

Birtley House Independent School

Fawkham Road, West Kingsdown, Sevenoaks, Kent TN15 6AY

Inspection dates

9–11 May 2018

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

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The headteacher's calm, determined and encouraging leadership has taken the school from strength to strength since the previous inspection.
- The headteacher is extremely well supported by her excellent deputy headteacher and by a highly effective staff team.
- All members of staff play a valuable role in supporting pupils' learning and well-being. They are caring and extremely knowledgeable about pupils' needs.
- Skilful teaching ensures that pupils make exceptionally strong progress, both academically and personally, across a range of subjects.
- Leaders and teachers make good use of assessment information to check pupils' progress and to make any adjustments to teaching needed to support pupils' learning.
- Pupils feel safe and secure. They say that everyone in school looks after them very well. One confidently commented: 'There's no danger in school.'
- Pupils welcome visitors with interest. They are fiercely proud of their school and speak enthusiastically about their achievements. One pupil said: 'There should be more schools like this one, so that more children can benefit from the same excellent education.'
- Pupils almost always behave exceptionally well. They are keen to learn and work hard in lessons. Pupils who have complex behavioural needs make huge strides forward in managing their behaviour.
- Parents and carers are very appreciative of the school's work. One parent reflected the views of parents generally when she said: 'Birtley House has been the absolute making of my child.'
- Extremely effective leadership and rigorous procedures ensure that the independent school standards are met. However, governance does not bring the same rigour and challenge to all aspects of its work in monitoring the school's performance.

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?

- Strengthen governance further so that leaders are held firmly to account for the quality of education.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- The headteacher and deputy headteacher are experts in the field of special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and have a deep and perceptive understanding of pupils' additional needs. They work closely with specialist agencies, including healthcare professionals, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists, to ensure that pupils benefit from high-quality support.
- Leaders are extremely ambitious for the school and for its pupils. They have the highest expectations of staff and pupils and work diligently to make sure that pupils achieve the best possible outcomes.
- Leaders have established a team of highly knowledgeable and effective teachers, teaching assistants and support staff. Staff morale is high. All members of staff share leaders' high expectations and play their part in making the school a positive and successful learning environment. Well-focused training contributes well to the development of teaching.
- Leaders have an accurate view of the school's performance. They use a wide range of information to identify suitable priorities for improvement. Leaders are never satisfied with the school's work and constantly strive to secure further improvements.
- Leaders ensure that the independent school standards and other requirements are met in full. They work diligently to ensure that the school provides pupils with a safe, attractive and stimulating learning environment.
- Pupils join and leave the school at different times during the school year depending on their particular needs. Leaders liaise closely and effectively with pupils' previous schools and with parents so that pupils settle into school quickly. Ongoing discussions with medical specialists ensure that any undiagnosed underlying conditions are fully considered.
- Leaders and teachers lose no time in identifying pupils' starting points when they join the school. Accurate assessments give leaders and teachers a clear picture of pupils' needs so that teaching builds strongly on pupils' prior learning from the day they arrive.
- Strong staff morale reflects leaders' success in ensuring that all members of staff feel valued and are able to contribute to the school's development. The school's tightly knit staff team works incredibly well together to ensure that each pupil is safe, happy and learning well. One member of staff commented: 'Birtley House is all about the children...that's what makes it exceptional.'
- The school teaches the national curriculum using a wide range of approaches according to pupils' individual needs. In addition, leaders provide many opportunities for pupils to develop physical, personal and social skills, such as horse-riding lessons and relaxation sessions.
- Pupils consider a range of different beliefs and religions, including Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, during religious education lessons, as well as during regular assemblies. Furthermore, visits to places of worship contribute to pupils' respect and understanding of different religions.
- Pupils learn about British values, including democracy, tolerance and the rule of law, as

well as considering British events at key points in Great Britain's history. Discussions about personal qualities, such as responsibility and kindness, help pupils to understand the contribution they can make to the school community and prepare them well for life in modern Britain.

