

Inspection report

Vranch House School

Independent special school

DfES ref no: 878/6007

Inspection under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002

Dates of inspection: 6 – 9 November 2006

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

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 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

Vranch House is an independent special school for pupils aged from 3 to 12 years with physical disabilities, particularly cerebral palsy, many of whom also have communication and speech difficulties. All the pupils have statements of special educational needs. The school occupies modern, purpose-built premises. It is run by the Devon and Exeter Spastics Society which also runs a paediatric therapy centre for pupils from maintained schools on the same site. The school aims: *'to provide each child with a challenging environment in which they can flourish ... for some children this will lead to a part-time or full-time placement in local maintained schools'* with whom there is close liaison.

Summary of main findings

This is an outstanding school which provides excellent educational and therapeutic services for its own pupils and for many other pupils in local authority schools who benefit from the facilities and expertise. Teaching, therapy and medical staff work very closely together and this ensures outstanding provision for the education, care and welfare of the pupils. Despite the severe physical disabilities of the pupils, the excellent teaching and support enable them to make very good progress both educationally and physically. Almost all of the pupils spend part of their week in mainstream schools and the investment in thorough preparation for full inclusion means that many of the pupils are able to take up full-time placements before the age of 11. The school is very well led and there is a particularly effective management structure which enables the charitable foundation to use its resources to good effect. Parents who responded to the questionnaire sent out before the inspection expressed a high degree of satisfaction and strong support for the school. The school complies with all the requirements for registration.

What the school does well:

- it provides outstanding education, care and welfare in a safe and stimulating environment;
- it enables excellent teamwork between educational and therapy staff which meets the needs of all pupils;
- it carries out very thorough assessments of educational and physical progress to ensure individual needs are met;

- it places a strong emphasis on inclusion into mainstream schools and provides very good support for local authority schools to enable this;
- it plays an important role in developing educational and physical aids for pupils with physical disabilities; and
- it works closely with schools, parents, the health authority, the local authority and other partners in promoting its charitable work and using its resources for the benefit of a very wide community.

Next Steps

This is an outstanding school with a forward-thinking staff. The school already has a comprehensive development plan to ensure continuous improvement. This plan is fully endorsed by the inspection team.

COMPLIANCE WITH THE REGULATIONS FOR REGISTRATION

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is carefully planned to ensure that all pupils have full access to a broad and rich variety of educational experiences. Each subject has a policy which outlines the aims of the subject, the programme of study, National Curriculum links and helpful guidance on the school's approach to teaching and learning in that subject. Using the general curriculum guidance, teachers prepare detailed lesson plans which identify learning objectives and the means of meeting the specific needs of each of the pupils. Subjects are linked by a common theme and are planned to provide experience across a range of intellectual and creative opportunities. Many activities are devised to allow the pupils to develop their communication skills so that they can respond to the full range of the school's curriculum.

As the pupils have considerable physical needs, there is an emphasis on encouraging independence. A comprehensive and detailed programme of physiotherapy accompanies the educational work of the school. Very good attention is given to the promotion of pupils' interaction with their environment and the recent completion of the sensory 'nature trail' is an example of the thought and care which goes into planning educational and physical opportunities. As a result of a recent review of the curriculum, staff have improved the programme for personal, social and health education (PSHE) and thereby raised the quality of the lunchtime experience for pupils. Information and communication technology (ICT) fulfils an important function in the work of the school and especially for communication between staff and pupils. The school is at the forefront of innovative design and development in ICT and through a separate charitable enterprise provides micro-technology services for children with physical disabilities throughout the United Kingdom.

The quality of teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is outstanding. It is underpinned by exemplary teamwork, detailed assessment and an excellent understanding of pupils' needs by all adults. Lessons are well planned, with clear objectives for each pupil and appropriate modifications that relate to individual communication skills and previous performance. Teachers and teaching assistants have an extremely detailed and accurate understanding of pupils' abilities and what motivates each one. They share this at weekly planning sessions with therapists. In this way the team is able to adapt the classroom experience for each pupil. The adults are clear about what they want to achieve and how best to attain the goals they have identified. Such commitment means that success is seen in terms of how much each pupil can achieve independently. Celebration becomes a natural part of each lesson and an important contributory factor to the very good progress made by all pupils.

Success is also achieved by ensuring that each pupil has an appropriate and effective communication aid. The role of ICT in this is considerable and the school benefits greatly from the skills of an experienced ICT professional. In addition, great

care is taken to ensure that resources are stimulating and contribute to a memorable experience. Thus, a lesson on 'Where the Wild Things Are' was greatly enhanced by the use of roaring sounds and water sprays to evoke sea journeys. Similarly, an excellent lesson on making an apple crumble was guaranteed by the excitement created by the teacher, by the tactile experience that each pupil has and by each completed crumble going home with a personal message.

