

# Witherslack Hall School

Independent Special School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	909/6027
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Inspection dates	27-28 November 2007
Reporting inspector	Honoree Gordon HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002 (as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005).

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## Purpose and scope of the inspection

The inspection was carried out by Ofsted under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, in order to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

This was a pilot joint inspection of education and social care. The full report on social care gives further detail and is available on the Ofsted website.

## Information about the school

Witherslack Hall School is situated in a rural location in the southern Lake District, not far from Kendal. Witherslack has operated as a residential special school for over 30 years. There are extensive grounds, with clearly designated boundaries. The school is a member of the Witherslack Group of Schools. It is registered and approved by the Department for Children, Schools and Families for up to 72 boys aged between 11 and 19 years who have special educational needs related to behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The school's aim is to develop 'resilience' and self-esteem so that pupils improve their behaviour and attitudes to learning and can be successful.

There are 53 students currently on roll, including seven day students who live in homes managed by the Witherslack Group. The boarding facilities are split into eight living units. Two of these are cottages in the grounds, which provide independent units for older students. The school offers post-16 provision with a specific programme designed to meet the needs of young adults.

## Evaluation of the school

The quality of education and care provided at Witherslack Hall School is outstanding. The school meets all the regulations for education. The school is particularly successful at helping the students to improve their behaviour and attitudes to learning. As a result, the students make good progress, enjoy their education and gain qualifications and skills which are useful for their future. The school has made good progress since the last inspection of education in 2001.

## Quality of education

The curriculum is outstanding. It meets students' needs particularly well, with a good balance between academic and vocational education. The curriculum policy is clear, based on the school's aim of '*developing resilience*', and supported with detailed schemes of work. The students follow all the main subjects of the National Curriculum, including a modern foreign language, currently Spanish.

There is an appropriate emphasis given to the development of basic skills. This is reinforced by the recent introduction of tutor time at the beginning of each school day. In these sessions students follow a structured programme of literacy and numeracy on an individual basis, supported well by teaching staff and care workers. These involve personalised reading programmes and use of computer software, for developing their skills, for example to improve spelling. Care staff ensure that literacy work continues after the school day ends.

The different subjects of the curriculum inter-link well to further develop basic skills. There are regular theme days, which encourage school-wide approaches to topics and deepen students' understanding and awareness of the world around them. These have a good mix of factual knowledge and practical activities, such as Eco day which focused on the environment. On Africa day students learned how to weave and made thatched mud huts in the grounds. Weekly half-day blocks of time are allocated to outdoor pursuits, physical education and to vocational subjects. The curriculum for information and communication technology (ICT) has improved since the previous inspection. It is now good. Students' skills in ICT are improving and the school has plans to develop this still further.

The Behavioural, Emotional and Social Therapy (BEST) programme provides good personal, social and health education, complemented very effectively by input and support from the care staff and, where appropriate, outside professionals. The grounds and the activity programme provide good opportunities for regular exercise and help to keep students healthy. Good links with several local schools extend the provision, particularly for vocational subjects and sport. These links include opportunities for competitive sport. There is a very good extra-curricular programme of visits that includes a residential visit to London, connected to the citizenship curriculum and a full outdoor pursuits programme in the local area. The latter includes the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme. Students can follow particular interests such as army cadets or fishing which require transport to off-site facilities.

There is a good choice of vocational options, often drawing on the local area, such as rural studies in the extensive grounds. The school has gained a silver Eco award for work related to the environment. Other vocational subjects include motor vehicle maintenance, carpentry and catering. These lead to a good range of accreditation and qualifications such as GCSEs and the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance unit awards and link directly into students' future employment prospects. They offer good opportunities for a 'hands on' curriculum which motivates the students and which complement well their basic skills work. Social and life skills are recognised through the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness (COPE). Moreover, by including their citizenship work, students have the possibility of achieving the equivalent of a good grade at GCSE. This good combination of basic skills and vocational subjects means that the curriculum prepares students well for their future.

