

Higford School

Higford Hall, Shifnal, TF11 9ET

Inspection dates 24–26 June 2015

Overall effectiveness	Good	2
Leadership and management	Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils	Outstanding	1
Quality of teaching	Good	2
Achievement of pupils	Good	2
Sixth form provision	Good	2

Summary of key findings

This is a good school

- Students make good and often outstanding progress, achieving well in their academic and personal development.
- High quality support from on-site psychologists and therapists reinforces teaching and learning.
- Teaching over time is good and helps students maximise their talents.
- Students' potentially challenging behaviour is extremely well supported by strong relationships between staff. This helps to create a very safe environment.
- Behaviour is managed extremely well and rarely interferes with learning. The school's arrangements for ensuring the safety and security of students are rigorous.
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is excellent, focusing on social skills.
- Many opportunities are taken to prepare students for life in modern Britain.
- Post-16 students are effectively supported to develop a range of life skills for life after school.
- All leaders, including those responsible for governance, have a clear vision that inspires staff and students in this improving school.
- Leaders monitor teaching and learning effectively. They ensure that the independent school regulations are met.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- There are not enough opportunities to compare students' work with that of other similar students elsewhere.
- Plans for measuring progress of the most able once national curriculum levels are ended are incomplete.
- Governance is not localised enough to hold leadership to full account.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

- The school meets the schedule to The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('the independent school standards') and associated requirements.

Information about this inspection

- The inspection took place with one day's notice. The inspector observed six lessons, each undertaken jointly with the headteacher.
- Meetings were held with the company's head of service, the headteacher, deputy headteacher and senior teacher. Other meetings were held with members of the on-site clinical team representing psychology, occupational therapy, and speech and language therapy. A meeting was also held with the learning and development officer.
- Telephone discussions were held with the School Improvement Partner and with representatives of local authorities who place students at the school.
- The views of parents and carers were gathered from meeting two parents at the school and from telephone conversations with two others. One parent contacted the inspection provider to pass on his views about the educational provision at the school. There were not enough responses to the Ofsted online Parent View survey to trigger an analysis from that source.
- The views of staff were gained from the 30 responses to the Ofsted staff questionnaire and from discussions held with individual members of staff throughout the inspection.
- Students' views were gathered from discussions throughout the inspection and have been taken fully into account. A detailed scrutiny of representative samples of students' work looked for evidence of their progress over time. Two case studies provided detailed evidence of how students are supported in school.
- A range of written information was examined, including information on the progress and achievement of students. Teachers planning and assessment was looked at, together with the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning. A range of policies and procedures, including those for safeguarding, were examined to help ensure compliance with the independent school regulations.

Inspection team

Martyn Groucutt, Lead inspector

Additional Inspector

Full report

Information about this school

- Higford School is part of the Options Group and provides education for boys and girls with autistic spectrum conditions and social, mental and emotional difficulties.
- The school is registered for up to 25 students and currently has 20 on roll, 16 of whom are male. All have a statement of special educational needs, or an education, health and care plan. All have been placed by local authorities, seven being children looked after by their local authority.
- The school first opened in 2008 and its last full inspection was in 2012. An emergency inspection held in December 2013 confirmed the findings of the last full inspection that this was a good school.
- In addition to fees paid by local authorities the school receives additional government funds known as the pupil premium. This is for students known to qualify for free school meals or who are looked after by their local authority, who can thus be identified as disadvantaged.
- The school does not make use of any alternative provision and does not enter students early for any examinations or accreditation.
- Since the last inspection, the headteacher has been given a quality assurance role across the company's four schools. At Higford, a new senior teacher joined the leadership team in January 2015. Since the last full inspection the number of students in the school has more than doubled.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase opportunities for teachers to work alongside colleagues in similar schools, giving opportunities to compare students' work and so increasing confidence that judgments about quality and progress are correct.
- Complete planning for ways in which the achievement of the most-able students can be measured and described once the national curriculum levels are ended.
- Implement proposals for a more local form of governance for Higford School within the wider Options Group framework to hold its leadership to account more strongly.

