

The Birches

C/o Hexagon Care Services, Unit 1 Tustin Court, Port Way, Preston, Lancashire PR2 2YQ

Inspection dates

16–18 July 2019

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	Good

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is an outstanding school

- The headteacher and staff are passionate about their work and determined to ensure that pupils realise their potential. Together, leaders and staff have systematically addressed the areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection.
- The proprietor, who is also the school improvement leader for all Hexagon Care Group schools, takes a keen interest in the school. Together with staff, she ensures that stringent safeguarding procedures are adhered to and all the independent school standards are met.
- Teaching is outstanding. Teachers know pupils exceptionally well and have high expectations of them. As a result, pupils make exceptional progress in subjects including English, mathematics and citizenship.
- Pupils attain a wide range of qualifications and benefit from excellent work experience. For several years, all Year 11 pupils have gone into either further education, employment or training.
- Opportunities for pupils to read for pleasure are somewhat limited, as is their appreciation of the work of different authors.
- Pupils benefit from an engaging curriculum, which captures their interest, deepens their understanding and ensures their good progress in a wide range of subjects.
- Staff form strong and trusting bonds with pupils. They help pupils to manage their emotions and previous traumatic experiences.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding. They work hard to overcome barriers to learning, attend school regularly and are determined to succeed. The school's work to cater for pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- The school's work to enhance pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding and appreciation of British values is highly effective.
- Parents, carers and representatives from placing authorities indicate that pupils are safe and making outstanding progress.
- Work-based learning providers are highly complimentary about the school, stating that communication is excellent.

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 the quality of teaching and learning by providing more opportunities for pupils to read for pleasure and develop their familiarity with the work of different authors.

Inspection judgements

Effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding

- The headteacher and staff work exceptionally well together to meet pupils' personal, social and academic needs. The headteacher has high expectations of both staff and pupils. Together with staff, and with the support of the school improvement adviser, the headteacher has resolved all areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection.
- The headteacher, teacher and teaching assistant form a highly effective unit. They are determined to equip pupils with the skills they need for the next stage of their learning after leaving school. Staff also help to develop pupils' self-belief and ability to overcome previous traumatic experiences.
- Working in close partnership with the headteacher, the proprietor ensures that stringent safeguarding procedures are adhered to and all the independent school standards are met.
- Staff morale is exceptionally high. All staff were at the school at the time of the previous inspection and all are of the view that the school has improved. Staff are especially appreciative of training and professional development, all of which they say is helping to continually improve their teaching practice. Staff are highly motivated, committed and determined to help pupils succeed in their learning.
- The proprietor takes a keen interest in helping staff to pursue their interests and improve their skills and knowledge. For example, the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) has recently been supported to gain the professional SENCo qualification. The teaching assistant has been encouraged to pursue her passion in teaching art and to learn from outstanding practice in other Hexagon schools.
- Staff plan and devise interesting learning experiences for pupils every day as well as having excellent long-term plans in place. Staff routinely work together and share best practice. All staff play a central role in improving teaching. They do this by observing each other's practice and giving advice on how to improve. The headteacher's feedback to staff is precise and constructive, focusing on what the class teachers and teaching assistant need to do to maintain excellent outcomes for pupils.
- Pupils benefit from a highly stimulating and well-organised curriculum, which is one of the main drivers behind pupils' learning success. Pupils make strong progress to develop the reading, writing and mathematics skills they need to successfully complete a wide range of awards in areas including biology, art and design, computing and history. The curriculum is further enriched to enable pupils to pursue high-quality work placements in areas such as media and creative arts, automobile engineering and construction.
- The school's work to develop pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding and their appreciation of British values is outstanding. Pupils are conversant with topical issues, such as Britain's exit from the European Union. They study and are accredited for their work on the rule of law and have a good understanding of politics and British institutions. Pupils appreciate the culturally diverse nature of British society, understand the principals of the major world faiths, have visited various places of worship and achieve awards for their work on Islam and Christianity.

- Pupils visit local places of interest, including Lancaster Castle and Fleetwood Museum, and take an active interest in local issues. Recently they visited the Salvation Army headquarters to learn about the charity's work with the homeless in Blackpool. Pupils are upstanding citizens. They have a deep sense of social justice and have raised funds for various good causes, including a local hospice. Pupils enjoy outdoor activities and regularly engage in sports, including football, basketball, boxing, badminton, bowling and table tennis.
- Parents and representatives from local authorities praise the school highly. They say that communication is excellent and that the school is very responsive. Parents typically comment: 'Without the school, there would have been nowhere for my child to go. He has made excellent progress' and 'Work experience has improved my child's self-confidence and self-esteem.' Work-based learning providers are equally positive in stating that pre-placement checks are 'rigorous', paying close attention to safeguarding.
- The proprietor knows the school exceptionally well and provides high-quality advice and support to staff, which includes extending pupils' work-experience placements and qualifications options. The proprietor and the newly appointed deputy school improvement adviser challenge the headteacher, providing precise advice which helps to maintain outstanding teaching.

