

Inspection of Birtley House Independent School

Fawkham Road, West Kingsdown, Sevenoaks, Kent TN15 6AY

Inspection dates:

23 to 25 September 2025

Overall effectiveness

Requires improvement

The quality of education

Requires improvement

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Requires improvement

Overall effectiveness at previous
inspection

Good

Does the school meet the independent
school standards?

No

What is it like to attend this school?

This is an inclusive and vibrant school community. Pupils are polite, respectful and thoughtful. Around school, they share happy smiles with their friends and staff as they go about their day. Pupils feel supported and listened to by empathetic and caring staff. They do not worry about any unkindness. Pupils trust that staff will help them deal with any worries or concerns.

The school has prioritised pupils' mental and physical health. Pupils understand the importance of a healthy diet and lifestyle. They know how to keep themselves safe and well. Pupils behave very well and attend school regularly. On the occasions when pupils find it difficult to manage their emotions, staff respond sensitively to help pupils regulate their feelings. Pupils practise breathing exercises and enjoy taking 'time out' to relax in the sensory garden.

The school has high expectations for pupils' behaviour and achievement. It caters exclusively for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). However, the quality of education that pupils receive is variable. The support that pupils receive in most subjects does not help them to learn as well as they should. Consequently, most pupils do not leave school well prepared for the next stage of their education.

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

Recently, the school has worked well to craft its curriculum to make sure that it is ambitious and meets the needs of the mixed-age classes. The curriculum sets suitable knowledge and skills that pupils should learn and remember for future success. Rightly, the curriculum places a focus on developing pupils' communication, literacy and numeracy skills.

The school caters for pupils with SEND. Most pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. The main areas of need include social and communication difficulties and specific or general learning difficulties. Overall, the needs of pupils with SEND are regularly reviewed, with suitable strategies in place. However, the school does not accurately understand and meet the needs of some pupils. This means that some pupils do not make as much progress through the curriculum as they should.

The curriculum is not implemented consistently well. The work provided to pupils does not allow for sufficient opportunities to develop a secure understanding of the most important knowledge and skills that pupils need for future learning. Too often, pupils are not supported to make links with what they already know. Additionally, the school does not check carefully what pupils know and understand before moving on to new work. This means that pupils are not as prepared for new learning as they could be.

Pupils have regular reading opportunities with an adult and look forward to listening to the stories staff read and share. Older pupils enjoy choosing from a diverse range of books in their classrooms and the school library. This helps pupils develop an understanding of the importance of reading and how reading can bring enjoyment. However, reading is not consistently prioritised. The school does not support pupils who are at an earlier stage of learning to read well enough. It has not ensured that staff have been trained to deliver the school's phonics programme effectively.

Staff morale is positive. They feel well informed about any school changes and report that workload is manageable. Staff value that the school is beginning to introduce a suitable programme to promote and prioritise their professional development.

Many parents and carers speak positively about their children's experiences at the school. They particularly appreciate the care provided and the strong partnerships the school builds with families. Relationships between staff and pupils are based on mutual respect. Pupils mainly settle into lessons quickly and calmly. In classrooms, pupils display positive attitudes to learning and they behave well. Where required, some pupils receive effective extra support to help them reach the school's high behaviour expectations. However, the proprietor's and school leaders' oversight of the school's behaviour system is inconsistent. This means that sometimes behaviour incidents are not reviewed and followed up effectively enough.

The school's work to promote pupils' personal development is a strength. Across the curriculum, staff foster pupils' understanding of the world they inhabit. For example, pupils learn about democracy and elect their peers to the school council. They are taught about safe and healthy relationships and lifestyles. Pupils understand the personal risks that they may face, both on and offline. The school fulfils its statutory duties regarding relationships and sex education. Staff sensitively cover important aspects of sex and relationships.

Pupils are proud of their roles as monitors. They know that they make a positive difference to the school environment. Pupils also enjoy the interesting range of clubs and opportunities on offer to them. These help pupils to explore and develop their talents and interests. For example, pupils relish the chance to show their creativity and talents at the annual 'Birtley's Got Talent' show. Trips to different places of worship help pupils to identify similarities and differences between different faiths. They understand that all people should be treated equally. Pupils are well prepared for life in modern Britain.

