

Inspection of a school judged good for overall effectiveness before September 2024: St Aidan's Church of England Academy

Hundens Lane, Darlington, County Durham DL1 1LL

Inspection dates:

10 and 11 June 2025

Outcome

Evidence gathered during this ungraded (section 8) inspection suggests that aspects of the school's work may not be as strong as at the time of the previous inspection. The school's next inspection will be a graded inspection.

The headteacher of this school is Dean Lythgoe. This school is part of Northern Lights Learning Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Jo Heaton, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Katie Hammond.

What is it like to attend this school?

St Aidan's CofE Academy is a warm and welcoming school. Pupils are happy here. They enjoy positive relationships with staff. Pupils are encouraged to fulfil the school's vision to 'live life to the full'. Since the school recently joined the trust, staff have increased expectations for pupils' achievement, so that this vision can be realised. Pupils' outcomes in public examinations in 2024 were low. Despite most pupils moving on to further education and training, they were not as well prepared as they should have been. Decisive action from the trust means that the school is now improving.

The school is calm. At social times, pupils are civilised and mix well. They follow the school's well-embedded routines closely. For example, pupils move from social time to 'line-up' quickly. This supports an orderly start to lessons, where most pupils concentrate and work hard.

There are a range of opportunities on offer to support pupils' wider development. For example, pupils enjoy being 'reading leaders' and 'sports leaders'. These help pupils to develop their sense of responsibility and communication skills. Pupils are positive about the extra-curricular opportunities at the school, for example in cookery, art, dance and a range of sports.

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

The school's curriculum is broad and ambitious. Pupils choose to study a range of academic, vocational and creative subjects. The curriculum is designed so that pupils build their knowledge and skills over time. For example, in art and design, pupils in Year 7 learn to use different lines, shapes and shading techniques before applying these skills effectively to create observational drawings.

Teachers use their expertise to explain concepts to pupils clearly. There is some variation in the effectiveness of the ways teaching supports pupils to develop their knowledge deeply, over time. For example, sometimes teachers' questioning does not help pupils to extend their thinking. Occasionally, teachers do not address the misconceptions or gaps that pupils have in their learning. Pupils do not achieve as well as they could. To address this, the school is beginning to implement a clear model for teaching. It is beginning to improve consistency, but it is in the early stages of implementation.

The school identifies pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) accurately. Teachers use appropriate strategies to ensure pupils' needs are met. However, pupils with SEND are subject to the same inconsistencies in teaching as their peers, so some pupils do not always achieve as well as they could.

To support pupils' reading, the school teaches pupils new vocabulary effectively. This helps pupils to understand the different texts they read across the curriculum. The school identifies pupils who need extra support with their reading appropriately. Recently introduced strategies to help pupils with their reading fluency and phonics are beginning to have a positive impact to support pupils to catch up. The culture for reading for pleasure is less developed. There are too few opportunities for pupils to appreciate the value of reading.

Most pupils behave well. The recent reduction in suspensions and school sanctions reflect the improvements in pupils' behaviour. However, lessons are still disrupted at times. While pupils believe the school's behaviour system is fair, staff do not follow procedures consistently. Pupils are not motivated by the rewards system. This results in some pupils displaying negative attitudes to school.

With support from the trust, the school has taken action that has begun to improve rates of attendance. However, too many pupils continue to have high levels of absence. As a result, these pupils have significant gaps in their learning. They do not achieve as well as they should.

The school celebrates diversity. Pupils are proud of the fact that everyone is equal in their school. Pupils have a secure understanding of healthy relationships and how to stay safe online. The school broadens pupils' wider development by organising residential visits and trips to cultural sites. Pupils benefit from effective careers education. They feel informed about the different education and training routes open to them.

The trust has been instrumental in influencing recent improvements, following a recent decline in performance. All leaders, including trustees and governors, are united in their vision. Staff appreciate that leaders prioritise their well-being.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- There are inconsistencies in the delivery of the curriculum, which affects how well pupils secure the deep knowledge and skills they need to succeed. This means that pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, do not learn in sufficient depth and do not achieve as well as they should. Leaders should work with staff, drawing on the stronger practice, where it exists, to ensure that pupils acquire deeper knowledge, achieve well and are better prepared for their next steps.
- Levels of absence and persistent absence are high. This means that a significant number of pupils are missing too much of their education. It also means that by the end of key stage 4, these pupils do not have the knowledge and understanding they need to achieve well in their examinations. The school should ensure that it further develops its approach to improving pupils' attendance.
- The school's behaviour policy is not used consistently. This leads to some pupils having negative attitudes to school and feeling that their efforts are not rewarded appropriately. The school should further develop a positive behaviour culture in school where sanctions and rewards are consistently applied.
- Reading for pleasure is not promoted as widely as it could be. This makes it difficult for pupils to appreciate a wide range of literature and develop a love for reading. The school should work to develop a positive culture for reading for pleasure.

Background

Until September 2024, on a graded (section 5) inspection we gave schools an overall effectiveness grade, in addition to the key and provision judgements. Overall effectiveness grades given before September 2024 will continue to be visible on school inspection reports and on Ofsted's website. From September 2024, graded inspections will not include an overall effectiveness grade. This school was, before September 2024, judged to be good for its overall effectiveness.

We have now inspected the school to determine whether it has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at that previous inspection. 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's work has improved significantly or that it may not be as strong as it was at the

last inspection, then the next inspection will be a graded inspection. A graded inspection 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 first ungraded inspection since we judged the school to be good for overall effectiveness in January 2020.

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	135314
Local authority	Darlington
Inspection number	10346403
Type of school	Secondary comprehensive
School category	Academy sponsor-led
Age range of pupils	11 to 16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	601
Appropriate authority	Board of trustees
Chair of trust	Katie Hammond
CEO of the trust	Jo Heaton
Headteacher	Dean Lythgoe
Website	staidansacademy.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	7 and 8 January 2020 under section 5 of the Education Act 2005

Information about this school

- The school is part of Northern Lights Learning Trust. It joined the trust in June 2024.
- The school has a Church of England denomination. The school's next section 48 inspection, for schools of a religious character, is likely to take place by the end of 2026.
- The school uses three unregistered alternative provisions and one registered alternative provision.
- 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 evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.

- Inspectors discussed the continued impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with senior leaders. The lead inspector also met with the CEO, a member of the board of trustees and members of the local governing body.
- Inspectors visited a sample of lessons, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, the inspectors: reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interest first.
- Throughout the inspection, inspectors met with groups of staff. They also considered the opinions expressed through Ofsted's online staff survey.
- The inspectors took account of responses to Ofsted's online parent and carer survey, Ofsted Parent View, and the free-text responses.

Inspection team

Dan McKeating, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Joanne Owens

Ofsted Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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