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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Darren Webster
Principal
The Free School Norwich
Kings House
15-17 Surrey Street
Norwich
NR1 3NX

Dear Mr Webster

No formal designation inspection of The Free School Norwich

Following my visit with Nathan Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 26 July 2022, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and the time you took to discuss your school.

This inspection was conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for no formal designation (NFD) inspections. The inspection was carried out because Her Majesty's Chief Inspector wished to determine the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements at the school as concerns had been raised with Ofsted about the effectiveness of leadership and management in the school (including governance).

We do not give graded judgements on NFD inspections. However, if we find some evidence that overall standards may be declining, but where no serious concerns have been identified, then the next inspection will normally be a section 5 inspection and will be brought forward. If we have serious concerns, we will deem the NFD inspection as a section 5 inspection immediately.

Evidence

Inspectors scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection arrangements. They met with the principal, senior leaders and trustees, including the chair of the trust. Inspectors held meetings with a range of staff and pupils. They spoke to parents at the gate and held telephone conversations with representatives of the local authority.

Inspectors looked at external safeguarding audits, trustee board minutes and other documentation relating to safeguarding practices in the school.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Safeguarding is effective.

Context

The Free School, Norwich, opened as a free school in September 2011. It is part of a single academy trust. There are currently 183 pupils on roll from ages 4 to 11. Most pupils attending the school are of White British heritage with a smaller number of Asian or Asian British heritage. The number of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above average. The number of pupils entitled to free school meals is close to average. The number of pupils included in the register of special educational needs is well above average.

The most recent Ofsted inspection of the school was in November 2017. The school was judged to be a good school. Since the inspection, there have been considerable changes to the school's leadership. There is a new principal and chair of the trust board. Safeguarding responsibilities, within the trust board, have changed. Additional staff have been trained as safeguarding leaders.

Main Findings

Safeguarding arrangements are effective. Leaders and trustees, working closely with the local authority, have addressed historic concerns about how safeguarding is led and managed. While pupils are safe, leaders and trustees continue to refine and improve their systems and processes. There is a positive safeguarding culture in the school where pupils' safety and well-being are prioritised by all.

Safeguarding leaders ensure that staff are well trained to spot if a pupil is at risk of harm. Staff have regular refresher training and so understand important safeguarding issues, such as peer-on-peer abuse and county lines. Staff know the systems for reporting concerns well and use them when needed. Weekly staff meetings prioritise safeguarding information and are welcomed by staff as a way to keep up to date with current issues or concerns. Leaders' termly safeguarding surveys of pupils' experiences support leaders to identify any broad or individual safeguarding issues or concerns. Additionally, a range of informal methods like 'hear me' books and 'worry boxes' are used to by pupils to tell adults about their day or if they have worries. Pupils value these methods and use them appropriately. Pupils know the names of trusted adults to talk to if they have concerns about themselves or their friends.

Pupils behave well. They are rarely bullied. Adults sort out issues quickly, so they do not reoccur. Discriminatory language is rare. Pupils respect each other's differences. The personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum covers a range of important

topics across all year groups. Pupils have an age-appropriate understanding of relationships and consent. They know what 'good friends' are. Children in Reception Year are confident, polite and get on with each other.

E-safety is a priority in the school. Clear IT systems keep pupils safe and prevent them from potentially accessing inappropriate websites or information. E-safety is an important part of the PSHE curriculum. Staff teach pupils about the risks and issues when using technology. Pupils, therefore, have a good understanding of how to keep safe online, particularly if they see something that worries or distresses them.

Systems for safeguarding, attendance and behaviour are aligned so no important information is lost. The local authority's safeguarding audits have helped safeguarding leaders and trustees by guiding them on which aspects of record-keeping needed to improve. Record-keeping has improved and has more detail than in the past. Records show appropriate actions and referrals to relevant agencies. Safeguarding records have clear timelines of concerns. A culture of sharing concerns underpins the work of the school. Staff ensure pupils get the help they need.

Leaders have clear processes in place for the safe recruitment of adults. Necessary pre-employment checks for staff are up to date. There are clear processes for reporting concerns about staff members. Staff know the processes and what to do if they need to 'whistleblow'.

Trustees are mindful of the historic issues with safeguarding and so test out everything that leaders tell them. They commissioned safeguarding audits to ensure that processes and procedures were being used appropriately to keep children safe. They regularly challenge leaders, both in and out of trustee meetings. In addition, trustees' presence around school has increased. Now that the local authority no longer conducts routine audits of the school's safeguarding systems, trustees do not always check leaders' actions in response to safeguarding concerns as thoroughly as they could. Trustees recognise this, have sought guidance on how to ensure they do this well, and have firm plans to do so from the start of next term. Trustees and leaders have a clear grasp of the significance of safeguarding pupils and show a determination to maintain their improved practices.

Additional support

The trust has worked closely with the local authority to audit and monitor the quality of safeguarding practice in the school. This has provided appropriate challenge and guidance to trustees and leaders to ensure that safeguarding in the school is effective. Leaders use a range of external training to ensure they are up to date with current legislation and safeguarding practices. They seek help and advice from other agencies to ensure pupils get the right support.

Priorities for further improvement

- While trustees have clear oversight of safeguarding procedures and processes, they do not always thoroughly explore the actions taken by leaders in response to safeguarding concerns. This means that leaders are not consistently challenged to justify and reflect on the decisions they have made. Trustees should ensure they routinely check safeguarding actions and question leaders about the decisions they have made.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Norfolk. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Damian Loneragan
Her Majesty's Inspector