Governance

- The proprietor knows that the headteacher and staff are doing an excellent job. The headteacher is very successful at organising placements, working with partners and ensuring outstanding outcomes, while working with the proprietor to furnish and ensure the suitability of new premises.
- The proprietor is in school regularly. Her background in education and knowledge of all Hexagon schools qualifies her well to provide the support necessary to maintain outstanding provision.
- The headteacher reports regularly to the proprietor and provides detailed reports on matters pertaining to work with placing authorities, pupils' achievement, attendance, behaviour and safeguarding. In addition, the headteacher reports on his work and shares excellent practice with the headteachers' forum, comprising headteachers from Hexagon schools, which is chaired by the proprietor.
- The proprietor has an excellent understanding of safeguarding. She is highly trained and is a designated safeguarding leader. The proprietor plays an invaluable role in supporting the school and has helped it to successfully address areas for improvement identified at the time of the previous inspection.

Safeguarding

- The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.
- All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and there is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school.
- The school has a comprehensive and current safeguarding policy which is available on request. All staff sign declarations to say that they have read the school's safeguarding policy and associated policies.

- Staff and governors have had 'Prevent' duty training, which is part of the government's agenda for tackling radicalisation and extremism. They are familiar with the school's safeguarding policy and associated policies, as well as the latest government guidelines on keeping children safe in education.
- Comprehensive procedures are in place for reporting and recording concerns. Staff are aware of risks associated with individual pupils. They work well with senior leaders to minimise such risks. Staff are expert at spotting signs of neglect and/or abuse and know exactly what to do if they are concerned about a pupil's welfare or safety.
- All appropriate checks are made on staff to ensure that they are suitable to work with children. Risk assessments are regularly carried out to ensure the safety and security of school premises. In addition, school trips and educational visits are risk assessed to ensure pupils' safety.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Outstanding

- The school has three teachers, including the headteacher. Staff form an exceptionally strong and responsive team. Staff know pupils extraordinarily well and have strong trusting bonds with them. Staff also have exceptionally high expectations of pupils and align learning to pupils' interests, aptitudes and abilities.
- Pupils love to engage in topical debates. This was evident during the inspection as pupils considered what it means to be British and discussed the challenges young people often face when out on the streets with their friends. Through skilfully managed debates, teachers ensure that pupils are aware of the dangers associated with gang culture and carrying knives. As a result, pupils reflect on their own circumstances and develop strategies to help them to resist negative peer pressure.
- Teachers encourage pupils to do their best and celebrate pupils' achievements. This is evident in the many displays of pupils' work around the school, which feature pupils' outstanding impressionistic pastel and crayon drawings, well-executed seascapes, photomontages of iconic film scenes and work in the style of American 'pop artists' such as Jackson Pollock.
- Exceptionally strong mathematics teaching helps to ensure that pupils are equipped with the secure calculation and problem-solving skills needed in the world of work and for independent living. Pupils are skilled at interpreting and presenting data in various formats such as histograms, pie charts and scatter and line graphs.
- Teachers' keen interest and specialist subject knowledge in history ensure that pupils are able to sequence important events in British history. Pupils have an exceptionally well-developed ability to empathise with others, as shown in their imagined and moving letters, written from the trenches in Flanders during the First World War to loved ones in England.
- Teachers encourage pupils to appreciate the satisfaction of preparing food and dining with their peers and staff. Recently, pupils cooked and served chicken calzone. Pupils have also made potato and chicken pakoras and informally competed with peers for dining awards. Pupils have been formally accredited for their cooking excellence.
- Teachers help pupils to become efficient readers, skilled at reading short texts and identifying salient information from book extracts. Teachers also encourage pupils to

pursue their reading interests, which mainly relate to technical matters and high-performance cars, and take every opportunity to engage pupils in reading activities in class. However, pupils rarely read for pleasure and have a somewhat limited appreciation of the work of different authors.

