

Birchwood Alternative Curriculum Pupil Referral Unit

Inspection report

Unique reference number	135462
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	381889
Inspection dates	18–19 January 2012
Lead inspector	James Bowden

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	14–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	72
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Chair	
Headteacher	Chrissa Drew
Date of previous school inspection	9–10 June 2009
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Age group	14–16
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Introduction

Inspection team

James Bowden

Additional inspector

Christine Murrell

Additional inspector

This inspection was carried out with two days' notice. Five lessons were observed, featuring four different teachers and tutors. Throughout one lesson, an inspector visited all four learning groups. Both inspectors spent lunchtimes with the students. They held discussions with the Chair of the Management Committee, students and the acting headteacher, and had a telephone discussion with the manager of one of the two external provisions commissioned by the unit. The inspectors observed the unit's work, and looked at students' files, curriculum plans, tracking data showing students' progress and attainment and students' work, including the displays in classrooms and corridors. Inspectors took account of the responses to the on-line questionnaire (Parent View) in planning the inspection; in addition questionnaire responses from nine parents and carers, 22 staff and 23 students were analysed and their views taken into account.

Information about the school

Birchwood (referred to as 'the unit' in this report) provides for students from Ashford and Shepway who are at risk of being, or have been, permanently excluded from their schools. The Birchwood South Centre and the Three-Men-in-a-Boat project, in Ashford, and the Adolescent Resource Centre (ARC 25) in Folkestone are all run by the unit. There are also two externally run provisions recently commissioned by the unit: a New Start centre at K College, Ashford; and the Marsh ARC in New Romney. These were not visited by the inspection team.

Students join the unit at different times during the year. Currently, boys outnumber girls by almost two to one. Most students are from White British backgrounds, though there are occasionally a very small number from other ethnic groups. A few are looked after by their local authorities and the proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average. All students have special educational needs and/or disabilities; most commonly, these are related to behaviour, emotional and social needs. Five students have a statement of special educational needs. The unit meets the current floor standard.

As a result of its first inspection the unit received a visit, in November 2010, as part of Ofsted's programme for monitoring Grade 3 schools. It was judged to have made satisfactory progress in making improvements and in demonstrating better capacity for sustained improvement. Since then, a new acting headteacher has been appointed.

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	3
Achievement of pupils	3
Quality of teaching	3
Behaviour and safety of pupils	2
Leadership and management	3

Key findings

- The unit offers a satisfactory level of education. It has improved since its previous inspection and is continuing to do so rapidly.
- Achievement is satisfactory over time, and improving because students' interest in education is re-kindled. Older students, in particular, are keen to improve their learning and gain accreditation in the courses they follow.
- Because of students' previous educational histories, attainment on entry is low. However, the unit places due emphasis on developing skills in literacy and numeracy to improve learning across the curriculum, resulting in satisfactory progress overall.
- Teaching is satisfactory and is improving. In better lessons, students were set challenging tasks and made good progress. In others where teaching was less effective, higher-attaining students were not always challenged enough.
- Although teachers mark students' work regularly, this is not consistently used well enough to explain to students what they need to do next.
- Students' behaviour and attendance improve markedly while they are at the unit. Behaviour over time has improved in lessons and around the unit. Attendance has also improved over time and is now close to the national expectation for pupil referral units.
- The unit provides a safe place for students to work and socialise throughout the day. Safeguarding arrangements are effective, including for work experience placements. Students say they enjoy attending the unit and that they feel safe when there.
- The unit is led and managed satisfactorily. The acting headteacher's ambitious vision and high expectations for what every student and teacher can achieve have led to rapid improvements.

Schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Raise attainment by:
 - sharpening the monitoring and evaluation of teaching in order to identify

the best practice so that principles of good teaching are employed consistently across the unit.

- Improve teaching specifically by:
 - ensuring that the level of challenge for all students, and in particular the higher attaining, is high enough so that they make at least good progress in all subjects
 - developing marking procedures so that students are involved in assessment processes and are clear about what they need to do to improve.

