

Report of a Primary Inspection  
Birches Primary School

October 2024

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# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Birches Primary School is a controlled, co-educational school located south of Lough Neagh, six miles from Portadown. The enrolment has increased steadily over the past four years and stands currently at 194 children. The school has been oversubscribed for the past three years. Twenty-one (11%) of the children have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN), and a small number of children have a statement of educational need. Approximately 9% of the children have free school meals entitlement.

The school is part of a well-established shared education partnership with a local maintained primary school and collaborates with two other primary schools as part of the Education Authority's 'Pathways into Partnership' programme.

The school holds the Eco Schools' 'Green Flag' Award.

## **B. VIEWS OF CHILDREN, PARENTS AND STAFF**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to year 7 children and all staff and parents/carers in advance of the inspection. A summary of all the questionnaire responses was shared with the principal and representatives from the board of governors.

All of the year 7 children responded to the questionnaire; a small number of whom provided written comments. The children all indicated that: they feel safe in school; the teachers and other adults treat them with care and respect; and they receive helpful information about changes that will happen to them as they grow up and develop.

Almost all of the staff responded to the questionnaire, all of whom indicated that: they are clear about the school's vision; their professional skills and knowledge are valued; and their views are sought and acted upon. The small number of written comments highlighted how the staff work as a team to support each other and the children.

Twenty-two percent of the parents/carers responded to the questionnaire, with a small number providing written comments. The parents/carers reported: their child's good progress; their enjoyment of school, including learning and playing outdoors; and the kind and caring staff. The written comments included a small number of individual concerns and suggestions as to how the provision could be enhanced further.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The ETI worked alongside Birches Primary School to consider how well the school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;

- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed succeed, and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

## **2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

- The children are empowered to lead change; their views are sought and acted upon, allowing them to make a significant contribution to achieving the school's vision.
- The children are excited about their learning; they enjoy working collaboratively and relish discovering and exploring new ways of learning.
- The children develop and apply their digital skills confidently in a range of contexts which connects their learning across the curriculum.
- The outdoor play-based learning is highly effective in developing the children's knowledge, skills and understanding across all areas of learning.
- The staff have a clear oversight of the barriers faced by the children; the children with SEN are enabled to participate meaningfully in their learning across the curriculum and to make progress from their individual starting points.
- Staff engage in robust self-evaluation and work collegially to identify, inform and monitor the strategic planning for development in their respective areas of responsibility.
- The staff's proactive and collaborative approach to continuous professional learning is impacting positively on the children's learning experiences and outcomes.
- The school is well supported in achieving its vision through effective partnerships with parents/carers and the strategic approach to external collaboration.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

### Area for consideration

- to address the variation in the extent to which the planning takes account of the children's needs, abilities and interests.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

The school's vision is informed and supported effectively by an ethos which nurtures the abilities and talents of every child, fostering respect, confidence and creativity in a welcoming, attractive and stimulating learning environment. Committed to **'inspiring a love of learning'**, the staff regularly engage in professional learning and reflection to provide **'stimulating and engaging opportunities'** for the children. Self-evaluation is robust; staff work collegially to identify, inform and monitor appropriately the strategic planning for development in their respective areas of responsibility.

The culture of valuing the children's rights and the participation of all of the children means that they are **'confident and successful'** in leading change, and they make a significant contribution to achieving their school's vision.

The governors bring a wide range of experience and skills to their role. Guided by the nurturing and strategic leadership, the governors have a clear understanding of their role in making the vision a reality.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

The staff make very effective use of the accommodation; the learning environment is welcoming and supportive, and the children's work is displayed in creative ways throughout the school. The impact of staff professional learning is evident in the consistent use of agreed strategies, language and resources by all of the staff.

The teachers' effective questioning enables the children to reflect on, develop and explain their thinking and responses. Digital learning is integrated across the curriculum and the children apply confidently their digital skills across a range of contexts. The children who are 'Digital Leaders' play an important role in reinforcing online safety messages to the other children. There is variation in the extent to which the planning takes account of the children's needs, abilities and interests, with the emphasis, at times, being more on the activities rather than the intended knowledge and skills.

