

Birches Head Academy

Birches Head Road, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent ST2 8DD

Inspection dates

26–27 January 2016

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

Effectiveness of leadership and management	Requires improvement
Quality of teaching, learning and assessment	Requires improvement
Personal development, behaviour and welfare	Requires improvement
Outcomes for pupils	Requires improvement
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Inadequate

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an academy that requires improvement

- Too few pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, make good progress in their learning in a number of subjects. Progress in mathematics has been slow.
- The progress of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs requires improvement. The provision to support these pupils is not having a good impact.
- Teachers do not use the assessment information that they have about pupils' knowledge and skills to good effect. The most-able pupils are not challenged well enough in the development of their skills or thinking.
- Teachers are not supporting pupils to develop good reading, writing and communication skills.
- Pupils' attendance is well below average but improving slowly.
- Pupils do not have consistently good attitudes to learning, some remain disengaged in lessons and not all teachers tackle this.
- The impact of subject leaders' work is not consistently good and this means that pupils' progress is patchy.

The academy has the following strengths

- This is a rapidly improving academy. The aspirations of pupils and staff are now high.
- The headteacher, consultant headteacher, senior leaders and some subject leaders have established a culture of high expectations that is beginning to bear fruit in pupils' outcomes.
- The quality of teaching is improving quickly as a result of good quality training and support for teachers.
- Leaders, including governors, know the academy's strengths and weaknesses well and have sharply focused plans for improvement.
- Pupils feel safe in school and understand how to keep themselves safe. Leaders work very well to ensure effective arrangements to safeguard pupils.

Full report

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the academy no longer requires special measures.

What does the academy need to do to improve further?

- Improve teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils' rates of progress increase quickly, including in mathematics, by making sure that teachers:
 - plan learning that more effectively takes into account what pupils already know and can do
 - provide sufficient challenge for the most-able pupils
 - provide targeted support for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs, including through the successful deployment of additional adults in the classroom
 - support pupils to develop and use accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar in writing
 - use strategies and approaches to engage pupils who are disinterested in learning.

- Reduce the number of pupils who are frequently absent from school by sharpening the existing work with these pupils, their families and external agencies.

- Strengthen leadership and management by:
 - developing the skills and expertise of subject leaders to make sure that all groups of pupils achieve consistently well, including sharing the best practice that exists
 - ensuring that the mathematics curriculum provides pupils with sufficient opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding through a range of methods, including problem solving
 - improving the monitoring and evaluation of the provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs
 - improving subject leaders' effectiveness in ensuring that pupils receive high quality, proportionate feedback on the quality of their work in line with the academy's expectations
 - ensuring that teachers are well trained to provide support for pupils to develop good levels of reading, writing and communication skills and that this training is then implemented in classrooms where appropriate.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management requires improvement

