

Birches Head Academy

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

Inspection dates

26–27 June 2018

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	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a school that requires improvement

- Currently and over time in English, mathematics, science and a range of other subjects, too many pupils make poor progress. Those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, disadvantaged pupils, those who are middle attaining and the most able are among this group.
- Leaders, including governors, have not ensured the effective use of the additional funding they receive to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. These pupils' performance and attendance continue to lag behind others.
- The quality of teaching, while improving, is too variable. Too often, teaching is not planned at the right level to challenge pupils' thinking and move their learning on.
- Teachers do not routinely share the best practice that is now more evident in the school.
- Plans to improve the school are not focused with precision upon those areas which will make the greatest difference to teaching, behaviour and outcomes.
- When teachers do not set work which interests pupils or meets their needs, some become bored and easily distracted.
- A small minority of pupils display poor behaviour in social times.
- While improving slowly, the absence and exclusion rates at the school are too high.

The school has the following strengths

- Leaders, including governors, have established an inclusive and ambitious culture.
- Since the last inspection, leaders have taken stronger action to address weaknesses and capacity for further improvement is evident.
- Pupils with low prior attainment and those who speak English as an additional language make good progress over time.
- Pupils report that they enjoy school more because teaching and behaviour are improving.
- The school's extra-curricular and careers programmes contribute much to pupils' development.
- Safeguarding is effective and pupils understand how to keep safe in and out of school.

Full report

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Improve the quality of leadership and management, by:
 - ensuring that extra funding is used effectively to improve the learning and attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities
 - developing more accurate and succinct self-evaluation which clearly address the main priorities for the school.
- Improve the quality of teaching to improve the progress of all pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils, those who have SEN/or disabilities, those who are middle attaining and the most able, by:
 - ensuring that work set matches the needs of pupils so they focus on their learning in class
 - insisting that all teachers follow school routines in relation to assessment, how they challenge pupils to work and think, and addressing literacy issues in pupils' books
 - providing more opportunities for teachers to improve their practice by learning from one another.
- Improve the quality of pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare, by:
 - reducing the overall absence level by strengthening procedures to ensure that pupils attend more regularly, so that attendance is at least in line with the national average
 - ensuring that the poor behaviour from some that disturbs other pupils during social times is tackled effectively
 - managing behaviour to reduce the proportion of pupils who are excluded.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Requires improvement

- Leaders and managers have not acted quickly enough to bring about improvements in the quality of education in the school. Although there have been some recent positive developments in the quality of teaching, levels of attendance and pupils' behaviour, leaders recognise that the pace of change has been too slow.
- While leaders can articulate the key areas of the school that require the most immediate improvement, their written plans are overly detailed and lack clarity.
- The school receives much additional funding to support disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. This money does not lead to the improvements in outcomes and attendance for which it is intended. Leaders' evaluation of how the money has been spent is scant. As a result, the school cannot judge what is needed to support these pupils effectively and improve their learning and social and emotional development.
- Leaders at all levels do not ensure that staff consistently follow school routines in relation to expectations on what happens in lessons and what is seen in books. Consequently, pupils receive an uneven experience. This is seen particularly in how pupils' work is assessed and how effectively they are made to work and think hard in lessons.
- Leaders' assessment of the accuracy of teaching, at times informed by the external reviews they have commissioned, has been too generous. Their tolerance of inconsistency and low-level disruption has sometimes been too high. Also, reviews of the quality of teaching can, at times, be too focused on teachers and insufficiently on pupils' learning. There is also evidence, however, of leaders focusing upon the quality of work in pupils' books as a key indicator of teaching quality.
- Leaders use partnership work with the Alpha Academies Trust, the local authority, a national leader of education and other schools to develop expertise in teaching and to ensure that assessed work is accurate. The impact of these developments is not shared widely enough with staff and does not yet have the impact across the school that it should.
- The curriculum at key stage 4 is broad and balanced. Pupils appreciate the support they and their parents and carers receive in choosing their subjects. Consequently, pupils are better equipped for their future education and career choices.
- Leaders have shown the capacity to bring about improvements in the school. They have the support of staff and external agencies, including the Alpha Academies Trust and the local authority. Those parents and pupils who contacted and spoke to inspectors felt the school has improved.
- Leaders have taken some decisive action. This includes addressing long-standing staffing issues which led to a relatively high staff turnover. Despite genuine difficulties in recruiting staff, teaching is now stronger and more stable.
- Newly qualified teachers and those new to the profession speak highly of the support they have been given by their subject mentors, middle and senior leaders.

