

Inspection of Birchwood School Bolton

Milnthorpe Road, Broughton, Bolton BL2 6PD

Inspection dates: 10 to 12 June 2025

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Requires improvement

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous inspection

Not previously inspected

Does the school meet the independent school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils enjoy coming to this welcoming school. They often join the school having been out of education for a long time or having had difficulties in previous settings. Staff support pupils to get back on track with their education.

The school expects all pupils, who all have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), to achieve well. However, there are weaknesses in how well the curriculum for pupils across school is designed and delivered in several subjects. This means that some pupils do not achieve as well as they should.

Staff help pupils to regulate their own behaviour and to manage their emotions. Staff notice when pupils experience distress or discomfort and they respond quickly and sensitively. Pupils enjoy affirming relationships with caring staff. They know that there are trusted adults who they can speak to about any worries that they may have.

Staff routinely look for ways to encourage pupils' confidence, resilience, and self-belief. For example, pupils are looking forward to the 'Birchwood's Got Talent' contest, where they can show off their musical talents such as singing, dancing, and playing instruments. However, pupils are yet to benefit from the full range of personal development opportunities that the school would like to offer.

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

From the time of the school's registration in August 2024, it has had delays in opening. The school eventually opened to pupils in January 2025, although several staff and pupils only started at the school a few weeks ago. The proprietor shares the school's ambition and commitment to provide a high-quality education for pupils. However, this is not fully realised. For example, the new leadership team has acted rapidly to establish the school but has not yet developed the curriculum as much as it would have liked.

In the subjects that are designed well, the school has given careful thought to the important knowledge that pupils should learn. However, curriculum thinking in other subjects is less well developed. In these subjects, the school has not set out the order of knowledge that it wants pupils to learn as clearly as it should. This means teachers are not always clear about what to teach and when. As a result, in these subjects, some pupils do not learn as well as they could. Nevertheless, the school seeks to ensure that pupils are well prepared for their next steps in education. This is particularly evident in key stage 4, where pupils study a suite of qualifications, including functional skills and GCSEs.

Teachers are knowledgeable about their subjects. They explain things clearly to pupils and design learning activities that capture pupils' interests. Teachers provide pupils with many opportunities to revisit and recap important learning. Where this is most effective, pupils remember their learning well.

The school knows that many pupils arrive with gaps in their knowledge. In some subjects, teachers effectively collect information to shape learning that helps pupils to bridge these gaps. However, in some other subjects, this is not the case. Staff do not check carefully enough what pupils know and have learned. This means that staff sometimes miss gaps in pupils' knowledge.

All pupils have education, health, and care (EHC) plans. Staff offer a range of support to help pupils to achieve academically and to build their social, communication and independence skills. However, the information gathered about pupils' individual needs, is not translated into measurable steps that are precise enough to help them to achieve their potential. This can affect teachers' ability to meet pupils needs effectively.

Reading and learning to communicate effectively is a priority. Sharing stories and reading books is a prominent feature in all classrooms. Pupils benefit from learning the foundations for reading, for example through listening and responding to sounds around school. Pupils who are ready to learn phonics are given the opportunity to develop their early reading skills. Staff apply a range of communication strategies across the school, including visual timetables and the use of symbols, to help pupils to respond to their learning and express their needs. However, some staff do not have the expertise to deliver the phonics programme consistently well. Nor are they consistently developing pupils' communication skills. This slows some pupils' progress in becoming confident and fluent readers and communicators.

The school is typically a calm place where pupils can learn. Through staff's kindness and patience, pupils become motivated learners. Many pupils join the school after having long periods of non-attendance in previous settings. The school analyses and tracks absence appropriately. It is successful at re-engaging pupils back into school. Consequently, pupils' attendance is positive, with most pupils attending every day.

Pupils' personal development is highly valued, although some aspects are more developed than others. Pupils are encouraged to think of others. For example, they enjoy participating in fundraising events and making items to sell for charity, such as friendship bracelets. Pupils learn about the protected characteristics and the importance of fundamental British values, such as respect and tolerance. This helps pupils to prepare for life in modern Britain. A programme of enrichment activities, such as visits to museums, cycling, gardening, and kayaking, is intended to provide wider opportunities for practical experiences to help build pupils' confidence and independence. However, the programme is yet to be put in place. As a result, pupils do not fully benefit from some opportunities beyond the academic curriculum.

The school has developed its careers, advice and guidance offer for pupils. From Year 7 onwards, pupils are provided with opportunities to experience an increasing range of professions and careers.

There were some independent school standards (the standards) related to the health and safety of pupils and the premises and accommodation that were not met at the start of the inspection. This included the cleanliness of some classrooms and the procedures for administering first aid and intimate care. Although pupils were not at risk of immediate harm, the proprietor did not have sufficient oversight or rigour in ensuring that the standards related to health and safety were consistently met. Swift action from the proprietor during the inspection ensured that most of these standards were met by the end of the inspection.

The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equalities Act 2010. It has an accessibility plan that sets out its plans to ensure that pupils with disabilities can participate fully in the school's curriculum. The school also complies with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.