Inspection judgements

The leadership and management are good

- The inspirational headteacher has created a leadership team that is strongly focused on continual improvement and excellence. They have ensured that all the independent school regulations have been met. Each member has their own areas of responsibility and effective delegation holds them to account. They have a detailed knowledge of what is going on and use their expertise to support and promote effective teaching.
- There is strong support from staff and their work is supported by excellent liaison with other professionals. Teamwork is a notable strength and support from the on-site team of educational psychologists, occupational and speech and language therapists is excellent. They help staff in working with students who have a wide range of severe needs and in developing their own expertise.
- Staff are committed to the school and its students, whose progress is often outstanding. Great care has been taken to ensure that the topics and themes taught enable all students to access learning. The key skills of literacy and numeracy are promoted well. This is reflected in the increased focus on the use of phonics (letters and the sounds they make) to support reading, together with an enhanced range of appropriate reading materials. There is a good focus on supporting students in developing their social and life skills throughout school.
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong. In particular, students are very well supported in helping each to develop a greater self-awareness and confidence, supporting enhanced social skills. They are helped to realise that people have different views, beliefs and faiths and that all have a right to be heard. This helps prepare them for life in modern Britain.
- Leaders analyse learning outcomes with care. When this revealed recently that standards in mathematics were lagging behind those in reading and writing, staff training was implemented that has successfully addressed this. Such training is well supported by the school's own training and development team.
- Monitoring of teachers' classrooms, planning and assessment gives leaders an accurate picture. It supports the effective process for staff appraisal and professional development. This reflects the needs and priorities of the school, identified through effective self-evaluation. It also supports staff in developing their own expertise.
- Teachers have clear annual performance objectives and there is a link between their performance and pay. The focus on effective learning meeting the needs of every individual reflects a strong commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity, fostering good relations and seeking to ensure there is no discrimination. Effective use of the pupil premium helps these students to make progress more rapidly from their starting points than that made by students nationally.
- Each teacher is responsible for the management of their team of tutors and classroom support assistants. They plan together and teachers monitor progress towards annual objectives. In this way, they carry out a middle leadership role effectively, helping their team develop the expertise to support their students.
- Strong and effective links with a range of external professionals is reflected in the way in which the school's headteacher and the learning and support manager are both trainers for the county's safeguarding children board. The school's arrangements for safeguarding meet all legal requirements and ensure that potentially vulnerable students are very well provided for.
- Links with parents and carers are also strong. Students have a daily home-school book and parents and carers say that there is very regular contact with school.
- Care is taken to liaise with parents, carers and local authorities to ensure effective support and guidance leads to careful planning for life after school. This formally starts after the transition review following a student's 14th birthday. All students stay at school for post-16 education and then move on either to

provision in their own locality or, where more appropriate and agreed by all parties, to specialist provision within the Options Group.

- The premises support effective teaching and learning, and are well equipped. This includes the provision of modern technology such as tablet computers to support learning.
- All the required information is made available to parents and carers who have students at the school. This includes the complaints procedure and provision of full details for safeguarding, which is provided on line on the company's generic website and in hard copy at the earliest opportunity. The school does not have its own discrete website.

■ **The governance of the school:**

A range of detailed procedures include the completions of weekly reports by the headteacher which are analysed by the company's quality management team. In addition, a monthly governance review looks carefully at areas such as safeguarding, personnel issues and outcomes for young people. The company's head of autism services meets four times a year with the school's School Improvement Partner to develop a clear overview of teaching, progress and achievement. In these ways the company has a clear picture of the nature of the curriculum being taught and the quality of teaching. Reports give a clear picture of the data on the progress of each student. The financial situation of the school is kept under close review, as is the way that funding is used to support effective education. This includes the use of appraisal to link teachers' pay with their performance and for setting challenging annual objectives for the headteacher. The company also has clear procedures for dealing with underperformance.

