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5 September 2025

Paul Masher
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Dear Mr Masher

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Birches Head Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 15 and 16 July 2025, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in October 2023.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's key and (where applicable) provision judgements, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection I discussed with you and other senior leaders, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust, the deputy CEO of the trust, trustees, local governors and a representative of the local authority, the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I met with relevant leaders to discuss safeguarding, attendance, behaviour and the quality of education. I met with groups of pupils and staff. I also spoke to pupils informally at social times and during the 'experiences' sessions I visited. I reviewed school improvement documentation. I have considered all this in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to no longer be judged as having serious weaknesses.

The progress made towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

The time since the previous monitoring inspection in January 2025 has been one of consolidating the many changes that have taken place since you joined the school in May 2024. Interim leadership roles have been made permanent, meaning that there is now greater stability as you and your team embark on the next phase of school improvement. There has been further strengthening of the local governing and trust boards. The school has persisted in the face of recruitment challenges and is fully staffed for September. Leaders are right to talk about the 'positive trajectory' of improvement to date, but they also know that there is still more to be done before these improvements are secure and sustainable. The Department for Education has recently appointed a regional improvement for standards and excellence adviser to further support school improvement at Birches Head Academy.

The number of pupils joining the school mid-year, including those who are new to the country, has continued to rise. There is increasingly helpful support in place to help these pupils settle well into school and the wider community. However, there is more to be done to ensure that these pupils rapidly develop a strong sense of belonging and commitment to meeting the school's expectations. Currently, they are disproportionately represented in absence and behaviour sanctions data.

In the previous monitoring inspection, improvements in attendance were starting to be seen. The school's work on this has continued, and overall attendance is drawing closer to national averages. There have been year-on-year improvements for all specific groups of pupils, most notably those who have been persistently or severely absent. However, the gap between attendance rates for disadvantaged pupils and their peers is not narrowing. The school has plans in place for September to work on addressing this in a more focused way.

Pupils and staff explain how behaviour at the school has continued to improve. There is a greater understanding of what the 'BHA way' means. Strategies such as the morning line-up help pupils to start their day positively and to see the importance of consistent behaviour across the school. Pupils are clear that expectations are higher and that the more rigorous consequences for poor behaviour will usually be applied consistently. When they need prompting from leaders to meet the school's high expectations around uniform, pupils do as they are asked. The school's 'behaviour charter' focuses on rewarding pupils for making the right choices through awarding positive behaviour points and rewards. Younger pupils value the praise texts that are sent home and 'be active' experiences, but older pupils do not share the same level of enthusiasm.

In the previous monitoring inspection, the high number of suspensions was noted as something that needed to be addressed. The number of suspensions has reduced each term since then, helped by use of 'the bungalow' as an alternative consequence. However, there is more to do to further reduce the number of suspensions and permanent exclusions.

The school's ongoing work to address bullying is continuing to show impact. Pupils report that it does still happen, but less frequently than before, and that it is usually dealt with effectively. They are less confident in how the school deals with any bullying that continues outside of school. Pupils know that incidents of derogatory or discriminatory language are taken seriously when reported. However, there is still a perception from some pupils that this language is acceptable when talking to people that they know in shared spaces, such as corridors.

There is a growing culture of belonging that pupils want to be an active part of. Year 7 pupils praise the support they received when they started at Birches Head Academy. They feel safe and enjoy coming to school. They are keen to help future Year 7 pupils settle in well. Pupil voice is playing a stronger role in the continued development of the school, for example through the pupil council. Many older pupils have applied to become pupil leaders as they want to contribute to the school community.

Leaders have continued the work to improve the quality of education that pupils receive. However, they know there is much still to do before they can be confident that the curriculum will be delivered to a consistent standard and pupils' outcomes improve. The school has rightly broadened its focus beyond the areas for improvement identified in the graded inspection. Through the trust collaboration networks and the regular training sessions and subject meetings within the 'monitoring for achievement' cycle, staff are being supported to develop their subject knowledge and pedagogy. New staff and early career teachers value the expert input and support they receive.

It was 'experience week' when this monitoring inspection took place, so there were no subject lessons taking place. Many Year 10 pupils were attending work experience placements. Pupils in other year groups followed a thoughtfully planned selection of 'be more' activities to help their social, cultural and creative development. These included African cooking, playing board games, orienteering and a visit to a cathedral. Pupils approached these sessions positively and engaged well with the activities, demonstrating positive attitudes to this different way of learning. However, as noted before, some pupils still find it difficult to talk with any depth about their learning. The school has plans in place to launch a new oracy strategy in September to help address this.

The school is currently moving to a new management system for recording safeguarding concerns. It has ensured that there is an effective interim process for staff to share any concerns that they may have about pupils, and this is working well. This means that the school's usual strong practice around responding to safeguarding concerns is unaffected by the transition.

This monitoring inspection took place in the final week of the academic year. Understandably, there is a focus in leaders' minds and energy on ensuring that the year ahead brings continued improvement at a pace that will mean pupils' outcomes improve. Trust and school leaders are working together to identify not just what actions to take, but which need prioritising at this point. Trustees and local governors continue to work together to ensure that leaders' decisions and actions work in the best interests of pupils.

The school is continuing to make use of external support, including from the local authority, to help improve attendance and the quality of education in some subjects. There remains a shared commitment from all to seeing Birches Head Academy improve.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, and the CEO of the Frank Field Education Trust, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Nicola Beech
His Majesty's Inspector