

The Birches

Independent Special School

Inspection report

DCSF Registration Number	888/6096
Unique Reference Number	130902
URN for social care	SC362135
Inspection number	331345
Inspection dates	19–20 May 2009
Reporting inspector	Greg Sorrell
Social care inspector	Stephen Trainor

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended. The inspection of boarding was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

An inspection of the boarding provision was also carried out. The full report on this provision is not published but may be obtained from Ofsted by telephoning 08456 404040.

Information about the school

The Birches is small special school owned by Whistledawn Ltd and run by the NorthernCare group. It provides up to 39 weeks education for a maximum of 6 boys. Some are emergency placements with others that are planned. The school is registered for students between the ages of 11 – 17. It is situated in a residential area of Poulton le Fylde, Lancashire. The school opened in 2002. It takes students from locations across the country. All have experienced interruptions in their educational history, for example through repeated family moves or a succession of permanent exclusions. The average length of stay is approximately one year, although one pupil has attended for two years. Most students have statements of special educational need for severe emotional social and behavioural difficulties and nearly all are operating below the level of their peers in mainstream schools.

Evaluation of the school

Quality of education

The quality of education provided is satisfactory and leads to the students making satisfactory academic progress, particularly in mathematics where they gain Entry Level certificates and other awards. As a result of specific support for literacy from the teaching assistant, they make good gains in reading, spelling and comprehension. Several awards are gained in physical activities including, canoeing, swimming, football and the Duke of Edinburgh Award. The proprietor has produced clear policies and schemes of work designed to support the school's curriculum based on the National Curriculum. However, these policies are not always fully implemented and this results in gaps in the school's declared claimed provision. For example, there are too few opportunities to develop investigative skills in science and capability in information and communication technology and design and technology. The creative approach to science makes good links to physical education and first-aid studies but is too narrow. There are no opportunities for Key Stage 3 pupils to study a modern foreign language. The weaknesses are a combination of shortages in subject specific expertise and associated resources in science, ICT and design and technology. In

some subjects, worksheets, although relevant to the subjects, are sometimes overused. When required, staff helpfully support work sent from referring schools when students are nearing GCSE completion.

There is an appropriate focus on the improvement of basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Other programmes include humanities, art and physical education. The provision for personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) is a strength of the school and includes regular sessions run by well informed residential staff. These aspects are well supported by visits from and to external agencies such as health centres and the local Connexions office. In support of the curriculum, excellent use is made of the local community for sports activities that are not possible on site.

The quality of teaching and the assessment of learning are satisfactory. The staff have appropriate subject knowledge to teaching English, mathematics, humanities and personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE). They recognise their shortfalls in the necessary expertise to teach information and communication technology and design and technology. However, there is strong evidence of outstanding expertise related to physical education and outdoor pursuits and this has a significant impact on the students' acquisition of skills and their personal development. The strongest teaching is typically when students are given practical learning activities, for example, practising resuscitation techniques and analysing their height and weight to calculate body mass indexes. Residential staff work very well with students when required although routine opportunities to support homework are missed. Relationships between staff and students are strong in and out of lessons. Relevant staff training on behaviour management has been appropriate and clearly has a positive impact. However, opportunities for training related to the curriculum, assessment and additional special educational needs have been limited.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students is good and all regulations are met. The school places a high priority on developing the students' self-esteem and confidence within the classroom and beyond. Regular use of praise and encouragement allied to positive role modelling and consistent behaviour management by all staff results in the students developing increasingly positive attitudes to learning. This is reflected in much improved attendance and behaviour compared to previous settings. Students new to the school settle in quickly due to good induction programmes and trust in adults who provide a firm but understanding approach to any behavioural difficulties. Breaks and lunchtimes are social occasions and students clearly understand the benefits of healthy lifestyles and nutrition. Their response to the school's efforts to support them stopping smoking is variable but some successes are noted.

Students respond well to the many opportunities to reflect on their behaviour and relationships with others. They develop a good understanding of service for others through their experiences with a range of search and rescue services. A developing moral and social awareness prepares them well for their future lives and helps them to make valuable contributions to school and community life.

Work undertaken through the curriculum gives them a good understanding of public institutions such as health agencies and the police. Recent studies assist the students to stay safe in the community and, for example, sessions on bullying, sexual health and dangers posed by weapons on the street. All students respond well to strenuous efforts to encourage participation in the local community through sports clubs. Cultural visits within the region, for example, to Liverpool, give the students first hand experience of other cultures and the development of a diverse society.

