

Serco Inspections
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0121 679 9158
Direct email: rachel.dayan@serco.com

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Mrs Sara Billins
Principal
North Oxfordshire Academy
Drayton Road
Banbury
OX16 0AN

Dear Mrs Billins

No formal designation monitoring inspection of North Oxfordshire Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 11–12 December 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was a monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the Chief Inspector was concerned about the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements at the academy.

Evidence

During my visit I scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding. I met with the Principal, members of the senior leadership team, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a range of other staff. I met groups of students, visited a range of classrooms and observed behaviour in lessons and around the academy. I examined documents relating to the academy's self-evaluation and improvement, including minutes of governing body meetings. I spoke by telephone to two representatives from the academy's sponsor, the United Learning Trust. I also had a telephone discussion with the local authority designated officer for safeguarding and met his deputy in person.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy's safeguarding arrangements meet requirements.

Context

North Oxfordshire Academy is a slightly larger-than-average, mixed school. The majority of its students are White British; about 15% come from a range of minority

ethnic backgrounds, the largest group being of Pakistani heritage. About 10% of students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is higher than average, at approximately 40%. An average proportion are disabled students or students who have special educational needs and are supported by school action; about double the average are supported beyond school or have a statement of special educational needs.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour in lessons and around the academy is typically good. Students' attitudes to learning are positive and well supported by the good relationships they have with staff and with one another. Poor behaviour is almost always related to teacher inexperience and the academy has good systems for developing the classroom management skills of newly qualified teachers. Students like the clarity of the behaviour management system, which works well because it is consistently applied. Academy leaders have thoroughly reviewed the use of internal and external exclusion because they rightly consider it wasteful of learning time. Exclusion from school in 2012 was above average. Exclusion, either from lessons or from school, is now reducing, because internal behaviour management systems are working more effectively and because students are taking greater responsibility for their own behaviour.

Students have a good understanding of different types of bullying, supported by a carefully considered programme of personal, social and health education. They say that the academy is a safe and welcoming place. They report that racist or homophobic bullying is unacceptable to them and to their teachers. Records confirm that such bullying is rare and dealt with forcibly and quickly.

The academy is actively involved in local safeguarding initiatives, such as the identification of young people at risk of child sexual exploitation or of becoming homeless. Comprehensive records show where multiple agencies are involved with a young person and keep academy welfare officers alert to any changes or new referrals.

The academy's drive for better attendance is having an impact on students' attitudes to school but the result of this is yet to show in rising attendance figures. The attendance officer is tenacious in pursuing absence; systems for holding families to account for their children's good attendance are tougher than in the past. Attendance data remain stubbornly below target, partly because the academy has inherited students from other schools with embedded patterns of persistent absence.

Sixth formers support younger students widely through well-planned mentoring programmes. An innovative programme of youth work is helping potentially vulnerable young people remain in education and make a positive contribution to academy life. This has attracted recognition from the National Youth Agency as a model of good practice for other schools.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Senior leaders are highly committed to keeping students safe and to ensuring that they understand how to keep themselves safe. Safeguarding systems are clear and well understood by staff at all levels. The leadership team is carefully structured so that lines of referral are clear. Concerns find their way quickly to skilled staff with the time and expertise to act on them. Students self-refer using the 'green form' system if they have any fears about bullying or safety and this is followed up assiduously.

The single central record of staff employment checks meets requirements and is generally well maintained. However the record did not show clearly enough where staffing checks have been done by other agencies, such as cleaning or catering companies. This was quickly rectified but had not been picked up by senior leaders, governors, or the Trust. Staff training in child protection and safeguarding is carried out at the appropriate level and with sufficient frequency. The academy meets the standard of training expected by the local authority designated officer for safeguarding, but this is only recently the case.

While safeguarding arrangements are appropriate, the systems for governors and the Trust to check these are not robust enough. Governors and the Trust are too accepting of the Principal's reports on this area, and do not question the reliability or the validity of assertions made.

External support

Despite sound internal mechanisms for ensuring that students are safe, the academy does not make good enough use of external checks so that its practice is objectively validated. Some degree of misunderstanding between academy leaders and the local authority about the requirements of child protection policy and practice has now been resolved. However, neither the sponsor nor the governing body has ensured that sufficiently rigorous checks are in place to uncover gaps in checking or in compliance should they emerge.

Priorities for further improvement

- The academy should report its safeguarding arrangements annually to the local authority, in accordance with its published guidance, to allow the designated child protection officers to sign off its policy and practice and/or make recommendations for improvement. This should begin immediately with the 2012-2013 report.
- The United Learning Trust should review the effectiveness of its systems for checking an academy's safeguarding arrangements, including the compliance of the single central register of staff.

- The Governing Body should ensure that these external checks are carried out assiduously by academy leaders and that the academy is not reliant solely on internal evaluation.
- The Governing Body should ensure that there is a designated safeguarding governor in post who has the time and expertise to monitor and challenge the academy's practice routinely.

I am copying this letter to the Director of Children's Services, to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc. Chair of the Governing Body, North Oxfordshire Academy.