The quality of the curriculum is a major factor in students' enjoyment of school. Students are engaged and willing to take an active part in the lessons because the

curriculum is interesting and because the teachers make it relevant to their lives. Consequently, students make good progress and their social skills develop very well. They develop good attitudes to others and learn to manage their behaviour effectively. Students' attitudes to learning improve considerably from their recent past and, of those who left in summer 2007, 13 continued into further education and one took up employment. The curriculum for the post-16 students is good, appropriate to their growing maturity, with semi-independent living on site and college placements that are combined with practical subjects at school.

Teaching and assessment are outstanding. Literacy and numeracy skills develop well from often very low starting points. The careful planning done by teachers, together with the care staff and teaching assistants, ensures that students make good progress overall; some make outstanding progress. Learning is sometimes limited by the gaps in students' previous knowledge or, occasionally, by moods or concentration span, as the work is challenging and teachers' expectations of what students can do are high. However, this level of challenge means that lessons proceed at a good pace, and students say that they are enjoyable. There is a very effective balance between the level of challenge and frequent checks on what students learn and can do.

Teachers have good range of subject knowledge and skills, kept up to date through a thorough programme of staff development involving both education and care staff and the sharing of good practice across the school. Teaching assistants and care staff provide very good support in the lessons, sharing in teaching and keeping individual students on task, by explaining and encouraging. This co-operation between care and education is a particular strength of the school. It provides continuity and structure to the students' lives and ensures that they are known as individuals and their needs met very well.

Teachers questioning is skilful, encouraging students to take an active part in the lessons, drawing in more reticent students and encouraging them to think for themselves. For example, in science they are asked to apply their knowledge, to think what might happen next and use appropriate scientific terms to explain this. Teachers encourage students to give extended responses and to express reasoned opinions wherever possible. In this way teachers encourage the students to be reflective about their learning and behaviour and to take some responsibility for their learning.

Small classes allow for very effective one-to-one support and detailed knowledge of students' needs. Relationships between staff and students are outstanding. As a result, students show good attitudes to learning, because they trust that all the staff have their best interests at heart and will support them when they are unsure. Resources are good. There is a good choice of interesting fiction and non-fiction books suitable for the age and ability range to help promote literacy. For practical and vocational lessons such as motor vehicle maintenance, construction and woodwork, there are specialised workshops. The school's setting in this respect is

particularly helpful as teachers draw on the rural surroundings to develop interesting practical work.

Good use is made of the interactive whiteboard technology in those lessons where teachers feel confident enough to use this, for example in mathematics, to provide clear explanations. This fits the preferred learning styles of a large number of the students and is an aspect the school is seeking to develop further.

Assessment is outstanding. Students receive a comprehensive set of interviews and tests on entry to the school, to determine their starting points. Test results show that for most this is below average, as many students have been absent from school for considerable periods of time and have had negative attitudes to learning. Particular weaknesses are common in literacy and numeracy.

Students' progress is closely monitored. Appropriate academic and personal targets are set for all subjects and for improving behaviour. The school has begun to develop a consistent approach to this across the different subjects. Students' progress is checked in every lesson so that teachers are sure of what has been learnt and progress and effort records are updated regularly. Of particular note is that students are themselves fully involved in this process. This has a direct impact on their motivation and develops a sense of responsibility.

Students are proud of their record of achievement covering academic work, effort and other successes, such as sporting achievements. They can put forward particular pieces of their work to enter 'work of the week' award.

## Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students

The provision for students' spiritual, moral social and cultural development is outstanding. Students have very positive attitudes to their lessons, are keen to learn and their behaviour is outstanding. All know right from wrong.

Many students arrive at school with low self-esteem and a lack of confidence. With support from staff these students make outstanding progress in their social relationships and self-confidence. Staff know students well and in turn students trust staff. They know who to turn to if they need extra support, or to share a confidence. The mutual respect between students and staff is noticeable.

Teachers manage behaviour very effectively. They have high expectations of how students can behave and students respond to this by listening carefully and by trying their best. The rewards system operates most effectively to encourage a very good atmosphere for learning in the classrooms. The BEST programme is used very effectively to help students learn about their emotions and their responses.