The development of outdoor learning has been a priority over the last number of years, and outdoor play-based learning is now a key strength of the provision. The children engage in hands-on, experiential learning, and have great fun exploring, building and problem solving. The creative and flexible outdoor learning spaces support the development of the children's imaginative and investigative skills, as well as their emotional and physical well-being.

The children's wellbeing is given high priority by all of the staff, and the children play an important role in supporting the health and wellbeing of others. As part of an initiative to increase girls' participation in exercise and sport, older girls have been trained to organise and lead break and lunch time activities. The leaders invited us to join a session where they taught the younger girls dribbling, passing and throwing skills. The 'Playground Team' helps keep the playground safe and encourages the children to take part in games and play together across year groups.

## C. BUILDING EQUITY

Staff professional learning is impacting positively on the provision for the children identified as having SEN and staff have a clear oversight of the barriers faced by the children. Classroom assistants have undertaken a range of appropriate training for SEN and provide support for the children during highly effective small group activities. In keeping with the school's vision that **'every child achieves their full potential,'** the children with SEN are enabled to participate meaningfully in their learning across the curriculum and make progress from their individual starting points. The analysis of a range of assessment data, along with teacher professional judgements, informs tailored support for the children. Well-established relationships and partnerships with external agencies ensure early identification of the children's needs, and advice and interventions to meet the identified needs are accessed in a timely manner.

Effective communication across the school, and with other local pre-schools, primary and post-primary schools, ensures the children can move smoothly and confidently from pre-school to primary, and from primary to post-primary education. Recent monitoring and review of current practice has highlighted strengthening the child and parent voice in relation to individual educational plans as an area for further development.

## D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS

By fostering an environment where children feel understood and valued, and their views are sought and acted upon, the school creates a positive atmosphere that encourages continuous improvement and success. The children's successes are celebrated widely across the school and the children share readily and take delight in the successes of others. The children's interactions with one another are respectful; they enjoy collaborating in pairs and groups and relish discovering and exploring new ways of learning. They are excited about their learning and are eager to show and talk about their work and their achievements. During the inspection, they shared with us examples of how their teachers help them improve on their work and how they support others with their learning, for example, as 'Literacy Leaders' and 'Digital Leaders.' In lessons, we saw the children: using and explaining different strategies in numeracy; considering carefully the audience when writing; and showing resilience when problem-solving. The school's analysis of data shows that the children are progressing in line with their ability.

Through a wide range of purposeful leadership roles and responsibilities, the children make an important and meaningful contribution to decision making. The children show awareness of how their actions can lead to a more dynamic school community and prepare them to be proactive and responsible citizens. In assembly, the 'Eco Team' and 'Green Team' outlined their priorities to protect the environment and advised how each class can contribute to meeting the whole-school green targets. The 'Ethos Team' is helping the children understand and live out the school's core values.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

The senior leaders set high expectations for all and empower staff to be proactive in seeking out professional learning opportunities. The staff value learning with and from others, including from their shared education and 'Pathways to Partnership' schools, and embrace new ways of working.

The school is well supported in achieving its vision through effective partnerships with parents/carers and the strategic approach to external collaboration. The 'Friends of Birches Parent Teacher Association' (PTA) is a very active group which fundraises and arranges events to broaden the children's learning experiences. The children told us how much they enjoy the library books and growing vegetables in the polytunnel, both of which were funded by the PTA. The children's learning experiences are enhanced through the school's involvement with the 'Loughshore Care Partnership' and 'South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association' who facilitate learning and health and wellbeing activities for children from several schools in the area.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

The children are succeeding in the welcoming, attractive and stimulating learning environment of Birches Primary School where their voices are heard, their contributions valued, and their achievements celebrated. The staff are committed to providing the children with consistently high-quality learning experiences.

The ETI will continue to work with Birches Primary School, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspect of practice which should be shared more widely is:

- the highly effective outdoor play-based learning, which is developing the children's knowledge, skills and understanding across all areas of learning.

The school is well placed to take forward the area for consideration detailed in this report.

## 5. APPENDIX

### APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%



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