- Teachers' work to broaden pupils' geographical knowledge is good, as shown in pupils' geography folders. Pupils have a well-developed knowledge of the Earth's continents. Pupils can accurately match flags to different countries in Asia and Europe and know that there are many different countries on the African continent, several of which they can name. Pupils' work correctly identifies different Australian territories and highlights features in both the Arctic and Antarctic poles.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Outstanding

Personal development and welfare

- The school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is outstanding.
- Soon after starting at the school, pupils begin to acquire the confidence they need to be self-assured learners. Their positive attitudes to learning have a strong impact on their academic progress and personal and social development. Pupils are proud of their achievement, especially in art, and thrive at their work placements. Pupils are especially proud of the many awards they receive in recognition of their excellent achievements.
- Staff constantly focus on developing pupils' pride in the presentation of their work and appearance. Pupils learn about the importance of personal hygiene and how to communicate effectively with others. Pupils know that they only have one chance to make a first impression. They benefit from independent careers advice and learn how to create convincing personal statements. Throughout their time at The Birches, pupils acquire the excellent skills they need to be successful and independent young adults.
- All pupils participate in work experience programmes. Most recently, pupils have successfully completed placements in creative media studios, sports centres and water parks. In addition, they have gained a wide range of skills in areas including automobile engineering and construction. Work-based learning providers speak highly of pupils, describing them as 'punctual', 'committed' and 'eager to do their best'.
- Pupils learn how to relax through meditation and using techniques to keep calm. This was observed during the inspection as pupils closed their eyes and listened to soothing music and quietly spoken instructions. They tensed and relaxed muscles in their arms, legs and face. After the activity, pupils opened their eyes and reported that they felt peaceful and ready to face the rest of the day.
- Pupils know how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. They visit the gym regularly, enjoy boxing and participate in a wide range of team sports. Pupils who spoke with the inspector explained that eating a balanced diet and generally 'looking after yourself' are all essential in order to maintain good mental and physical health.
- Excellent teaching and a comprehensive curriculum which covers the personal, social, health and citizenship aspects of learning help to ensure that pupils are well prepared for adult life. For example, pupils learn how to manage their personal finances and work out monthly bills. They also learn how to read payslips, distinguishing between net and gross

income. Pupils appreciate the importance of pension planning and understand the financial implications of using credit cards.

- Pupils learn about dangers and risks. They are acutely aware of the dangers of using illegal drugs and know that smoking tobacco causes cancer. Pupils know that if they drink alcohol when they are adults, they should do so in moderation to avoid serious illnesses and diseases.
- Pupils say that they always feel safe in school. Pupils constantly talk to staff about their thoughts and feelings and know that any concerns they have will be taken seriously by staff and dealt with immediately.

Behaviour

- The behaviour of pupils is outstanding.
- Most pupils arrive at the school with social, emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties, many having been previously excluded from school. However, the care and support pupils receive at The Birches help them to settle into school life quickly and engage in learning.
- Teachers are expert at identifying and short-circuiting 'flash points'. They employ a wide range of strategies to help pupils to manage their behaviour and emotions and come to terms with previous traumatic experiences. Pupils find art therapy calming, and enjoy using miniature bricks, trowels and cement to build structures, while talking about their feelings and concerns.
- Behaviour in class is usually excellent. Pupils listen to teachers, follow instructions closely and are always prepared to answer questions and share their views. Pupils are punctual to lessons, bring the correct equipment and are ready to learn. If a pupil finds learning difficult, there is always someone available to talk to.
- Pupils know exactly what racism and homophobic bullying are and insist that neither happen at school. They are also adamant that the school is calm and peaceful and that bullying is non-existent.
- Parents and representatives from local authorities are of the view that pupils' behaviour improves very markedly after they start at the school. Work-based learning providers say that pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Inspection evidence, including the school's own behaviour logs, indicates that pupils' behaviour is typically outstanding over time.
- Pupils know that it is important to attend school regularly. Absence is very rare, and it is not unusual for pupils' attendance to be 100%.

Outcomes for pupils

Outstanding

- Pupils start their learning at The Birches with significant gaps in their skills, knowledge and understanding, having spent long periods out of education. This is shown in the assessment information held by the school. On entry, pupils' reading, writing, mathematics and communication skills are below those expected for their ages.
- Inspection evidence, including the school's own data and work in pupils' books and folders, indicates that once pupils have settled into school, they begin to make strong

progress. Over time, pupils acquire skills and develop their knowledge and understanding in a wide range of subjects, including history, computing, science, religious education (RE), physical education (PE) and food technology.

