

The Birches School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	105613
Local Authority	Manchester
Inspection number	331551
Inspection dates	8–9 July 2009
Reporting inspector	Michael McDowell

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

The registered childcare, managed by the governing body, was inspected under section 49 of the Childcare Act 2006.

Type of school	Special
School category	Community special
Age range of pupils	2–11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number on roll	
School (total)	107
Government funded early education provision for children aged 3 to the end of the EYFS	0
Childcare provision for children aged 0 to 3 years	0
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mrs Sharon Byrne
Headteacher	Mr Andy Pitts
Date of previous school inspection	25 June 2008
Date of previous funded early education inspection	Not previously inspected
Date of previous childcare inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Newholme Road West Didsbury Manchester Lancashire M20 2XZ
Telephone number	0161 4488895
Fax number	0161 4454970

Age group	2–11
Inspection dates	8–9 July 2009
Inspection number	331551

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Further copies of this report are obtainable from the school. Under the Education Act 2005, the school must provide a copy of this report free of charge to certain categories of people. A charge not exceeding the full cost of reproduction may be made for any other copies supplied.

Introduction

The inspection was carried out by two additional inspectors.

Description of the school

The Birches is a school for girls and boys aged 2 to 11 who have statements of special educational needs because of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Most pupils have severe learning difficulties (SLD). A substantial minority have autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) or profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). There is also a small group of pupils who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). There are more than twice as many boys as girls. Just over one in three of the pupils is White British and a slightly higher proportion is British Asian, chiefly of Pakistani heritage. Other pupils are from a Black, Black British Caribbean, or Black British African background. Thirty-seven pupils speak English as an additional language and are at an early stage of acquiring English. There is a very small number of asylum seekers and looked-after children on roll. The school makes provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage either in its 'explorers' class or in specialist classes for those with PMLD or ASD. The school has been awarded the Sports Activemark and the Gold Healthy Schools Award.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Overall effectiveness of the school

Grade: 1

In accordance with section 13 (5) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires significant improvement.

This is an outstanding school that has put behind it the significant weaknesses revealed in the last report. It provides a safe and secure learning environment in which children thrive. Parents praise the school. They feel that their children make good progress. They describe it as a happy place in which their children receive love as well as effective education. Because of pupils' learning difficulties and/or disabilities, standards are very much below those expected for children their age in mainstream schools. However, achievement is outstanding. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage get off to an excellent start and make exceptional progress in relation to their capabilities. Pupils, irrespective of the nature of their learning difficulties, continue to make outstanding gains throughout their time in school. All groups including those with the highest level of dependency make exceptional progress in developing communication skills. Pupils with less profound and complex needs develop their speaking, listening and reading remarkably well and make good progress in their writing. Writing is particularly challenging for many pupils who have disabilities that affect their physical control. Pupils also make excellent progress in mathematics, information and communication technology (ICT) and all other subjects. They meet or exceed the challenging learning targets that are set for them. There are no significant differences in achievement between girls and boys or ethnic groups. Pupils looked after by the local authority do as well as all others. Pupils owe their success to provision that is of the highest quality.

Teaching and learning are outstanding. Teachers and classroom teams know their pupils exceptionally well. They thoroughly understand their needs and set tasks that are challenging but carefully matched to their capabilities. Relationships between staff and pupils are excellent and help pupils' confidence and learning. The curriculum is exemplary. Best practice is followed in making the National Curriculum accessible to groups of learners whose particular learning difficulties mean that they have distinct and different requirements. There is great emphasis on teaching pupils to be healthy, safe and confident.

Care, guidance and support, which were inadequate at the last inspection, are now outstanding. The school's attention to ensuring the health, safety and welfare of pupils is exemplary. There are robust, regularly reviewed policies for child protection and health and safety. Due attention is paid to risk assessments. Particular care has been taken to ensure that children are safe when using the hydro-therapy pool. Pupils are given all the guidance they need to improve their work and their personal development. The excellent teaching, care, guidance and support given to the pupils lead to outstanding personal development. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is exemplary. Pupils are confident and really enjoy coming to school. They are well informed about healthy lifestyles and are physically very active. They are proud of their role in improving the school through use of their school council budget. They develop communication and self-help skills that will stand them in good stead in the next stage of their education.