Main report

Achievement of pupils

Students' low attainment when starting at the unit is usually a result of their negative experiences of mainstream education and, in some cases, considerable gaps in schooling. Since appointment, the acting headteacher has brought about improvements to teaching and behaviour. These have led to better achievement and an increase in students' interest and enthusiasm for learning, as well as improvements in aspects of their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Overall, in relation to their starting points, there are no significant differences in the progress and achievement of different groups of students, including those whose circumstances make them the most vulnerable. The unit's tracking data show that those students looked after by their local authorities benefit well from the dovetailed package of support they receive, hence they do not lag behind their peers in the unit. Careful assessment of students' capability on entry informs the unit as to the range of support and learning focus best suited to students. This supports their improving progress and a steady rise in attainment is helping to better prepare students for the next stage of their lives when they leave. Most move on to education, employment or training when they leave and the unit's tracking of students shows a large majority continue to remain so after six months.

Overall, progress in English and mathematics is steady and improving as a result of formal provision and a cross-curricular approach to support for students' literacy and numeracy skills. This is having a positive impact on students' attitudes to the development of key skills; for example, one student told the inspectors how the unit's focus on this aspect of his learning had re-invigorated an interest in mathematics and that it was now enjoyable. Work seen in lessons, in students' folders and displays round the unit shows good progress, in particular, is being made in personal, social and health education. In a lesson exploring issues related to illegal substances, students were developing their knowledge and understanding of the complexities of the range of sanctions for different classes of substances. The improved assessment and tracking procedures since the previous inspection support students' learning well. Students' academic work is regularly assessed, as is their attendance and personal development. Of the few parents and carers who responded to the inspection questionnaire, all responses about their child's progress were positive. Students' responses also showed they felt they were making progress

since attending the unit.

Quality of teaching

A particular strength of teaching is how consistent teachers and adults are in managing students' behaviour in lessons. This ensures a positive learning atmosphere and is underpinned by effective working relationships between staff and students. Staff know their students well and their flexible, yet firm, approach enables the learning and behavioural needs of all students to be met. This was particularly effective in two lessons observed during the inspection. In the first, students were exploring issues of objectivity and subjectivity using visual prompts provided by the teacher, including moral, social and religious issues. In the second, good focused questioning led to many opportunities for students to offer their own ideas as to differences between fact and fiction. In both these lessons students were developing well their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding as well as their writing and note-taking skills, which are central to the appropriate curriculum. Teaching assistants and other support staff generally work in close partnership with teachers and support students in working towards their targets, rather than simply spoon-feeding answers and responses.

However, the higher-attaining students are not always making the progress they are capable of because of a lack of challenge through more demanding work and more involvement through, for example, small group discussion work. The range of resources is generally matched well to the range of capabilities in groups and in some lessons is enlivened by the effective use of information and communication technology. Students' progress in accredited entry level courses is tracked closely and not signed-off until the teacher is satisfied all has been completed. Although students' work is generally marked consistently, the quality of this is inconsistent. This is particularly so in the use of supporting comments to tell students what they need to do to improve the quality of their work, and the steps needed to accelerate their progress. Most parents and carers are happy with the quality of teaching, a view partially endorsed by inspection evidence, particularly with regard to aspects of the most effective practice observed.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Typical behaviour over time is good and improving, as evidenced by the overall decline in fixed-term exclusions, with fewer numbers of students being involved. The unit has recognised the impact on overall statistics of higher numbers of students being subject to fixed-term exclusions in one of the commissioned provisions and work is underway to address this anomaly. Incidents of bullying or harassment, including those based on race, gender or sexuality, are rare, and, as confirmed in discussion with students, are dealt with quickly and effectively if they do occur.

Indicative of students' positive attitudes and behaviour is how well the unit is cared for and displays of work respected and appreciated. All benefit from a secure and safe learning environment. The appointment of specialist behaviour support staff has had a significant impact on improving students' behaviour and attitudes to learning in the unit. High expectations and clear parameters for behaviour are appreciated by students and result in a calm atmosphere in most lessons. Students get on well with

one another and socialise particularly well over lunch and lunchtime sessions in the unit. A strong example of this was the surprise birthday cake presented by the students to one of their peers during the inspection visit, this gesture being much appreciated by the recipient.

Students' behaviour is carefully monitored against the specific behaviour targets set for them in their individual education plans and behaviour improves accordingly. Although a few parents and carers, students and staff had reservations about standards of behaviour, they were more positive about how well the unit dealt with this. This was confirmed by inspectors who saw no instances of learning being disrupted by untoward behaviour and staff managing behaviour particularly well. Attendance and improving punctuality are also an effective focus of the unit's work. Data show that attendance has improved and for some individuals has improved rapidly compared to their attendance prior to joining the unit. Notwithstanding this a hard core of students, few in number, are persistently absent, but the unit is working hard to resolve this issue.

