

A report on

Birchwood School

**27 Pendwyallt Road
Coryton
CF14 7EF**

Date of inspection: October 2025

by

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

About Birchwood School

Name of provider	Birchwood School
Proprietor status	Orbis Education and Care
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Independent
Residential provision?	Yes
Number of pupils on roll	51
Pupils of statutory school age	42
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	22/01/2022
Start date of inspection	14/10/2025

School context:

Birchwood School (formally known as Tŷ Coryton) provides a specialist integrated day and residential service for children and young people between the ages of 8 and 19 years with a range of complex needs including autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and social, emotional and behavioural challenges. The majority of pupils have severe learning difficulties. In addition, many pupils have speech, communication and language difficulties and around half of pupils do not communicate using speech.

There are currently 50 pupils on roll. All pupils have an individual development plan (IDP) or equivalent. Pupils are placed by authorities in Wales and England. A minority of pupils are in the care of their local authority.

The school is accommodated in a large mansion house on the outskirts of Cardiff and is administered by Orbis Education and Care. A very few pupils are resident in the Oakfield House children's home that has separate purpose-built accommodation on-site.

The head of school has been in post since 2024 and is supported by a deputy headteacher and an assistant headteacher. In addition, there is an executive headteacher who has been in post since 2023.

Summary

Birchwood School is welcoming and nurturing, where nearly all staff work closely together to help nearly all pupils develop their social and emotional skills appropriately. The school's peaceful setting and extensive grounds provide calm, reflective spaces that help nearly all pupils manage their emotions and build positive relationships with staff and peers.

Nearly all parents value the school's strong communication, smooth transition processes, and personalised support.

Most pupils benefit from a wide range of enrichment activities such as horse riding, swimming, and community visits. Further, a majority of pupils benefit from vocational learning opportunities, such as the podcast studio and hair salon, which help them to prepare for life beyond school.

Nearly all staff build strong, positive relationships with pupils and model respectful behaviour. This creates a calm, polite atmosphere where nearly all pupils feel safe and happy. Most pupils say they enjoy school and those in the school council feel that their opinions are listened to.

Specialist staff, including therapists and behaviour practitioners, work alongside teaching staff to ensure that pupils' needs are met.

The school supports families in practical ways, for example by providing uniforms, meals, and access to the 'Birchwood Bargains' shop, where pupils can buy or receive essential items such as toiletries and clothing.

Before pupils join Birchwood School, leaders carefully assess each child's needs and plan tailored support. Staff meet regularly to review strategies and ensure that support is adapted when pupils face personal difficulties. This approach helps most pupils settle quickly, improve attendance, and regulate their emotions more effectively.

Nearly all teachers know their pupils well and plan lessons that reflect their interests. However, while staff identify key skills for pupils to develop, the long-term planning of learning pathways and progression remains underdeveloped. As a result, staff are not able to clearly determine whether each pupil is working at an appropriate level of challenge.

Where teaching is most effective, staff make purposeful use of learning time. Lessons move at an appropriate pace, and activities are well matched to pupils' abilities, enabling them to remain fully engaged. Where teaching is less effective, an overreliance on short

activities and frequent breaks limits pupils' opportunities to consolidate their learning. As a result, pupils do not always sustain focus or develop their skills in sufficient depth.

School leaders are highly committed and know each pupil well. They have created a strong collaborative culture where most staff feel valued and supported. Leaders encourage professional development, offering training and qualifications to develop staff expertise.

Governance provides appropriate oversight and works with leaders to share best practice across the wider organisation. However, at the time of the inspection, inspectors identified issues relating to record keeping and underlying administrative systems that were raised with the school leadership team.

The school does not meet all of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Main evaluation

Birchwood School provides a welcoming, inclusive and nurturing environment that supports pupils' social and emotional development well. Staff work collaboratively to help pupils develop these skills appropriately. Set within extensive grounds, the school provides peaceful and reflective spaces where pupils can build relationships with peers and staff and regulate their emotions when needed. The close-knit community benefits both pupils and staff.

Creating a safe environment in which to learn

Nearly all staff build positive, professional relationships with pupils and encourage appropriate behaviour through modelling expectations. As a result, the environment is calm and pupils are polite and welcoming to visitors.

Nearly all parents and carers value staff communication and the individual pastoral support provided to their children. They also appreciate the admissions and transition processes, which enable pupils to settle and become ready to learn, often after periods where they have not attended school regularly.

