

Birtenshaw School, Merseyside

82 Higher Lane, Liverpool, Merseyside L9 7AB

Inspection dates

13–15 November 2018

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	Not previously inspected

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school

- The school meets all the regulatory requirements of the independent school standards.
- The executive headteacher has established an ambitious culture where only the best will do. She has rapidly gained the confidence of all those associated with the school.
- Pupils have complex learning and behavioural needs. Strong relationships between adults and pupils enable pupils to grow in self-esteem, confidence and in their ability to collaborate with others.
- Pupils behave well. High-quality training enables staff to establish a calm, learning environment.
- Attendance levels are high and pupils enjoy being in school.
- The rich curriculum and good provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development contribute to pupils' good personal development. The school prepares pupils well for life in modern Britain.
- Teaching, learning and assessment are good. Pupils typically make good progress from low starting points because staff accurately assess their abilities, and tasks are carefully matched to meet their individual needs. Occasionally, opportunities are missed to build on pupils' emerging language skills.
- Parents and carers are very supportive of the work of the school. They are pleased with the provision and the way the school is led.
- Staff are vigilant in all aspects of pupils' welfare and they safeguard pupils effectively. Pupils are safe and secure and increasingly know how to communicate any concerns that they might have.
- Leaders have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and these are reflected in the development plans. However, staff have too little involvement in producing the plans and it is not clear how some of the proposed improvements will be measured.

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?

- Improve teaching and learning, by ensuring that:
 - staff take every opportunity to develop pupils' language skills.
- Improve leadership and management, by ensuring that:
 - staff are encouraged to contribute to the school's development plans
 - plans make it clear how the impact of any changes will be measured.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Good

- Leaders have ensured that the school meets all of the independent school standards.
- The school's mission, to 'brighten lives and build futures', is at the heart of everything that happens at Birtenshaw School. The proprietor and school leaders have the highest aspirations for all pupils who join the school. This is illustrated by the newly opened, high-quality building that has been provided for the pupils. The excellent facilities, including specialist rooms and hydrotherapy pool, are used well to support the needs of the pupils.
- The highly effective executive headteacher leads by example. She has been actively involved throughout the planning for, and opening of the school, including recruiting staff who share her vision for the school. She assumed full-time responsibility for the school following the departure of the head of school in October 2018.
- Staff feel valued and their morale is high. This is because the school is providing them with structures, routines and professional development opportunities.
- Parents, in their written and telephone responses, overwhelmingly confirm that they are happy with what the school provides. They say that staff are friendly and approachable and that they value the daily communication that they receive from the school. As a result, they feel well informed about their children's experiences in school and feel able to complement some of that work at home. 'I'm astounded by the progress my child has made since joining the school,' is typical of comments made by parents.
- The school has established good working relationships with therapists, social workers and other professionals involved in the lives of pupils. This helps to ensure that their wider needs are met through multi-agency working.
- The school's evaluation of its performance is an accurate one. Leaders have identified the right priorities and provided a detailed plan of how they intend to make improvements. Although the school's self-evaluation document and improvement plans are comprehensive and realistic, they are not precise enough. Some sections do not refer to the impact of the changes that have been planned or how the success of future improvements will be measured. Most staff are new to the school and have little involvement in producing the plans.
- Staff performance is managed successfully, with regular opportunities provided by leaders to meet colleagues and provide support where necessary. It is used effectively to improve staff performance. Targets are clear and relevant to the individual members of staff and directly linked to school improvement and pupils' progress. The overwhelming majority of staff comment positively on the level of support they receive in school.
- The curriculum is carefully designed to meet the complex, individual needs of pupils. It is rich and varied, enabling pupils to learn in a supportive and creative environment. Most pupils arrive at the school after experiencing difficulties in their previous schools or settings and have gaps and delays in their learning and skills. Consequently, the curriculum aims to fill these gaps as well as developing pupils' social, emotional, communication and life skills.
- For many pupils, the introduction and consistent use of a picture communication system

have widened their horizons. This means that they are able to communicate their feelings, emotions and needs non-verbally, removing many of the frustrations that they previously experienced.

- The recruitment of specialist staff to work with children in early years is paying dividends. In rapid time, they have transformed the learning environment for younger children. They provide them with regular access to the school's outside areas and numerous specialist areas, such as the sensory integration room and soft-play areas. This helps children to grow in confidence and experience success in their learning.
- The school keeps detailed records of all pupils and their individual needs. Education, health and care plans are well documented and carefully followed. Records of individual pupils' behaviour and starting points are thorough and provide a reliable basis for discussing their academic and social progress. Before pupils join the school, leaders work closely with parents and other stakeholders to meet the pupils and gather information. This is invaluable and contributes to the smooth and efficient transition process.
- Although there are currently no pupils in key stages 3 and 4 or in sixth form, a comprehensive curriculum has been planned for pupils in these key stages, including access to external examinations and accreditations where appropriate. The school is well supported by other schools within the Birtenshaw group, which have extensive experience of working with older pupils. Consequently, the school is well equipped and fully prepared to cater for the older pupils when they arrive.
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and the promotion of British values are threaded sensitively throughout the curriculum according to pupils' understanding and stage of development. The school celebrates different beliefs and cultures, as well as promoting equality of opportunity and diversity. In all classes, a strong emphasis is placed on respecting and valuing each other and making the right choices. This is helping pupils to prepare for their future lives.

