

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
MAT@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



3 October 2022

David Walker, Chair of the Board of Trustees
Elizabeth Horne CBE, Chief Executive Officer
Horizons Specialist Academy Trust
Abbey Hill Academy
Ketton Road
Stockton-on-Tees
TS19 8BU

Dear Mr Walker and Mrs Horne

Summary evaluation of Horizons Specialist Academy Trust

Following the summary evaluation of Horizons Specialist Academy Trust ('the trust') in September 2022, when I was accompanied by Zoe Lightfoot, His Majesty's Inspector, I am writing on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the trust on 12 to 15 September. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the summary evaluation and a wider consideration of the trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of evidence gathering activities

For stage 1 of this summary evaluation, three schools were inspected between November 2021 and June 2022. All of these inspections were carried out under either section 5 or 8 of the Education Act 2005 (the Act), as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- One school improved from requires improvement to good.
- One school had its first section 5 inspection as a sponsor-led academy and was judged to be good.
- One school retained the same judgement of good.

Over the course of the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff. We met with the members of the trust and five representatives of the board of trustees, including the chair of the board. We visited the three trust schools that had not been inspected during stage one of the summary evaluation process. In each of these schools, we met with the principal, members of the academy council, other senior leaders, leaders responsible for subjects, teachers and, in one school, an inspector met with pupils.

Context

Horizons Specialist Academy Trust (HSAT) is a multi-phase, specialist academy trust. Pupils range from ages five to 19. There are six schools in the trust, providing for a range of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The schools are located in Middlesbrough, Stockton-on-Tees and Redcar and Cleveland local authorities. The trust was established in 2013.

Archway Academy Pupil Referral Unit joined the trust in September 2021 as a converter academy.

The trust's schools vary in size from just below 50 pupils in Green Gates Academy to around 350 pupils in Abbey Hill Academy.

Most pupils have an education, health and care plan covering four broad areas of need: communication and interaction, sensory and/or physical needs, social, emotional and mental health difficulties or cognition and learning needs.

There are five members of the trust. The Trust Board is currently made up of 8 Trustees. A further, ninth, appointment is imminent. This group is responsible for the strategic oversight and performance of the trust and its schools.

Main findings

Currently, the inspection outcomes for the trust's academies, including the most recent inspections, are as follows:

- Five schools are judged to be good.
- One school has yet to be inspected since joining the trust. When its predecessor school, Archway, was last inspected by Ofsted in March 2018, it was judged to be good.

Impact of the trust on its academies – governance and delegation

- There is a multi-layered approach to quality assurance and leadership across the trust. Academy councils have considerable delegated responsibilities, including to evaluate, monitor and challenge pupil attendance. Trustees ensure they are fully informed about the strengths and areas to develop relating to the work of each council. Members of more-established academy councils carry out their responsibilities well. Trust leaders are working to improve induction procedures to ensure newer academy councils understand their roles and responsibilities.
- Most curriculum decisions are made at an individual academy level. This is due to the diverse nature of the schools within the trust and the differing needs of the pupil cohorts. However, there are some aspects or approaches to the curriculum which are common across the trust.
- Stage one inspection outcomes, pupils' achievements and the proportion of pupils moving into education, employment and training confirm HSAT to be a strong and improving trust.
- Trust leaders play a central role in the trust's self-evaluation process. External evaluations of the trust's effectiveness are brokered regularly. Trustees and the chief executive officer (CEO) use this information to hold leaders and themselves to account for their work.
- Members understand their distinct role well. They understand their responsibilities and are confident when talking about governance and finance. Members, trustees and more established academy councils understand their roles and responsibilities because of the comprehensive scheme of delegation.
- Trust leaders endeavour to provide pupils with 'infinite opportunities' as outlined in the trust's vision. They speak with purpose about how all adults want the very best for each pupil. Nevertheless, there is a need to strengthen how the trust's vision, ambitions and intentions are communicated to all staff across the trust.

Impact of the trust on its academies – leadership and management

- Appropriate policies are in place. They provide clear guidance and lines of accountability relating to roles and responsibilities. Leaders and trustees review them regularly. In some instances, there is autonomy for academies to deviate or implement a policy in a different way, to better meet the additional and differing needs of their pupils.
- The CEO knows the trust well. She leads from the front, modelling wider trust values 'to do more and to do it better'. Trustees have an eye on succession planning. They have supported the CEO to make additional appointments to safeguard the trust in this regard. These appointments have further

strengthened the executive leadership of the trust. The CEO, deputy CEO and executive principal provide strong, effective leadership.

- Trust leaders carry out an intense and robust due diligence process prior to new schools joining the trust. In this way, leaders understand the strengths and areas to improve across each new academy school and are able to assign resources and staff to swiftly improve the quality of provision, if necessary.
- Strong processes and systems, which include a high degree of external quality assurance, ensure the trust's funds are used effectively.
- Leaders and staff who have joined the trust recently describe high levels of satisfaction with the process. Staff received regular updates and were supported by the trust to understand clearly any new ways of working and the trust's policies. However, members of newer academy councils do not have as clear an understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as outlined in the scheme of delegation.

