

Larches House School

Larches Lane, Ashton-on-Ribble, Preston, Lancashire, PR2 1QE

Inspection dates 25–26 June 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Good	2
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- From low starting points, all groups of students in each area of this pupil referral unit progress well in their learning. Their achievements are good.
- In every area of the service, teaching is generally good with some that is outstanding.
- Staff are skilful in encouraging reluctant learners to attend school. Students' behaviour is good.
- Students report that they feel safe here and this is confirmed by the feedback from parents and staff.
- Through good procedures, leaders and managers ensure a safe environment for students throughout all parts of the service.
- Leadership and management are good. The service has significantly expanded since the last inspection. The quality of both teaching and learning is continuing to improve.
- Good and effective support is provided for leaders and managers by the management committee and the local authority.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Teaching is not yet consistently outstanding and students do not always make as much progress as they should in lessons. This is because work is not always closely matched to their needs and abilities.
- The information available to staff about students' attainment and progress is not detailed enough to enable them to act quickly if learning slows.
- The rate of absence remains too high because the service does not yet provide a full-time education for all students who require it. Furthermore, a few students do not attend as regularly as they could.

Information about this inspection

- The inspectors observed nine extensive parts of lessons at the three sites, some of which were undertaken jointly with the headteacher. They made a number of shorter visits to classrooms. Altogether, inspectors spent around five hours observing teaching and learning.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior staff at three sites. Three members of the management committee were interviewed, as was a representative of the local authority. Inspectors spoke with students during their lessons and at break times. A meeting was held with a group of Year 11 leavers. Telephone conversations were conducted between an inspector and senior staff in eight local secondary schools that use the service. An inspector met with a previously registered student. A worker from the Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) spoke with an inspector about the service.
- Visits to the sites of five providers of alternative education were undertaken.
- There were insufficient responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire for parents. However, a recent survey of parents' views undertaken by the service was taken into account, as were 14 questionnaires returned by members of staff.

Inspection team

Terry McKenzie, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

David Halford

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- This pupil referral unit is a complex facility that provides a range of services to the city of Preston and the surrounding district. It can provide up to 130 full-time equivalent places for boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 16. Currently, the management committee is responsible for 151 students, most of whom attend part time. More than half are dual registered with a mainstream school. At the time of inspection, Year 11 students were not receiving lessons, however, they were attending for a summer Year 11 programme.
- There are three main sites. The service at one main site supports students who have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools for lack of attendance or behavioural difficulties. Those in Key Stage 3 are expected to return to mainstream schools within a period of three months. A second self-contained site provides for students who have medical difficulties, mainly associated with social, emotional and mental health issues. This is located on the site of a primary school. A further self-contained facility is located on the site of a secondary school and provides for students in Key Stage 3 who are at risk of exclusion but not registered to the pupil referral unit; nine local secondary schools purchase services from Larches House in respect of this. The service also supports students through outreach in their mainstream schools when being reintegrated.
- The service makes use of seven alternative education providers, all of which are located in Preston, and these are: Preston Vocational Centre, 4TechMoto, Community Service Volunteers, Soundskills, Brite Futures, Preston College and Ashton Community Science College
- All students are supported at, at least school action plus. A very few have a statement of special educational needs.
- The great majority are of White British origin. Almost all are supported by pupil premium funding. These include students known to be eligible for free school meals and those looked after by the local authority. The funds received on behalf of each student placed in the service are far in excess of the additional amounts provided by the pupil premium funding.
- Year 7 students generally arrive in the service late in the school year. It is, therefore, not appropriate to report on the Year 7 catch up funding.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Enable students to have every opportunity to make the maximum possible progress by:
 - providing teachers with better systems to measure and analyse students' achievements so they can take rapid action if learning slows down
 - ensuring teachers take full account of students' previous attainment and progress when they plan their lessons, so that well-matched, small steps of learning are provided for all.
- Improve the rates of students' attendance by:
 - providing a full-time education place for all who require it
 - reducing the rates of unauthorised absence for those who are most reluctant to attend.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- Almost all students begin with academic standards well below those in mainstream schools. This is because they have all experienced great turmoil in their recent education. Many have not attended school regularly because of social, emotional, medical and behavioural reasons. Nevertheless, following enrolment, most demonstrate good achievement.
- Within a short time of joining, the great majority of students improve their attendance and take part in learning. As a result, all groups of students, in all areas of the service, progress well in their studies. They close the gaps in their learning.
- The aim is to return Key Stage 3 students to mainstream schools quickly. Most go back within three months. Through meeting the individual needs of students, the service ensures equality of opportunity for all. None are discriminated against and the good relations fostered between students, their families and the mainstream schools, help to ensure their successful reintegration.
- In Key Stage 3, the emphasis is on improving English and mathematics skills as quickly as possible. Students return to mainstream knowing that they have not been left behind.
- All are considered to have special educational needs and there are no significant differences in the progress of any groups, including boys and girls, those in each key stage, any from minority ethnic groups and those known to be eligible for free school meals. Younger students improve their literacy skills quickly. Reading is a high priority and staff encourage it at every opportunity.
- Courses are tailored to the needs of individual students, particularly in Key Stage 4. These older students generally remain with the service until the end of their statutory school careers. The proportion of students achieving GCSE passes is lower than in mainstream schools, but all leave with some qualifications. A few gain higher grades at GCSE, including in English and mathematics. Almost half of this year's school leavers are expected to gain five GCSE passes, including in English and mathematics. The opinions of senior staff in other local mainstream schools and others such as a CAMHS workers, is that without the service, these groups of students with social, emotional, medical and behavioural difficulties would otherwise have achieved much less.
- Some early entry to public examinations takes place for those in Key Stage 4. For example, this year a group of Year 10 students have undertaken the International GCSE in English literature. This has been done to provide them with early experience of the rigours and requirements for GCSE entry. All of those students spoken with agreed that it was a worthwhile experience. The teacher concerned with this group stated that it provides them with excellent preparation for the GCSE English language course they will commence next year.
- In all areas of the service, students do not make as much progress as they could because some find tasks too easy and finish them very quickly whilst others struggle to understand how to complete the work in the time available. There is the potential for some students to obtain even more from their studies here, attain at a higher level and make even greater progress if they could come full-time.