Leadership and management was judged inadequate at the last inspection because of deficiencies in safeguarding procedures. It is now outstanding. The headteacher and all in leadership roles have worked hard and effectively to address the areas for improvement flagged up by the last inspection. At the same time they have continued to focus on raising the quality of teaching

and learning, developing the curriculum and improving achievement. They have been very successful. The school continually reviews its practice and analyses outcomes. It understands its strengths and areas for improvement very well. It keeps a close eye on pupils' performance. The school has a very strong commitment to equal opportunities and eliminating discrimination. It works highly effectively with others to promote pupils' well-being. It has made an excellent start in promoting community cohesion. Governance is outstanding. The school provides outstanding value for money and under its current leadership is excellently placed to continue to improve.

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

Grade: 1

Provision to meet the needs of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage is outstanding. All children work on all the areas of learning in a way best suited to their individual needs. Children who have SLD are in the 'explorers' class. Others who have PMLD or autistic spectrum disorders are taught in specialist classes alongside children who are a little older but at a similar developmental stage. Achievement from very low starting points is outstanding. Those in the PMLD groups respond to their stimulating learning environment and begin to develop awareness of others and the world around them, as well as communication skills. Those with ASD do exceptionally well in an environment in which stimulus is kept deliberately low. They interact excellently with their teachers and make use of a picture exchange system to communicate. All of these children have access to outside play areas and they are encouraged as much as possible to explore and make choices. Those in the 'explorers' class are enthusiastic learners who respond very positively to carefully planned learning opportunities. There is a balance of child-chosen and adult-led activities. Excellent use is made of outdoor space. Children's personal development is excellent and their social skills and emotional well-being are fostered very well. All children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are given outstanding help to learn and develop. Promotion of their welfare is exemplary and all care and welfare requirements are met fully. Leadership of the Early Years Foundation Stage is highly effective and provision is excellently managed.

What the school should do to improve further

There are no areas for improvement in addition to those already identified by the school. The school knows the steps it must take to continue to improve and has well developed and appropriate plans.

Achievement and standards

Grade: 1

Pupils across the age range achieve exceptionally well. Those with the highest levels of dependency and the most profound learning difficulties are given tasks that fully match their capabilities and extend their experiences. As a result they continually make highly significant gains. They move from barely acknowledging others and their environment to joyfully recognising their teachers. They make positive, happy responses to activities that make use of all their senses to extend their awareness of the world around them. Pupils with autistic spectrum disorders thrive in a setting in which understanding of the nature of their needs and learning difficulties is excellent. They make outstanding progress particularly in developing communication skills using a picture exchange communication system. Their personal and social development is notable and their ICT skills develop strongly. The progress made in literacy and numeracy by pupils with severe learning difficulties is first-rate. The school gauges this accurately

against the p-scales, a way of measuring achievement that is sufficiently sensitive to pick up the comparatively small gains made by such children. These pupils make excellent progress in developing independent learning skills. They do very well in English, mathematics, ICT and all the subjects they are taught. Pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties make outstanding progress in their personal and social development and as a result become successful learners. From low starting points they make up lost ground in all areas of the curriculum. Their speaking, listening and reading skills develop rapidly. They make good progress in writing. Their achievement in mathematics and ICT is excellent.