Impact of the trust on its academies – curriculum and quality of education

- More recently, trust and academy leaders have reviewed the curriculum offer to ensure it is broad and balanced, and meets the needs of pupils with SEND, based on pupils' additional needs and future aspirations.
- There are established, professional development opportunities available to teaching and support staff. Staff actively seek to improve their own practice. Trust leaders willingly support staff to do so. A range of staff across the trust have gained accreditation to support them in their role or gained practical experience which helps them to provide stronger support for pupils. For example, a new member of staff with a passion for signing Makaton (key word signing) has been supported by trust leaders to become a trainer.
- Careers opportunities, guidance and preparation for adulthood are important priorities across the trust. Pupils of all ages benefit from a strong careers curriculum, helping to prepare them for the world of work and adulthood.
- Leaders understand well where curriculum implementation is strong and where it needs improvement. Staff receive swift and appropriate professional support to help improve the quality of education pupils receive.
- As the country, and the trust, emerged from a period of COVID-19 restrictions, leaders and staff have identified that pupils' reading fluency and phonics knowledge require further development. Accordingly, leaders of literacy have reviewed ways of working and have changed their approaches to teaching pupils to read. Trust leaders need to continue to enhance staff skills and expertise so that pupils at the early stages of reading are supported appropriately and helped to improve their phonics knowledge from their different starting points.

Impact of the trust on its academies – Behaviour and Attitudes

- Staff support effectively those pupils who have a wide range of needs. Some pupils' behaviour can be unpredictable. Staff are steadfast in their resolve to support each pupil as best they can. Staff have the pupil information they need and are trained well to deal with the situations that arise. Leaders provide swift and effective support for staff to manage pupils' behaviour.
- Trust leaders have developed effective systems to monitor, analyse and respond to pupils' behaviour. Information linked to pupils' behaviour and attendance is shared regularly with members of each academy council and the board of trustees. Trustees provide a significant amount of challenge to leaders to improve pupils' behaviour and attendance.
- Trust leaders are outward facing. They strive to ensure all pupils receive the best education possible to help improve their attitudes to school and learning in general. Trust leaders make effective use of alternative education providers for some pupils. Leaders visit pupils and providers often. This ensures trust leaders understand clearly the impact each placement is having and how it is supporting pupils' next steps in education, employment and training. For most pupils in alternative education provision, rates of attendance and attitudes to learning quickly improve from their different starting points.
- Attendance across the trust requires improvement. While there has been some improvement since the period of COVID-19 restrictions, there is more to do. The trust has taken proactive steps in recent times to appoint parent support advisers (PSAs) in each school. The PSAs are developing caring relationships with pupils who do not attend as often as they should. This work is starting to have the desired effect.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding was judged to be effective in all inspections completed as part of stage one of this summary evaluation.

The trust has appointed safeguarding leaders who are knowledgeable and have the skills and time to support staff and pupils' safeguarding needs. Trust leaders with responsibility for safeguarding know pupils and their families well. They know who the most vulnerable pupils are. In addition, safeguarding leaders know their communities, the localities and the risks pupils may encounter in detail. They provide safeguarding training and regular updates for staff. Staff feel confident and have the skills to support pupils. They have the confidence and expertise to amend the safeguarding curriculum in each school further to ensure it meets the needs of each cohort, should emerging risks be identified.

There are comprehensive safer recruitment procedures in place across the trust. Leaders and members of each academy council have been trained appropriately. They understand their safeguarding roles and responsibilities in full.

Each academy site and the resources pupils use are unique. Trust leaders are proactive. They seek new and innovative ways to educate and support pupils with SEND. When new resources or spaces are developed, such as the hydrotherapy pool, sensory square and space cube, leaders and site staff conduct robust risk assessments. Pupils' safety is a priority in this specialist trust.

Recommendations

- Further improve rates of pupils' attendance across the trust.
- Continue to enhance staff skills and expertise so that pupils at the early stages of reading are supported appropriately, helping them to improve their phonics knowledge from their different starting points.
- Strengthen how the trust's vision, ambitions and intentions are communicated across the trust.
- Ensure members of new academy councils understand clearly the responsibilities that have been delegated to them.

Yours sincerely

Lee Elliott
His Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the Trust

School Information				Most recent inspection		
URN	School name	Local Authority	Date joined trust	Does the inspection relate to the school in its current form?	Inspection date	OE grade
139974	Abbey Hill Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/08/2013	Yes	25/06/2015	Good
141384	Green Gates Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/09/2014	Yes	09/10/2019	Good
148694	Archway Academy	Redcar and Cleveland	01/09/2021	No	20/03/2018	Good
143519	Hollis Academy	Middlesbrough	01/10/2016	Yes	23/06/2022	Good
141385	Westlands Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/09/2014	Yes	23/11/2021	Good
146953	Mo Mowlam Academy	Redcar and Cleveland	01/09/2019	Yes	20/01/2022	Good

*Schools highlighted received either a section 5 or section 8 inspection in part 1 of the MAT SE