Although most pupils require intensive physio-, occupational and speech therapy, this does not diminish the learning experience. Staff are skilled in closely linking therapy programmes to the curriculum, so that even when splints have to be fitted or pupils need to exercise particular muscle groups, this is incorporated into the lesson itself. It is also impressive that therapists show the same imaginative and structured teaching skills as assistants and teachers. Each activity is carefully recorded and contributes to the individual education plans (IEPs) which are shared with parents. Communication is central to the excellent teaching. In the most successful lessons every channel of communication and, increasingly, signing is used to ensure that pupils can express their understanding, ideas and feelings.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

2. The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

There is very good provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Assemblies take place daily, are of high quality and fully involve the pupils. They are introduced to a wide range of cultures and faiths through the school curriculum, taking part, for example, in African drumming with visitors to the school. They make pizzas in food technology and they experience Divali and other festivals in religious education lessons. A rich programme of visits, including nurseries, animal sanctuaries and local buildings, enhances all pupils' understanding of their immediate environment.

All lessons place a strong emphasis on pupils becoming independent, making choices and following the rules. The current code of behaviour has been developed by the pupils themselves. The determination and conduct of pupils is outstanding and testifies to the effectiveness of this approach. Working together, watching the performance of others in activities such as wheelchair mobility, and developing communication skills are all part of the gradual development of good social skills. These are used and further developed in shopping expeditions and visits. Pupils' awareness of themselves and of healthy lifestyles develops well through the PSHE curriculum.

The excellent inclusion programme means that 26 of the 31 pupils have a significant experience of education within local schools. This provides further opportunities to experience mainstream education and to adapt to, and communicate with, a wider range of children and adults outside Vranth House.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

The school's concern for pupils' welfare, health and safety is excellent. The procedures it has put in place to ensure that the school is a safe and therapeutic environment are of a similarly high standard. Every pupil receives the highest quality of physical and emotional support. This aspect of the school's provision is overseen and informed by an excellent team of therapists and medical staff. Not only do they have high levels of expertise within the fields of physio-, occupational and speech therapy, they also relate well to pupils and make sure that therapeutic and medical support is provided, as far as possible, within a classroom setting. Where pupils are withdrawn for physiotherapy every effort is made to avoid the same lessons being interrupted in consecutive weeks.

All adults receive training and advice that ensure pupils' health needs are dealt with in a consistent and appropriate way. Eleven of the current staff are qualified First Aiders which means that visits and physical activities can be undertaken in safety. The quality of the teamwork in classrooms and around the school is exemplary. There is regular child protection training for all staff. Pupils themselves report that they feel safe and never experience unkindness in either Vbranch House or their mainstream placements.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

Pupils are well supported by a large number of appropriately qualified educational, therapy and medical staff. There is a robust and effective recruitment process which ensures that all necessary checks are carried out before employment. Turnover is very low because the management of staff is good and they are all fully involved in the life and work of the school.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

Well-designed, well-maintained, purpose-built premises ensure that the environment meets the needs of the pupils. Because all the pupils have mobility problems, corridors are wide and classrooms are spacious to allow for the movement of wheelchairs and other aids. An electronic track around the corridors is used with a training device to give experience of independent mobility or to prepare pupils for powered wheelchairs.

The school grounds, which are well tended and mainly laid to lawns with mature trees, have recently been improved to provide a very attractive seating area with wooden decking. This is much used during fine weather as an outdoor classroom. A new pathway, which also has the electronic track beneath the surface, has been built around the garden to provide pupils with a sensory nature trail on which they can interact with musical devices, scented plants, a movement-activated water spray, and other objects to touch and experience. The pupils enjoy this trail a great deal.

A fully equipped swimming pool provides additional physiotherapy facilities. Other therapy and medical facilities are also used for the paediatric and occupational therapy clinics held at the school for pupils from maintained schools in the local authority area.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The school provides a wide variety of general information for parents and other partners, especially on its informative website. The prospectus contains a full range of information about the school and the Devon and Exeter Spastics Society, including copies of the Chairman's and Trustees' reports which helpfully place the work of the school in its wider context.

Communication between parents and the school is very effective. The headteacher sends a half-termly newsletter to parents and at the beginning of the term each teacher produces a newsletter outlining the term's events. Books are used for daily messages and requests. Pupils take home a newsletter every day showing the activities in which they have been involved. This provides an excellent aide-memoire for daily communication between parents and children about experiences at school; these newsletters are also shared by the pupils with their mainstream settings. Comprehensive written reports are provided annually and parents have the opportunity to meet with staff to discuss their children's progress. Reports are also given to parents by the inclusion advisory teacher after mainstream school visits, during which progress and needs are discussed. Mainstream schools are fully involved in sharing information about pupils through the very good outreach procedures.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

7. The effectiveness of the school's procedures for handling complaints

The published complaints procedure, which meets all requirements, encourages informal resolution in the first instance, followed by a formal process within a clear timescale.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

SCHOOL DETAILS

Name of school:	Vranch House
DfES Number:	878/6007
Type of school:	Special day school for pupils with physical disabilities
Status:	Independent
Age range of pupils:	3 – 12 years
Gender of pupils:	Mixed
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys: 2 Girls: 3 Total: 5
Number on roll (part-time pupils):	Boys: 20 Girls: 6 Total: 26
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys: 22 Girls: 9 Total: 31
Annual fees:	£19,905
Address of school:	Pinhoe Road Exeter Devon EX4 8AD
Telephone number:	01392 468333
Fax number:	01392 463818
Email address:	education@vranchhouse.org
Headteacher:	Miss Maureen Boon
Proprietor:	Devon and Exeter Spastics Society
Reporting Inspector:	Peter Way HMI
Date of inspection:	6 – 9 November 2006

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