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets requirements under schedule 10 of the Equalities Act 2010. The building is well resourced and maintained to a high standard. There are adequate risk assessments in place. However, the proprietor's and school leaders' oversight of their roles and responsibilities is variable. This means that they do not demonstrate an accurate evaluation of the impact of their strategic actions. Too often there is confusion about lines of accountability, which means that some key aspects of the independent school standards ('the standards') are overlooked. For example, initially some key policies, documents and information

on the school's website were out of date. School leaders rectified this during the inspection.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- In some subjects, the school has not ensured that the work given to pupils enables them to develop detailed knowledge in that subject. As a result, most pupils do not acquire the depth of knowledge that they need. The school should ensure that staff are trained and supported to provide pupils with work that deepens their knowledge over time
- The school has not ensured that staff are trained to deliver its chosen phonics programme effectively. As a result, the teaching of phonics is variable. Pupils who are at the earlier stages of learning to read are not well supported to become fluent readers. The school should make sure that staff are equipped to support pupils to become confident and fluent readers.
- The school does not consistently identify and meet some pupils' specific SEND needs. This hampers these pupils' learning. The school should ensure that systems to identify pupils' SEND needs are consistent and robust and that strategies to support pupils are implemented and regularly reviewed.
- The proprietor's and the school's evaluation of the quality of education and monitoring of the behaviour system is not effective enough. Additionally, leaders' collective understanding of their roles and responsibilities to meet the standards is varied. The proprietor should ensure that leaders at all levels have the knowledge and expertise to fulfil their roles and responsibilities effectively.

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	136211
DfE registration number	886/6136
Local authority	Kent
Inspection number	10374999
Type of school	Other Independent Special School
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	28
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	The Birtley House Kent Ltd
Headteacher	Paul Mortimer-Lee (Director)
Annual fees (day pupils)	£18,000 to £56,862
Telephone number	01474853192
Website	www.birtleyhouseschool.co.uk
Email address	office@birtleyhouseschool.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	19 to 21 October 2022

Information about this school

- Birtley House Independent School provides education for pupils with SEND. The school caters for pupils with specific or general learning difficulties, social and communication difficulties, language and communication needs, and emotional, attachment and anxiety disorders. Most pupils have an EHC plan and many are placed at the school by local authorities.
- The school is located at Fawkham Road, West Kingsdown, Sevenoaks, Kent TN15 6AY. It operates from a detached house, which is set within extensive grounds.
- The new headteacher took up their post in September 2025.
- The school does not currently use any alternative provision.
- The school does not have a religious denomination.

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 evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the second routine inspection that the school has 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 senior leaders, staff and pupils. The lead inspector also met with the proprietor.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives into these subjects: reading, mathematics, physical education and history. To do this, they met with senior leaders, looked at curriculum plans, had discussions with staff and pupils, visited lessons and looked at pupils' work. Inspectors also reviewed the curriculum on some other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors spoke with staff and pupils. The lead inspector met with the designated safeguarding leads to examine records and actions. This included sampling a range of safeguarding documentation. She reviewed checks on the safer recruitment of adults.
- Inspectors talked to pupils of different ages about their learning and experiences at school.
- The views of staff, pupils and parents were gathered through discussions and Ofsted's online surveys.

- Inspectors looked at the school site and scrutinised a wide range of documentary evidence to check on the statutory requirements of the independent school standards.

Inspection team

Shazia Akram, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Liz McIntosh

Ofsted Inspector

Annex. Compliance with regulatory requirements

The school failed to meet the following independent school standards

Part 1. Quality of education provided

- 3 The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school-
 - 3(a) enables pupils to acquire new knowledge and make good progress according to their ability so that they increase their understanding and develop their skills in the subjects taught;
 - 3(b) fosters in pupils self-motivation, the application of intellectual, physical and creative effort, interest in their work and the ability to think and learn for themselves;
 - 3(c) involves well planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time;
 - 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(e) demonstrates good knowledge and understanding of the subject matter being taught;
 - 3(f) utilises effectively classroom resources of a good quality, quantity and range;
 - 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;
 - 3(h) utilises effective strategies for managing behaviour and encouraging pupils to act responsibly.

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.

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