

Birch Wood (Melton Area Special School)

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	134640
Local Authority	Leicestershire
Inspection number	381707
Inspection dates	20–21 September 2011
Reporting inspector	Martyn Groucutt

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

Type of school	Special
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	3–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	113
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	14
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Dr Matthew O'Callaghan
Headteacher	Phil Ormerod
Date of previous school inspection	13 May 2009
School address	Grange Drive Melton Mowbray LE13 1HA
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Age group	3–19
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors. A total of 20 lessons taught by 20 teachers were observed and meetings held with the senior and middle managers, the Chair of the Governing Body and pupils. Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at pupils' work, teachers planning and data on pupil progress, together with a range of policies and procedures, including those for safeguarding and protecting pupils. A total of 61 parent and carer questionnaires were scrutinised, together with 30 from staff and 46 from pupils.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at a number of key areas.

- The use of data on pupil performance to individualise teaching and the curriculum.
- The impact of teaching on maximising the potential of individual pupils.
- The effects of the introduction of a wider management team.
- The extent to which links with external professionals support provision for pupils.

Information about the school

Birch Wood is an area special school mainly serving north-east Leicestershire and providing education primarily for pupils with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties. It also provides for an increasing number of pupils with moderate learning difficulties, as well as promoting inclusion within mainstream settings. This element of school life entered a new phase with the very recent opening of a new block for teaching 11 to 19 year olds with moderate learning difficulties close to the existing school, a mainstream primary and a sixth form college, promoting the development of a learning campus. Many of the pupils have associated difficulties, such as emotional and behavioural difficulties, and a large number have autistic spectrum disorders. Two thirds of the pupils are boys and, of the total on roll, the overwhelming majority are of White British heritage. Of the small number coming from minority ethnic communities, none speak English as an additional language. The number of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is close to the national average. The school has acquired Healthy Schools status and the Inclusion Quality Mark. It has become a specialist school for communication.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

'This school has catered for our son's needs in a very specific way designed to maximise his full potential, which he is achieving.' This comment from a parent encapsulates what is at the heart of this outstanding school. Sustained progress since the last inspection and the pursuit of excellence, based on highly effective self-evaluation of strengths and areas for improvement, provides an outstanding capacity to sustain improvement. Every pupil, whatever their learning difficulty or disability, is able to succeed and maximise their potential. The clear focus on excellence and the use of resources to support the needs of every pupil enables the school to offer outstanding value for money.

The headteacher has been in post for a year and has introduced a wider, more distributive style of leadership. The senior leadership team is completed by the deputy and the newly-appointed assistant headteacher: between them they have a clear vision and sharp focus for the school's strategic development. This structure also supports the promotion of outreach to mainstream schools in the area, utilising its specialist school status, with over 50 schools currently being supported directly and others seeking advice from specialist staff. Middle managers willingly accept responsibility for the promotion of their curriculum and key stage areas, and lead by excellent example. Teachers and teaching assistants show commitment of the highest order to their pupils and the team work that they display in their classrooms is exceptional. Since the last inspection, the school has developed and refined its ability to use the data it has on the performance of every pupil to maximise their performance. This is reflected in the excellent classroom practice that enables staff to understand the potential of the pupils with whom they work and allows the school to demonstrate the often outstanding progress that they make. It also shows clearly that there are no differences in the progress of different groups, such as those from minority ethnic communities, reflecting full equality of opportunity for all. Pupils' enjoyment and achievement are outstanding, also reflected in their level of attendance which is far above the average for special schools. As pupils move to the end of Key Stage 4 and beyond, they are able to follow a range of external accreditation, such as that offered at Entry Level and by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). However, there is room to extend opportunities for accreditation for this 14 to 19 age group. Similarly, as they move through the school, pupils do not always get opportunities to assess their own work and that of their peers which would help to reinforce their excellent learning.

Pupils told the inspectors that they feel safe at school, a view shared by 100% of

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parents and carers who responded. This extends to internet safety for this group of pupils who are potentially very vulnerable. Because they enjoy school so much, behaviour in lessons and around the school is outstanding and pupils take great care to look after each other. Many have extremely challenging behaviour when they join the school, but carefully individualised behaviour plans ensure that pupils can focus on overcoming their difficulties and get on with learning. Opportunities to promote future economic well-being are deployed skilfully and this includes an excellent relationship with the local Connexions service. The transition to life after school is managed extremely effectively.

