and challenging behaviours, opened on the same site. It currently has six pupils. The majority of pupils attend on a daily basis, and eight are boarders during term time. Nine pupils board for 52 weeks in the group's children's homes. The school takes pupils from 20 referring local authorities, mainly in the north of England. The school was previously inspected in 1999. The most recent inspection by the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) was 7 – 9 March 2006. The school's aims are *'Through the development of positive social interaction and communication skills, we hope to offer opportunities to explore emotions and feelings in a secure non-threatening atmosphere that promotes individual educational attainment'*.

Overall evaluation of the school

Pontville is a good school which achieves its aims and reflects its motto *'communicating success'* very well. It 'opens doors' for pupils previously closed by the barriers they had to their learning. It meets their communication needs particularly effectively and, as a result, enables them to enjoy school and achieve well. Pupils' personal development is outstanding. The school cares well for its pupils but some of its procedures for risk assessment lack the necessary rigour. The school complies with most of the independent school regulations. Under the strong leadership of the headteacher and his senior managers the school has clear plans for securing continuing improvement.

Quality of education

Curriculum

The curriculum is good. It is suitably broad, adapted to meet the pupils' needs, and prepares them extremely well for adult life. The school has successfully achieved its

goal of ensuring that the development of pupils' social communication skills permeates all aspects of the curriculum. A very effective whole school approach to developing the curriculum supports teachers in planning for progression in pupils' learning and personal development. Personal, social and health education forms an integral part of everyday life at the school, as well as being taught in discrete weekly lessons. The school now has a broader range of accreditation which is flexible and can be adapted to changing pupils' needs in the future. This extends into the residential setting, where the pupils can achieve accreditation for their developing independence and life skills. Work-related learning is an entitlement for all pupils and takes place both on and off-site. Pupils routinely venture out into the community to learn in realistic settings. The school has recently achieved the Quality Assurance Award for Careers Education and Guidance. Information and communication technology (ICT) is underdeveloped and the school is taking steps to bring about improvements in this aspect of the curriculum. For example, there has been recent investment in an ICT suite and in interactive whiteboards in classrooms.

Teaching and assessment

Teaching is good. This is because of teachers' very good focus on pupils' communication needs and way they adapt lessons to meet these. The excellent support and monitoring by the senior speech and language therapist, and the way the classes are grouped according to language levels, have ensured a good match of work. As a result, pupils learn well. Regular lesson observations by senior staff also aid improvement. They provide the school with a clear view of the quality of teaching and learning.

Lessons are well paced, which keeps pupils interested. Challenging work and probing questioning, keeps pupils on their toes and stretches them well. The highly committed, well qualified and experienced teachers, plan lessons thoroughly and are clear about what they want the pupils to learn. Although learning objectives are a little broad, the activity sections of lesson plans show clearly what teachers expect their pupils to learn. Teachers use their very good knowledge of pupils' needs to provide work in small successful steps. This enables pupils to gain confidence in what they are doing, gaining a sense of achievement and making good progress. Teaching assistants provide very valuable support in the practical part of the lesson, often giving pupils the encouragement to succeed. However, they are not always used fully in introductions.

Where teaching is satisfactory, pupils are not as challenged as they could be and introductions do not always clearly demonstrate to pupils what they need to do and why. There is little use of ICT in lessons to support learning or to reinforce pupils' ICT skills.

Assessment is satisfactory. There are good systems to assess pupils' learning at the end of lessons, although occasionally there is more focus on how they have behaved and less on what they have learned. Information on pupils' levels of attainment are recorded, usually termly, although in some subjects the detail is not refined enough for the school to demonstrate progress convincingly. In English and for social

communication, for example, this is done better because attainment is recorded in sufficient detail to show the small steps of progress pupils are making. The school does not yet have a detailed overview of pupils' attainment and progress across all subjects.

Pupils' progress and achievement

Pupils achieve well. They make particularly good progress in their language skills and in their readiness to learn. Pupils' histories show that their language difficulties have been major barriers to progress. The school's approach 'lifts these barriers' and enables pupils to make good academic progress. In addition, the school improves pupils' self-confidence and this has a significant impact on the progress they make. Post-16 students have a very practical programme of work and through the experiences provided, and the careful guidance by staff, they succeed well. The new Witherslack Lodge unit has made a significant impact on its disaffected pupils. It is helping them deal with their emotions and enabling them to make effective progress.

The curriculum supports pupils' progress well by the way it builds on prior learning. There is good emphasis on improving academic performance and gaining vocational skills. The school is building up the range of awards that pupils can gain. Pupils have achieved a good number of Assessment and Qualifications Alliance unit awards over past years and a few have gained Entry Level qualifications. This year, for the first time in the school's history, 14 pupils are undertaking up to six General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations.