- Leaders have implemented a full programme of spiritual, moral, social and cultural education which supports pupils' personal development. Inspectors saw an assembly for Year 8 pupils on the need for careful money management and the importance of high attendance at school. External agencies, including the police, work with pupils and provide opportunities for them to discuss matters of local and national importance.
- Pupils are given the skills which will enable them to contribute to society once they leave school. This includes developing leadership skills. Some pupils are members of the school council, others are prefects or anti-bullying ambassadors. Pupils, including those in Year 7, work with teachers helping younger pupils settle into secondary school as part of the school's primary transfer work.
- Inspectors saw aspects of the school's induction process for primary school pupils during the inspection. This was very effective in helping pupils settle into their new school and to become familiar with the standard of work expected in English and mathematics.
- The support offered to Year 7 pupils who join the school with low literacy and/or numeracy levels is successful. Leaders can show impressive gains in pupils' skill development in a relatively short period of time.
- Pupils told inspectors they appreciate and enjoy the wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer at the school. This includes sport, clubs, trips and overseas visits. Communication with parents on the wider life of the school via the website and school newsletters is very effective.

Governance of the school

- Governors are highly committed, enthusiastic and ambitious for the school. They appreciate that the pace of improvement since the last inspection has been too slow.
- Minutes of governors' meetings show they now hold leaders to account more effectively. There is a clear focus upon governors wanting to see evidence of improving standards through high-quality teaching.
- Governors work well together as a team and with senior leaders. They are clear about the difference between governance and management. Within these boundaries, governors know the school very well. However, they have not questioned the lack of clear direction in the school improvement plan.
- Governors and leaders have taken robust action to make the school more financially viable. This includes making staffing more cost-effective. Recent savings in administration costs and projected increased pupil numbers mean the budget deficit is reducing.
- Governors have not, however, taken enough account of how the school spends additional funding intended for disadvantaged pupils. They have not held the leadership of the school sufficiently to account for the lack of evidence relating to the effectiveness of this spending.
- Governors had not ensured that the website contained all statutory information. This was addressed during the inspection.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- This aspect of the school is strongly led. For example, the process of checks to ensure that staff are suitable to work with pupils is well thought through. Staff do not start until all processes are complete. There is a comprehensive and effective training programme, including an overview given to new staff as part of their induction.
- Pupils told inspectors they felt safe at the school. They could also explain how they are taught to keep safe, including on areas such as behaving sensibly around water, keeping mentally and physically fit and keeping safe online. Leaders' work to ensure the curriculum supports pupils' safeguarding is highly effective.
- Inspectors reviewed school systems in relation to pupils who are taken off the school roll. There were 26 such pupils this academic year. Some pupils move to alternative provision with the agreement of the local authority, other pupils move schools, some families emigrate and some parents decide to home educate their children. Leaders provided clear documentation that these changes are made following appropriate checks and liaison with external agencies.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Requires improvement