- Current leaders had to make radical changes to substantial aspects of the academy's work to allow improvements to begin. As a result, the impact of their work has not yet had the time to secure pupils' good achievement.
- The quality of teaching has improved significantly since the time of the last inspection but inconsistencies remain in a range of subjects, including in mathematics. Not all subject leaders are as good as the best in making sure that pupils' achievement is improving quickly or ensuring that the academy's policies for marking and feedback are being applied to good effect.
- The arrangements to provide and monitor the impact of support for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs have not been good. The newly appointed leader of this aspect of the academy's work has begun a well-considered root and branch review of how pupils' needs are identified and, as a result, the training that staff require.
- Leaders have not trained teachers well enough to make sure that they have the skills and expertise to raise pupils' levels and use of literacy in subjects other than English. In recent months, a new leader has been appointed to make improvements and has provided some training and advice to teachers. Some improvements, such as in promoting the accuracy of written work, are evident, but these are not embedded.
- The headteacher has quickly won the support of staff and pupils and has the highest of expectations. She has an accurate view of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. Her sharply focused plans for improvement are in place and have made sure that the management of teachers' performance is intrinsically linked to how teachers improve all aspects of pupils' experiences. Staff morale is high.
- The consultant headteacher from St Joseph's College has been inspirational in raising aspirations of staff and pupils and building a cohesive leadership team.
- Improvements in teaching are as a result of good quality training and support for teachers that has drawn on expertise from within the academy as well as beyond. Plans for future training are sharply focused on the weaknesses that exist. One pupil commented, 'teachers like being here, they know how to help us learn and they believe that we can'. This captures the views of many pupils.
- Leaders forensically track the progress of pupils and use this information to inform where additional support is needed. External checks of teachers' assessments provide leaders with assurances that teachers' judgements are increasingly accurate.
- The academy's curriculum meets the needs of the students well. Leaders' focus on raising aspirations and expectations are reflected in the carefully chosen academic and work-based qualifications offered. Additional learning time to support pupils who join the academy with low levels of skills in English and mathematics is helping these pupils. Leaders are also implementing changes to make sure that the content of the curriculum reflects the needs of more-able pupils.
- The mathematics curriculum has been developed to take into account changes to the National Curriculum and assessment arrangements. The leader of this subject has identified the need for pupils to have a wider range of opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding, which include, but are not exclusively linked to, solving problems.
- There is an increasing range of extra-curricular opportunities for pupils, such as the 'Academy of Excellence' sessions on a Saturday morning and more sports being offered, including tennis and rugby.
- 'I feel completely supported, challenged and nurtured at this school.' This view, expressed by a newly qualified teacher reflects the high quality and effective provision for teachers at the start of their careers.
- Additional funding to support the most disadvantaged pupils has been put to good effect to improve this group of pupils' achievement. Leaders, including governors, have further strengthened their approach to evaluating the impact of this spending.
- Pupils have numerous opportunities to understand the importance of tolerance and respect, as well as what being a 'good British citizen' looks like. Religious education lessons give pupils opportunities to learn about and discuss different faiths and cultures. In English and history lessons, pupils make good contributions to discussions about the class system in British history and how society is portrayed in novels such as 'Animal Farm', including making links with life today.
- Leaders are actively gathering examples of where schools have been successful in raising pupils' attendance so that they can learn from this and sharpen their own work with families and agencies.

- Appropriate arrangements are in place to assure leaders of the safety of and quality of education for the very small number of pupils attending courses offsite.
- The local authority has provided substantial funding to the academy while it has been in special measures. Leaders have used this well to make sure that high-quality support, including from St Joseph's College, for leadership and improving teaching has had an impact. The local authority has monitored this carefully.
- **The governance of the academy:**
 - Governance has improved well since the time of the last inspection. Governors have a good handle on their strategic responsibilities and have increased the levels of challenge to senior leaders. They share the headteacher's expectation of a 'no-excuses' culture.
 - Governors have actively sought out training that will help them develop their skills as well as making proportionate visits to the academy. The most recent one was to help them understand the 'pupil experience'.
 - Governors evaluate the impact of how well additional government funding is spent, including for disadvantaged pupils and pupils who join Year 7 with low levels of skills in English and mathematics. Processes to make more effective evaluations have been put in place this academic year, including for considering the difference this funding is making for individual pupils.
- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. The academy's expectations of mutual respect and care for each other help pupils feel safe in school. Staff are trained well and are proactive in raising any concerns. Leaders tenaciously pursue support for the most vulnerable pupils and are not afraid to challenge the local authority or other agencies when they feel more can be done. Coordinated and effective work with the local authority's 'community cohesion' officer has helped to reduce the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism where these have existed for individual and small groups of pupils. Leaders have intensive and regular contact with pupils who are frequently absent from school, and with their families, to do their best to keep checks on the safety of these pupils. The small number of pupils who are in the care of the local authority receive high quality personal and academic support.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment requires improvement

