

Summarised inspection findings

Donaldson's School

24 June 2025

Key contextual information

School Name: Donaldson's School
SEED number: 5570948

Donaldson's School is a grant-aided special school situated in Linlithgow. It is also referred to as the 'Sensational Learning Centre' (SLC). The SLC supports neurodivergent children and young people who are not able to learn in a mainstream school setting. It is situated alongside three Donaldson's Trust services. These are 'Vibe', which works with young people aged 12-18 who access wellbeing support while remaining on the roll of their local authority school, 'Treehouse' which is an adult support service and 'Gate', which is a skills development service for those aged over 16. Staff at the SLC work with 13 children and young people across three classes. Children and young people range in stage from P4 to S6. The headteacher has been in place since August 2024. She was previously the deputy headteacher and has been at the centre since April 2022. She is supported by a principal teacher who joined the staff team this academic session. There are 3.9 full-time equivalent class teachers who are supported by learning and wellbeing practitioners. There have been significant staffing changes within the education team over the past two years, with all current teachers having been recruited during this time.

2.3 Learning, teaching and assessment

good

This indicator focuses on ensuring high-quality learning experiences for all children and young people. It highlights the importance of highly-skilled staff who work with children, young people and others to ensure learning is motivating and meaningful. Effective use of assessment by staff and learners ensures children and young people maximise their successes and achievements. The themes are:

- learning and engagement
- quality of teaching
- effective use of assessment
- planning, tracking and monitoring

- The headteacher has worked well with the staff team to establish an inclusive and nurturing culture where children and young people feel safe and cared for. Relationships between children, young people and staff are positive and trusting and based on the promotion of children's rights. All staff prioritise the wellbeing and positive mental health of children and young people. This is evident in the warm interactions across the SLC and in staff's careful planning to meet the needs of the children and young people in their care.
- Almost all staff have undertaken valuable professional learning to understand better the neurodiverse nature of the learners. This includes sessions on how to identify triggering situations and de-escalate potential incidents when children and young people are becoming dysregulated. Senior leaders work with parents and partners effectively, planning well to meet the needs of children and young people. They compile comprehensive risk assessments and implement helpful interventions to support learners to maintain full time placements within the SLC. There are very few incidents of dysregulated behaviour, as a result of staff's careful planning in conjunction with the strong, positive ethos in the SLC.
- Teachers ensure that learning activities are appropriately challenging, enjoyable and well-matched to most learners' needs and interests. The majority of children and young people are exercising choice in their learning and as a result, they are becoming more independent.

Teachers should build on this by considering how they can provide further opportunities for children and young people to lead and extend their learning. This will support senior phase learners to understand that they can continue to progress with their education beyond their time at the SLC.

- Children and young people engage well and regularly enjoy learning in a variety of contexts within the well-resourced grounds and indoor areas. These include wild and landscaped woodland areas surrounding the SLC, a multi-use games area, a play park and a swimming pool. Staff provide learning experiences that are supporting all children and young people to appreciate and care for the natural environment while increasing healthy physical activity and independent outdoor play. Senior leaders should now work with staff to devise a more progressive approach to planning outdoor education which builds on children and young people's prior learning.
- Teachers devise creative and motivating learning experiences, capitalising on learners' individual interests. For example, teachers make use of the well-equipped teaching kitchen to support learners to make healthy and tasty meals chosen by learners. Teachers link baking and cooking to mathematical skills such as weighing, measuring and counting. In literacy, teachers make use of learners' interests in music, sport and literature to motivate them to engage purposefully in learning activities. They encourage learners to research and present information about role models they have chosen for 'neurodiversity celebration week'. This is supporting children and young people to make connections across their learning and apply their skills in new and more challenging contexts. Staff should continue to encourage children and young people to make links between the skills they are learning across the curriculum, emphasising the relevance of learning to everyday contexts.
- All children and young people have sensory issues, anxiety and communication differences. Around half of children and young people have hearing impairment or are Deaf. Senior leaders work well with partner agencies to provide children and young people with valuable support to help meet their needs and overcome barriers to learning. For example, the centre employs a speech and language therapist and a play therapist to work directly with children and young people to develop strategies to improve communication. The Donaldson's Trust sponsors all teaching staff to undertake training in British Sign language. All staff develop learners' communication skills well. They support learners to listen and talk or watch and sign during class discussions and while delivering presentations. Staff make good use of assistive technology to support learning. Staff's dedication to professional learning and partnership working is improving the communication skills of all children and young people. Children and young people are increasingly able to express their opinions, needs and preferences, which is increasing their ability to socialise and manage their emotions.
- Teachers support children and young people to benefit from specialist provisions such as the sensory room or physical movement in the pool. Children access these spaces when they require support with their movement or specific sensory stimulation to help them regulate and engage in their learning. These spaces are both therapeutic and used to enhance learning experiences. Staff use these to provide effective physical education and other curricular experiences such as expressive art sessions. These approaches increase learners' physical activity and incorporate sensory experiences to create a richer and more engaging learning environment.
- Staff have adapted the curriculum to incorporate a focus on dealing sensitively with trauma experiences and building emotional literacy. This is supporting children and young people to manage their anxieties in school and results in their increased ability to access and engage well in education. For example, lessons on emotional literacy are enhancing learners' self-

awareness and concentration skills and are supporting them to overcome challenges associated with their neurodiversity.