The quality of teaching is good

- The good teaching is directly responsible for students' good achievement. Without it, students would not come to school and take part as they do. Where teaching is outstanding, students make exceptional progress in their learning. In science, a quick and accurate understanding of forces was gained through exceptionally well-designed practical work.
- In all parts of the service, teachers are skilful in encouraging students to take part in learning. They do this by providing interesting lessons designed to capture their enthusiasm. Teachers foster good relationships, so students quickly learn to trust them. This was evident in Year 8

where students enthusiastically checked their own understanding of mathematics through a test that they marked for themselves, with the support of the teacher.

- Teaching assistants are usually deployed well by teachers to support students' learning. Teachers skilfully maintain the balance between direct teaching and support for individuals.
- Where learning is particularly effective little time is wasted. For example, in an English lesson, the balance of activities enabled students to maintain their full concentration and to learn very well.
- The headteacher's records indicate that teaching is improving and that this is shown by the increased rates of progress that students are demonstrating, and the year-on-year gains at GCSEs. Alternative education is used wisely to encourage students to study in new and different ways. This has the added effect of encouraging students to participate more readily in the traditional areas of the curriculum.
- School records also indicate the most effective teaching is in the core subjects and this is supported by observations during the inspection. However, the way in which the information about students' achievement is gathered and recorded is not yet sufficiently robust to enable leaders and managers to check the rates of progress made by students throughout short periods of time, and in different subjects. Consequently, advice and support to teachers about how to spot the differences in performance of individuals and groups of students, is not as good as it should be.
- Similarly, and because the school records are not yet robust, teachers sometimes have too little information on which to base their planning. As a result, the steps in learning they provide for students are sometimes too general and it is not always obvious what it is that students are specifically supposed to learn.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- The behaviour of students is good. In lessons, their attitudes to learning are generally very productive. This is demonstrated by their willingness to attend lessons punctually and complete tasks. Students take pride in their work. Their exercise books and folders are generally maintained to a high standard.
- Very occasionally, when the pace of learning slows or when activities become less enthralling, the concentration of students slips. In one lesson, for example, an inspector watched as a student accessed a social media website whilst waiting for the next set of instructions. When the pace of learning is rapid then students' attitudes are intense, thus contributing to outstanding achievement in these the circumstances.
- In all areas, students were polite and welcoming to the inspectors. They were often curious about the nature and purpose of the inspection. The behaviour at lunchtimes and during break times was good. Students respect the buildings in which they work. There is very little graffiti, damage or litter. Students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good.
- The service's work to keep students safe and secure is good. The safeguarding procedures and child protection measures are of a very high standard. Consequently, the different groups of potentially very vulnerable students are kept safe. Students report that they feel safe in all parts of the provision including in alternative education. They told the inspectors that there is very little bullying or harassment. A high staff presence ensures that any difficulties are quickly resolved. A feature of the service is the effective way that staff integrate new students through induction and gain their trust quickly
- The great majority of students attend regularly having previously demonstrated very low attendance. However, a small group of persistent absentees gain very little from the service.
- A group of school leavers emphasised to an inspector the good work of the service. Several stated that without it they would have gained no qualifications and had very limited chances of moving on in life. As it is, all of the current Year 11 students have well-planned destinations. All will move on to either education, training or employment. The local authority, via the Young People's Service, is equipped to monitor their progress through these placements for the next 12