Governance

- Governance of the school is effective. Although the governing body has only recently been established, it does not hold back from making significant changes that improve the effectiveness of the school, for example by deploying the executive headteacher to take on full-time responsibility for the school following the departure of the head of school.
- The chair is very experienced and is effective in both supporting the school and holding it to account.
- She has an accurate view of the school's work through regular visits and meetings with the executive headteacher.
- Governors ensure that arrangements to safeguard pupils are effective. Checks are undertaken to ensure that agreed policies are delivered in practice.

Safeguarding

- Arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- The school complies with all elements of the independent school standards regarding the safety of pupils, including publishing a suitable safeguarding and child protection policy on its website. The policy includes current government requirements. Staff are vigilant and

ensure that the safeguarding of pupils is a top priority.

- Staff are appropriately trained in all aspects of safeguarding. Leaders are thorough in following up concerns and ensuring that they inform outside agencies if they are worried that a pupil might be at risk. Staff keep comprehensive records that detail safeguarding concerns and actions. Staff are well trained to recognise signs of radicalisation or extremism.
- Buildings are well maintained and designed to meet the latest safety standards. Access to doors are clear in case of fire, and regular checks of the buildings are made for potential fire risks and other safety hazards.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Good

- Pupils often arrive at Birtenshaw having had unhappy educational experiences in their previous school or setting. Many were unable to cope within a mainstream group.
- Each pupil is carefully assessed before they join the school, often in their previous setting or home environment. Pupils also visit regularly, both with their parents and on their own. Based on these initial assessments, staff plan an individualised timetable and approach for each pupil. These transition arrangements mean that pupils' needs are carefully managed and understood from the moment they arrive. Staff work effectively to help fill gaps in pupils' previous learning.
- Pupils' work, observations of lessons, individual pupils' records and the executive headteacher's records of teaching observations offer strong evidence that both teaching and pupils' learning are good across the school.
- Staff are successful in achieving their number one priority, which is communicating with pupils and helping them to improve within a calm and encouraging environment. Resources are carefully deployed and very well used to support pupils' learning. For example, staff use a wide variety of methods to help pupils communicate and understand if they cannot express themselves verbally. These include pictures, sign language, cue cards and the use of technology.
- Staff have good specialist knowledge. They establish strong and trusting relationships with the pupils they support. This encourages pupils to try out new experiences, take risks and grow in confidence.
- Pupils' behaviour is managed effectively in lessons. Staff demonstrate great patience when dealing with challenging behaviour. Staff are skilled at de-escalating situations and avoiding confrontations. As a result, most classes are orderly, allowing for effective learning to take place.
- Lessons are well planned. Staff are flexible and know the different attention spans that pupils are capable of, as well as their anxiety levels and learning needs. As a result, pupils' records already highlight positive steps in their learning and show how they have improved since arriving at Birtenshaw.
- Just occasionally, opportunities to extend or build on pupils' emerging language skills are missed. For example, some staff ask questions and then provide the answer themselves before pupils have had the chance to reflect on the question or work it out. This hinders their rate of progress.

- Systems for tracking pupils' progress are good. These are closely aligned to the early years foundation stage profile and the national curriculum, enabling staff to set challenging but realistic targets.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Good

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is good.
- For many pupils, attending Birtenshaw has been the first time that they have experienced success in school and enjoyed a period of stability.
- Pupils make good progress in coping with their personal anxieties and emotional barriers to learning. This is due to the quality of the individual care they receive and the strong and trusting relationships they develop with staff. This enables pupils to grow in confidence and self-esteem.
- Parents confirm just how much their children enjoy school. 'I never have a problem getting him to school now. He happily runs out to meet the transport each day,' is typical of the comments made by parents.
- High levels of individual supervision contribute effectively to pupils' safety. The school is a secure environment where adults place a high priority on pupils' well-being. All staff work continually to highlight for pupils' the risks they might face, including e-safety, both in school and within the wider community.
- Staff are highly skilled at recognising pupils' emotions and are often able to pre-empt any difficulties that might occur in lessons. If necessary, pupils are offered support before their emotions escalate or are encouraged to use the safe-space rooms, supervised by experienced staff. Here they can calm down, learn to self-regulate and begin to understand their own role in keeping themselves safe.
- The majority of pupils use non-verbal means of communication, such as picture cards that they point to. This enables them to share how they feel and explain what they want. In this way, staff are able to share with pupils examples of how they can keep themselves safe.
- During the inspection, a group of older pupils from a Birtenshaw group school in Bolton visited to present an 'anti-bullying assembly'. It was well received by the younger children and, at an appropriate level, the lessons from the presentation were shared with pupils in classes.
- Pupils learn about themselves and about the importance of safe and healthy lifestyles. For example, pupils can select their own lunches in the dining room and staff discuss with them what they enjoy and what constitutes a healthy diet.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is good.
- Pupils settle well into school life. Incidents of poor behaviour reduce as pupils understand the routines and expectations and build strong relationships.
- When pupils struggle to manage themselves, good supervision and sensitive responses