- Senior leaders devise leadership and representative roles for learners which impact on decision-making within the SLC. The pupil council representatives take notes and set agendas for change within the centre. They help to make decisions about learning topics and outings. Almost all children and young people have significant, appropriate input in reviewing their own education plans. This is helping children and young people to be aware of their support needs and goals using the language of the wellbeing indicators.
- Senior leaders have recently introduced a new lesson plan structure which helps ensure teachers share the purpose of learning consistently. Teachers systematically check that learners understand what they need to do to achieve success in learning. These formative assessment approaches support children and young people well to understand what to expect, and to reflect on their learning. Staff ensure that they clearly explain tasks and assess learners' understanding using open and closed questioning techniques effectively. Teachers are also implementing a consistent approach to lesson planning which incorporates an evaluation and review of the learning goals. Senior leaders and staff should continue to embed these new structures to ensure consistent high-quality learning, teaching and assessment.
- Teachers also use a variety of more formal assessments to support teachers' judgement of a level. There is currently no established summative assessment policy across the SLC. Senior leaders should now develop a consistent strategy across all stages, using agreed assessment approaches.
- The SLC is developing partnerships with other schools with a similar cohort to share moderation processes in the broad general education (BGE) stage. These partnerships are increasing staff confidence in their professional judgements when moderating Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) levels.
- Using recently devised systems, staff are developing monitoring, tracking and assessment tools, such as the pupil portfolio. Staff are at the early stages of monitoring children and young people's progress accurately. They are starting to track learners' wellbeing and improvements in their communication effectively. Improvements in learners' communication and wellbeing are supporting children and young people to access the curriculum more effectively. Staff should now include learners in discussions about their progress to ensure that they understand their next steps in learning.

2.1 Safeguarding and child protection

- The school submitted self-evaluation information related to child protection and safeguarding. Inspectors discussed this information with relevant staff and, where appropriate, children. In addition, inspectors examined a sample of safeguarding documentation. Areas for development have been agreed with the school and The Donaldson's Trust.

3.2 Raising attainment and achievement

good

This indicator focuses on the school's success in achieving the best possible outcomes for all learners. Success is measured in attainment across all areas of the curriculum and through the school's ability to demonstrate learners' achievements in relation to skills and attributes. Continuous improvement or sustained high standards over time is a key feature of this indicator. The themes are:

- attainment in literacy and numeracy
- attainment over time
- overall quality of learners' achievement
- equity for all learners

Attainment in literacy and numeracy

- The SLC roll is very small, and learners experience a highly personalised curriculum. As such, direct comparisons to national expectations of achievements are not appropriate for learners at each CfE level. All children require significant support to achieve CfE levels. Overall, most children and young people are making good progress in literacy and numeracy.

Attainment in literacy and English

- Learners are making good progress in literacy and English. Almost all children and young people in the BGE are working at CfE first and second levels. In the senior phase, the majority of young people are gaining qualifications at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework levels three and four.

Listening and talking / Watching and Signing

- Across the SLC, most learners take turns and contribute to discussions appropriately. They respond respectfully to other children and young people and know when to listen or watch the teacher. Most children and young people select ideas and information and organise these for an audience. They use the skills they are developing to present to their peers and teachers. Children and young people need to develop their confidence further in using their listening and talking, and watching and signing skills with unfamiliar adults.

Reading

- Almost all children and young people select texts for enjoyment and explain why they have chosen a text and why they like it. They read aloud and use punctuation and grammar to support their understanding. Most learners cannot yet answer inferential questions about texts. Learners make notes under suitable headings, at developmentally appropriate stages. They use these to develop their understanding of what they are reading. They create texts to demonstrate what they have learned using strategies such as storyboards. Learners need to develop their knowledge of the less literal aspects of text further, such as theme and genre.

Writing

- Learners, where developmentally able, write about personal experiences and describe their feelings and the sequence of events. They need to develop further their ability to persuade the reader in different ways. Most learners can write for a range of purposes using appropriate form and style, for example in writing formal letters. The majority of children and young people would benefit from more opportunities to write extended pieces to consolidate further their knowledge of written techniques.

Numeracy and mathematics

- Most children and young people are making good progress in numeracy and mathematics. A few are making very good progress.

