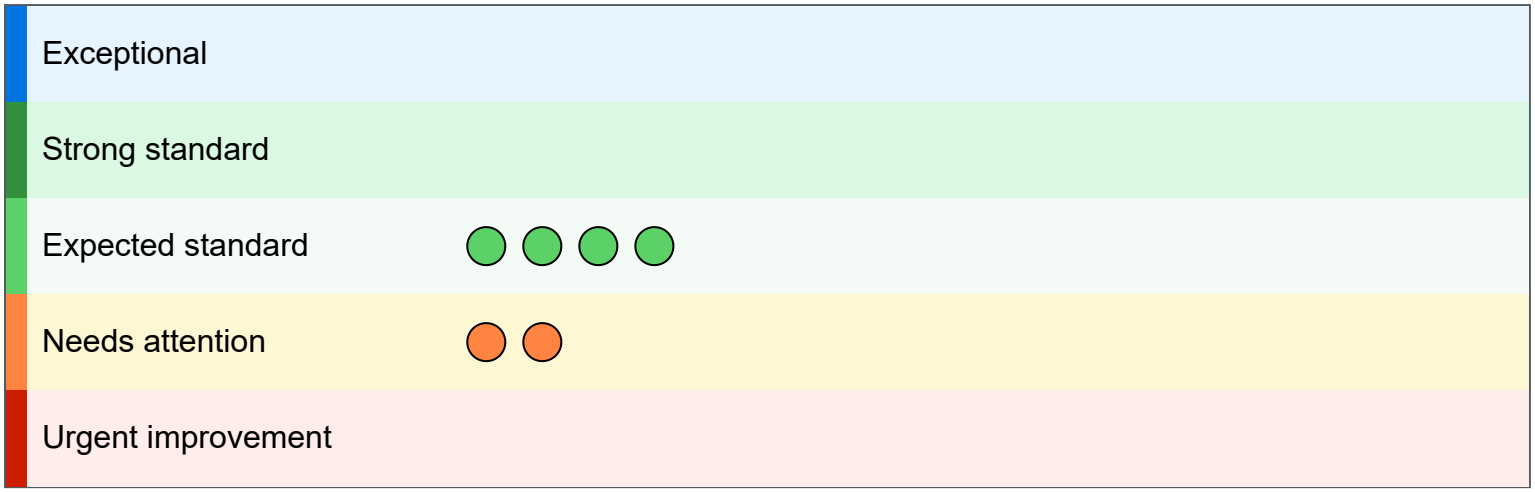
Lift Unity City

Address: Ormesby Road, Middlesbrough, TS3 8RE

Unique reference number (URN): 133768

Inspection report: 21 April 2026



Safeguarding standards met

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, pupils are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect schools for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- Met: The school has an open and positive culture of safeguarding. All legal requirements are met.
- Not met: The school has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.

Expected standard

Attendance and behaviour

Expected standard

Attendance at Unity City is everyone's responsibility. Leaders ensure that pupils receive a positive welcome at the start of the day. Tutors follow up any concerns over attendance. A team of 4 attendance officers works with pupils and families to overcome more entrenched barriers. Special provisions within school, such as 'The Retreat' and 'Horizons', help pupils with anxieties about coming to school. Leaders challenge any unauthorised absences. This mixture of support and challenge is proving successful. Although below national averages, attendance for all pupils and for vulnerable pupils has shown an improving trend for 3 successive years.

Leaders have taken positive action to improve behaviour. They have developed strong routines at the start of the day. Support for pupils who need extra help to manage their behaviour is increasingly effective. Behaviour in lessons is positive, with little low-level disruption. At social times, some pupils' behaviour can be more boisterous. Most pupils interact well with one another and with staff. The increasing number of pupils at the school is leading to some crowding on stairs that worries some pupils. Leaders have stationed staff on staircases to manage this at transition times.

Leaders and staff take bullying and discrimination very seriously. Where concerns arise, they address them with pupils and families. Incidents of bullying and racist language are declining. Most pupils express confidence in how well bullying is addressed, although some pupils have concerns over this and some other aspects of behaviour.

