



Whinfell School

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Introduction and summary

Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by the Office for Standards in Education under Section 163 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

Whinfell School is located in Kendal, Cumbria. It is an independent residential special school providing up to 39 weeks full-time care and education for up to six boys between the ages of 11 and 16 years of age. All pupils have autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and display social and emotional difficulties associated with their lack of language and communication skills. All experience degrees of anxiety in social situations, and some have an obsessional compulsive disorder. All pupils have attended a mainstream or special school before being admitted to Whinfell. For the majority of the pupils these placements have not been successful. Most have refused to attend, or have shown aggressive behaviour. Engagement in learning for many pupils has not taken place for up to two years, and as their anxieties have become greater, they have found it increasingly more difficult to function outside their home environment.

The pupils have been placed in the school by their Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and all have a statement of special educational need. The pupils currently attending are between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. All speak English as their first language.

Summary of main findings

Whinfell is a good and improving school. It is successfully meeting the academic, personal and social needs of its pupils. It achieves its stated aims by raising the pupils' self-esteem and confidence, and by improving their social skills and behaviour. There is a consistent approach between the education and residential settings to the management of behaviour. This helps the pupils to make good progress in personal development, overcome their anxieties, and re-engage in learning. There is an appropriate and relevant curriculum for each pupil, based on very thorough assessment. Overall, teaching is very good. Staff have a good knowledge of the wide range of subjects they teach, and particular attention is paid to the linking together of subjects so that pupils' knowledge and understanding are reinforced in different lessons. The teachers and support workers work closely together in lessons, and all have a great deal of understanding of pupils' academic and personal needs. The involvement of pupils in the constant review of their targets is a key strength. The senior managers have good insight into the school's strengths and weaknesses, and are self-evaluative in their

management and development of the school.

What the school does well

- there are very supportive relationships between staff and pupils which help pupils to overcome their anxieties, develop positive attitudes to themselves and learning, and improve their social skills. This is in sharp contrast to the attitudes recorded in their earlier schooling;
- it ensures that the quality of teaching is very good, and that very effective teamwork has been established between all the adults involved in teaching and supporting pupils;
- it has very thorough assessment systems and uses the information to set realistic and achievable targets for pupils;
- it ensures that pupils are continually and fully involved in reviewing and setting their targets;
- it provides thorough annual review reports and detailed information for parents and pupils;
- it has developed good quality policies and practices in relation to the welfare, health and safety of pupils, and
- it provides a bright, clean and attractive learning environment which pupils treat with respect.

What the school must do in order to comply with the regulations

The school meets all the requirements.

Next steps

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

- record the outcomes in the different areas of learning which pupils achieve during the weekly 'Activity Day';
- include in the timetable more opportunities for the discrete teaching of information and communication technology (ICT), for music, and for a modern foreign language; and
- seek more ways of preparing pupils to live in a multi-cultural society.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

1. The quality of education provided by the school

The quality of the curriculum

The school provides a broad and relevant curriculum. The staff are continuing to improve this so that each pupil, from the moment they come into the school until they leave, will have an individual curriculum. The curriculum reflects the National Curriculum and includes religious education (RE), personal, social and health education (PSHE), and citizenship. Policies for all subjects are carefully written and reflect the school's overall curriculum policy. The school's aim is to match the different ways in which pupils learn through providing a range of teaching approaches. It aims to provide opportunities for pupils to re-engage in learning and reach their potential in academic achievement and self-awareness. The content of each subject is drawn from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority schemes of work, and many are taught through a cross-curricular approach. For example, this approach is used to teach history, geography and RE. This helps pupils to overcome one of their main difficulties, which is to make connections between their learning in different

subjects. Over an academic year all subjects are taught, but there is room for improving the opportunities for pupils to be taught ICT, music, and for those pupils for whom it is appropriate, a modern foreign language, through discrete lessons. These subjects are taught through other subjects and the school's 'Activity Days'. This does not provide enough opportunities for pupils to gain awards in recognition of their achievements or to extend any talent they may have.

Due to the fact that pupils have previously missed a great deal of school, many have very low levels of literacy and numeracy. There is an appropriate emphasis on these subjects. The teaching of reading, spelling, and writing is a high priority for each pupil, and staff concentrate on developing these skills in all subjects. Some pupils, once they have settled into the school and the routine of lessons, begin to read and write, while for others, there is evidence that once they re-engage in learning they recall forgotten skills. All pupils are achieving well and many pupils make very good progress in a short time. All pupils are aware of their progress and the gains they are making in terms of National Curriculum levels of attainment. This is because the pupils are fully involved in reviewing and setting targets, both at the end of each lesson and during weekly review meetings with their key workers. This partnership in the learning process ensures that pupils' self-awareness and self-esteem are increased.

