

The Birches

106 Breck Road, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 7HT

Inspection dates

18–20 October 2016

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- Leadership and management are good at all levels. Consequently, the school and pupil outcomes are improving. Leaders ensure that all of the independent school standards are met.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are good. Pupils enter the school with very negative attitudes towards school. They gain an understanding of the importance of educational attainment as a gateway to future life chances. The development of pupils' personal and social skills is good. Pupils are allowed to express their initial feelings of anger and anxiety about school in a safe environment where staff respond in a positive and supportive way.
- Staff relentlessly focus on improving pupils' behaviour by applying a consistent set of rules and establishing a 'no excuses' culture. Attendance rates are good and much better than pupils' previous attendance when they attended other schools.
- Pupils re-engage in learning because leaders are determined that the curriculum is closely matched to pupils' specific needs.
- The information received from the placing authorities and previous schools is sometimes insufficiently detailed and does not allow teachers to build upon pupils' prior learning.
- A variety of teaching techniques and resources are used expertly by teachers to prompt pupils to think and engage in learning. Teachers skilfully develop pupils' abilities to concentrate and produce extended pieces of writing.
- Pupils enter the school with low levels of literacy and numeracy and leaders ensure that there is a strong focus on the development of these basic skills.
- Pupils are well prepared for the next phase of their education. Staff emphasise to pupils the need for them to reduce risk-taking behaviour and grow in maturity as they reach adulthood.
- Class sizes are very small and pupils often receive individual tuition. Good pastoral support enables pupils to gain a sense of achievement which, for many, is the first time they have developed a sense of pride in their schoolwork.
- Pupils gain a wide range of qualifications including GCSEs in mathematics and English.
- Policies and procedures to ensure pupils' safety and welfare are implemented effectively. Pupils' challenging behaviour decreases steadily over time.
- Leaders and governors have not articulated clearly enough the school's educational mission to parents, carers and other professionals. They are not aware of how well pupils at this school are doing compared with those in similar schools.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Ensure that a comprehensive range of educational information is gained from all referring authorities so that a swift transition to the school is made and staff can build quickly on pupils' prior learning.
- Improve communication with placing authorities, parents and professionals to make sure the school's educational mission, aims and objectives are understood.
- Develop an understanding of how similar schools benchmark their success in order to compare pupils' performance to others nationally and share good practice.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- The proprietor has ensured that all of the requirements of the independent school standards are met. Welfare and safety of pupils at school are given the highest priority.
- Leaders ensure that there is accountability at all levels and they place a strong focus on supporting pupils to progress academically. The significant challenges and barriers to learning that pupils have experienced are not accepted as an excuse for low achievement. There is an expectation that every pupil will leave with qualifications that enable them to enrol on an apprenticeship or other college course.
- The headteacher has a strong commitment to the development of pupils' personal development and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding, which is shared by all staff. Staff exhibit great skill and patience in supporting pupils with complex and challenging behaviours to re-engage in learning. There is a relaxed but resolute atmosphere. Most pupils start the school with a very limited ability to cope with formal classroom situations; however, they are supported very well to gain the confidence to fit in.
- All staff feel proud to work at the school. They recognise that it is an extremely challenging environment but feel that their work is valuable and appreciated. They feel well supported in terms of their professional development. Performance management of staff is effective.
- The curriculum is tailor-made to match pupils' individual needs. The range of subject knowledge required by staff is very large but they cope well with these demands, ensuring that a broad and balanced curriculum is provided and it is accessible to pupils.
- Pupils learn about fundamental British values as part of the citizenship and religious education programmes. This knowledge and understanding prepare them well for the next stage of their life.
- The school has a safeguarding policy which meets current government requirements. The policy is not published on the proprietor's website but it is available to parents, carers and referring authorities on request.
- The headteacher and proprietor have a good understanding of the school's strengths and what must be improved. There is a suitable action plan which deals well with short-term operational issues. However, there is no strategic plan to set out the educational mission and vision of the school and/or the proprietor for parents, local authorities or other professionals.

Governance

- Governance of the school is effective. The school is well supported by the head of education from Hexagon Care to ensure that the proprietor of the school knows its day-to-day strengths and what needs to be done to improve further.
- The head of education and headteacher report back effectively to governors on educational standards. Accurate reports are provided for their information and approval. Frequent meetings are held to discuss the quality of the school's work.
- The proprietor plays an active role in evaluating and monitoring the headteacher's performance and his targets for the future, including ensuring that all of the independent school standards are met.
- Leaders do not compare the main outcomes achieved by this school with others who fulfil a similar role nationally. Consequently, they cannot benchmark the school's