Governance

- Although the school does not have a governing body the school's directors provide strong support for school leaders. Their commitment to the school has been central to securing the school's development since the previous inspection and its considerable success.
- Leaders regularly provide directors with a wide range of information about the school's performance, including information about teaching and learning, health and safety, and about leaders' plans for future developments. This ensures that directors have a full picture of the school's performance and a clear view of the school's compliance with the independent school standards. The directors rightly have confidence in senior leaders to provide clear, determined and effective direction for the school.
- Leaders are committed to continually reviewing and improving the school's performance. They have taken sensible steps to strengthen this aspect. For example, they have established worthwhile partnerships with external advisers and with leaders in other schools to help them to evaluate and improve the school's performance. Nevertheless, governance within the school is at an early stage and is therefore still developing the skills needed in order to hold leaders even more stringently to account.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders and all members of staff give pupils' safety the same appropriately high priority. They are keenly aware of the potential additional vulnerability of pupils due to their specific SEN and/or disabilities. Leaders make sure the safeguarding policy is made available to parents via the school's website as well as keeping a copy readily available in the school office.
- The school's detailed safeguarding policy ensures that key information is easily accessible, including contact details for the local safeguarding children board. The school takes any worries raised about pupils' safety very seriously and acts swiftly where there is a concern. Leaders work closely and successfully with agencies, such as children's services and the local authority safeguarding team, wherever necessary.
- Leaders have completely overhauled arrangements for storing staff and pupil records since the previous inspection. Safeguarding records and reports are very well organised and stored confidentially and securely. The office managers keep a close eye on staff recruitment procedures, making sure that all required checks have been completed and are up to date.
- The site manager plays a key role in making sure that the school site is secure and that resources and equipment are fit for purpose. He has established rigorous systems for checking that pupils can play and learn safely, and maintains meticulous, clearly accessible records.
- Strong relationships throughout the school ensure that pupils feel comfortable about approaching adults when they are anxious or concerned.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- The key to the school's highly effective teaching lies in adults' detailed understanding of pupils' needs, combined with strong subject knowledge. As a result, teaching supports pupils' learning exceptionally well.
- Teachers are adept at teaching pupils who have varying, and often complex, SEN and/or disabilities. They plan lessons carefully, matching tasks closely to pupils' abilities, so that individual pupils are consistently supported and challenged to do their best.
- Teachers use creative and flexible approaches to teaching the national curriculum aims and objectives. For example, during the inspection, pupils in key stage 2 constructed imaginary worlds from craft materials. The task promoted rich discussion among pupils about the vocabulary that they could use in their writing to describe their fictional settings, while also developing their personal and social skills. The work in pupils' books indicates teachers' considerable success in engaging pupils in learning, and in ensuring that pupils make strong progress.
- Teachers and teaching assistants work very well together, sharing ideas and expertise to support pupils' learning effectively. They make superb use of resources during lessons to strengthen pupils' understanding in a range of subjects. For example, during the inspection pupils confidently used word banks and number squares to help them to complete English and mathematical tasks successfully. The school's strategies ensure that pupils access learning very well during lessons, while also helping them to develop a toolkit of skills which will support them in the next stage of their learning.
- Teachers and teaching assistants are always alert to pupils' well-being during lessons and respond sensitively to pupils' emotional needs. Trusting and respectful relationships between teachers and pupils mean that pupils feel valued and make a significant contribution to pupils' growing confidence.
- Reading skills are taught extremely well. Effective phonics teaching ensures that pupils make rapid progress in reading, while regular discussions of books during lessons give pupils the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of their reading. Teachers provide regular opportunities for pupils to read and to visit the school's library, so that pupils can practise and improve their reading skills.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- The development of pupils' personal skills and emotional well-being is at the heart of the school's work. Leaders have developed extremely effective support strategies to ensure that pupils feel safe, valued and in the right frame of mind to learn. For example, the school's specially trained pet dog is very much part of the staff team, providing reassurance and comfort to all pupils. Pupils say that they love the school's pets and that stroking them helps them to feel better, particularly if they feel anxious.
- Pupils understand some of the steps taken by adults in school to keep them safe. For

example, they know that adults are equipped with first aid kits during playtimes and understand why the school medicine cabinet is kept locked, with one pupil commenting: 'The good thing is that you can't get into the medicine without a teacher.'

- Pupils in Year 6 are looking forward to moving to their new secondary schools in September. They say that teachers have 'geared up the work' this year so that they feel ready for the move. One said he felt 'nervous but excited' about the next step in his education.
- Pupils are ambitious for their future. The oldest pupils are developing a clear idea of what they would like to do in the world of work.
- Pupils say that they love school and that they are reluctant to miss a minute of the school day. One pupil even said that he would happily have gone into school on the recent bank holiday Monday had he been allowed to do so.
- Most parents who completed Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, feel that pupils are safe, happy and well behaved. Many commented on how well their children have thrived personally since joining the school. For example, one parent said: 'My child's confidence and social development have developed beyond recognition.'

