

Inspection of Abbey School for Exceptional Children

10–12 Abbey Square, Chester CH1 2HU

Inspection dates:

13 to 15 September 2022

Overall effectiveness

Good

The quality of education

Good

Behaviour and attitudes

Good

Personal development

Good

Leadership and management

Good

Does the school meet the independent
school standards?

Yes

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils receive a supportive welcome each morning from skilled staff. Well-established routines help pupils to feel happy and safe in school. Leaders and staff work as part of a close-knit team to carefully consider pupils' special educational needs and or/disabilities (SEND).

Pupils are at the heart of leaders' work. Leaders are ambitious for all pupils to gain confidence so that they can thrive academically. Staff share this ambition. Leaders and staff ensure that pupils achieve well.

Well-trained staff manage pupils' complex SEND and associated challenging behaviours well. Pupils receive effective therapeutic support. They feel listened to and valued. Pupils told inspectors that staff respond quickly and effectively to any signs of bullying or poor behaviour. Consequently, disruption to pupils' learning is kept to a minimum.

Pupils enjoy many opportunities to learn about the wider world. These include visits to the cathedral grounds and trips to the zoo.

Pupils' preparation for adulthood is a priority. Leaders carefully consider the purpose and value of all learning opportunities. This helps staff, pupils, parents and carers to focus on aspirations for pupils' futures. For example, pupils grow vegetables in the horticulture garden and develop their life skills in the local community.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders have created an ambitious and well-designed curriculum. Pupils, including children in the early years and students in the sixth form, benefit from a wide range of subjects. Leaders have ensured that the curriculum clearly sets out the important knowledge that pupils need to learn.

Staff work together with on-site specialists to tailor the curriculum for each pupil. For example, staff think carefully about the small blocks of knowledge that pupils will need to gain so that they can reach their individual goals. The curriculum enables pupils to achieve well academically and to develop crucial life skills. For example, staff and parents work together to help pupils improve their tolerance of having their hair brushed and nails cut.

Staff deliver the curriculum well. Leaders have ensured that the learning environment meets the needs of pupils. Pupils with sensory needs benefit from the low-stimulus environment and lighting and acoustic conditions. Consequently, pupils can focus on their learning. Pupils revisit the important curriculum knowledge often and in different contexts. This helps to ensure that pupils remember and can use this knowledge with increasing confidence and independence.

Staff check pupils' progress effectively. This aids the identification of pupils' new or changing SEND. Staff adapt their teaching so that barriers to pupils' learning are reduced.

Leaders have made sure that staff have secure knowledge of the subjects that they teach. Senior leaders check the impact of the curriculum on pupils' learning and development. However, in some subjects other than English and mathematics, subject leadership is in its infancy. Leaders do not have a sufficiently well-developed knowledge of the subjects that they lead. This limits leaders' ability to improve staff expertise in these subjects.

Leaders place a strong focus on improving pupils' communication skills. Staff receive effective guidance from specialists such as speech and language therapists. Staff use high-quality resources such as visual aids, symbols and alternative communication tools. Consequently, pupils' communication skills improve from their different starting points.

Leaders have fostered pupils' love of reading. Pupils regularly enjoy listening to a range of rhymes and stories. Staff carefully select stories to introduce pupils to different cultures and ideas. Pupils at the early stages of reading receive effective support for as long as required. Pupils enjoy the books that they read. Most pupils learn to read with increasing confidence and fluency. However, a small number of pupils do not read books that match closely to the sounds that they know. This slows their progress.

Leaders and staff get to know pupils well. Staff skilfully support pupils to improve their behaviour over time. A sensory room and other smaller rooms are available to pupils when they need a safe space or time to regulate their emotions. Caring and supportive staff are always on hand. As a result, staff support pupils to manage their own behaviour increasingly well.

Pupils benefit from well-designed opportunities to enhance their personal development. For example, older pupils recently worked together to plan a school visit. This helped pupils to learn how to travel safely to an aquarium by taxi or public transport. Pupils receive effective, impartial careers information advice and guidance.

Staff support pupils to try new experiences. Pupils experience a range of different sports and foods. This helps to improve pupils' fitness and diets. Parents were full of praise for the way that leaders and staff develop their child's life skills. Leaders have established a carefully designed relationships and sex education curriculum. Younger pupils learn the importance of hygiene. Older pupils learn about growing up and healthy relationships. Parents greatly appreciate the support and care that their children receive.