The wider organisation has invested significantly in developing the site and providing resources. These include a podcasting studio and an onsite barbers and hairdressing salon to provide vocational learning opportunities to pupils.

Nearly all pupils feel safe in school and say that they enjoy attending. Members of the school council feel that their voices are heard by leaders.

The school ensures that all pupils, including those who have experienced poverty or disadvantage, have equal opportunities to participate in curricular and enrichment activities. It provides all pupils with their uniform, several meals and snacks during the school day. Further, the school has created a school charity shop called 'Birchwood Bargains', where pupils can buy or be gifted clothes and other essential personal or household items.

Leaders have implemented a robust system when receiving referrals at the school. They analyse a wide range of information about pupils' needs and backgrounds before admission. In addition to this, leaders co-ordinate and plan purposeful therapeutic intervention and support for pupils as they transition into the school. This helps school staff to effectively meet the social and emotional needs of the pupils, and many pupils settle quickly and improve their emotional regulation and attendance over time.

Teachers are supported by an on-site team of clinical specialists, including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, positive behaviour support practitioners, trauma-informed practitioners and a psychiatrist. This team provides statutory aspects of pupils' additional learning provision and also supports staff in class through collaboration and coaching to develop practice. For example, during weekly 'triage' meetings, the clinical team support teaching staff to implement effective strategies to support pupils through challenging personal events, such as moving home or bereavement. As a result, behaviour plans and support strategies adapt quickly to meet the changing needs of pupils.

Staff use a range of appropriate behaviour management strategies to ensure the safety and well-being of pupils and others. Detailed incident records are maintained, and leaders analyse these regularly to identify triggers and trends. Following this analysis, leaders implement targeted training at individual, group or whole-school level. Over time, these approaches have contributed to a reduction in incidents and improved consistency in behaviour management.

Collaborative leadership

Leaders are highly dedicated and committed to the school. They know pupils and their needs extremely well, taking a keen interest in their achievements and progress.

The recently restructured leadership team has developed a collaborative culture across the school. Most staff highly value the support offered by leaders and the high level of visibility they provide and, as a result, staff morale is high.

Leaders provide coaching and mentoring to staff and offer varied opportunities for career progression through Birchwood School. They have supported staff to gain postgraduate qualifications, including those wishing to complete teaching qualifications, leadership courses, and vocational training to further enhance staff knowledge and skills.

Leaders undertake regular quality assurance activities. However, systems and processes in the school do not support leaders well enough to effectively evaluate important areas of compliance or to identify aspects of provision that may benefit from improvement.

Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding demonstrate a secure understanding of their responsibilities, including where these span across national boundaries and where the external agencies' approaches differ from those in Wales. The school makes timely referrals to external agencies and has a well-embedded approach to recording concerns using an electronic system. Designated safeguarding staff have completed suitable training and leaders make sure that there is sufficient capacity to ensure that a designated person is always available when required.

Governance of the school is structured and holds leaders to account appropriately. There is a clear focus on developing leadership capacity and encouraging partnership working with other schools within the Orbis group. As a result, leaders share good practice and hold termly meetings to discuss school improvement priorities. Furthermore, all teaching staff attend an annual conference, where they network and share ideas about how to improve their practice.

Leaders and staff approach their work with commitment and passion. However, a few issues were raised during the inspection related to record-keeping and administrative systems. These were not able to be rectified successfully during the inspection.

Teaching and learning experiences

Nearly all staff take the time to get to know the pupils very well on a social and emotional level. As a result, they provide activities and learning spaces that reflect pupils' interests. Many pupils willingly enter their classroom at the beginning of the day and benefit from "connection time" where they reflect on their behaviour and emotions. Although most pupils settle into their classroom well, they are not consistently challenged to move swiftly from social and emotional activities, such as games and media, to focused learning.

The quality of teaching and learning varies considerably across the school. In too many lessons, the pace of learning is slow and the level of challenge is too low. Activities are often short in duration or lack sufficient depth to help pupils embed and extend their skills. At times, teaching staff intervene too quickly, which limits pupils' independence and reduces opportunities for them to persevere with tasks. Planning does not consistently ensure that activities are well matched to pupils' individual needs or prior learning, and staff are not always clear about the intended learning outcomes. As a result, expectations of what pupils can achieve are sometimes too low.

