

Inspection of The Birches School

Newholme Road, West Didsbury, Manchester M20 2XZ

Inspection dates: 14 and 15 May 2024

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Early years provision	Good
Previous inspection grade	Outstanding

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils are met each day by staff who know them well and support them into school. Staff forge positive and trusting relationships with pupils. This helps pupils to feel safe. The school has high expectations of what pupils can achieve. Pupils' confidence, resilience and independence grow as they move through the school. They achieve well from their individual starting points.

Pupils play happily together in the playground, and they eat sensibly together in the dining hall. They are respectful to each other and towards adults. Pupils behave well during lessons and when moving around the school. Staff are well trained to respond calmly to some pupils who may be in crisis. Staff use the school's behaviour systems effectively in order to address any incidents of inappropriate behaviour. Pupils' behaviour improves over time.

Pupils enjoy taking part in sports, such as swimming in the on-site pool and football. They recently participated in a table-top cricket competition. Pupils spoke positively about their visits to an art gallery and a zoo. They enjoy learning outside in the woodland area on the school site. Pupils value opportunities to take on responsibilities, such as being school councillors. They learn to help others. For example, pupils raise money for charities through the 'Birches Bake Off' event.

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

The school is ambitious for its pupils. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school identifies the additional needs of pupils quickly. The school's curriculum pathways ensure that pupils receive effective support to meet their needs. Pupils progress well through the curriculum.

The school places pupils' communication at the heart of the curriculum. Staff work together and with other professionals, such as speech and language therapists, to promote pupils' communication skills effectively. For example, staff use verbal reinforcements, sign language and symbols well to help pupils access their learning.

The school is in the process of improving some aspects of the curriculum. In most subjects, it has clearly determined the knowledge that pupils should learn and the order in which it should be taught, from the beginning of the early years to Year 6. This helps pupils to build securely on their earlier learning. However, in a small number of subjects, the school is still identifying what pupils should know and the order in which new learning should be taught. In these subjects, pupils do not learn some of the building blocks that are essential for their future learning.

Teachers typically use a range of assessment strategies well to check what pupils know and to address any errors and misconceptions that they may have. In the main, the curriculum is delivered well.

The school places a strong focus on developing pupils' reading. Children in the Reception class experience different sounds through listening to rhymes and singing songs. Pupils read from books that are carefully matched to the sounds that they know. Many staff who deliver the phonics programme have been well trained. Most deliver phonics sessions and individual reading support effectively. However, occasionally, some staff do not deliver aspects of the phonics programme well enough. This hinders how quickly some pupils learn to read.

The school has devised clear rules and routines. For instance, children in the Reception class learn to take turns and share classroom resources kindly. A small number of pupils struggle to regulate their own behaviour. They have supportive opportunities to use sensory areas and outdoor spaces that help them to improve their behaviour.

Many pupils attend school well. There are a few pupils who do not attend school regularly enough. However, the school provides effective support for these pupils and their families so that, over time, most pupils attend more regularly.

Pupils receive age-appropriate advice about relationships. They find out about democracy through election events. The school is taking effective steps to broaden the experiences that pupils receive, such as by providing more visits to places of interest. Pupils learn about different religions. While pupils celebrate and are respectful of people's differences, some do not have a sufficient understanding of religions, faiths and cultures beyond their own experiences. As a result, some pupils are not sufficiently prepared for life in multicultural Britain.

Governors bring suitable experiences and skills to their roles. They offer informed challenge and support to the school. Governors understand what the school does well and what it needs to do to improve. Staff appreciate the school's efforts in reducing their workload when implementing any changes.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In a few subjects, the school is refining what pupils should learn and the order in which it should be taught. This hinders some pupils from learning as well as they should. The school should ensure that the curriculum identifies the knowledge that pupils should learn clearly.
- A small number of staff do not implement the phonics programme consistently well. This hinders how quickly some pupils learn to read. The school should ensure that staff receive the necessary training to implement the phonics curriculum effectively.

- Some pupils do not have a sufficient understanding of different religions, faiths and cultures. As a result, these pupils are not as prepared as they could be for life in modern Britain. The school should ensure that the curriculum enables pupils to develop their knowledge about different faiths and beliefs so that they are better prepared for their future lives.

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.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with SEND; pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	105613
Local authority	Manchester
Inspection number	10321282
Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	2 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	169
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Barbara Woolley
Headteacher	Rob O'Hara
Website	www.thebirchesschool.org
Dates of previous inspection	11 and 12 July 2023, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- All pupils have an education, health and care plan. The school caters for pupils with severe to profound and multiple learning difficulties and autism. Some pupils have additional sensory and physical disabilities and complex behavioural needs.
- The school currently provides education for pupils aged five to 11.
- There have been recent changes to the school's leadership. This includes the appointment of two deputy headteachers in September 2023.
- The school does not make use of alternative providers.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, deputy headteachers, other leaders and staff.
- The lead inspector spoke with representatives of the governing body, including the chair of governors. He also spoke with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors spoke with pupils about their experiences in school and their views on behaviour and bullying. Inspectors also observed pupils' behaviour during lessons and at breaktimes.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including self-evaluation documents and records of pupils' behaviour and attendance.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors reviewed the single central record, took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in communication and early reading, mathematics, geography and personal, social, health and economic education. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke with teachers, spoke with some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. An inspector observed some pupils read to familiar staff.
- Inspectors met with subject leaders to review other areas of the curriculum.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's online survey for staff.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. An inspector spoke with some parents before the start of the school day.
- There were no responses to Ofsted's pupil survey.

Inspection team

Ahmed Marikar, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Gil Bourgade	Ofsted Inspector
Mary Abeyasekera	Ofsted Inspector

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