Personal development and well-being

Grade: 1

Pupils exceptional personal development is illustrated very well in the school council. Members are confident, relaxed, articulate and eager to convey their enjoyment of school. They are proud that they have been given responsibility to speak out for others. They use their significant budget to good effect and have organised discos and purchased better resources for the playground. They are sure that their work has had a positive impact on the school. Pupils across the age range make great strides in developing their social and communication skills. They learn to recognise their feelings and emotions and those who, in the past, have had difficulties in controlling their negative impulses begin to do this. Pupils have very clear understanding of the importance of healthy eating. They are very keen on their school meals and know that a healthy lifestyle includes plenty of exercise. They know how they should behave in order to stay safe and they are respectful to one another. Pupils thoroughly enjoy coming to school. They say that they enjoy their lessons and they are particularly pleased with how well they are getting on. Their attendance is excellent. Pupils help where they can around the school and develop their independence by taking on responsibility for tasks such as clearing-up or delivering registers.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning

Grade: 1

There is much exemplary teaching and learning in all areas of the school and lessons are consistently outstanding or good. This is because teachers have excellent knowledge and understanding of their pupils' needs and capabilities and are highly resourceful in finding ways to engage even those who are hardest to reach. Classroom teams are of exceptional quality. They understand and carry out their roles extremely well. Learners are engaged by very well chosen tasks and activities and encouraged by guidance and praise to do as well as they can. They are given very clear messages about their successes and what they should do next. Planning is very thorough and note is taken of even the smallest gains made by pupils. The management of classes in which many activities may be taking place simultaneously is superb. It is very rare for pupils to become fractious or un-cooperative in the very calm and positive climate for learning that teachers create. All such incidents are dealt with swiftly and the learning of others is not disrupted. Parents overwhelmingly report that they feel that their wishes are respected and that they are treated as partners in their children's education.

Curriculum and other activities

Grade: 1

The curriculum fully meets National Curriculum requirements and the varied needs of individual pupils. Those in the Early Years Foundation Stage who, because of the profound and complex nature of their learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are not placed in the Early Years Foundation Stage 'explorers' class are given access to the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum through expertly adapted learning experiences. For most pupils the primary requirement is to develop their communication and self-help skills. The school offers excellent programmes to teach picture exchange communication, signing, oral communication, reading and writing. Pupils also have excellent opportunities to develop their IT skills. Independence, social understanding and self-confidence are fostered very well in subjects across the curriculum and especially in personal, social, health and citizenship education. There are many imaginative enrichment activities. Recently an overnight camp was organised in the extensive school grounds that thrilled those who took part. There are lunch-time and after-school clubs, and performances by visiting artistes such as the 'Oily Cart' company bring about great enjoyment and make learning great fun.

Care, guidance and support

Grade: 1

This is now a very strong aspect of the school's practice. A great deal of work has taken place to put right the deficiencies identified at the last inspection. This effort has paid off. The school is now held to be a model of good practice in its own area. Safeguarding procedures now fully meet present government requirements. Robust policies and protocols are in place to ensure child protection and the health and safety of pupils. All staff members are familiar with these procedures. They know what is expected of them. Where these are required, pupils have clear health care plans. The school thoroughly monitors the progress of its pupils. Every pupil is given excellent guidance that enables them to achieve as well as possible. All have individual plans with specific targets. These are reviewed termly, or earlier if targets have been achieved. Guidance for pupils with behavioural and emotional difficulties is a significant strength. These pupils are very familiar with the clear personal development goals set for them. Excellent liaison with other agencies ensures that pupils receive the therapeutic help they require. There are physiotherapists based on site and visiting speech and language therapists. The school has used its own resources to acquire the services of a music therapist. Children at risk are identified at the earliest possible stage and the school takes a lead in marshalling support from outside agencies to help pupils and families experiencing significant difficulties.

Leadership and management

Grade: 1

Leadership has been very effective in putting right the inadequacies identified at the last inspection and in pressing forward to raise achievement. The headteacher and the leadership team are fully supported by the staff in making the school as good as it can be. The school is very well managed and resources are used to great effect to improve provision and learning outcomes. The governors are rigorous and – while very supportive – they hold the school to account. They have been especially vigilant in ensuring that provision for ensuring pupils' safety is effective. The leadership knows the school very well. It keeps it under review and tracks the

