

# Inspection of Birtley House Independent School

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

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Inspection dates: 19 to 21 October 2022

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## **Overall effectiveness**

**Good**

The quality of education

**Good**

Behaviour and attitudes

**Outstanding**

Personal development

**Outstanding**

Leadership and management

**Good**

Overall effectiveness at previous  
inspection

Outstanding

Does the school meet the independent  
school standards?

**Yes**

## **What is it like to attend this school?**

Most pupils are delighted to attend this school which, from the outside, looks like a big house. The school's close 'family feel' continues this same theme. The culture and atmosphere are those of positivity, expectation and encouragement. It is a climate that is fuelled by adults and pupils alike. Any hint of bullying is rare to see and any issues are successfully dealt with.

Pupils' behaviour and enthusiasm are a credit to them and the school. Pupils are polite in their interactions. Adults show strong awareness and sensitivity to pupils' individual needs. Pupils quickly learn to not mind making mistakes and being corrected. They feel safe to do so, understanding that this helps them learn.

The special things that make each person unique are cherished and celebrated. The school fosters a sense of pride about pupils' particular special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) as part of this, often raising pupils' sense of self-worth and self-belief.

Pupils regularly venture out on trips, including to the library, shops, cafés, castles or different places of worship. The school enjoys helpful links with Brands Hatch racing circuit, whose employees share openly their experiences with older pupils, introducing them to their world of work.

## **What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?**

In this remarkably positive, nurturing and secure environment, pupils' personalities and characters blossom. The development of pupils' social and communication skills is a core part of the curriculum. Pupils are given extra help and specifically targeted support as necessary. The curriculum for relationships education and health education takes account of the latest guidance. It has been shared with parents and carers. Healthy lifestyles are well promoted, but in a sensitive way according to pupils' specific medical and/or dietary needs.

Leaders plan thoughtfully to meet the requirements set out in pupils' education, health and care (EHC) plans, while maintaining a broad, ambitious curriculum. Where suitable, the focus is on meeting pupils' entitlements in class rather than withdrawing them from lessons. Leaders work closely with specialist professionals to train staff to use helpful strategies as part of daily routines.

Teachers' expectations are high, but they judge this carefully to keep the mood in lessons buoyant. Teachers have obvious expertise in teaching pupils with SEND. Adults judge their support well, offering help and encouragement for pupils to do things for themselves. Resources are adapted to support pupils' particular needs and to enable them to access the same learning as their peers. The promotion of inclusion and improving accessibility are central to the school's strategy. Plans show clearly the school's past and present actions to achieve these aims, as well as leaders' future intentions.

Pupils' behaviour in lessons is excellent. They show focus, concentration, obvious effort and usually determination. The day is often punctuated by moments of humour. Pupils and staff enjoy these together, without disrupting the flow of the lesson.

There is a strong commitment that pupils' particular SEND will not prevent them learning to read. Pupils are given the time and repetition they need to succeed. Leaders and staff use a range of well-pitched materials for pupils who need more extensive consolidation. This ensures that pupils get the practice they need without getting demoralised or the feeling that they are stuck on the same reading book.

Whatever their stage of learning to read, most pupils love reading and/or books. Through sharing books together and hearing adults read aloud, pupils are given access to a wide variety of texts. This gives them the chance to experience and be inspired by content, sometimes beyond their current literacy skills.

The mathematics curriculum unashamedly prioritises number skills as the bedrock of mathematics learning. Teachers take care to secure the important foundations of mathematics. They do not compromise on this for the sake of artificially covering more content. Teachers check pupils' progress against the curriculum carefully to judge when the time is right to move on. As a result, pupils become increasingly confident and able mathematicians.

The curriculum in some foundation subjects is in a period of transition. The school has introduced a very new, topic-based 'creative curriculum' for some subjects. Although this remains grounded in previous curriculum plans, choices about the precise content and adaptations to meet the needs of pupils are less advanced or established compared with those for English and mathematics.

There is no doubt that leaders work tirelessly and passionately to continue to improve the school. They have not stood still, achieving a number of successes while leading the school through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders expect much of themselves, staff and pupils. They are mindful of staff workload and well-being, and the atmosphere is one of mutual support. Effective induction of new staff helps them to settle quickly and feel part of the school.