Inclusion

Expected standard

Staff work as a close team to keep a focus on the most vulnerable pupils. They assess and identify the needs of pupils well, particularly for those with multiple vulnerabilities. Staff are acutely aware of the barriers that pupils face. Staff take practical action to support pupils' welfare. For example, the school has set up its own mental health service to provide pupils with timely support. Leaders respond well to the needs of pupils who may have social care involvement and those who may be young carers themselves. This inclusive ethos and support extends to parents and carers.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) benefit from positive support in many areas. Additional interventions support their engagement. Pupils in the school's specially resourced provision for pupils with SEND typically receive purposeful help. Leaders are providing staff with training so that adaptations to teaching can better support pupils' progress.

The school's use of pupil premium funding is supporting improved behaviour and attendance for disadvantaged pupils. Targeted support in areas such as handwriting and reading is better addressing gaps in pupils' basic knowledge. Although academic outcomes have been weak over time, there are encouraging signs that the progress current pupils are making through the curriculum is improving.

The school uses alternative provision in a considered way. Leaders check how well this enhances pupils' engagement and achievement. Pupils in the school's on-site provision appreciate how this helps them to build positive relationships and better manage their behaviour.

Leadership and governance

Expected standard

Leaders have provided clear leadership that has brought important improvements in a short space of time. The new team took over after a period of instability and substantial staff changes. The new team has brought a shared purpose. Leaders care for pupils, and this is reflected in the relationships that they have built. They put pupils' wellbeing and safety at the centre of their work.

Much has been achieved. Behaviour and attendance are improving. Signs of academic improvement are also evident. Staff benefit from an enhanced professional learning programme and access to professional coaching. This is leading to improving teaching across many areas.

The level of change that leaders have managed in a highly complex situation should not be underestimated. They have built a loyal and supportive staff team who care deeply for the community that they serve. Leaders have high expectations. They are positive role models. Staff feel cared for and well supported.

The standards board appointed by the trust is providing challenge and support that is accelerating the improvement process. It brings an objective layer of accountability. The academy council provides local input into the governance structure. The trust is providing stronger support to the school.

Relationships with the community are improving. In many areas, leaders extend the support for pupils to their families. Increasing numbers of families are choosing the school as their first choice for their children. A minority of parents and carers are unhappy with communication and some aspects of support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, but the overall picture is positive.

Personal development and wellbeing

Expected standard

Leaders have developed a personal development programme that is responsive to the needs of pupils. They listen to pupils, parents, carers and staff to adapt the programme as necessary. The ‘adulting for beginners’ curriculum at key stage 3 is a particular strength. Pupils gain practical life skills, such as basic home maintenance. They benefit from personal development coaches who provide consistent pastoral support and help them to manage both academic demands and personal challenges.

Pupils access an appropriate personal, social and health education programme that develops their understanding of important issues. They learn the importance of healthy relationships and consent. The school works well with external providers to deepen pupils' awareness of these issues. The curriculum has a strong focus on safeguarding, including raising awareness of online dangers and knife crime. Leaders recognise the importance of building pupils' character traits. Pupils experience structured team-building activities and

leadership roles to develop their social skills and independence. Careers education is prioritised through a 3-phase model that enables pupils to explore options, gain experience and prepare for post-16 pathways.

The curriculum develops pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness. Pupils are taught about fundamental British values and characteristics that are protected in law. Leaders monitor how well these characteristics are upheld. Some pupils develop a deep understanding of these important themes, although this is not consistently the case.

Leaders provide pupils with opportunities to develop their interests and track participation in clubs and activities. Pupils can take part in a range of clubs, including cadets, chess and an LGBT club, alongside exciting opportunities for indoor skydiving and horse riding. Leaders make sure that disadvantaged pupils, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupils who speak English as an additional language benefit from what the school offers.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention

Pupils' achievement over time has not been good enough, including that of disadvantaged pupils. Many pupils arrive at school with significant gaps in their basic knowledge, and these gaps have not been sufficiently addressed. However, improvements in the curriculum and teaching are beginning to have an impact. Outcomes for pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, showed some signs of improvement in 2025.