- Teaching is not consistently helping pupils to achieve well. There is some excellent teaching in the academy and there have been considerable improvements in the past twelve months, but high quality teaching is not yet the norm.
- Teachers do not take enough account of what pupils already know and can do when they plan lessons. This means that some pupils, and in particular the most able, are not challenged and others find work too difficult.
- Not all teachers provide enough targeted support for pupils who need additional help during lessons, including disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. While these pupils' needs are understood, the strategies and approaches that teachers, and teaching assistants, use are not consistently effective.
- In some lessons, including in mathematics, teachers are not tackling those pupils who are disinterested or disengaged in their learning. As a result, some of these pupils are allowed to work at a slow pace or to leave work unfinished or with untidy presentation.
- The quality of feedback that pupils receive is patchy, within and across subjects. This means that pupils do not always understand what they need to do to improve. In lessons, some teachers give pupils good quality, instant verbal feedback.
- Teaching is helping to improve pupils' reading, writing and communication skills but there is still much to do before this is good. For example, some teachers do not correct basic written errors and others do not have the skills and understanding to help lower-attaining pupils to structure extended written work.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and the most effective use this and a range of resources to enthuse and engage their pupils. One Year 11 boy explained to an inspector that he now 'got' why it was important to study novels and understand characters in English lessons. He attributed this development to the enthusiasm of his teacher and that teacher's ability to explain complicated ideas in a simple way.
- The most effective teachers use skilful questioning to check pupils' understanding and reinforce learning points. For example, in a Year 7 gymnastics lesson, the teacher asked questions that focused on what was good about what the pupils had just observed and what could be done to improve.

- Most lessons are calm and orderly and teachers are consistent in their use of the academy's policies and procedures to reward pupils as well as to manage any off-task behaviour. The most positive relationships were observed where teachers had the highest expectations of pupils' behaviour and engagement with learning. Year 11 pupils in a mathematics lesson explained that a 'firm but fair' approach helped lessons to focus on learning rather than the teacher having to manage behaviour.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The academy's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare requires improvement.
- Pupils' attendance is well below average and the number who are frequently absent is too high. There have been slight improvements over time. Disadvantaged pupils have been more likely to be absent than other pupils, although in the past six months this is being redressed.
- Pupils are punctual at the beginning of the day and to lessons. Leaders have worked on this as a high priority to good effect.
- Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep safe and they describe feeling safe in school. They know why and how to be safe when using social media and the internet. Pupils have a general understanding of risks associated with radicalisation and extremism and a strong awareness of other issues facing young people, including drug addiction and gang culture.
- An increasing number of pupils are responding enthusiastically to the increased opportunities to develop their leadership skills and confidence. This can be seen in applications to be prefects, membership of the school council and participation in extra-curricular activities, such as the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. Around the academy, pupils have sensible conversations with adults.
- Pupils understand that bullying can take different forms. The work that leaders have done to raise awareness of how to tackle bullying means that pupils are confident that when any incidents occur they will be dealt with. The academy's records confirm this.
- Academy leaders have made sure that pupils understand, respect and are tolerant of different faiths, cultures and ways of life. Year 7 pupils could describe the similarities between world faiths and pupils in a history lesson explained that it was 'important to know what had happened in the past so that we can understand why people might feel the way they do now'.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are not consistently good. For example, there is a minority of older pupils who are reluctant to start work quickly or to persevere without being continually directed by the teacher. Low level disruption still exists but this is decreasing. Many younger students display good learning habits, for example when practising performance pieces in music or silently reading a novel in English.
- Previous high levels of pupils being excluded from school for unacceptable behaviour and conduct were linked to leaders' increased expectations and pupils not responding well to these. Overall levels of exclusions, including for disadvantaged pupils, are reducing as pupils have a better understanding of what is expected of them and teachers and leaders now use sanctions consistently.
- Pupils' conduct around the academy is generally good and in the assemblies observed by inspectors were exemplary. At social times, most pupils chat sensibly with their friends or play games in designated areas with a good level of staff supervision. In the crowded canteen, pupils were orderly.
- Pupils are dressed smartly and wear their new uniform with pride. Many pupils are good ambassadors for the academy.
- Pupils are respectful of each other and of adults. This is one aspect that both pupils and staff say has considerably improved in the last twelve months.
- A very small number of pupils attend courses away from the academy site and it is not possible to evaluate their behaviour or personal development without identifying individuals.

