

The Birches

Independent school progress report

DCSF registration number	888/6096
Unique Reference Number	130902
Inspection number	353996
Inspection dates	31 March 2010
Reporting inspector	Saleem Hussain

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Purpose and scope of the visit

This inspection visit was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002¹, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005².

The visit was conducted at the request of the Registration Authority for independent schools in order to monitor the progress the school has made in implementing its action plan following the previous inspection.

Information about the school

The Birches is a small special school owned by Whistledawn Ltd and run by Northern Care. It provides up to 39 weeks education for a maximum of six boys. Some are emergency placements while others are planned placements. The school is registered for students between the ages of 11 and 16 years. Currently there are three students on roll. The school 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. Most students have statements of special educational needs for severe emotional, social and behavioural difficulties and nearly all are operating below the level of their peers in mainstream schools.

Context of the visit

The boarding provision was last inspected by Ofsted in October 2009. The school had its last inspection of education in May 2009. It was required to produce an action plan that was accepted in November 2009. This is the report of the first monitoring visit to evaluate progress against the school's action plan.

Summary of the progress made in implementing the action plan

At the last inspection, the quality of education was judged to be satisfactory and this led to the students making satisfactory academic progress. Personal development and the overall welfare, health and safety of students were good. The school met most of the independent schools regulations. The school had clear policies and schemes of work to support the curriculum, based on the National Curriculum. However, these policies and schemes were not always fully implemented and this resulted in gaps in the school's provision. There were not enough opportunities to develop investigative skills in science and to develop skills in information and communication technology (ICT) and design and technology (DT). Also, there were

¹ www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2002/ukpga_20020032_en_14#pt10-ch1-pb4-l1g162

² www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts2005/ukpga_20050018_en_15#sch8

no opportunities for Key Stage 3 students to study a modern foreign language. Finally, there were shortages in subject-specific teaching expertise and associated resources in science, ICT and DT.

The education manager and headteacher developed clear strategies and procedures to remedy the weaknesses identified at the last inspection. The school reviewed the implementation of the whole curriculum. Subject policies, timetables and schemes of work were checked to ensure that the school provided enough experiences in all the required areas of learning. The schemes of work for science, ICT and DT were extended to include all the experiences recommended by the latest national guidance. The school also investigated students' preferences about learning a modern foreign language and found that French was the choice. Additional staff training was provided to improve subject knowledge, for example by drawing on the expertise of other teachers working for the company. The school carried out an audit of all learning resources in order to improve the range and quantity. The accommodation was reorganised to provide a dedicated classroom for teaching DT.

Through fully implementing the agreed action plan, the school has remedied all the shortcomings. The curriculum policies and schemes of work are now fully implemented. The school timetable reflects this. Discussions with students confirm that they now enjoy a broad curriculum which gives them sufficient experiences in all the required areas of learning. Students say that they like French lessons and there are plenty of opportunities to develop investigative skills in science and skills in ICT and DT. Teachers demonstrate appropriate knowledge and understanding of the subject matter being taught. For example, in a science lesson the teacher used his knowledge of human biology to plan challenging work to enable students of all abilities to learn and make progress. The school has also made improvements to the quality, quantity and range of resources. Lessons make good use of these resources. The school now has sufficient textbooks to meet teaching and learning needs. The ICT suite is well equipped to support the development of skills and the new DT room has many suitable resources for students to use.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school has made good progress and now meets all regulatory requirements.

School details

Name of school	The Birches
DCSF number	888/6096
Unique reference number	130902
Type of school	Special school for students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties
Status	Independent
Date school opened	2002
Age range of students	11-16 years
Gender of students	Boys
Number on roll (full-time students)	3
Number of students with a statement of special educational need	2
Annual fees (boarding)	£130,000
Telephone number	01253 316160 (Company office)
Email address	birches.education@northern-care.co.uk
Headteacher	Mr Mike Simpkins
Proprietor	Whistledawn Ltd; trading as Northern Care
Reporting inspector	Mr Saleem Hussain
Dates of inspection	31 March 2010