However, what is not yet in place is a dedicated form of governance for Higford School, based firmly on holding the school's senior leaders to specific account for their school. The process at present is focused on the governance of schools across the whole group.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are outstanding

Behaviour

- The behaviour of students is outstanding. Most arrive with a turbulent history of previous education and have tended to communicate through high levels of challenging behaviour. The school is extremely effective in reducing the incidence and severity of such incidents.
- Detailed and precise individual plans for supporting positive behaviour are monitored regularly in depth to ensure they continue to address the behavioural needs of each individual. These are developed with the full support of the clinical team and reflect the important contribution it makes to the success of the school. Staff all receive effective training in dealing with challenging behaviour, updated regularly, and are well supported in putting this into effect.
- As a result, there is a high degree of consistency in the way in which staff work with students, helping them develop a sense of security and better understanding. Students are therefore in a much better position to learn and make progress. They really enjoy their learning and develop strong relationships with the adults who work with them. Decreasing amounts of time is lost to learning as a result of their behaviour being transformed over time. This is reinforced by ongoing individual support involving the clinical team through a student's time at the school, including transition planning to future placements. They help staff in classrooms by providing important insights into the causes of certain behaviour from individuals and ways in which this can be addressed.
- Parents, carers and local authorities are extremely positive about the ways in which behaviour becomes more positive. Not only are students able to learn and make the most of their ability but there is a dramatic change in the social aspects of students' lives. This is reflected in much more positive social behaviour and has a dramatic impact on the positive quality of wider family life.

Safety

- The school's work to keep students safe and secure is outstanding. All students are vulnerable in a variety of ways and the school is rigorous in seeking to ensure their safety. At the same time, they seek to

provide a range of activities that enable students to become more confident and aware of the world in which they live, such as opportunities for horse riding or visits to a nearby farm, which are extremely well supervised.

- Risk assessments of places, situations and students are rigorous. At the same time, detailed safeguarding arrangements seek to ensure that students are always safe. Staff receive detailed training to support them in this, alongside training in first aid, supporting students who are unwell, fire safety and in the safe use of restraint as a last resort.
- Close supervision of students ensures there is no opportunity for bullying and any incidents of negative behaviour are picked up immediately. Students and their parents and carers firmly believe that the school is a very safe place. Work undertaken as part of personal, social and health education, which is seen as central to students' education, seeks to develop an understanding of why positive personal relationships are important. Bullying is dealt with in a variety of ways, each intended to address the different levels of understanding shown by students. Discriminatory or derogatory language towards others is not tolerated. There are rigorous checks to ensure that students are not put at risk by the misuse of technology that might lead to cyber bullying or inappropriate contacts using social networking sites.
- Care is taken to ensure that transition protects the best interests of students, so seeking to ensure continuing safety after students have left school.
- The site itself is secure and care is taken to ensure that visitors are checked and monitored. The independent school standards for welfare, health and safety are all met.

The quality of teaching

is good

- The school meets all the independent school standards for teaching. Teachers, together with the tutors and learning support assistants who make up the individual class teams, work together extremely effectively. This enables each individual student to be supported in a way that addresses and meets their specific needs, so helping them maximise their talents and ability.
- Students make the best progress they can in the skills of speaking and listening, which for some non-verbal students is well supported by the effective use of signing, pictures and symbols to support communication. At the same time, they are encouraged to develop a range of life and social skills that prepares them for later life.
- Students are encouraged to make the most progress they can in the areas of literacy, numeracy and communication. This is reflected in the focus on supporting reading skills and the use of phonics, areas which have received enhanced resources since the last inspection. It allows them to make rapid progress in their learning from their individual starting points.
- Weekly planning time ensures that lessons are well coordinated within the class teams and address individual needs. Staff at all levels have high expectations, to which students respond positively. They really enjoy their lessons and, because staff act as such positive role models, students see skills such as team work and collaboration reflected all around them, helping them develop their own social skills.
- Staff use questioning effectively, both to check understanding and to get students to express their own ideas. This is pitched at just the right level, reflecting staff's detailed understanding of every student with whom they work.
- Work is assessed regularly and, depending on the ability of each student, they receive positive feedback and help for improving their work. This is either in written form, or just as frequently it is oral since some students find written criticism hard to accept, or sometimes to understand.
- While assessment is usually accurate, teachers do not get many opportunities to set the work of their students against that produced by similar students elsewhere. This means that, in such a small setting, there is a risk of teachers feeling isolated or lacking confidence that they are fully challenging students to

