

15th August 2022

Dear Parents and Carers,

RE: OFSTED Report

As you will be aware on 11th and 12th May 2022, the school was visited by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs), Louise Walker. She was accompanied by five further Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) and they followed a framework first introduced in September 2019. During their time at the school they met a range of people and used many activities to produce a snapshot of the school. As expected, they made a number of observations and highlighted some important and useful next steps for the school.

Whilst there are a large number of positives, this is not entirely reflected in the 'Overall Effectiveness' grading. Not least, because we also have some areas for improvement that limit this judgement. In this letter I will outline some of the key points, explain the outcomes, as well as to share some of the steps which have already been taken and need to be taken.

We are pleased that our work on teaching and learning has been acknowledged, with many positive comments regarding the Quality of Education and the Sixth Form, both of which were graded as 'Good'. Inspectors saw high quality teaching, an ambitious and relevant curriculum with equal support for students with additional needs. They witnessed no disruptive behaviour in lessons. We are happy that staff and students' hard work and effort is recognised in this way.

Positive Features of The Abbey School

- The Quality of Education at The Abbey School continues to be 'Good'.
- The Sixth Form continues to be 'Good'.
- Leaders are determined that all students have a broad and interesting curriculum.
- Leaders and staff have high aspirations for students.
- Students in the Sixth Form benefit from the small group sizes and learn well.
- Pupils with SEND are well supported and fully included in school life.
- Pupils enjoy a wide range of opportunities.
- Pupils are well informed about different career pathways and future study options.
- The curriculum is well planned.
- Pupils have a strong understanding of how to keep themselves mentally and physically healthy.
- Staff feel motivated and valued.

A crucial point to make, is that due to Covid-19, Ofsted have not looked at any student outcome data as part of their inspection of schools. This includes any student results achieved during the pandemic or any predicted data for this summer. With this in mind, we feel it important to point out that in the five years since the last school inspection academic results have improved immensely. This summer, the first year of normal exams since we the start of the pandemic, we are predicting:

- twice as many students achieving strong passes in English and Maths at GCSE than 2017
- twice as many Sixth Form students gaining A*-B passes at A Level than 2017

This is important contextual information for the level of academic improvement in the school. Still, this should not draw attention away from the serious areas for improvement identified by the inspection team.

Safeguarding

We take child protection and safeguarding very seriously and ultimately is the basis of all that we do. As recently as January of this year, we had commissioned an independent review of safeguarding in our school. That audit had found that safeguarding was effective, but also made recommendations for improvement that had already been implemented.

Whilst we were shocked and surprised, that Ofsted judged that safeguarding was 'not effective' when they visited us in the Spring, we want to reassure parents that we took immediate action at the time of the inspection to address these issues and they have since been rectified. Since the inspection there has been a swift change in leadership of safeguarding and a significant increase in the number of staff across the school trained to the level of Designated Safeguarding Lead.

There were a number of issues identified regarding safeguarding including training, record keeping and use of external agencies. We can report that all students' records have already been transferred to a new electronic system and this is now fully operational. The inspectors also highlighted an administrative error regarding updating statutory safeguarding training, which was fully rectified on the second day of the inspection.

Pupil attendance is very important, links to safeguarding and has a big impact on educational outcomes. Inspectors felt that the school was taking appropriate action to improve attendance, but this needs to continue to be followed through and the impact tracked.

Leadership and Management

Because the inspectors have made a judgement on safeguarding, their protocol means that they have no choice but to grade the 'Leadership and Management' as 'Inadequate'. This means the Regional Schools Commissioner will be involved in monitoring our next steps, which will likely include joining a Multi-Academy Trust. There are advantages and disadvantages to this as you know. We have already been working with some effective trusts and experienced partners to help us move forward on the required improvements.

A key focus is our capacity to make the changes required. An important distinction here is that Ofsted have judged us as Inadequate but with 'Serious Weaknesses' and not needing 'Special Measures'. This judgement means that they deem there is the capacity for leaders to improve the school. Moreover we are still considered an appropriate setting for new teachers to train.

As we move forward we will commission a number of external reviews on the areas identified as needing improvement. We have been working very closely for some months with The Howard Academy Trust, a strong local MAT, whose CEO and Director of Education (both with inspection experience) have been closely involved with formulating the action plan for improvement and monitoring progress against this. They have met with children, staff and audited our practice and are of the opinion that safeguarding is now effective.