Directors have taken an important step forward to strengthen governance since the previous inspection, forming an advisory board. All of the independent school standards are met. Advisory board members bring a range of valuable experience and expertise. They are reviewing helpful areas of the school's work in a 'critical friend' capacity. However, it is early days. Governance of the quality of education, which the advisory board has not currently been asked to oversee, is still not tight enough.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

The safeguarding policy takes account of guidance and is published on the school's website. It emphasises how pupils' SEND may sometimes make them potentially more vulnerable. Leaders and staff are mindful of this and vigilant about any signs of possible concern. They use deliberate strategies to create a culture and opportunities where pupils are most likely to disclose anything that is wrong. Careful records of any such matters are kept and acted on in line with relevant guidance.

The school's management of health, safety and welfare is diligent and systematic. The attractive environment is very well kept, inside and out.

## **What does the school need to do to improve?**

### **(Information for the school and proprietor)**

- The curriculum in foundation subjects is not as consistently well developed or established as subjects such as English and mathematics. Sometimes, there is not enough clarity about what the most important things for pupils to learn are, or how this learning can be secured to lead to the best possible achievement. Leaders should ensure that it is clear in every subject what pupils should know, and be able to do and remember, and that teachers consistently use effective ways of bringing this learning about.
- Governance of some aspects of the school's work, particularly the quality of education, is not tight enough. The absence of constructive challenge of school leaders on education matters means that they are not as well supported as they could be. The proprietors should ensure that those involved with overseeing the school's effectiveness:
  - have clear terms of reference outlining what they should consider; and
  - the necessary knowledge collectively to probe across all aspects of the school's work, including the quality of education.

## **How can I feed back my views?**

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

## School details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	136211
<b>DfE registration number</b>	886/6136
<b>Local authority</b>	Kent
<b>Inspection number</b>	10232317
<b>Type of school</b>	Other independent special school
<b>School category</b>	Independent school
<b>Age range of pupils</b>	5 to 11
<b>Gender of pupils</b>	Mixed
<b>Number of pupils on the school roll</b>	40
<b>Number of part-time pupils</b>	0
<b>Proprietor</b>	Paul Mortimer-Lee and Camille Maruccia-Lee
<b>Headteacher</b>	Emma Palmer
<b>Annual fees (day pupils)</b>	£15,300 to £39,285
<b>Telephone number</b>	01474 853192
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.birtleyhouseschool.co.uk">www.birtleyhouseschool.co.uk</a>
<b>Email address</b>	<a href="mailto:office@birtleyhouseschool.co.uk">office@birtleyhouseschool.co.uk</a>
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	9 to 11 May 2018

## Information about this school

- Birtley House Independent School provides education for pupils with SEND. The school caters for pupils with specific or general learning difficulties, social and communication difficulties, language and communication needs, and emotional, attachment and anxiety disorders. Most pupils have an EHC plan and many are placed at the school by local authorities.
- The school's previous standard inspection was in May 2018. Since then, the school has formally changed its status from independent school to independent special school. A material change inspection took place in July 2021 to advise the Department for Education on matters relating to this change of registration.
- The school does not use alternative providers.

## Information about this inspection

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

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

This was the first routine inspection the school had received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. The inspector discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and has taken that into account in his evaluation of the school.

- The inspector worked closely with the senior leadership team throughout the inspection. He held extensive discussions with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher. The inspector held a remote meeting with one of the proprietors and met two members of the director's advisory board.
- To help understand the quality of education provided, the inspector carried out focused activities (known as deep dives) in relation to certain subjects. The inspector carried out deep dives in reading, mathematics and history. This involved discussing the curriculum in those subjects with leaders and teachers, visiting lessons, speaking with pupils and looking at their work. He heard some pupils reading.
- In addition to the deep dives, the inspector considered the content of the personal, social and health education curriculum. He also briefly reviewed and discussed with leaders plans for other subjects in the school's 'creative curriculum', and physical education.
- The inspector examined a wide range of documents and records relating to the independent school standards. He explored with leaders and staff the school's work to keep pupils safe.

- As well as informal conversations with staff and pupils, the inspector considered inspection survey responses from 27 parents, 17 staff and 10 pupils.

### **Inspection team**

Clive Dunn, lead inspector

Ofsted Inspector

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