- The quality of teaching is far too variable across the school. It leads to many pupils making weak progress in most subjects, including English, mathematics and science. Too many teachers do not take pupils' abilities and aptitudes fully into account in their planning. This means that the activities planned are not appropriate for everyone in the class. As a result, pupils of varying abilities make less progress than they should. At times this poor planning by teachers leads to off-task behaviour which disrupts learning.
- Many teachers have good subject knowledge. However, inspectors and senior leaders in visits to lessons did not see teachers consistently using their subject expertise. For example, teachers do not routinely provide challenging tasks for pupils to think about and act upon. Work seen in books provided insufficient evidence that pupils are being set work to stretch their thinking, thus enabling them to make good progress. Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are sometimes too low.
- Relationships between teachers and pupils support learning. However, there is variability in how this leads to effective class discussion. Some pupils are not supported to become confident in debating or answering questions. This makes it more difficult for teachers to pick up pupils' misunderstandings and help them overcome these.
- Leaders' self-evaluation acknowledges that homework is set too inconsistently. Homework tasks do not consolidate learning nor prepare pupils for any forthcoming work. Pupils rarely record homework in their school planners. Pupils told inspectors that the setting of homework is mixed across subjects.
- Inspectors saw some strong teaching across a number of subjects. This was particularly where teachers, supported by heads of department, are consistent in following leaders' expectations on assessment, challenging pupils' thinking and supporting better literacy standards. Strong and effective questioning was used in

English, mathematics and history to develop pupils' thinking and to make learning more effective and enjoyable. Where teachers have high expectations, pupils respond positively.

- A number of books looked at, especially in English, are well presented, with evidence of the extended writing leaders expect to see. Teachers across the school do not spend enough time developing their practice based upon the good teaching and learning seen in many departments.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Requires improvement

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development requires improvement.
- Pupils' attendance at school is too low. This is especially the case for disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- While there has been some improvement in overall attendance, a fifth of Year 11 pupils have been regularly absent from school this academic year. This clearly has a detrimental effect on the progress they make.
- Pupils are mixed in their views about bullying at school. Most felt that, while it did sometimes occur, it was relatively rare and dealt with quickly and effectively by staff. Pupils felt there was far less bullying than previously. Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, however, felt bullying was more common, although they said teachers did deal with it.
- While many pupils know how to be successful learners, not all teachers plan lessons well enough for pupils to stay on track in lessons. Off-task behaviour disrupting the learning of others is far too prevalent.
- Pupils wear their uniform smartly, even in the very hot weather at the time of the inspection. Most pupils are proud of their school environment and treat it with respect.
- Pupils are unanimous in how well the school helps them to keep safe online and to recognise other potential dangers, including within the local community. Pupils say their teachers encourage them to be physically fit and offer opportunities for them to discuss any emotional concerns they may have.
- Pupils have access to and appreciate the high-quality and impartial careers advice and guidance provided. As a result, they can make well-informed choices about their futures. Some pupils who had already decided upon future jobs, including in medicine and engineering, could explain how the school had helped them with their planning. The careers programme also contributes to almost all pupils moving on to education, employment or training when they leave school.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils requires improvement.
- Pupils' conduct is not consistently orderly in lessons or around the school.
- Pupils explained to inspectors the sanction systems in place to support better

behaviour in lessons but felt these are inconsistently applied. Younger students said about half of their lessons are disturbed at some point by low-level disruption. Older pupils were unanimous in saying teachers are better at ensuring good behaviour than in the past.

- While inspectors saw pupils socialising well in all areas of the school, including within and across different year groups, they also witnessed poor conduct from a small number of pupils. Teachers addressed this quickly, but leaders agree the behaviour of a small minority of pupils is sometimes too volatile and requires their continued attention.
- Until recently, pupils have been excluded from school far more than others nationally, including repeat exclusions for continued poor behaviour. While still high, exclusions are reducing. Permanent exclusions have fallen markedly this academic year.
- Pupils who met with inspectors, both formally and informally, were unfailingly polite. Pupils are generally relaxed and friendly and their communication skills are strong. They make visitors feel welcome.
- Leaders' records show that pupils in alternative provision are on appropriate courses and there are regular checks on their well-being and attendance.