Outcomes for pupils

requires improvement

- Pupils and groups of pupils do not make good progress in a range of subjects. However, the legacy of underachievement that the older pupils faced is being tackled and younger pupils are making quicker progress.
- Only 35% of Year 11 pupils achieved five GCSEs, including English and mathematics, at grade C or above in the 2015 examinations. This is a slight increase on the previous year's results. This year group of pupils made slow progress in mathematics, French and geography but much quicker progress in English.
- Pupils are making particularly quick progress in English. Far more than has been the case previously are making good progress from their starting points. However, pupils' basic reading and writing skills are a barrier to accelerated improvement in English and other subjects.
- Pupils' progress in mathematics is improving but not at the same rate as English. Changes to the curriculum and teaching approaches are beginning to make some difference but the impact is not yet sustained.
- Gaps in the achievement between disadvantaged pupils and their peers nationally remain wide overall. However, the progress of disadvantaged pupils is improving quickly when compared to all pupils nationally, and when compared to pupils in this academy. This is most obvious in English. In other subjects, including mathematics, there are also good improvements for these pupils.
- The most-able pupils underachieve. Too few pupils have achieved the higher grades in GCSE examinations and teaching is not challenging enough for these pupils. However, improvements to teaching approaches, teachers' increased expectations and changes to the curriculum for individual subjects are beginning to have a positive impact.
- Outcomes for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs also require improvement. Previous significant underachievement for some of these pupils currently in the school is being tackled well, including in mathematics, where weaknesses in pupils' progress had been particularly evident.
- A large number of pupils join the academy with below-average skills in English and mathematics. Leaders are using additional funding well to support these pupils. For example, programmes to improve pupils' reading skills have been particularly successful in helping them be better able to read and access texts.
- Almost all pupils who leave the academy at the end of Year 11 do so with at least five GCSE qualifications and go on to further study or into employment. These are positive features of the academy's work, although leaders' drive to improve aspirations means that they want this to be even better.
- It is not possible to evaluate the progress of pupils attending alternative provision because numbers are so small it would risk identifying individuals.

School details

Unique reference number	124390
Local authority	Stoke-on-Trent
Inspection number	10004233

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	656
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rachel Billington
Headteacher	Katie Dixon
Telephone number	01782 233595
Website	www.bircheshead.org.uk
Email address	info@bircheshead.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	10–11 December 2013

Information about this school

- This is a smaller than averaged-sized secondary school.
- Almost half of pupils are eligible for pupil premium funding (additional government funding for pupils know to be eligible for free school meals or who are cared for by the local authority).
- The headteacher and national leader of education (NLE) of a local outstanding school, St Joseph’s College, has supported the strategic leadership of Birches Head Academy since October 2014 as a consultant headteacher. Additional interim senior leadership support was in place between October 2015 and July 2015. The current headteacher took up post in April 2015. There have been considerable changes in teaching staff and those holding leadership roles. This academy is to be sponsored as a new academy by St Joseph’s College.
- The academy does not meet the government’s current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils’ attainment and progress by the end of Year 11.
- A very small number of pupils attend courses that take place away from the academy site. The providers of these courses are Sporting Stars and Groundworks.

Information about this inspection

- During the two-day inspection, inspectors observed lessons and pupils' behaviour and conduct around the site.
- Inspectors took account of evidence from monitoring visits while the academy was subject to special measures.
- Inspectors spoke to two groups of pupils formally and many more during the course of the academy day to discuss their experiences and gain their views.
- There were too few responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, to gather the views of parents. However, inspectors considered the views of parents gathered by the academy's own surveys.
- Inspectors met with representatives of the governing body and the local authority as well as senior and subject leaders, and a group of newly qualified teachers.
- A range of documents were reviewed, including information relating to pupils' attainment and progress and rates of attendance, as well as those related to the quality of teaching and how leaders ensure the safeguarding of pupils.

Inspection team

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