from staff enable pupils to calm themselves and re-engage with learning. Detailed records of any incidents are retained and lessons learned are shared with all staff.

- Classroom visits confirmed the good relationships between staff and pupils and, as pupils grow in confidence, increasingly between pupils and their peers. At lunchtimes, staff and pupils enjoy conversations in what is generally the calm atmosphere of the dining room.
- Attendance levels are good and above the national average. The school's own transport system supports this good attendance because, in most cases, an adult from school, known to the pupils, greets them each day at their own home and then escorts them to and from school.

Outcomes for pupils

Good

- Most pupils have complex needs and most pupils' starting points are well below those typical for their age.
- Pupils quickly begin to make progress in an environment which is well suited to their needs and with highly knowledgeable staff who understand their learning needs very well.
- On arrival, most pupils are unable to communicate verbally, so the school rightly emphasises the use of signing and picture communication systems where necessary. In the short time that they have been at Birtenshaw, pupils make rapid progress in their ability to communicate with adults and their peers. Most are able to make their feelings known and can point out which activity they will be trying next. The structure and routine found in each of the classes help to build pupils' confidence and increase their self-esteem.
- Pupils' progress is carefully tracked and they are set challenging but realistic targets. For most pupils, the steps they make are small, but assessments show that almost all pupils are reaching the targets set for them, with many exceeding them. This represents good progress overall and this progress is confirmed by observations of pupils as they go about their activities.
- As the term progresses, an increasing number of pupils begin to communicate verbally, generally using single words or phrases. Parents who spoke to the inspector were understandably delighted with this progress. Sharing books in the well-equipped library with a trusted teacher or learning support assistant encourages pupils to try out new words and build their vocabulary. Some are able to recognise letters of the alphabet and join in with rhyming or number songs.
- Pupils also make huge strides in their personal, social and emotional development. With the support of school staff and the occupational therapist, pupils learn good coping strategies to manage their behaviours and anxieties. For example, there are improvements in their ability to collaborate and take turns and in self-regulating their behaviour. Records also show that many pupils are able to settle to an activity for increasingly long periods.
- Pupils enjoy the well-chosen curricular options open to them, including topics, themes and practical activities outdoors.

School details

Unique reference number	145182
DfE registration number	341/6011
Inspection number	10053742

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 special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	3 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	24
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Birtenshaw
Chair	Kathryn Brown
Executive Headteacher	Julie Barnes
Annual fees (day pupils)	£56,940 to £85,644
Telephone number	0151 317 8277
Website	www.birtenshaw.org.uk
Email address	merseyside.school@birtenshaw.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- Birtenshaw School, Merseyside is part of Birtenshaw, a charitable organisation.
- It is an independent special school registered for 50 pupils from ages three to 19.
- The school was registered with the Department for Education in November 2017 and admitted its first pupils in September 2018.
- The head of school left in October 2018. From that date, the executive headteacher took up full-time responsibility for the school.
- Currently, there are 24 pupils on roll aged from four to 10. Pupils have a moderate to

severe learning disability and/or complex health needs. Many pupils have been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder.

- All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
- The school buildings are new and have additional specialist resources. These include a hydrotherapy pool, multi-sensory room, safe-space rooms and a life-skills room.
- The school is located in Liverpool and pupils are placed at Birtenshaw by two local authorities.
- The school does not use alternative provision.
- This is the school's first standard inspection.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed pupils' learning in all classes. Most of these observations were undertaken jointly with the executive headteacher.
- Meetings were held with the chair of governors, executive headteacher, other school leaders and staff.
- The inspector had phone conversations with parents of pupils, the chief executive officer of the Birtenshaw group and an officer from a local authority that places pupils at the school.
- The inspector met with pupils both formally and informally. He looked at their work and the school's records of their progress. He also listened to individual pupils as they shared books with staff.
- There were insufficient responses to generate a report from Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. The inspector took account of three written submissions.
- The inspector took into account 21 Ofsted questionnaires that were completed by staff.
- The inspector scrutinised a range of documents provided by the school, including those available on its website. The inspector checked the school's compliance with the appropriate regulations for independent schools.

Inspection team

Mike Hewlett, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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