- The school has an outstanding record in rewarding pupils for their sterling work. Many qualifications are available for pupils, accredited by various bodies, including the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). All pupils acquire functional skills in English and mathematics; some follow the GCSE curriculum for these subjects.
- Pupils acquire certificates for their knowledge of problems and healthy lifestyles, and gain 'unit awards' for their knowledge of trench warfare, food hygiene, sports such as table tennis and preparing and cooking food. In addition, pupils have gained BTEC qualifications in food technology.
- Pupils' excellent appreciation of faith diversity is recognised in certificates gained for their understanding of Islamic beliefs and teachings (including when the Koran was revealed to Muhammed and Sunni and Shia Muslims) and their studies of the Five Pillars of Islam.
- Pupils' outstanding progress in art results in their attainment of unit awards, including for creating a piece of themed art using different techniques and demonstrating their understanding and appreciation of design, colour and pattern.
- Pupils' progress in science is good. This year, pupils in Years 10 and 11 successfully completed unit awards in biology on aspects of the human body. Pupils' awards and achievements linked to the rule of law and government recognise their excellent understanding of British values.
- Pupils make exceptionally strong progress in mathematics, which they say they enjoy. Mathematics books are well presented and contain many examples of activities which help pupils to develop their fluency in using operations. Where pupils struggle, for example with algebra, teachers persevere and use different strategies to enhance pupils' understanding.
- Pupils make outstanding progress on their different work placements. For example, current pupils are in the process of acquiring certificates in occupational studies in the workplace. In addition, pupils have gained Level 1 Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) awards in filming and editing.
- Daily one-to-one interventions are available for pupils finding specific aspects of English and mathematics difficult. The school's own records indicate that strong teaching and attention to pupils' specific learning needs ensure that interventions are highly effective in developing pupils' reading, writing and problem-solving skills. However, pupils' reading skills are not as strong as they could be because few opportunities are available for them to read for pleasure and benefit from the fluency that comes with reading regularly.
- The SENCo is highly effective. Her training equips her well in assessing pupils' skills on entry to the school and monitoring their progress thereafter. Most pupils at the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The school's own records show that pupils routinely meet their personal targets. They develop strong speaking, listening, reading and calculation skills. In addition, pupils make strong progress in a wide range of other subjects.
- The school has an outstanding record in creating pathways for pupils. All pupils who have ever left the school have gone into either education, employment or training. Previous

pupils have left the school with strong basic skills and exceptionally positive attitudes to learning. Current pupils are developing excellent skills, knowledge and understanding in a wide range of subjects. As a result, they are very well prepared to be successful in the next stage of their learning after leaving school.

School details

Unique reference number	130902
DfE registration number	888/6096
Inspection number	10092574

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	11 to 17
Gender of pupils	Boys
Number of pupils on the school roll	7
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Hexagon Care Services
Chair	Francis Ashcroft
Headteacher	Craig Gaskin
Annual fees (day pupils)	£30,940
Telephone number	01253 892305
Website	www.hexagoncare.com
Email address	birches.headteacher@hexagoncare.com
Date of previous inspection	18–20 October 2016

Information about this school

- The Birches is an independent special school registered for up to six boys aged 11 to 17 who have social, emotional and mental health difficulties and associated complex challenging behaviour and associated anxiety.
- The Birches is one of a small number of schools which, together with other services, form part of the Hexagon Care Group. Due to the vulnerable nature of pupils, the school does not have a dedicated website. General information about schools and services is available on Hexagon's website. The school aims to 'assist young people in coming to terms with their own abuse and trauma as well as their offending' and to '... support young people to develop empathy and respect for others by promoting positive relationships and

behaviour.'

- Pupils come from several local authorities and all are looked after. All pupils have an education, health and care plan. There are three members of staff: a headteacher, a teacher and a higher-level teaching assistant.
- At the time of the inspection, senior leaders had recruited a specialist science teacher. In addition, the school was in the process of applying to the Department for Education (DfE) for a material change to consider the suitability of new premises. During the inspection, the DfE acknowledged a change in proprietor, from Francis Ashcroft to Caroline Ashdown.

Information about this inspection

- The inspector observed learning in citizenship and meditation. Pupils' English, mathematics, history, geography, art and science work was scrutinised. Assessments in these and other subjects were also examined.
- Meetings were held with the headteacher and the school improvement leader for Hexagon Care throughout the course of the inspection. The inspector also met with all staff, including the SENCo and the higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA), who is also responsible for art and interventions.
- The inspector held telephone conversations with the proprietor, parents, representatives from placing authorities and work-based learning providers.
- The inspector took account of three staff responses to questionnaires completed during the inspection and held separate interviews with three pupils. There were too few responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, to be considered. The inspector took account of two text messages submitted during the inspection.
- The inspector examined a range of documentary evidence. This included pupils' EHC plans, checks on the quality of teaching and teachers' performance, and safeguarding documentation, including risk assessments. In addition, the inspector scrutinised the school's development plans and reviews of its own performance.
- The inspector checked various records of pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour and the school's records and checks on the suitability of staff to work with children.
- At the time of the inspection, few pupils were in school. Year 11 pupils had left, and Year 10 pupils' availability was limited due to scheduled end-of-year trips and work placements.

Inspection team

Lenford White, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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