Support for pupils' reading is enabling them to better access the curriculum. A handwriting programme helps pupils who need support to record and capture their work in writing. Work in pupils' books shows that they have greater confidence in writing at length and sustaining narratives. The improvements at key stage 3 are equipping pupils with stronger foundations for the future. The proportions of pupils progressing to employment, education or training are increasing. While many gaps remain, emerging signs of improved achievement are evident.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention

Leaders have done much to enhance the curriculum and improve the quality of teaching after a period of staffing changes. Some of these improvements are not embedded to consistent effect. Leaders are aware of the strengths and areas for improvement across departments. They provide staff with training and support to enhance their practice. Leaders have introduced new teaching approaches across the school. These are helping pupils to retain information and apply their knowledge. Despite this, there is some variation in how well teachers check pupils' learning. In some subjects, these checks do not tell teachers how deeply pupils understand their learning. This means that, in these subjects, teachers do not make well-informed adaptations to their teaching to meet the needs of all pupils.

The curriculum is generally taught well and most staff have appropriate subject knowledge. Staff are made aware of pupils' needs. Additional support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is often used well. On occasion, adaptations to teaching in lessons are not as effective as they could be. Leaders are working with staff to improve this.

Leaders are aware that some pupils lack the essential knowledge that they need. They are putting support in place that is beginning to address barriers to pupils' literacy and numeracy, although this work is not consistently embedded and gaps remain.

What it's like to be a pupil at this school

Staff place pupils' safety and wellbeing at the centre of their work. Pupils benefit from this focus. Leaders put routines in place at the start of the school day to check that pupils are safe and ready to learn. Pupils are made aware of the risks they face in their local area and beyond. Staff teach pupils how these potential risks can be addressed. Staff are continually mindful of pupils' welfare and respond to concerns that may arise. They work with local partners, including the police, fire service and social care, to keep a watchful eye on pupils' wellbeing.

Leaders encourage a culture of respect. Pupils typically respond positively to this. Staff take any incidents of bullying seriously. They work with pupils and families to show that bullying will not be tolerated. Leaders provide pupils with many opportunities to extend their interests and develop their character traits.

In lessons, pupils behave well and focus on their learning. They enjoy respectful relationships with staff. Pupils who need extra help with their behaviour benefit from support. On occasion, behaviour outside of classrooms can be livelier, although not ill-tempered. Leaders are taking action to address the concerns that some pupils express over congestion on the busy stairways.

Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, have not achieved well enough over time. This is beginning to change. Improvements in the curriculum and teaching are helping pupils to make better progress through the curriculum. Pupils with barriers to learning, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are receiving better support. This is enabling current pupils to overcome some of the emotional and social barriers to school life and some of the academic barriers to their learning. Pupils' attendance is improving, and increasing proportions of pupils now progress to education, employment or training.

Next steps

- Leaders should intensify developments in curriculum and teaching to further develop pupils' foundational knowledge to support stronger achievement for all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils.
- Leaders should improve the use of assessment to check learning, deepen understanding and adapt teaching and the curriculum to better support pupils' progress.

- Leaders should further embed strategies to improve pupils' behaviour and their perception of behaviour, particularly at social times and at times of transition at the end of breaks.

About this inspection

The school is part of the Lift Schools Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Rebecca Boomer Clark, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Alistair Da Costa.

Inspectors carried out this full inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Following our renewed inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMIs.

The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Inspectors spoke with the principal, senior leaders, subject leaders and a range of teaching and non-teaching staff. Inspectors also met with members of the interim standards board and the regional and national director of education. Inspectors talked to pupils in lessons, at social times and in more formal meetings.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school includes provision for 30 pupils with moderate learning difficulties in its specially resourced provision.

The school makes use of 2 registered alternative provisions and one that is unregistered.

The school also has an on-site alternative provision, Horizons, for pupils who need extra support.