successes, share good practice or develop a long-term strategic plan based on comparative information.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Staff have read and understand the key documents on keeping children safe in education. The designated safeguarding leaders have undertaken appropriate child-protection training.
- School leaders work closely with care staff to ensure that the safety and welfare of pupils are given the highest priority. The school does not have a dedicated website but the safeguarding policy is available to parents or carers on request from the school.
- All of the required recruitment and staff vetting checks are carried out to confirm that staff are suitable to work with pupils.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Pupils enter school with very negative attitudes towards education. Their previous attendance has been poor and their complex care needs and challenging behaviours have prevented them from reaching the academic standards of which they are capable. Good-quality teaching helps to overcome these barriers and to achieve well, both academically and in their personal development.
- Staff are highly adaptable and ensure that good-quality learning takes place across different lessons. Staff develop a good range of subject knowledge which means that they can teach concepts securely in a range of subjects. Pupils' workbooks and school records show that most pupils make good progress from low starting points.
- Staff break down barriers to learning by planning lessons that have the right balance of challenge and choice. Many pupils perceive themselves as failures and staff work hard and successfully to build individuals' self-esteem by positive re-enforcement and by ensuring that small gains in learning lead to good progress over time.
- Assessment of progress is accurate but sometimes there is insufficient information provided by referring schools or authorities to enable teachers to precisely understand pupils' capabilities when they arrive at the school.
- Staff do not shy away from challenging pupils, even when challenge is met with very negative or hostile behaviour. Pupils gradually develop confidence and learn to cope with failure and not to give up at the first attempt. The most able pupils progress particularly well and achieve GCSE examination success.
- The very high staff-to-pupil ratio ensures that all pupils receive good support and guidance. Lessons are organised in a formal way to encourage pupils to get back into the routine of attending mainstream school and behaving in a way conducive to learning. This means that several pupils have successfully been reintegrated into mainstream education.
- Pupils have a broad range of aptitudes and abilities. The most able progress well to achieve success in subjects including English, mathematics, history, science, citizenship and art. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities also make good progress and gain functional skills qualifications.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good. Many pupils initially refuse to engage with learning or at times are very angry about their school experiences. Staff help pupils to overcome these barriers to learning but the school recognises that this is a long process that has to be built up over time and into the next phase of the pupils' education.
- Pupils receive impartial advice from school staff on careers and future working life. If pupils stay at the school until the end of Year 11, they all move on to college or training opportunities. Pupils are supported to overcome barriers and learn to trust teachers and their peers. The longer a pupil stays at the school, the more the impact of the school's work becomes apparent. When the pupils are ready, staff carefully reintegrate pupils into mainstream schools.
- Pupils' workbooks and displays indicate that pupils have a good awareness of different types of bullying and the negative impact it can have. This includes homophobia, racism, religious intolerance and sexism. Bullying is very rare in the school and, if it does happen, is dealt with well by staff.
- The school collects the views of all who work with individual pupils and feedback is positive. A carer reported that a pupil had made great strides since attending the school.
- Pupils take part in a range of suitable extra-curricular activities, including ice-skating, golf, bushcraft and trips to the zoo. Rewards are used well to improve behaviour.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good in the context of their special educational needs and/or disabilities and their mental health needs. Behaviour improves and levels of anxiety and anger reduce significantly over time, due to the good support pupils receive.
- The atmosphere in the school is relaxed and calm. Adults are good role models for their pupils. They remain calm and measured in all circumstances.
- Attendance levels are high and almost all pupils attend every day. This is in sharp contrast with their attendance in previous schools.
- The school rules are clear and appropriate. Staff apply the rules consistently but are able to recognise the need for constant positive re-enforcement for relatively small improvements. The rewards system is used well and procedures are appreciated and understood by all pupils.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Pupils enter the school with low levels of skills, knowledge and understanding for their age. Prior attendance is generally low or non-existent. From these low starting points, pupils usually make good progress, both academically and in their personal development.
- In a wide range of subjects, the progress of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is good and as a result they make up ground on their peers. Pupils' exercise books show that they are developing a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding.
- Pupils develop confidence with their reading, speaking and listening skills. There is significant improvement in these basic skills. Pupils' handwriting improves considerably

over time.

- The positive attitudes and high expectations of staff enable pupils to develop the self-confidence and tenacity to overcome their barriers to learning. Pupils' attitudes to learning, behaviour and self-esteem improve the longer they stay in this school.
- Leaders see the school as a stepping stone to greater educational achievement and all the pupils who have left the school at the age of 16 have gone on to enrol at college or with a training provider.
- Pupils who attend the school for an extended period achieve qualifications at GCSE level in English, mathematics and a number of other subjects. Less-able pupils achieve success in functional skills, literacy and numeracy.

School details

Unique reference number	130902
DfE registration number	888/6096
Inspection number	10006077

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Independent special school
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number of pupils on the school roll	6
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Hexagon Care Services
Chair	Francis Ashcroft
Headteacher	Craig Gaskin
Annual fees (day pupils)	£26,000
Telephone number	01253 892 305
Website	www.hexagoncare.com
Email address	birches.headteacher@hexagoncare.com
Date of previous inspection	4–5 December 2012

Information about this school

- The Birches is an independent special school registered for up to seven boys aged 11 to 16, who have social, emotional and mental health difficulties and associated complex challenging behaviour and associated anxiety.
- Pupils come from several local authorities and all are looked after.
- The school does not have its own dedicated website but comprehensive information is available on the Hexagon Care website and on request from the school.
- The school is part of the Hexagon Care Services group. It transferred from Northern Care to Hexagon Care in 2014.
- There are three members of staff: a headteacher, a teacher and a teaching assistant.

Learning is organised on an individualised basis or in very small groups.

- Many pupils have an education, health and care plan or a statement of special educational needs.
- The school was last inspected in December 2012.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The school does not have any specific religious affiliation. It aims to give pupils 'the opportunity to develop and thrive within a nurturing and safe environment in order to prepare them for their future steps.'

Information about this inspection

- This inspection was carried out at one day's notice and took place over two days.
- The inspector had discussions with two representatives from the Hexagon Care Services group, the headteacher, teacher and teaching assistant.
- The inspector observed teaching and learning in 10 lessons, looked at a range of pupils' work and talked to them about school life. He also looked at an extensive range of documents and data on pupils' progress and their progression beyond school.
- The inspector considered the views of referring authorities, parents and carers. There were insufficient responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, to consider. The inspector took into account the views of carers who took the opportunity to express views about the school.
- The inspector took into account the three responses to the Ofsted staff survey.
- In order to check the school's compliance with the independent schools' standards, the inspector examined policies, procedures and other records. These included the checks of the suitability of adults to work with children recorded on the school's single register, the attendance register and the behaviour and consequences record.

Inspection team

Andrew Johnson, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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