Staff value the support that they receive for their well-being and workload. For example, they appreciate the time the school gives them to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Staff are proud to work at the school.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and proprietor)

- In several subjects, the school has not considered exactly what pupils should learn and in what order. This hinders some pupils from achieving as well as they could. The school should finalise the curriculum content in these subjects to ensure that teachers know exactly what knowledge pupils must learn and when they should learn it.
- There are occasions when checks on learning are not used effectively. Where this happens, teachers are not clear about what pupils have learned and where there might be gaps in pupils' knowledge. The school should ensure that teachers have a clear understanding of exactly where pupils are in their learning and use this information to precisely determine pupils' next steps.
- At times, learning is not adapted well enough to meet the needs of some pupils with SEND. As a result, these pupils do not learn as well as they should. The school should ensure that it checks the quality and effectiveness of support plans and how well they are being implemented across the curriculum to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEND are fully met.
- Some staff do not deliver the early reading and phonics programme or communication strategies as clearly and precisely as they could. Where this is the case, some pupils do not learn as well as they should. The school should support staff so that they have the knowledge and expertise to deliver the early reading and phonics programme and communication strategies effectively.

- The school is still developing some aspects of the personal development offer that it provides to pupils. As a result, pupils are not as well prepared for life in modern Britain as they could be. The school should develop its thinking in these areas so that pupils benefit from a full range of opportunities for broader development.
- Some of the school's processes for holding leaders to account for their responsibilities for welfare, health and safety have not been fully effective over time. Consequently, the proprietor has not ensured that some of the standards have been consistently met. The proprietor must ensure that there are effective systems in place so that all standards are consistently and fully met.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	150807
DfE registration number	350/6021
Local authority	Bolton
Inspection number	10395740
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	15
Proprietor	Birchwood Children's Services Limited
Chair	Terence Roy McKenzie
Headteacher	William Monteith
Annual fees (day pupils)	£86,500
Telephone number	01204 201 396
Website	www.birchwoodbolton.co.uk
Email address	wmonteith@bolton.bwchildren.co.uk
Date of previous inspection	Not previously inspected

Information about this school

- This was the first standard inspection since the school was registered on 6 August 2024.
- Although it was originally intended that the school would be open from September 2024, the school did not open to pupils until 6 January 2025.
- The school operates from premises at Milnthorpe Road, Brightmet, Bolton BL2 6PD.
- All pupils who attend this school have SEND. All have an EHC plan. Pupils' needs include social, emotional, and mental health needs and autism.
- The school has an agreed capacity with the Department of Education (DfE) for 80 pupils.
- At the time of this inspection, there were no Year 11 pupils or post-16 students on roll. Around half of the pupils on roll did not join the school until April 2025.
- The school does not use alternative provision.
- The proprietor is Birchwood Children's Services Limited. The proprietor acts as the governing body for the school. A new chair of the proprietor body was appointed in December 2024.
- Since the pre-registration inspection there have been several changes to staffing. A new headteacher and executive headteacher took up post in January 2025. Between January and May 2025, there have been a number of new senior, teaching and support staff appointed.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school has failed to meet the independent school standards. These are the requirements of the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- 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 leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the executive headteacher, headteacher and assistant headteacher. They also spoke to other members of staff, including those responsible for aspects of the curriculum and careers education.

- Inspectors held discussions with members of staff, which focused on the well-being and safeguarding of pupils.
- An inspector met with members of the proprietor body, including the chair. She also spoke on the telephone to a representative of Bolton Local Authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English, mathematics and personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, looked at samples of pupils' work and, where appropriate, spoke to some pupils about their learning.
- Inspectors also looked at curriculum plans and spoke to leaders about the curriculum in some other subjects.
- 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.
- The lead inspector made a tour of the premises. Inspectors also reviewed documentation and other information to check the school's compliance with the standards.
- Inspectors considered the responses to the online survey, Ofsted Parent View. Inspectors also considered the responses to Ofsted's online staff survey.
- There were no responses to the pupil survey. However, inspectors spoke informally with some pupils about school life as they walked around the school. These conversations were held in the presence of a member of staff to support and reassure pupils.

Inspection team

Sue Eastwood, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Mark Cocker

Ofsted Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 2(1) The standard in this paragraph is met if-
 - 2(1)(a) the proprietor ensures that a written policy on the curriculum, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, which provides for the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2) is drawn up and implemented effectively; and
 - 2(1)(b) the written policy, plans and schemes of work-
 - 2(1)(b)(i) take into account the ages, aptitudes, and needs of all pupils, including those pupils with an EHC plan.
- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school-
 - 3(d) shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs, and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons;
 - 3(g) demonstrates that a framework is in place to assess pupils' work regularly and thoroughly and use information from that assessment to plan teaching so that pupils can progress.

Part 3. Welfare, health, and safety of pupils

- 11 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that relevant health and safety laws are complied with by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written health and safety policy.

Part 5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

- 25 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the school premises and the accommodation and facilities provided therein are maintained to a standard such that, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of pupils are ensured.

Part 8. Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 34(1) The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school-
 - 34(1)(a) demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently;
 - 34(1)(b) fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and
 - 34(1)(c) actively promote the well-being of pupils.

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