The outstanding curriculum is delivered exceptionally well. Teaching is good and frequently outstanding. The assessment of work is detailed and its quality assured by rigorous moderation. Pupils are highly engaged in their work in class and enjoy a range of clubs and activities that includes residential opportunities. Because they are so well supported they make good and often outstanding progress towards their challenging individual targets. The wider support from a range of professionals, such as therapists and psychologists, is highly effective in enabling the school to work so effectively with all its pupils.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further develop opportunities and techniques for pupils to be involved in self-assessment and peer-assessment.
- Extend appropriate and challenging opportunities for accreditation for the 14 to 19 age group.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**1**

The school is making highly effective use of the data gathered from a variety of sources to maximise the achievement of all pupils. The use of nationally-produced progression data enables the school to set challenging targets at appropriate levels, with the clear expectation that they will be met. There is clear evidence that virtually all pupils are achieving their individual targets and that many are making outstanding progress from their individual starting points. Teachers use data effectively and so can identify any pupils who are not making expected progress, supporting them in getting back on track. Lessons are exciting, often utilising technology very effectively, as seen in a small group where the school's specialism in communication was put to excellent use. Video was used to film responses, providing an example of how pupils can self-assess their success and also providing effective evidence of progress over time. The school also seeks to measure the self-esteem of pupils. Virtually all said that they felt their self-esteem was at least normal for young people of their age, but over three-quarters said their self-esteem was high. This reflects the school's success in maximising the potential of its pupils and supporting their enjoyment of learning.

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The school has not only created an extremely safe environment but also gives positive encouragement to pupils to be aware of safety. Sometimes this also involves parents, such as in the work done around the risks of the abuse of the internet. This is reflected in the positive care that pupils show for each other, which is a contributory factor in the outstanding behaviour demonstrated in every phase. In discussions, pupils show a good understanding of the importance of a healthy diet and this is reinforced through the snacks prepared for them during the day and in school lunches. There is also an excellent range of clubs that provide sporting and recreational opportunities, while for some the very good use of the hydrotherapy pool provides opportunities to develop greater flexibility and mobility. The successful promotion of workplace skills was seen in lessons, as well as in the wider opportunities where pupils develop literacy, numeracy and computer skills, alongside enhancing life-skills, such as the post-16 ASDAN work done on understanding personal finances.

Pupils enjoy wide-ranging opportunities to promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Daily reflection time enables pupils to think deeply about their own and others’ experiences. They reflect personal values that enables the school to be a harmonious place and they show a keen understanding of acting in a principled way and ‘doing the right thing’. Excellent assemblies support the development of insights that enable pupils to fully appreciate cultural diversity, supported by regular trips to different places of worship and communities.

These are the grades for pupils’ outcomes

Pupils’ achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attainment ¹	*
The quality of pupils’ learning and their progress	1
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	1
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1
Pupils’ behaviour	1
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1
Taking into account:	
Pupils’ attendance ¹	1
The extent of pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

* In some schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations for the pupils’ age.

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How effective is the provision?

The individualisation of the curriculum is at the heart of the outstanding provision, supported by the exceptional quality of the teamwork of teachers and teaching assistants within every classroom. Teaching is at least good and much is outstanding. The attitudes of pupils are extremely positive because they appreciate the efforts their teachers and teaching assistants make for them. There is a very positive rapport between everyone in the school community. Lessons are planned in detail and teachers are extremely aware of each pupil’s individual education plan. Because these are set against the careful tracking of progress, they enable teachers to address individual needs very effectively. Pupils become fully engaged in practical learning, such as in the science lesson on electricity using miniature robots where there was a real buzz of learning through exploration. This is an example of pupils being able to control their own learning within the confines of the wider lesson objectives. Ways in which pupils use this style of learning for assessing their own work and that of classmates are less developed. The curriculum is sometimes widened, for example through the themed week on Italy which was a shared experience with the neighbouring primary school. This more informal curriculum provides other outstanding chances for personal development, such as the excellent opportunities to participate in residential opportunities which are a regular feature of school life. The school’s specialist status enables it to provide effective support to promote inclusion in mainstream schools, for example through supporting pupils’ communication skills.

Care, guidance and support are outstanding, with staff often working in close conjunction with a range of therapists and other professionals. Arrangements for safeguarding are outstanding for this vulnerable group of pupils. Great care is taken over transition arrangements, whether this is with the specialist nurseries providing early year’s provision for many of the children who go on the Birch Wood, or in the plans for progression post-16 or post-19 which enable smooth and supported transition to college, employment opportunities or other provision for young adults. Case studies show the detailed planning that goes into ensuring that individual needs are met effectively. The overwhelmingly positive response of parents and carers to the inspection questionnaire is a testimony to the considerable success of the school in this area of provision.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	1
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	1
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils’ needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

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How effective are leadership and management?

Leadership and management at all levels are focused on school improvement and ensuring that pupils receive a high quality of education. The headteacher has galvanised staff into a team that is highly motivated and committed, reflected in the extremely positive responses to the staff questionnaire. Systems for monitoring and evaluating are effective. This has enabled the school to identify and prioritise issues that support continuing school and professional development. The governing body meets all its statutory duties and has been instrumental in supporting developments, such as the recent enhancement of provision and scope for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. Parents are engaged and supported in many ways, including active support for a self-help group, the Solutions Circle. Excellent partnerships, such as those with adolescent mental health services, psychology, children’s services and a range of therapies, help the school to meet the wide range of often complex difficulties faced by its pupils. Community links, supported and developed through specialist school provision; see support groups such as Menphys and Mencap having bases in the school. There is a strong commitment to promoting equality of opportunity for all and safeguarding arrangements are outstanding because of the wide range of proactive relationships with other professionals who have responsibilities for the safety of young people. Pupils are encouraged to think about the nature of communities locally, nationally and globally, supported by links in the process of being developed with teachers in Tanzania.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school’s engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	1