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Strong and caring relationships are key features across the school. Pupils feel valued and respected, secure in the knowledge that there is always an adult close by whenever needed.
- Consistently high expectations and well-established routines provide a strong framework for pupils' excellent behaviour. Pupils behave extremely well during lessons and listen attentively during assemblies. They move around the school sensibly and play happily and safely with friends during playtimes.
- Sometimes individual pupils become frustrated when their work does not go according to plan in lessons. Adults respond promptly, positively and without fuss when this is the case. Their calm and caring responses quickly reassure pupils so that they settle into learning tasks once again.
- Attendance rates were above the national average in 2017. Occasionally individual pupils have medical needs which require them to attend specialist appointments during the school day. Teachers work closely with parents and medical experts to ensure that pupils miss as little school as possible and to ensure that pupils catch up with any work missed.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Pupils of all abilities make dramatic progress from their different starting points, both academically and personally.
- Pupils make strong progress in English so that they can express themselves clearly, both verbally and in writing. They develop secure reading and writing skills which enable them to write successfully for a range of purposes. Pupils work carefully and neatly. They develop clear, legible handwriting styles which help them to organise their work.

- The work set for pupils in lessons is often challenging, such as the recent work describing Alice's feelings in 'Alice and Wonderland'. Pupils develop an increasing ability to empathise with fictional characters and to reflect on their own emotions
- Pupils learn how to use phonics knowledge very well to help them to read unfamiliar words successfully. They are keen to read their work during lessons, and enjoy changing their reading books in the school library.
- Pupils make rapid progress in mathematics. They develop a confident knowledge of number and quickly go on to learn how to solve mathematical problems. The most able pupils relish the challenge of tackling more demanding tasks, such as the work completed by pupils during an investigation into the link between the area and perimeter of shapes.
- Some pupils have had negative experiences of education before arriving in the school which have affected their attitudes to learning and caused gaps in their learning. Highly effective teaching and close attention to supporting pupils' individual needs ensure that they quickly develop positive attitudes to school and make strong progress.
- Pupils' work reflects the considerable progress they make in developing the confidence to tackle work set during lessons. Pupils speak enthusiastically about learning and are determined to succeed. For example, during the inspection pupils persevered during a craft session to make models of imaginary worlds. One said, 'There's always a way to solve a problem!' This reflects the school's success in developing pupils' positive attitudes.
- Pupils develop an increasing awareness of the wider world. For example, during the inspection pupils wrote letters as if from Greenpeace advising what to do if you find an unusual animal in the garden. One wrote, 'I don't think you can have a green turtle in your pond because turtles live in the ocean and eat seaweed,' while another wrote, 'Penguins eat fish and live in Antarctica, which is an extreme climate! So give it some ice and some fish to eat.'

School details

Unique reference number	136211
DfE registration number	886/6136
Inspection number	10033955

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	Other independent school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	37
Number of part-time pupils	2
Proprietor	Birtley House Kent Ltd
Chair	N/A
Headteacher	Emma Sillitoe
Annual fees (day pupils)	£13,590 to £15,141
Telephone number	01474 853 192
Website	www.birtleyhouseschool.co.uk
Email address	office@birtleyhouseschool.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	25–27 March 2014

Information about this school

- Birtley House Independent School is a mixed independent day special school. The school provides for pupils who have moderate and sometimes complex SEN and/or disabilities. Pupils' needs vary but can include specific or general learning difficulties, social and communication difficulties, language and communication needs and emotional, attachment and anxiety disorders. The majority of pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- Pupils are referred to the school by four local authorities and by a number of independent schools. Pupils join the school at different times during the school year and at different ages. Their length of stay in the school varies according to their individual needs. The

number of pupils on roll has increased considerably since the previous inspection.

- Therapists provide specialist support each week. Approximately half of the therapy is provided by the National Health Service and half by private companies.
- The school was previously inspected in March 2014.
- The school does not use alternative provision.
- Pupils are taught English and mathematics in the mornings in ability groups of mixed ages. They are taught in mixed-ability and mixed-age groups in the afternoons.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed learning during eight lessons. Five of these observations were carried out jointly with the headteacher. The inspector also observed an occupational therapy session and a relaxation session.
- The inspector toured the school and its classrooms at different points during the inspection with the headteacher and the site manager, including a visit to the playground during playtime.
- The inspector spoke with pupils, staff, therapists, leaders and parents. She met with four pupils to discuss their views of the school.
- The inspector reviewed a wide range of school documentation regarding the quality of education and compliance with the independent school standards.
- The inspector analysed 24 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and 16 responses to the staff questionnaire. She also took account of a letter received from a parent.

Inspection team

Julie Sackett, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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