Principal: Jill Gray

Lead inspector:
Malcolm Kirtley, Ofsted Inspector

Team inspectors:
Jill Bowe, Ofsted Inspector
Philip Wheatley, Ofsted Inspector
Joanne Maw, Ofsted Inspector
Rob Spurr, Ofsted Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.

This data is from 21 April 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

1,027
Close to average

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils currently at this school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

National average: 1,067

School capacity

1,050
Close to average

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils who can attend the school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

National average: 1,153

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

72.54%
Well above average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

National average: 28.9%

Pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

4.48%
Above average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan. This covers pupils with more support than is available through special educational needs support.

National average: 3.09%

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

13.24%
Close to average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with reported special educational support needs at the school.

National average: 13.4%

Location deprivation

Well above average

What does this mean?

Based on the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) and the school's location, we have calculated whether the school is located in a more or less deprived area.

Resourced Provision or SEND Unit (if applicable)

Resourced provision

What does this mean?

Whether school has Resourced Provision or SEND unit (if applicable).

Type of specialist provision (if applicable)

MLD - Moderate Learning Difficulty

What does this mean?

The type of Special Educational Needs provision provided at the school (if applicable).

All pupils' performance

English and maths GCSE

Percentage of pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (revised)	20.6%	45.4%	Below
2023/24 (final)	18.0%	45.9%	Below
2022/23 (final)	12.8%	45.3%	Below

Attainment 8

A measure of pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (revised)	34.2	46.0	Below
2023/24 (final)	31.8	45.9	Below
2022/23 (final)	35.7	46.3	Below

Progress 8

How much progress pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	-0.87	-0.03	Below
2022/23 (final)	-0.57	-0.03	Below

Disadvantaged pupils' performance

Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years and children looked after.

Disadvantaged pupils' English and maths GCSE grade 5 or above

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieving grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (revised)	12.7%	25.8%	Below
2023/24 (final)	14.5%	25.8%	Below
2022/23 (final)	11.0%	25.2%	Below

Disadvantaged pupils' Attainment 8

A measure of disadvantaged pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (revised)	29.6	34.9	Below
2023/24 (final)	28.3	34.6	Below
2022/23 (final)	33.5	35.0	Close to average

Disadvantaged pupils' Progress 8

How much progress disadvantaged pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	-1.01	-0.57	Below
2022/23 (final)	-0.59	-0.57	Close to average

Disadvantaged pupils' performance gap

Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years and children looked after. The school disadvantage gap is the difference between the performance of the school's disadvantaged pupils compared to the performance of all non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

Disadvantaged pupils' English and maths GCSE grade 5 or above

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2024/25 (revised)	12.7%	53.1%	-40.4 pp
2023/24 (final)	14.5%	53.1%	-38.6 pp
2022/23 (final)	11.0%	52.4%	-41.4 pp

Disadvantaged pupils' Attainment 8

A measure of disadvantaged pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2024/25 (revised)	29.6	50.4	-20.9
2023/24 (final)	28.3	50.0	-21.7
2022/23 (final)	33.5	50.3	-16.8

Disadvantaged pupils' Progress 8

How much progress disadvantaged pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2023/24 (final)	-1.01	0.16	-1.18
2022/23 (final)	-0.59	0.17	-0.76

Destinations after 16

Destinations after 16

Percentage of pupils staying in education or employment for at least 2 terms after the end of secondary school (key stage 4).

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023 leavers (provisional)	74%	91%	Below
2022 leavers (revised)	78%	93%	Below
2021 leavers (revised)	89%	94%	Below

Absence

Overall absence

The percentage of all possible mornings and afternoons missed due to absence from school (for whatever reason, whether authorised or unauthorised) across all pupils.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (2 term)	13.3%	8.1%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	14.6%	8.9%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	16.6%	9.0%	Above

Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (2 term)	39.1%	21.9%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	42.4%	25.6%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	48.2%	26.5%	Above

Our grades explained

Exceptional

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other schools can learn from it.

Strong standard

The school reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard

The school is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement

The school needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for children and learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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