Welfare, health and safety of the students

The school's provision for safeguarding the welfare, health and safety of students is good and all regulations are met. The school establishes appropriate education and behaviour support plans and any incidents of restraint are correctly recorded. School and residential staff have very good working relationships as shown by regular 'handover' meetings and written records. Staffing levels are high and risk assessments are systematically carried out. Procedures for safeguarding students' on-going safety are good and nutritious meals help to keep students fit and healthy. The school works effectively with other agencies to support students' personal welfare. Students say they feel safe and agree with referring local authorities in saying they are pleased with the school's work. Attention given to preparing the students for life after school is good. The working relationships with Connexions and the local business partnership are very effective and students are well prepared for leaving school. The school safeguards students well and all staff receive regular training on child protection. The designated person is fully aware of requirements and all staff are familiar with procedures. The school has prepared a suitable plan designed to increase accessibility to the premises and curriculum over time.

Suitability of the proprietor and staff

The school fulfils its responsibilities to ensure that all staff are appropriately checked prior to taking up their appointments. A comprehensive record is maintained of the checks made.

School's premises and accommodation

The school's premises are located to the rear of the students' living accommodation and comprise of one large classroom and two smaller rooms designated for practical activities and computer assisted learning. There is an additional room, which is used for small meetings. There is good provision for school administration. The school is well maintained and attractively decorated. Flooring is of good quality although the carpeting in the activity room is unsuitable. There is good evidence of students' off-

site experiences displayed on walls, although there are relatively few examples of students' work. The small outdoor area is well used for relaxation. The staff compensate for the lack of space on-site by making excellent use of the local community and beyond for sports and social activities, including an extensive range of adventurous outdoor pursuits.

Provision of information for parents, carers and others

The school provides parents, carers and referring local authorities with all the required information. Responses from these groups indicate that they are satisfied with the work of the school and information received. However, in relation to one student, the school has been unsuccessful in its efforts to engage one local authority in an overdue review of his statement of special educational needs. This review is required to be undertaken as a matter of urgency.

Procedures for handling complaints

The school has a clear, written complaints procedure that meets all the regulations.

Effectiveness of the boarding provision

The residential provision was judged to be good and National Minimum Standards were met. A full report on this provision is available on application to Ofsted.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school meets all of the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended ("the Regulations"), with the exception of those listed below.

The school does not meet all requirements in respect of the curriculum (standard 1) and must:

- implement the curriculum and schemes of work as detailed in the school's written policies (paragraph 1(2))
- provide appropriate experiences in the scientific, technological and linguistic areas of learning (paragraph 1(2)(a)(ii))
- ensure teachers demonstrate appropriate knowledge and understanding of all subjects being taught (paragraph 1(3)(e))
- provide classroom resources of an adequate quality, quantity and range to meet teaching needs in all subjects (paragraph 1(3)(f)).

The school meets the National Minimum Standards for Residential Special Schools and associated regulations.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development by boarding staff:

- ensure that risk assessments clearly identify progress and development
- develop group work linked to the education programmes to provide additional developmental opportunities for the young people
- establish specific equality and diversity training to further develop staff knowledge and practice across all the Every Child Matters outcome headings
- ensure all staff complete their Level 3 National Vocational Training

Inspection Judgement Recording Form

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education			✓	
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils			✓	
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs			✓	
How well pupils make progress in their learning			✓	

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		✓		
The behaviour of pupils		✓		

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils		✓		
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The quality of boarding provision

Evaluation of boarding provision		✓		
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School details

Name of school	The Birches		
DCSF number	888/6096		
Unique reference number	130902		
Type of school	Special		
Status	Independent Special		
Date school opened	2002		
Age range of students	11–17		
Gender of pupils	Boys		
Number on roll (full-time students)	Boys: 3	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of boarders	Boys: 3	Girls: 0	Total: 0
Number of pupils with a statement of special educational need	Boys: 2	Girls: 0	Total: 2
Number of pupils who are looked after	Boys: 3	Girls: 0	Total: 3
Annual fees (boarders)	£100,000 - £150,000		
Email address	birches.education@northern-care.co.uk		
Headteacher	Mr Mike Simpkins		
Proprietor	NorthernCare		
Reporting inspector	Greg Sorrell		
Dates of inspection	19–20 May 2009		