Students have a strong voice in decision-making through the school council. The school acts to implement suggestions where they can, such as giving students a

choice of courses at mealtimes. Students understand the importance of a healthy diet and exercise and are proud of their sporting achievements. A wide range of extra-curricular activities promotes students' personal and social development, increasing their self-esteem and team work skills.

Education about citizenship is strong. Students have an increasing understanding of how government works. This is enhanced through an annual Year 10 trip to Parliament and through elections for school council. Students make a positive contribution to the community through charitable events, sponsorships and their involvement in sports events. There are outstanding opportunities for students to develop their understanding of other cultures and their spiritual awareness through studying a wide range of other cultures. This is reinforced through assemblies, Theme Days and educational visits.

The preparation for students' economic well-being is good, because they make good progress in their basic skills from their different starting points. The school prepares them well for their future, including the good opportunities it provides for gaining qualifications. The provision effectively promotes students' independence, but the rural location and the current arrangements for supervision place some restrictions on this, particularly for older students.

Attendance is satisfactory, has improved year upon year and is better than is usually found in schools with a similar intake. This reflects students' enjoyment of school. All students feel valued: this is a fully inclusive school where every child matters.

## Welfare, health and safety of the students

The school makes outstanding provision for students' welfare, health and safety. All the required policies and procedures are in place to underpin this, including an effective policy to deal with any allegations of bullying. The school undertakes appropriate risk assessments for activities in and out of school.

Students say that they feel safe and they can approach staff for advice or support. Each pupil has a key worker who liaises between the school family, outside agencies and the care staff to ensure that educational and care plans are implemented effectively and also complement each other. The out-of-school clubs, regular exercise, healthy meals and excellent relationships help students to live healthy lives and stay safe.

The school meets the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2002.

## Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school meets all requirements. Effective procedures are in place for the recruitment and appointment of staff. The school keeps a central register of checks which meets current regulations. All the required checks are carried out on staff,

including a check with the criminal records bureau, to ensure that they are suitable to work with children.

## School's premises and accommodation

The school's premises and accommodation are good. The school has specialist accommodation for science, art, ICT, physical education, music and a library. There are workshops for construction, motor vehicle engineering, catering, design technology and woodwork. There are sufficient general teaching rooms and a small dining hall. The accommodation is clean and in good order.

The location is particularly attractive. There is plenty of space for recreation, much of it well designed, such as an adventure playground and floodlit games pitch. The grounds are extensively used for rural studies and environmental work. This, together with the frequent off-site visits for outdoor pursuits and leisure activities ensure that there is good provision for keeping students fit and healthy.

## Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The provision of information for parents, carers and others is outstanding. All the information parents need is in the prospectus, newsletters and reports, or on the informative website. The prospectus gives a good flavour of what the school stands for and what is expected of students.

Reports to parents about their child's progress are outstanding. They provide information about achievement and behaviour and state how students are doing in comparison to national norms. The reports are helpful in that they specify pupil targets and what students have to do to improve. From their responses in the questionnaires, parents and local authorities who place children at the school are happy with the school.

## Procedures for handling complaints

The school's procedures for handling complaints meet requirements.

## Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended January 2005.

## 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:

- encourage teachers to use interactive technologies more frequently
- explore the possibilities for older students to have increasing independence.

## School details

Name of school	Witherslack Hall School
DCSF number	909/6027
Unique reference number	112452
Type of school	Residential and day special; for pupils with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties
Status	Independent
Date school opened	1973
Age range of students	11-19
Gender of students	Boys
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 53
Number of boarders	Boys: 46
Number of students with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 52
Number of students who are looked after	Boys: 11
Annual fees (day students)	£27,459 - £64,143
Annual fees (boarders)	£42,483 - £99,381
Address of school	Witherslack Hall School Grange-over-Sands Cumbria LA11 6SD
Telephone number	01539 552397
Fax number	01539 552419
Email address	tmcintosh@whs.uk.com
Headteacher	Mr R Hartlebury
Proprietor	Mr James Bowers
Reporting inspector	Honoree Gordon HMI
Dates of inspection	27-28 November 2007