Staff value the professional development opportunities that leaders provide. A significant minority of staff reported concerns about their workload. However, the

vast majority appreciate how senior leaders carefully consider staff's work-life balance.

The proprietor body keeps a careful check on leaders' work. An advisory board further strengthens the proprietor body's oversight. Members of the advisory board offer effective support and challenge to senior leaders. This ensures that the independent school standards are met consistently.

Leaders and staff ensure that the school site is a clean and a pleasant place for pupils to learn. Staff report any issues quickly to the site maintenance team. Concerns are quickly fixed by a competent person. The school meets the requirements of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. Leaders have established suitable risk assessments for a range of activities. Leaders ensure that policies are available to parents. Clear visual cues and a lift support pupils' access to the building. Leaders have ensured that the school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Leaders have ensured that the safeguarding policy is available on the school's website. It reflects the latest government guidance.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Leaders and staff complete regular safeguarding training. As a result, they are able to identify any signs of neglect. Leaders respond quickly to any reports about pupils' welfare. When required, leaders refer concerns to appropriate agencies. This ensures that pupils and their families get the support that they need to stay safe.

Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe. For example, staff support pupils to develop communication skills so that pupils can represent themselves where possible. This helps pupils to raise concerns if they feel uncomfortable.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and proprietor)

- Some pupils at the early stages of reading do not read from books that match closely to the sounds that they are learning. This hinders their progress. Leaders should ensure that the books that these pupils read match closely to the sounds that they know.
- Subject leadership is not as developed as it should be in some subjects. In these subjects, leaders do not have the knowledge and skills that they need to improve staff's expertise and subject-specific pedagogy. Leaders should ensure that subject leaders receive appropriate support to carry out their roles effectively.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use [Ofsted Parent View](#) to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further [guidance](#) on how to complain about a school.

School details

Unique reference number	147951
DfE registration number	896/6010
Local authority	Cheshire West and Chester
Inspection number	10203854
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	4 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	56
Number of part-time pupils	None
Proprietor	Abbey School Ltd
Chair	Barnabas Borbely
Principal	Katy Lee
Annual fees (day pupils)	£82,737
Telephone number	01244 960000
Website	www.abbeyschool.com
Email address	l.rushforth@abbeyschool.com

Information about this school

- The school opened in September 2020. This is its first standard inspection.
- The school is based at 10–12 Abbey Square in the centre of Chester.
- The chair of the proprietor body, Abbey School Ltd, is the sole director.
- The school provides for children, pupils and students with autism. Some pupils have additional learning difficulties. All pupils have an education, health and care plan or, if resident in Wales, a statement of special educational needs.
- A significant number of teaching and support staff started to work at the school in September 2022.
- Leaders do not make use of alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

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

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspection considered the day school and not the linked residential provision.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: English including reading, mathematics, design and technology and personal, social, health and economic education. For each deep dive, inspectors met with leaders to discuss curriculums, spoke with teachers, visited lessons, spoke with pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. The lead inspector observed pupils reading to a familiar adult. The lead inspector also considered other curriculums and met with subject leaders.
- At the time of the inspection, there were no children in the Reception class. Therefore, no judgement has been formed for the early years. However, inspectors considered the early years curriculum and welfare requirements through their inspection activities.
- A very small number of sixth-form students were on the school roll at the time of the inspection. Consequently, no judgement for the sixth form has been made. However, inspectors considered the education and welfare of these students when judging other aspects of the school.
- During the inspection, inspectors spoke with pupils and staff about school life. They spoke with the principal, senior leaders, members of staff and the chair of

the proprietor body. The lead inspector held an online meeting with the chair of the school's advisory board.

- The lead inspector spoke to parents by telephone. Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. They also considered the responses to Ofsted's online questionnaires for staff and pupils.
- The lead inspector spoke to a representative of Cheshire West and Chester local authority by telephone.
- During the inspection, inspectors reviewed a range of documentation, including that in relation to safeguarding and information relating to the independent school standards. They looked at records of pupils' behaviour and attendance.
- The lead inspector checked the school premises and met with staff responsible for the maintenance of the school site.

Inspection team

Adam Sproston, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Linda Griffiths

Ofsted Inspector

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