Outcomes for pupils

Requires improvement

- In 2016 and 2017 the progress made by pupils across a range of subjects was among the lowest nationally. Progress for current pupils, although better, is still weak. Moreover, progress is not consistent across year groups or groups of pupils. This is because leaders are not yet fully tackling weaknesses and inconsistencies in teaching, low attendance and some pupils' poor attitudes to learning.
- Disadvantaged pupils make particularly poor progress, despite the school receiving additional funding to address this. While leaders have identified some of the barriers that prevent pupils achieving the results of which they are capable, they have not yet consistently embedded high-quality teaching and learning across the school. This means pupils are not making good progress.
- Pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities have performed poorly over time. Relatively new systems are now supporting these pupils and there is improvement in their performance.
- Current school data, supported by inspection evidence, suggests that standards are improving generally from the low points of 2016 and 2017, but remain well below national standards. Outcomes in Year 9 are particularly low but leaders are aware of this and strategies are in place to reduce the deficits in pupils' skills and knowledge.
- The proportion of pupils who are entered for and achieve the English Baccalaureate is markedly below national averages. This is because of low take-up of modern foreign languages. Leaders' efforts to address this have had variable impact. While there are 40 pupils in the current Year 10 studying languages, there are very few in Year 11 and a similarly low number who have opted for modern foreign languages in Year 9.
- Leaders have implemented strong systems to support the outcomes of less-able pupils and those who speak English as an additional language. Pupils are identified and

assessed accurately. Plans are carefully designed to help them learn well. As a result, these pupils make progress at least in line with other pupils nationally and have done so over time.

- There is a relatively small number of pupils who attend alternative provision. School information suggests that they are placed on appropriate courses and make progress.
- Reading is now better supported in the school, including pupils having access to a relatively well-resourced library. There are now regular sessions in the school day where pupils are expected to read for pleasure. As a result, some pupils are developing a love of reading.

School details

Unique reference number	124390
Local authority	Stoke-on-Trent
Inspection number	10042862

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

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Community
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	605
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Rachel Billington
Headteacher	Katie Dixon
Telephone number	01782 233595
Website	www.bircheshead.org.uk
Email address	kdixon@bircheshead.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	26–27 January 2016

Information about this school

- The school does not meet the government’s current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils’ attainment and progress at the end of Year 11.
- The school meets the Department for Education’s definition of a coasting school based on key stage 4 academic results in 2015, 2016 and 2017.
- Birches Head Academy is smaller than the average-sized secondary school.
- Leaders are applying for the school to become part of the Alpha Academy Trust. Currently governance is provided by the school, the local authority and members of the Alpha Academy Trust.
- Some support is provided to the school by a national leader of education.
- Most pupils are White British.
- The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above average.

- The proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, including those who have an education, health and care plan, is broadly average.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils is above the national average.
- Eight pupils attend alternative provision at Stoke College, Sporting Stars, Alpha Learning and Created Academy, on a full-time basis.

Information about this inspection

- Inspectors undertook a range of activities including observing learning in lessons, an assembly and tutor times.
- Pupils' behaviour was observed before school, at breaktimes, lunchtimes and as they moved around school.
- Inspectors held discussions with senior leaders, other leaders, newly qualified teachers and those new to the profession. The lead inspector met with three governors, including the chair, the chief executive officer of the Alpha Academies Trust and two representatives from the local authority.
- Four groups of pupils met with inspectors. The lead inspector also met with a group of Year 11 pupils who leaders invited back into school especially for this purpose.
- Inspectors looked at pupils' books in lessons and at a large sample of work, with leaders.
- Inspectors considered a range of information about pupils' current and recent achievement.
- Inspectors reviewed a wide range of documentation. This included development plans, external reviews of the school, policies, the minutes of governors' meetings and information on the school website.
- Inspectors took account of nine responses to the online Parent View questionnaire and 12 responses to the questionnaire for staff.

Inspection team

Nigel Griffiths, lead inspector	Ofsted Inspector
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David Hermitt	Ofsted Inspector
Lynda Mitchell	Ofsted Inspector

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In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' refers to those pupils who attract government pupil premium funding: pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years and pupils in care or who left care through adoption or another formal route. www.gov.uk/pupil-premium-information-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings.

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