Early Years Foundation Stage

Traditionally there have been very small numbers in the Early Years Foundation Stage, most children attending specialist nurseries. Strong links enable teachers to

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have an excellent knowledge of the children and their specific needs when they start. This is supported by careful observation undertaken by the classroom team. This was seen in an excellent lesson where children responded very positively to the story of the three bears. Their responses to a range of practical activities at different work stations were carefully noted. Teaching is outstanding and teamwork is of the highest order, enabling children to grow in confidence. The facilities are excellent and both the indoor and outdoor provision is utilised carefully, giving children opportunities to learn both through teacher directed learning and through self-discovery. Effective baselines and Early Years profiles developed during the year allow teachers to work at the right level with every child so they are able to demonstrate good and often exemplary progress, reflected in their Learning Journeys and the outstanding quality of provision. Extremely effective leadership and teamwork promote active learning in a safe and stimulating environment that leads to outstanding outcomes.

These are the grades for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Overall effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
Taking into account:	
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The quality of provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage	1
The effectiveness of leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage	1

Sixth form

The overwhelming majority of provision is for students with more severe needs who would not be ready for college or other provision at the age of 16. The leadership utilises the detailed knowledge of every student to ensure that provision links directly to individual needs: in this, it is highly effective. Within the outstanding provision is a class specifically for students with autism. This is highly effective, giving students many chances to promote their communications and life skills. There is a focus on gaining independence and students have the opportunity to gain external accreditation through ASDAN modules. The curriculum is specifically tailored to meet individual needs and aptitudes, as well as promoting the skills needed for independent living, and careful tracking helps to maximise progress. Teachers show total commitment to their students and excellent teaching enables students to leave for the next phase of their lives very well prepared the challenges of adulthood and greater independence. Excellent transition arrangements support this move into adult life.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	1

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Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Views of parents and carers

The support of parents and carers for the school is very strong, with an extremely small number dissenting from any of the questionnaire statements. This is reflected in the comment, 'We viewed seven schools and practically wrote a begging letter to get our son into Birch Wood. It is a wonderful school.' There were other strong endorsements of the work of the staff, including the effectiveness of staff team work which the inspectors found to be one of the key strengths of the school. Inspection findings support these views. Some parents and carers whose children only started two weeks ago felt unable to respond to all the statements.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted’s questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Birch Wood (Melton Area Special School) to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 61 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 113 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	50	82	11	18	0	0	0	0
The school keeps my child safe	53	87	8	13	0	0	0	0
The school informs me about my child’s progress	43	70	17	28	1	2	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	39	64	20	33	2	3	0	0
The teaching is good at this school	45	74	16	26	0	0	0	0
The school helps me to support my child’s learning	39	64	19	31	2	3	0	0
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	37	61	23	37	1	2	0	0
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	37	61	20	33	0	0	1	2
The school meets my child’s particular needs	44	72	16	26	0	0	0	0
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	43	71	15	25	1	2	0	0
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	38	63	18	29	2	3	0	0
The school is led and managed effectively	42	69	18	29	1	2	0	0
Overall, I am happy with my child’s experience at this school	50	82	11	18	0	0	0	0

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

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	43	47	10	0
Primary schools	6	46	42	6
Secondary schools	14	36	41	9
Sixth forms	15	42	41	3
Special schools	30	48	19	3
Pupil referral units	14	50	31	5
All schools	10	44	39	6

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above are for the period 1 September 2010 to 08 April 2011 and 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.

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

Sixth form figures reflect the judgements made for the overall effectiveness of the sixth form in secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on 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 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:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement. ■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. ■ The quality of teaching. ■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships. ■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
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.

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.



22 September 2011

Dear Pupils

Inspection of Birch Wood (Melton Area Special School), Melton Mowbray, LE13 1HA

I am writing to thank you for the very warm welcome you gave to the inspectors on our recent visit. You go to an outstanding school that does its very best to ensure that each of you achieves the very best that you can.

We were most impressed by your outstanding behaviour and the care you show towards each other. Your attendance is excellent and it is clear that you like your teachers and teaching assistants a lot. They are very committed to you. They work so well together that your lessons are outstanding and planned so carefully so that the needs of every one of you are addressed. Mr Ormerod and the other school leaders have helped your teachers to make a very exciting school. You told us that you feel safe at school and, as you get older, the care that is given includes making sure that when you leave you go on to something that is just right for you.

Even the very best schools can do things to make them even better and we have asked your school to do the following.

- Provide more opportunities for you to discuss the work that you and your classmates have done during lesson times.
- For those of you who are older, increase the types of qualifications you can get at school.

We know how hard you work and how much you enjoy taking part in a wide range of activities. If you continue in this way, you will be able to achieve your very best. We wish you good luck for the future.

Yours sincerely

Martyn Groucutt
Lead inspector

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