Personal development

The pupils' personal development is outstanding. The very good relationships between pupils and staff are based on mutual respect for each other. Through the school council the pupils influence decisions about the school and so bring about improvements, for example in the lunchtime arrangements. Behaviour in and around the school is outstanding. Pupils understand the points system well and are proud of their bonus points and merits. Staff work successfully in helping pupils to overcome some of their communication difficulties and initial reluctance to engage in learning. Generally, pupils have a positive attitude to learning and a positive view of school life. They enjoy practical activities and are proud of their achievements, especially when they can see their successes. Many opportunities are created for pupils to develop their self-esteem and their growing confidence is evident to those who have known them for some time. The pupils are routinely encouraged and enabled to develop their independence and skills for adult life. They are keen to show off the work they do in caring for the animals on the school's farm, and are enthusiastic about their involvement in the local community. Growing and planting flowers in the town centre and in local homes for the elderly is a well-established responsibility which pupils take on and enjoy.

The welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school's attention to the welfare, health and safety of pupils is satisfactory. Pupils are provided with good opportunities to keep healthy and their understanding about the importance of eating healthy is also good. They have sound opportunities to learn about keeping safe. The school has recently achieved the Healthy Schools Award.

Policies in relation to anti-bullying, safe-guarding children and health and safety on school visits are clear and well presented. These have been constructed with the latest guidance in mind, although they do not make written reference to this. There are good First Aid and medication procedures in the residence and the school which now comply with recent CSCI recommendations. The school meets most aspects of health and safety, but it is insufficiently rigorous with regard to an aspect of risk assessment. While risk assessments are in place for individual pupils and for off-site activities, there are few risk assessments in place for work in subjects in general, and none in land based studies for post-16 students in particular.

The very good behaviour policy identifies rewards and sanctions and the system for collecting points in lessons. These lead to awards for good behaviour, which are valued and respected by pupils. Pupils are well supervised during the day and any difficult behaviour is managed exceptionally well. Misdemeanours are recorded thoroughly.

Organisation of the school

The school is well-led and organised. This has driven forward the significant improvements seen in the past few years in the quality of education and the learning environment. The climate of self-review which has been established amongst staff is reflected in their high expectations. Staff are well qualified and experienced and all necessary checks are now carried out before new staff appointed are able to start working with pupils.

Parents are very supportive of the school and appreciate how well their children have improved since starting there. One parent described the school as 'one in a million'. The school provides a good range of information for parents and they feel well informed about their child's progress. The school's specialist approaches to developing pupils' social communication skills are explained fully in the prospectus. However, the school does not provide sufficient detail for parents and others about their provision for pupils with English as an additional language, and about their arrangements for ensuring pupils' protection, welfare and safety. It does not meet the requirement to send an annual account of income and expenditure to local authorities who place and fund pupils at the school. The school has suitable arrangements for handling complaints and these are implemented in line with school policy.

The premises are generally in good order and benefit from a routine maintenance and improvement programme. Significant investment has been made in facilities and accommodation in recent years and plans are in place to refurbish the gymnasium.

What the school must do to comply with regulations

In order to comply with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003 the school should:

- ensure that it carries out risk assessments in line with the guidance provided by the Department for Education and Skills (paragraph 3(4));
- provide particulars of the educational and welfare provision for pupils for whom English is an additional language (paragraph 6(2)(f));
- provide particulars of policies relating to child protection and health and safety and ensure that parents and others are aware that these are available on request (paragraph 6(2)(h)); and
- provide to local authorities an annual account of income received and expenditure incurred by the school in respect of pupils registered at the school who are wholly or partly funded by them (paragraph 6(7)).

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by the regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- provide a whole school overview of pupils' attainment and the progress they are making in all subjects; and
- develop pupils' greater use of ICT in lessons.

School details

Name of school:	Pontville Residential School		
DfES Number:	888/6050		
Type of school:	Special		
Status:	Independent		
Date school opened:	1910		
Age range of pupils:	11 - 19		
Gender of pupils:	Mixed		
Number on roll :	Boys: 58	Girls: 8	Total: 66
Number of boarders:	Boys: 6	Girls: 2	Total: 8
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 58	Girls: 8	Total: 66
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 12	Girls: 3	Total: 15
Annual fees (day pupils):	£26,691 - £62,352		
Annual fees (boarders):	£41,298 - £96,609		
Address of school:	Black Moss Lane Ormskirk Lancashire L39 4TW		
Telephone number:	01695 578734		
Fax number:	01695 579224		
Email address:	office@pontville.co.uk		
Headteacher:	Mr Iain Sim		
Proprietor:	Mr J Bowers		
Reporting Inspector:	Caroline Broomhead HMI		
Dates of inspection:	13 - 14 June 2006		

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