

16<sup>th</sup> August 2022

Dear Parents and Carers,

**RE: OFSTED Report**

We hope that your child enjoyed the recent transition day at The Abbey School and are looking forward to joining us in September.

As you will be aware, on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> May 2022, the school was visited by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs), Louise Walker. She was accompanied by five 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 positive observations and highlighted some important and useful next steps for the school.

Whilst there are a large number of positives, this is not reflected in the 'Overall Effectiveness' grading. Not least, because we 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 share some of the steps which have already been taken and still 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 do not look 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 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 this is the basis of all that we do. As recently as January of this year, we commissioned an independent review of safeguarding in our school. That audit, undertaken by an experienced Ofsted inspector, found that safeguarding was effective, but also made recommendations for improvement that had already been implemented by the time of the inspection.

Consequently, we were shocked and surprised that Ofsted judged that safeguarding was 'not effective' when they visited us in the Spring. I want to reassure parents that I took immediate action at the time of the inspection to address these issues and they have since been rectified, including 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 inspectors have made a judgement that safeguarding is ineffective, their protocol means that they have no choice but to grade the 'Leadership and Management' as 'Inadequate', despite their very positive comments on teaching and learning.

A key focus now 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 local MAT, whose CEO and Director of Education (both with inspection experience) have been helping us to formulate the action plan for improvement and monitor 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 sought to support this where necessary.

## **Behaviour and Attitudes**

We were pleased that inspectors told senior staff that there was no low-level disruption in any of the 70 classes they observed, and also 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 sadly over-shadowed 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 addition 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 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 they have. We do invest a lot of time in supporting students pastorally at The Abbey School, but we 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.

## **Conclusions and Next Steps**

I can assure parents that I 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.

This Ofsted judgement will no doubt come as a shock to parents and carers. However, 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.

I recognise that any decision around secondary school choice is a huge one for parents. 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 already show visitors, parents and prospective parents around the school daily since we are confident of the excellent practice that you will see and we like to celebrate the hard work of our young people. Shortly, we will also be offering a series of events where parents can visit me 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr Rowland Speller', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr Rowland Speller  
Headteacher