Number, money and measure

- Children and young people use numeracy in activities across the curriculum. They develop skills in sequencing and pattern identification. Children and young people, across all levels, access learning activities outdoors. Across all lessons, children develop measuring skills by estimating then checking the length and weight of items in nature. They explore fractions by taking part in practical activities and sharing what they find. They are learning to explore number patterns and recognise when a picture or symbol is used to replace a number in a number statement. All learners should have further opportunities to practice their numeracy skills in real-life contexts, including within the local community. This will allow them to prepare for life beyond the SLC.

Shape, position and movement

- Most children and young people identify and describe the properties of a range of two-dimensional shapes and three-dimensional objects. They describe accurately the properties of shapes such as angles and symmetry, appropriate to their stage of learning. Staff should continue to find ways to extend learning about shape, position and movement, by supporting learners to describe, follow and records directions with words or signs associated with angles, directions and turns.

Information handling

- Overall, most children and young people identify suitable, developmentally appropriate ways to collect data, organise it in a chart and display it using bar graphs, line graphs and in tabular form. They develop these skills in practical contexts such as when gathering opinions for the pupil council. Staff should now increase opportunities to develop and extend children and young people's information handling skills using digital technologies.

Attendance

- Most children and young people who attend have experienced periods of significant non-attendance prior to enrolment in the SLC. Attendance in 2023/24 was 83%. The current rate of attendance for session 2024/25 is 87% which is in line with the national figure for the sector. The SLC demonstrates sustained improved attendance for most children and young people. There are a few learners who are significantly above the absence rate of 10%. These young people are either recent enrolments with improving patterns of attendance or have had periods of absence due to medical procedures. Senior leaders monitor attendance closely and plan effective interventions to address non-attendance.

Attainment over time

- In the BGE, children and young people are making strong progress over time. Staff are using a recently-developed tracking system. This is beginning to provide more detailed information on the progress that children and young people are making across the curriculum. Senior leaders and teachers have a clearer understanding of the progress that learners are making within CfE levels, as a result.
- Young people in the senior phase demonstrate an improving pattern of attainment in the number of qualifications gained and the levels they are attaining at since 2022/23. The staff now need to build further on the progress made in recent sessions. Senior leaders recognise the need to maximise accreditation for all learners at a level appropriate to their individual

need. They need to broaden the range of qualifications and accreditation available to young people at the senior phase.

Overall quality of learners' achievements

- Staff across Donaldson's provide children and young people with a comprehensive range of activities which improve their social and communication skills. They support learners to build on the skills learned in the SLC in less familiar contexts. Learners are demonstrating resilience and improving their ability to self-regulate. They gain these skills through participating in a number of achievement activities. For example during their sessions in pony therapy, while film-making, when contributing to the local foodbank and through celebrating neurodiversity week. The SLC is developing a progressive achievement framework which should increase the number of awards and skills gained by children and young people at the BGE and senior phase. Staff are tracking participation in activities at an individual level and this is recorded in pupil plans which are shared with parents. As a next step, senior leaders and staff should create a system to track skills more comprehensively. This will enable the SLC to identify more clearly learners' skills and target interventions more effectively.
- In recent sessions, a few young people in the senior phase have benefited from vocational work which enables them to demonstrate skills and knowledge for the world of work. A few learners undertook bespoke work experience, learning to fill out applications, participate in interviews and understand 'contracts'. Young people develop skills through contributing to the community, for example, linking with a local café. They demonstrate self-confidence, social skills and an awareness of finances and budgeting. Staff should continue to support learners to use their developing skills in new contexts.

Equity for all learners

- All staff have a strong understanding of the social, emotional, communication and wellbeing needs of children and young people. The headteacher compiles detailed learner profiles which provide crucial information on strategies to engage children and young people in learning. Almost all staff are sensitive to the needs of learners and provide attentive, compassionate support which enables children and young people to overcome barriers to learning.
- The SLC can demonstrate improved patterns of attendance for most children and young people who attend. Senior leaders monitor attendance closely and plan interventions such as play or equine therapy effectively to re-engage children and young people following periods of absence.
- Since 2023, all young people have successfully moved into a positive initial-post-school destination when leaving the SLC. Senior leaders have identified the need to enhance transition arrangements to reflect closer working with local authorities and track the sustainability young people's placements. This will support the SLC to have a deeper understanding of the efficacy of their work in supporting young people and families with their life in the community.

Other relevant evidence

- In the senior phase, teachers do not consistently follow pathways for young people to achieve accreditation or be assessed for qualifications for their learning. As a next step, senior leaders need to consider how best to expand the range and level of course awards and accreditation. This will support all learners to achieve more as they move through the senior phase before leaving the SLC.

Explanation of terms of quantity

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

All	100%
Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Other quantitative terms used in this report are to be understood as in common English usage.