Most teachers provide meaningful activities for pupils to develop their communication skills, particularly speaking and listening. Teachers use effective visual resources and communication aids during activities, for example when discussing characters in a book, taking turns to choose items for a shopping list, or when taking part in the school council. As a result, many pupils communicate confidently with staff, peers and visitors.

Where teaching is most effective, staff use learning time wisely. Lessons have a suitable pace and activities are well matched to pupils' ability, enabling them to fully engage, for example when matching flashcards to job roles and discussing what each job involves, or when pupils produce 'death masks' linked to their studies on ancient Egypt and confidently use terms such as 'mummification', 'decomposing' and the 'Lands of Two Fields' to explain the purpose of the task. However, where teaching is less effective, an

overreliance on short activities and frequent breaks inhibits pupils' ability to sustain focus and embed their skills.

Most pupils value and benefit from a variety of enrichment activities, including educational visits, for example horse riding, swimming, accessible cycling and shopping in local supermarkets. As a result, most pupils develop their physical and social skills well over time. Many pupils also gain confidence and self-esteem when being out in the community, which supports their preparation for the next steps in their development.

The school provides a suitable range of work-related activities and newly introduced qualifications within careers, life skills and the world of work. For example, pupils can choose to work in the school's fully functioning music studio or learn hairdressing techniques in the school salon. In addition, where appropriate, pupils complete job applications and plan work experience.

Across the school, teachers and support staff provide verbal praise and encouragement, which helps pupils to stay motivated and engaged. However, the use of assessment to evaluate pupils' progress and inform future learning is underdeveloped. Staff do not consistently analyse pupils' progress over time, and assessment information is not used systematically to plan the next steps in learning. As a result, leaders and teachers do not have a clear enough understanding of how well pupils are achieving in relation to their starting points or potential.

Leaders and other key professionals identify the skills that pupils need to develop when they start at the school. This enables teachers to plan daily learning activities where pupils can experience and develop these skills. However, the systematic planning of these skills and the planning of pupils' pathways and programme of learning over time is undeveloped. As a result, there is a lack of formal recognition of pupils' progress whilst at the school, despite their continued attendance and engagement in lessons. Consequently, staff are unclear whether pupils are working below, at or above expected levels, and therefore lack a secure enough understanding of whether the curriculum provides sufficient challenge for all pupils.

The school does not fully comply with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

Independent school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2002 and related regulations: the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. These regulations require an independent school to meet an appropriate standard in the following areas:

The quality of education provided by the school

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets most of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 the school should:

- Ensure that a written policy on the independent school's 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 [2(1)(a)]
- Ensure there are opportunities for all pupils to learn and make progress, including providing differentiated opportunities where appropriate, and effective preparation of pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life [2(2)(h)]
- Enable 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 [2(3)(a)]
- Ensure well planned lessons, effective teaching methods, suitable activities and wise management of learning time [2(3)(c)]

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 the school should:

- Ensure that admission and attendance registers are maintained in accordance with regulations made under section 434 of the 1996 Act(1). [17]

The suitability of proprietors and staff

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 the school should:

- Ensure the checks referred to in sub-paragraph (2) (except where sub-paragraph (4) applies) are completed before a person's appointment. [20(3)]

Premises of and boarding accommodation at schools

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

The provision of information

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

The manner in which complaints are to be handled

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

Safeguarding

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any cause for concern.

Recommendations

We have made four recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1. Comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024
- R2. Refine and embed systems and processes to evaluate and ensure the effectiveness of the work of the school
- R3. Develop and embed appropriate learning pathways to meet the full range of pupils' additional learning needs
- R4. Ensure that learning activities enable pupils to make the progress of which they are capable

What happens next

Since the school does not meet the standards required for registration, the Welsh Government will require the proprietor to submit an action plan within a specified period of time. This plan will set out the steps that the school will take to meet the standards, and the timescale within which it will complete each step. The Welsh Government may then request Estyn to support the school through an improvement process.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from parent/carers and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and support staff through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors/proprietor(s), leaders and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit lessons and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school had taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body (where appropriate), information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. '*most pupils...*' or '*very few pupils...*'. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/>)

The report was produced in accordance with section 163 of the Education Act 2002. The main purpose of inspection under this section is to report on compliance with the Independent Schools Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. In schools that provide non-maintained nursery education, this report also satisfies the requirements of Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework

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