months, as it did for last year's leavers. When questioned, students are keen to emphasise the importance of their relationships with staff and how much the adults have done for them.

- A previous student, about to take up a place at university, explained the benefits of the service and described how the outstanding commitment of the staff can change students' lives.

The leadership and management are good

- Leadership and management at all levels have been consistently good since the last inspection. The service has grown considerably in the last three years by including the medical service and introducing the facility to support students at risk of exclusion from mainstream schools. New courses have been added to match students' needs better. These include The Prince's Trust and vocational courses accessed through alternative education.
- Leaders and managers have high expectations of those that work here. Through close monitoring and by observing the work of teachers regularly, the overall quality of teaching has improved. This has resulted in students making better progress and gaining more qualifications. The headteacher has encouraged some to accept additional responsibilities as middle managers. This is already proving worthwhile through, for example, teachers helping to develop new ways of gathering information.
- New systems have been introduced designed to measure and record the attainments and progress of students. However, leaders and managers have not yet provided staff with ways of using them to identify students who are falling behind in their studies. Consequently, some chances are missed to help students catch up in English and mathematics.
- Many students who come here have previously been challenging in their behaviour. Nevertheless, serious incidents are rare. The numbers of restraints and exclusions have dropped and staff demonstrate confidence in their ability to deal with reluctant learners. Disruptions in lessons are rare and when they occur are generally resolved quickly.
- A very few students remain as persistent absentees, but overall the rate of attendance is improving. This is because the service works closely with the local authority to try to ensure regular attendance. Nevertheless, more must yet be done to encourage some to come to school more often. Some part-time students would benefit from full-time education but the service does not currently have the facilities to accommodate all. This is because part-time education has, in the past, been the normal arrangement made for most.
- The service has been monitored and supported by the local authority since the last inspection and throughout the recent significant changes. The local authority continues to fund places at the unit and this has helped to stabilise finances.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - The management committee is made up of members experienced in education and other relevant fields. Members are determined that this should be an outstanding service and have steered it through a period of great change that has included significant expansion, a tripling of capacity and the delegation of funding. The budget has recently moved into surplus - a significant turnaround. Members have overseen the headteacher's drive to improve teaching and have supported this by regularly scrutinising the targets set for staff, and by ensuring there is no underperformance. Members scrutinise the school's systems available to ensure students make expected progress. They are aware that the learning of some is slowed by their not having access to full-time education. Members are working with the headteacher to provide full-time placements for all students who would benefit. Funding has only recently been delegated to the management committee from the local authority and there have been no opportunities since the delegation of the budget for members to link teachers' pay to the quality of work. However, members recently supported the headteacher in the appointment of a new senior member of staff. Members have ensured that all requirements for safeguarding are met.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	119112
Local authority	Lancashire
Inspection number	439466

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Pupil referral unit
School category	Pupil referral unit
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	151
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	John Bisby
Headteacher	Julie Bather
Date of previous school inspection	15 March 2011
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