Since we are currently a stand-alone academy our existing governance structure reflects this. Governors (also known as trustees) volunteer their time for the benefit of the school. They bring a range of skills to the Board's work and are in the process of reviewing both their structure and

monitoring activities to address the weaknesses that have been identified. External support will be taken to support this where necessary.

Behaviour and Attitudes

We were pleased that inspectors told senior staff that there was no low-level disruption in classes and that learning is conducted in a calm and orderly environment. Similarly, staff and older students told inspectors that classroom behaviour had improved considerably during their time in the school, making learning more effective, with a behaviour policy that was applied consistently.

These positive comments did not make the final report, and are undermined by a number of students not feeling safe. Students commented specifically about online bullying and inspectors did not like the way that students treated each other in unstructured time; this led to the judgement for behaviour being 'Inadequate'. In contrast to this, a number of students commented to inspectors that teachers are too strict and that our expectations of compliance are too high. Whilst school leaders feel and governors believe that there is evidence that this has led to improved outcomes, Ofsted were unable to consider the improvement in grades since 2019 in any of their judgements.

Feeling safe in school is paramount and I fully acknowledge Ofsted's comments. We have a lot to do to raise students' confidence in our ability to deal with aspects of bullying and any other concerns that we have. We do invest a lot of time in supporting students pastorally at The Abbey School, but we also have far more work to do in this area.

Personal Development

Some students told inspectors that the personal, social and health education curriculum does not help everyone understand the importance of treating others with respect and consideration, and as a result the section was graded 'Requires Improvement'.

To begin to address these issues we have already launched a number of initiatives including adapting the personal development curriculum, training for staff and revising the systems for reporting/tracking concerns. Moreover, across the whole of last term, students received additional assemblies and PSHE targeted around these topics, with a range of mechanisms put in place to measure the impact of the work that is being undertaken.

We will seek out, and develop, the best learning opportunities, to help pupils understand and respect 'difference' further, including protected characteristics.

Conclusions and Next Steps

We can assure parents that we embrace the findings of the Ofsted team and have taken the necessary actions to rectify many of the issues raised. We have learnt from the mistakes made and have reflected upon what we need to do to improve, whilst acknowledging the positive comments that inspectors made about teaching and learning. The impact of the steps that we have taken since May to tackle all of the issues have been robustly peer-reviewed by external consultants with experience of school inspection.

It is very apparent that the priorities for schools have changed since Covid-19. Pupil attendance and issues linked to behaviour are matters that have been widely recognised in the national debate, alongside concerns around levels of student anxiety and mental health. We take these challenges

very seriously and want our children to feel both safe and happy whilst continuing the current trajectory of rapidly improving exam results.

The outcome of the inspection means that we now enter a period of increased scrutiny and monitoring by Ofsted. As a wider community, it is important that we all pull together to build an environment and culture where students feel safe and are able to become the best version of themselves.

Whilst this Ofsted judgement will no doubt come as a shock to parents and carers, myself, senior staff and governors at school have been pro-active throughout this period by working with a range of external bodies, including the local authority and a strong, local multi-academy trust.

Educational outcomes continue to be good and are improving rapidly in our school at GCSE and A Level. We will have an Ofsted visit again at some point. We expect this to focus on our new safeguarding arrangements and action plan. Our external advisors have given us confidence that in a very short time this judgement can be changed.

The judgement will automatically trigger a 'warning notice' from the DfE, but please have confidence that we have been in productive discussions with them, ahead of time, about how the school can work collaboratively with others in order to continue to move forwards.

Should you wish to tour the school again now, or at any point during your child's time here we invite you to get in touch. We show visitors, parents and prospective parents around the school daily since we are confident of the excellent practice that you will see and like to celebrate the hard work of our young people. Shortly we will also be offering a series of coffee mornings, where parents can visit myself and senior staff at the school and find out what we are doing to address the issues raised in this letter. Once the dates of these are confirmed you will be able to book online.

The following link will take you to the Ofsted report:

<https://theabbeyschool.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/document/Ofsted-Report-May-2022.pdf?t=1660562478>

As always, thank you for your continued support

Kind Regards,



Dr Rowland Speller
Headteacher