There is a carefully planned PSHE programme, which also includes citizenship. Pupils receive discrete lessons in this subject, either as a group or individually. It is emphasised throughout the whole of the school day and in the residential setting. For example, an emphasis on friendship, covered in assembly, was also referred to in lessons. The subject promotes the personal development of pupils very effectively, and has a good influence on improving pupils' self-esteem, confidence and social skills. Sex education and drugs awareness are appropriately taught as part of this subject, and also in science. Careers education is currently being introduced into this area of curriculum. Pupils are supported and advised by the local Connexions service.

Due to the anxieties that pupils experience in new situations, they have missed some of the educational opportunities of pupils of similar age. These include educational visits, and, sometimes, participation in sport. These experiences become intolerable for pupils and because of this their behaviour in these situations is unpredictable, unacceptable or misunderstood. The school carefully controls the pupils' exposure to such situations. This is based on their expert observation and assessment. Meaningful and well-planned educational experiences outside the classroom are organised so as to make a very positive contribution to the curriculum and to pupils' personal development. However, the learning outcomes for each pupil from the weekly 'Activity Day' are not recorded and there are missed opportunities for these to contribute to each pupil's profile.

All pupils have a statement of special educational need. The school meets the educational provision detailed in these very well. All pupils have individual education and care plans (IECPs) which contain a priority goal as a target for each pupil. When planning lessons, teachers include experiences that will support a pupil's progress towards achieving this goal, as well as achieving personal targets in each subject.

The quality of the teaching and assessment

The quality of teaching is very good. This high quality ensures that most pupils achieve well and make very good progress. All parents or carers who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire said that the quality of teaching was good and that it enabled their children to make progress. A particular strength of teaching is the ability of all staff to teach a wide range of subjects to pupils who are at different levels of attainment. Teachers and support staff are highly skilled in communicating with, and questioning, pupils of different abilities and levels of understanding, so that they do not feel anxious, threatened or confused. They also have a great deal of expertise in identifying, anticipating and managing pupils' anxieties so that pupils remain engaged in the learning process. Because of this, pupils are very co-operative, and respond to the efforts of staff to persuade them to take part in lessons. For many pupils this is in sharp contrast to their behaviour in previous schools. The expertise of staff is complemented by good communication between all staff about pupils' needs. As a result, learning support staff, who take groups or individual pupils, also teach them very effectively.

A particular strength of the school is the use of self-assessment by pupils, both at the end of each lesson and in individual tutorial times with key workers. Pupils welcome this chance to evaluate how well they are doing in relation to personal targets. They are very realistic in their comments and when rewarding themselves points. All teachers use the end of lessons very well to review the personal attitudes of pupils and develop their self-awareness.

Assessment is very good. There is a whole school policy for the assessment of pupils, beginning when they enter the school and continuing at regular intervals. There are very detailed assessment records of each pupil's attainments in literacy, numeracy and science. These are regularly reviewed and updated, and targets are set in each aspect of the subjects. Informal assessment also takes place at the end of each unit of work providing teachers with information on what pupils have learnt. The information is recorded using National Curriculum levels of attainment and is reported to parents. The school has introduced an accreditation award for units of work that pupils successfully complete. This means that pupils are beginning to have some external recognition for their achievements. This could be usefully extended to further subjects, such as ICT, which are taught through a cross-curricular approach.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good. However, the preparation of pupils for a future life in a multi-cultural community receives less emphasis.

Pupils have very good opportunities to be reflective about their feelings and the difficulties they are encountering. They are given good opportunities through poetry, geography, art and science to experience the beauty of the world around them. Morning assemblies and end-of-day gatherings offer time for reflection and for pupils to congratulate each other and to think of others instead of themselves. Staff act as excellent role models for pupils' moral development, both by example and by encouraging pupils to make appropriate choices, take responsibility for their actions, and to acknowledge how their attitudes and behaviour may affect themselves and others. As a consequence, pupils improve their self-knowledge, self-esteem and self-confidence.