Leadership and management

Although changes have taken place in the structure, provision and management of the unit since the previous inspection, the acting headteacher's ambition and culture of high expectations of students has resulted in improvements, in some instances rapid. Staff at all levels share this vision and ensure the unit is one where every child really does matter, being provided with the necessary good quality support and guidance needed. Equality of opportunity is promoted effectively and any discrimination tackled immediately. There is a good focus on improving achievement and some steady improvements in this respect are evident, as shown by year-on-year analysis of the unit's data. Almost all students now leave the unit destined for further education, employment or training. This has been underpinned by support from the local authority, other specialist staff and the management committee, which is an experienced body with a good understanding of the complexities of the unit's provision. The unit recognises there are further improvements to be made to ensure that its vision becomes reality, such as a sharper focus on the monitoring and evaluation of teaching to improve attainment and students' achievement further. These improvements, underpinned by accurate self-evaluation and the unit's work with others to support ongoing development, demonstrate a strong capacity for further and sustained improvement.

Newly introduced and regular management discussion forums bring together all centre managers, including those of the commissioned provisions. This is helping establish a clear and consistent programme to ensure all students achieve their potential. When and where appropriate, students can move between these provisions to access particular aspects of the curriculum, which ensure their personal needs are met while contributing to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. This is useful in supporting those students who start with part-time placements at the Three-Men-in-a-Boat project based at the Birchwood South Centre. Appropriate systems and procedures and the improving consistency of these across the unit ensure the smooth day-to-day running of the provision overall, including good safeguarding procedures. Of the few parents and carers who responded to the inspection questionnaire, most are positive about their child's experiences at the unit.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	46	46	8	0
Primary schools	8	47	40	5
Secondary schools	14	38	40	8
Special schools	28	48	20	4
Pupil referral units	15	50	29	5
All schools	11	46	38	6

New school inspection arrangements have been introduced from 1 January 2012. This means that inspectors make judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 31 August 2011 and represent judgements that were made under the school inspection arrangements that were introduced on 1 September 2009. These data are consistent with the latest published official statistics about maintained school inspection outcomes (see www.ofsted.gov.uk).

The sample of schools inspected during 2010/11 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Primary schools include primary academy converters. Secondary schools include secondary academy converters, sponsor-led academies and city technology colleges. Special schools include special academy converters and non-maintained special schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning and development taking account of their attainment.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Attendance:	the regular attendance of pupils at school and in lessons, taking into account the school's efforts to encourage good attendance.
Behaviour:	how well pupils behave in lessons, with emphasis on their attitude to learning. Pupils' punctuality to lessons and their conduct around the school.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving based on its self-evaluation and what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the governors and headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.
Safety:	how safe pupils are in school, including in lessons; and their understanding of risks. Pupils' freedom from bullying and harassment. How well the school promotes safety, for example e-learning.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



24 January 2012

Dear Students

**Inspection of Birchwood Alternative Curriculum Pupil Referral Unit,
Folkestone, CT19 5BY**

Not so long ago two of us came to the unit to see how you are getting on, visiting the Birchwood South Centre and ARC 25. We also wanted to know whether we could suggest anything to make things even better for you. We thoroughly enjoyed our time at the unit, meeting and talking with you. We would particularly like to thank you for inviting us to have lunch with you at Birchwood South – the company was friendly and, chef, the food was very tasty! The great majority of you who responded to the inspection questionnaire said that you felt safe at the unit, adults explained to you how to improve your work and that the staff at the unit helped you to do as well as you could. In addition, you said that you are helped to improve your literacy and numeracy skills. Our visit confirmed this and we decided that the unit provides you with a satisfactory quality of education overall.

Here are some of the other good things we found:

- You are improving your progress in learning and are being prepared well for the next stage of your life when you leave.
- The quality of teaching is improving.
- Your behaviour is good and you get on well with all the adults you work with.
- The acting headteacher of the unit and her staff have plans to make things even better for you.

We found the unit could make some changes to improve your learning and achievement further. We have therefore asked the acting headteacher to ensure all teachers provide more challenge for the most able students and make sure all of you know exactly what you have to do to meet your subject targets.

You too can help by continuing to work hard but some of you need to improve your attendance. I would like to wish you all the best for your future education.

Yours sincerely

James Bowden
Lead inspector

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