do their very best when assessing their work.

The achievement of pupils

is good

- From their very low starting points, students are encouraged to make rapid progress, both academically and in developing enhanced social and life skills. The school uses the progression guidance produced to measure the progress of students with severe learning difficulties. It shows virtually all students make at least the progress expected and a high proportion make progress well above that expected.
- A detailed measurement of the levels at which each student is working when they enter the school enables challenging targets for measuring progress to be set. They are measured on a termly basis. When a student is not making expected progress in reading, writing or mathematics, they are given additional support to help them catch up.
- The most-able students are challenged effectively. In recent times the school has admitted a number of more-able students, whose progress can be measured against the national curriculum levels and descriptors. Teaching reflects this and so additional external accreditation, such as Entry Level examinations, have been introduced to ensure that greater challenge leads to appropriate success in external accreditation.
- Disadvantaged students in receipt of additional support from the pupil premium make similarly positive progress. Within school, where a high proportion of students make accelerating progress, it is not always easy to show these students narrowing the attainment with others. However, when compared to students nationally, this group's progress is well above that found across the country in English and mathematics.
- Due to the care taken to ensure that individual needs are addressed effectively, when the school has come to look at the performance of identified groups such as boys and girls, or students from minority ethnic backgrounds, there is no difference in their performance or progress compared with the rest.
- The school meets the independent school standards relating to learning and achievement. However, when it comes to measuring the achievement and progress of the most able, who are currently judged against the national curriculum levels, the school has yet to complete its preparations for how it will sustain effective evaluation once these levels have ended, as currently proposed.

The sixth form provision

is good

- Sixth form provision is good. It is supported by very effective leadership and teaching which allows students to continue to make effective progress and good achievement. There is an increased focus on developing life skills to support students as they reach adulthood and move on to life after school, building on work previously undertaken. Currently, all students remain at school until they are 19 years of age. Care is then taken to work closely with parents and placing local authorities to ensure smooth and effective transition to the services that will be accessed after school.
- Teachers have a good understanding of their students' needs, which are met well. There is no break in provision between Key Stage 4 and post-16 education. Teaching and learning remains firmly focused on an individualised programme that meets identified needs. Opportunities for accreditation are in line with each individual's needs and ability. Students enjoy sixth form life and this is reflected in positive behaviour. The care and attention they receive helps ensure they continue to be safe, even as they spend increasing time in community based activities such as visits to shops.

What inspection judgements mean

School	
Grade	Judgement
Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Requires improvement
Grade 4	Inadequate

Detailed grade characteristics can be viewed in the *Non-association independent school inspection handbook* which is published on the GOV.UK website: www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-association-independent-school-inspection-handbook.

School details

Unique reference number	135445
Inspection number	462939
DfE registration number	896/6106

This inspection was carried out under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

Type of school	Special school – autistic spectrum disorder
School status	Independent school
Age range of pupils	8–19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	20
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	8
Proprietor	Options Autism 5 Ltd.
Headteacher	Anne Adams
Date of previous school inspection	3-4 December 2013
Annual fees (day pupils)	£79,560
Telephone number	01952 630600
Fax number	01952 630605
Email address	anne.adams@optionsautism.co.uk

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