The range of well-planned activities, both within and outside school, and within the educational and residential settings, makes a very positive contribution to pupils' social and personal development. This contributes especially effectively to the development of behaviour which is acceptable in specific situations. The curriculum provides them with opportunities to look at ways of being 'a good citizen'. Opportunities for pupils' cultural development are good overall. These are included within all subjects and are very well supported by the opportunities provided in the evenings and during weekends. Through the inclusion of 'Theme Days' the school ensures that the pupils' knowledge and understanding of other cultures is developed. These themes have focused on specific countries, such as Italy and Mexico.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

3. The welfare, health and safety of the pupils

All the staff at the school safeguard and protect the pupils very effectively. The policies and practices have been given careful consideration so that the health and safety risks to pupils are minimised.

All staff undertake their responsibilities in relation to pupils' welfare, health and safety thoroughly. Policies are

comprehensive and include procedures for child protection, anti-bullying strategies, health and safety issues, fire safety, and educational visits. The school ensures that there is always a member of staff qualified in First Aid on the premises and included in educational visits. Medicines are stored safely. Fire safety precautions are carried out regularly and systematically recorded. Log books for incidents, sanctions, and rewards are very well kept and contain comprehensive details which are all witnessed.

There is a very good ratio of pupils to staff. Pupils are supervised at all times in the building, outside in the grounds, and on school trips. The reward system for pupils is supported by an appropriate range of sanctions. This combination promotes very good and improving behaviour. Misdemeanors are dealt with fairly and effectively, and pupils understand that once an incident has been dealt with, it is forgotten and there is a new start. This approach reduces their anxieties. For the occasions when physical control is required, all staff have been trained in appropriate procedures, which are based on clear policies. All serious incidents are recorded and are monitored by senior staff.

Meals are prepared on the premises, and pupils and staff take their lunch together in a dining room that is bright and clean. The food is well prepared and presented and contains a range of healthy options. The chef is very much part of the team in the school. She is involved in teaching pupils basic cookery skills, as well as taking part in residential trips. Arrangements for the registration of admissions and attendance meet the requirements fully. Attendance is monitored, and any absence occurring when a pupil returns from his weekend at home is followed up immediately. Continuing absence is notified to the placing authority.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

4. The suitability of the proprietor and staff

Teaching staff are suitably qualified and are trained to teach secondary-aged pupils. Appropriate checks have been made, prior to appointment, of all adults employed by the school who are in contact with pupils.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

5. The suitability of the premises and accommodation

The classroom provision within the residential setting is limited, but all available space is used to its best advantage. For example, the lounge and dining area are used for whole school assemblies or meetings. The classrooms have recently been enlarged and refurbished and provide adequate space for the number of pupils on roll. They are bright and attractive, appropriately furnished, and resourced according to the ages and needs of the pupils. The accommodation is very carefully maintained, both internally and externally. Pupils are encouraged to respect the building and there is a complete absence of litter and graffiti. There are attractive displays of pupils' work throughout the school and in the residential setting. The high standard of maintenance and decoration contributes significantly to pupils' progress and their personal development.

Outside space includes a small, fenced, hard play area and a small grassed area, but there is safe access to an adjacent field. The dining room and kitchen are maintained to a high standard of cleanliness and hygiene.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

6. The quality of information for parents and other partners

The prospectus is clearly laid out and is supplemented by two very informative handbooks; one for parents and a simpler child-friendly version for pupils. They contain information concerning admissions, details of health, safety and welfare of pupils, and procedures for complaints. The school has also included an explanation of its anti-bullying policy and sanctions.

Annual reports are of good quality and provide comprehensive information about pupils' academic and personal development which is used to evaluate progress and set new targets for the pupils. Parents are pleased with the progress made by their children. Over three-quarters of the parents indicated in the pre-inspection questionnaire that they were very confident that the school was efficiently run and that they were kept fully informed about their children's progress.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

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

The school has a clear policy for handling complaints. Alongside initial informal measures, there are formal procedures for complaints to be considered fairly and objectively. Complaints procedures are set out in a simplified form in the school's prospectus.

Does the school meet the requirements for registration?

Yes.

School details

Name of school:	Whinfell School		
DfES ref number:	909/6054		
Type of school:	Special		
Status:	Independent		
Age range of pupils:	11 - 16 years		
Gender of pupils:	Boys		
Number on roll (full-time pupils):	Boys 6,	Girls ,	Total 6
Number of boarders:	Boys 6,	Girls ,	Total 6
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need:	Boys 6,	Girls ,	Total 6

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Headteacher:	Mr Richard Tyson		
Proprietor:	Mrs S Tyson and Mrs A McGlynn		
Lead Inspector:	Mrs Frances Gander		
Dates of inspection:	6 - 9 June 2005		

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