progress of all pupils. Tracking data is closely analysed and challenging attainment targets are set. The school currently makes use of a benchmarking system to describe the extent of pupils' achievement over time. It realises, however, that this system is not suited to quantifying the progress of pupils with more profound and complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities. It is seeking an alternative. The school has excellent relationships with parents. It is open to their views and tries to resolve any queries or complaints it receives in an open manner. The school's work towards promoting community cohesion is extensive and imaginative. It is, for example, taking steps to provide transport so that isolated families without their own car can send their children to after-school clubs. It has worked with national organisations to promote disability awareness in the area and staff members have taken the trouble to learn phrases in many languages so that they can greet parents in their own language. The school has an 'minority ethnic support worker' and has taken the important step of appointing a family liaison officer to support those in minority groups.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the guidance 'Complaints about school inspection', which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Annex A

Inspection judgements

Key to judgements: grade 1 is outstanding, grade 2 good, grade 3 satisfactory, and grade 4 inadequate	School Overall
---	----------------

Overall effectiveness

How effective, efficient and inclusive is the provision of education, integrated care and any extended services in meeting the needs of learners?	1
Effective steps have been taken to promote improvement since the last inspection	Yes
How well does the school work in partnership with others to promote learners' well being?	1
The capacity to make any necessary improvements	1

Effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage

How effective is the provision in meeting the needs of children in the EYFS?	1
How well do children in the EYFS achieve?	1
How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the children in the EYFS?	1
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	1
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	1
How effectively is provision in the EYFS led and managed?	1

Achievement and standards

How well do learners achieve?	1
The standards ¹ reached by learners	4
How well learners make progress, taking account of any significant variations between groups of learners	1
How well learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make progress	1

¹Grade 1 - Exceptionally and consistently high; Grade 2 - Generally above average with none significantly below average; Grade 3 - Broadly average to below average; Grade 4 - Exceptionally low.

Personal development and well-being

How good are the overall personal development and well-being of the learners?	1
The extent of learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	1
The extent to which learners adopt healthy lifestyles	1
The extent to which learners adopt safe practices	1
The extent to which learners enjoy their education	1
The attendance of learners	1
The behaviour of learners	1
The extent to which learners make a positive contribution to the community	1
How well learners develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	1

The quality of provision

How effective are teaching and learning in meeting the full range of learners' needs?	1
How well do the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of learners?	1
How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?	1

Leadership and management

How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting all learners?	1
How effectively leaders and managers at all levels set clear direction leading to improvement and promote high quality of care and education	1
How effectively leaders and managers use challenging targets to raise standards	1
The effectiveness of the school's self-evaluation	1
How well equality of opportunity is promoted and discrimination eliminated	1
How well does the school contribute to community cohesion?	1
How effectively and efficiently resources, including staff, are deployed to achieve value for money	1
The extent to which governors and other supervisory boards discharge their responsibilities	1
Do procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements?	Yes
Does this school require special measures?	No
Does this school require a notice to improve?	No

Annex B**Text from letter to pupils explaining the findings of the inspection**

My colleague and I really enjoyed being with you when we inspected your school. We thought that you looked so happy and so pleased with what you were learning. Those of you in the School Council should be really proud of the good things you have done for all the other children. We were very impressed by the way you thought of others and not just yourselves. You said that you really liked lots of your lessons. You also really enjoyed other things like the chance to camp in the grounds or to have the Oily Cart performers in the school. You know a lot about how to keep healthy and safe. Some of you said that you loved your school dinners and that these were very healthy. None of you were at all afraid to come to school and you did not think there was any bullying going on. You know that you can turn to your teachers for all the help you need.

We agree with you that yours is a lovely school that does as much as it can for you. We will describe it as outstanding in our report. It no longer needs a 'notice to improve'. You achieve as well as you can because you are taught so well, are given such interesting and fun things to do and receive excellent help, care and support. You are kept as safe as possible. You behave extremely well. I was extremely impressed by those of you in the POD. You are really learning to be excellent pupils. Your school is led and managed extremely well. Your headteacher and all the staff know exactly what to do to keep your school as good as it is and where possible make it better.

Thank you once again for a lovely two days and best wishes to you all.