

Inspection of an outstanding school: Blackfriars Academy

Priory Road, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire ST5 2TF

Inspection dates:

10 and 11 October 2023

Outcome

Blackfriars Academy continues to be an outstanding school.

The principal of this school is Alison Parr. This school is part of Shaw Education Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Jo Morgan, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Andrew Meehan.

What is it like to attend this school?

Blackfriars Academy prepares pupils well for the next stages of their education and lives. Pupils know that every adult in school will support them along their journey into adulthood. Pupils thrive from the opportunities given to them.

Behaviour across the school is exemplary. At playtime and lunchtime, pupils play and interact together respectfully. They hold doors open for adults and for each other. They warmly greet visitors with a smile and a handshake. Pupils are highly motivated and speak positively about their school experience. Pupils know that adults will keep them safe in school.

The school has high expectations for what each individual pupil can achieve. Staff speak with conviction of the 'power of education to transform the lives of pupils and parents and carers'. This ambition is realised. Pupils achieve exceptionally well. These achievements include a range of academic and vocational qualifications and other accreditations. In addition, pupils are taught skills that prepare them well for independent living in a home.

Pupils are given a range of leadership opportunities. They can become, for example, peer or equality and inclusion mentors. Pupils are proud of these roles. They take their responsibilities seriously. Pupil mentors wear colourful jumpers, which makes them stand out around school. Younger pupils approach them with confidence and ask them for help if needed.

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

Pupils arrive from many different settings, including other special and mainstream schools. The school takes the time to understand quickly pupils' needs and experiences. It works closely with previous schools, parents and specialists. This means that pupils receive the support they need without delay. No time is wasted.

The school continuously reviews and updates the curriculum, including in the sixth form. This is well established across all subject areas. The school has identified the key knowledge it wants pupils to learn and in which order. There is a sharp focus on building vocabulary and communication and preparing pupils for life after Blackfriars. Furthermore, the curriculum is enriched with visits and experiences. These enrichment activities are carefully considered in order to improve pupils' learning further.

All pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. These cover a broad range of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). These include physical disabilities, autism, severe learning difficulties and other complex needs. Leaders have a detailed understanding of each child's academic needs and their SEND. Teachers use this information well and plan activities that closely match pupils' stage of learning. As a result, pupils are engaged well and highly motivated to learn. Staff check that pupils have understood the important knowledge they need to succeed. They are very skilful at using questioning and other communication strategies to help identify what pupils know and can do. In addition, systems to identify and review pupils' changing SEND are thorough and accurate.

Many pupils arrive with different experiences and skills in reading. Regular phonics and focused interventions quickly help pupils to catch up. Pupils talk about the books and stories they have read and enjoy. All pupils experience daily, whole-class 'big read' sessions. Staff carefully prepare these sessions with books to match pupils' developmental needs and interests. This helps to develop pupils' passion for books and reading. Pupils at the pre-reading stage are well supported. They are able to recognise symbols and associate meaning with them.

Support for pupils with their communication is exceptional at Blackfriars Academy. Staff take time to understand how to support each pupil's communication needs. Staff teach pupils how to use communication aids in lessons, at home and in the community. Adults are highly skilled in using a wide range of communication systems. This allows pupils to have a voice and to communicate what works for them and what does not. Adults use this information well. They adapt their provision to take account of pupils' views.

The school's offer to promote careers information, education, advice and guidance is strong. Pupils, for instance, take part in work experience that is well matched to their individual needs. Pupils are well prepared for appropriate outcomes in employment, further training or supporting living.

The school is determined to prepare pupils for the world around them. Pupils are offered a wealth of opportunities beyond the academic. They have access to a wide variety of extra-curricular clubs. These include a computing club and the popular rabbit club, where

pupils learn to care for animals. In addition, pupils learn how to keep their homes tidy, use a washing machine and to prepare and cook meals.

Leaders and staff speak highly of each other. Staff feel well supported to carry out their roles. Parents and specialist agencies are overwhelmingly positive about the education, care and support that pupils receive at Blackfriars Academy.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

Background

When we have judged a school to be outstanding, we will then normally go into the school about once every four years to confirm that the school remains outstanding. This is called an ungraded inspection, and it is carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. We do not give graded judgements on an ungraded inspection. However, if we find evidence that a school would now receive a higher or lower grade, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection, which is carried out under section 5 of the Act. Usually this is within one to two years of the date of the ungraded inspection. If we have serious concerns about safeguarding, behaviour or the quality of education, we will deem the ungraded inspection a graded inspection immediately.

This is the second ungraded inspection since we judged the predecessor school, Blackfriars School, to be outstanding in January 2013.

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.

Further information

You can search for [published performance information](#) about the school.

In the report, '[disadvantaged pupils](#)' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the [definition of children in need of help and protection](#); pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's [pupil premium funding](#) (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	141448
Local authority	Staffordshire
Inspection number	10257049
Type of school	Special
School category	Academy converter
Age range of pupils	11 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in sixth-form provision	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	117
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	2
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Andrew Meehan
CEO of the trust	Jo Morgan
Principal	Alison Parr
Website	www.blackfriarsacademy.org.uk
Date of previous inspection	15 October 2020, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- There have been several changes in governance since the previous inspection. An assistant principal has also been appointed since the previous inspection.
- Blackfriars Academy is part of Shaw Education Trust.
- All pupils have an EHC plan. These cover a broad range of SEND. These include physical disabilities, autism, severe learning difficulties and other complex needs. Pupils also have additional needs, such as profound and multiple learning disabilities, and sensory and medical needs.
- The school uses two unregistered alternative providers.
- 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.

Information about this inspection

- Inspections are a point-in-time judgement about the quality of a school's education provision.
- This was the first routine inspection the school had received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- The inspectors met with the headteacher, the chief executive officer, representatives from the trust, the chair of the academy council, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, subject leaders, teachers and pupils. Inspectors also spoke to a leader from the alternative provision used by the school. They also talked informally with parents and carers, transport escorts, drivers and staff.
- The lead inspector spoke with a representative of the local authority.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in early reading, communication, personal, social and health education, history and religious education. For each deep dive, inspectors discussed the curriculum with areas of learning leaders, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also looked at additional areas of learning.
- Inspectors looked at a sample of pupils' EHC plans.
- The lead inspector observed pupils reading to a familiar adult.
- Inspectors spoke to groups of pupils formally and informally about their learning and experiences at school.
- Inspectors observed informal times to evaluate safeguarding and pupils' behaviour.
- Safeguarding documents were reviewed, including the checks that leaders make on staff's suitability to work with children. The inspectors examined how staff implement safeguarding policies and procedures effectively across the school. They also considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- Inspectors considered responses to the online questionnaire, Ofsted Parent View. This included free-text comments. Inspectors also looked at responses to Ofsted's online staff survey.
- Inspectors looked at a range of documentation provided by the school. This included the school's self-evaluation, school policies, curriculum documents and SEND records.

Inspection team

Anna Vrahimi, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Sarahjane Cuncannon Edwards

Ofsted Inspector

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