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Mr Andy Pitts  
Headteacher  
The Birches School  
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Dear Mr Pitts

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your senior staff gave me when I inspected your school on Tuesday 10 February 2009, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please thank the governors, staff and pupils who also gave up their time to talk to me and answer my questions.

As a result of the inspection on 25-26 June 2008, the school was asked to ensure all safeguarding checks comply fully with statutory requirements; ensure leaders and managers eliminate all risks to health and safety; and, ensure teachers' planning and recording identifies what individual pupils are expected to learn in lessons.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making outstanding progress in addressing the issues and in raising pupils' achievement.

The last inspection report makes clear that a shortcoming in safeguarding checks was the reason for the inadequate overall judgement given to the school. All aspects of safeguarding have been reviewed and procedures and practices to ensure child protection are now exemplary. The senior management team has applied the same sharp focus to managing risk and ensuring pupils' health and safety as it has to safeguarding, and this aspect of the school's care for pupils' safety and well-being is now also exemplary. The third area for improvement, concerning the teachers' provision for pupils' individual learning needs, is fully resolved.

The safeguarding procedures have been transformed. The school meets all the government's requirements for safeguarding. The strengths of its procedures are based around the secure single record of Criminal Record Bureau checks for all staff and volunteers and the quality of its training in safeguarding. Staff due to have their suitability to be with children reviewed are automatically flagged for attention to senior staff. Senior staff rigorously ensure that staff employed by all of the many



authorities and organisations involved with the school can provide evidence of their own checks before allowing access to children. Disclosures are carefully considered before the individuals concerned are accepted within the school. All of the staff spoken to, including teachers and teaching assistants new to the school or working on a temporary basis at the school, had been trained or had their training refreshed as a priority on joining the school. The training materials are of high quality and are taught by qualified staff.

The assessment of risk has also been transformed. Senior managers have reviewed every aspect of the school building and the way it operates in the light of risk posed to pupils and staff. Particular attention has been given to the use of the hydrotherapy pool, to visits out of school and for the health and safety of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and the staff who work with them. The assessments are highly specific to the individual location but the procedures are entirely consistent throughout the school. There is outstanding attention to detail; for example, in planning a trip out of school, staff ask for the risk assessment from the venue, assess the risks during the journey, and tailor the risk assessment of the venue and the journey to the specific disability of the pupils who are going on the trip. With regard to the hydrotherapy pool, a risk assessment is completed each day and signed off by a senior manager before it can be used. At least one member of staff present must be trained in resuscitation techniques before permission is given.

Staff are positive about the tightening of arrangements for safeguarding and for risk assessment. They feel the school is safer for them and for the children.

Teachers' planning of lessons to meet the pupils' individual learning needs is of good quality. Strategies that are consistent across the school make the learning intended in each lesson, or over a short period of time, clear to the pupils by way of prominently displayed targets for literacy, numeracy and for personal development and life skills. Pupils are increasingly involved in assessing their own progress. The focus of teaching and learning has moved clearly to the impact on pupils' learning. Teachers' planning and records of progress are rigorously monitored by the senior managers to ensure consistency, as is the quality of the pupils' individual education and behaviour plans. The progress in this area for improvement, as in the two other areas, has been enhanced by the linking of The Birches to a secondary specialist support school within the local authority recognised by Ofsted for the outstanding quality of its work.

The leaders and managers of the school at all levels have risen exceptionally well to the challenges they face. Senior managers in particular, provide a very clear direction for staff through the quality and clarity of their documentation, the transparency of their arrangements to monitor and evaluate the work of the school, and because of their commitment to continuous professional training for staff and volunteers. Governors, who remain very proud of the school and what it achieves for its pupils, now provide a rigorous oversight of the work of senior managers. They recognise their accountability for the school and seek to understand for themselves the impact of new policies before they approve them. As an example, the governors

on the senior management group visited the hydrotherapy pool to examine the risks and proposed arrangements for themselves before they accepted the risk assessment for this facility.

The local authority has provided good support for the school to tackle the weaknesses identified in the inspection report. Most effectively, it brokered the arrangements between the school and the outstanding secondary specialist support school and ensured that advice and challenge for the school was of high quality. Such is the progress made by The Birches that links between the two schools are now of mutual benefit.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Brian Padgett  
Her Majesty's Inspector