

Inspection of Sandwell Learning Centre

Inspection dates: 11 to 13 February 2025

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education **Good**

Behaviour and attitudes **Good**

Personal development **Good**

Leadership and management **Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection Good

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

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils like coming to this school where they build warm and trusting relationships with staff and each other. This is important because most pupils who attend this school have had substantial gaps in their education or disruption to their lives. All pupils have social, emotional and mental health needs. They benefit from the school's focus on helping them learn to manage their emotions. Over time, they develop the skills they need to build secure friendships and relate to others.

The school is ambitious for what pupils will achieve, both in terms of academic outcomes and the skills and knowledge they need for adult life. Pupils feel proud they learn well in a broad range of subjects. They are supported to think about their future career and educational options, and this motivates them to work hard.

Pupils here are taught to behave respectfully towards others. Staff model the school's high expectations daily. Sometimes pupils find it challenging to meet these but appreciate that staff show patience and understanding while supporting them to make good choices. Although bullying and unkindness sometimes occur, pupils are rightly confident that the school deals with this well.

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

The school has put in place a suitably broad and ambitious curriculum with a particular focus on developing pupils' social skills and employability. The content of this is aligned with the national curriculum and meets the requirements of the independent school standards (the standards). In designing this curriculum, the school has thought carefully about their pupil cohort and what they need to know. For example, they have considered the nature of pupils' special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) when emphasising oracy in English and relationships within the personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education curriculum.

Pupils join this school at different points and with variable prior knowledge. When they arrive, teaching and clinical staff get to know them well. They build up a detailed understanding of what they know and can do. This includes identifying any SEND or other individual needs quickly and accurately. Although staff know pupils very well and check their learning effectively, they do not always use this knowledge to adapt the curriculum. This means that the activities provided in lessons do not always build on pupils' existing knowledge and are sometimes difficult for them to access successfully. Despite this, pupils generally learn well over time. They take pride in their work and persist when they find things challenging.

Learning to read is an important part of the curriculum. The school recognises that this is an area that many of its pupils find difficult. Well-trained staff check pupils' reading ability when they join the school and identify any gaps. The school uses this information to provide targeted support that helps pupils read with increased accuracy and fluency. This helps pupils to access the rest of the curriculum with greater confidence.

Staff are highly skilled at motivating pupils and getting them to engage in their learning. Although lessons are sometimes disrupted due to poor behaviour, staff support pupils to refocus quickly so any loss of learning is minimised. Pupils attend school regularly, and the school has effective procedures to follow up on any periods of absence.

Considering the needs of its cohort, the school rightly prioritises PSHE, social skills and citizenship. As part of this offer, pupils learn about aspects of the world around them such as democracy and the justice system. They benefit from a wide range of opportunities to learn how to recognise and regulate their emotions. The school's clinical team support the delivery of this curriculum. They work side by side with teachers so that learning and therapies are joined up successfully. Pupils benefit from taking on leadership roles. For example, school councillors have contributed towards improvements to the reward system, which also forms part of their social and moral development.

Careers education is a strength of the school's offer. Pupils encounter a very wide range of employers and education providers. They engage with work experience and learn about the different pathways available to them. They take part in memorable trips where they can try out new things such as construction work or music production. These opportunities expand pupils' horizons and inspire them to think positively and proactively about their futures.

Leaders are focused on making continual improvements to the school for the benefit of all pupils. With the support of the proprietor body, they ensure that the school continues to meet all parts of the standards. The proprietor body has robust systems in place to check that the school complies with its statutory obligations. This includes ensuring that the school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and publishes an appropriate accessibility plan. Leaders, including the proprietor body, understand the importance of considering staff workload and well-being. Staff appreciate this and feel well supported. They value the extensive training and development opportunities they receive, particularly in relation to behaviour and safeguarding.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

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

- Sometimes lesson activities are not well designed to build on pupils' prior knowledge. This means that pupils sometimes find it difficult to access tasks or their learning is not as secure as it could be. The school should ensure that teachers have the necessary expertise to adapt the curriculum so learning more consistently builds on what pupils already know.

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	148112
DfE registration number	931/6024
Local authority	Oxfordshire
Inspection number	10342170
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent day school
Age range of pupils	8 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	15
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Witherslack Group Ltd
Chair	Richard Wilkins
Headteacher	Andrew Southwell
Annual fees (day pupils)	£115,674
Telephone number	01865509150
Website	www.witherslackgroup.co.uk/sandwell-learning-centre
Email address	sandwell@witherslackgroup.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	23 to 25 March 2022

Information about this school

- Sandwell Learning Centre is an independent special school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. All places at the school are commissioned and funded by a local authority. Most pupils at the school have an education, health and care plan.
- The school is registered to admit 16 pupils.
- The school is owned and managed by Witherslack Group Ltd.
- Although the school is registered to accept pupils up to the age of 19, the school does not currently have any pupils over the age of 16.
- The school's previous standard inspection took place in March 2022.
- The school does not currently use any alternative provision.
- The school operates from a single site in Alvescot, Nr Bampton, Oxfordshire, OX18 2PY

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.

Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with a range of school leaders, including the headteacher and deputy headteachers. The lead inspector also met with representatives of the proprietor body.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, early reading, personal development and mathematics. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- Inspectors also looked at examples of pupils' work in other subjects, including humanities.
- 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 checked whether the school continues to meet the standards. This included looking at the school's premises and other relevant information such as policies, risk assessments and documents relating to health and safety.
- Inspectors spoke with staff and pupils at the school. Inspectors considered responses to the online survey, Ofsted Parent View, as well as responses to the Ofsted surveys for staff and pupils.

Inspection team

Chris Ellison, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Shazia Akram

His Majesty's Inspector

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