

Inspection of Options Higford

Higford Hall, Higford, Shifnal, Shropshire TF11 9ET

Inspection dates: 29 April to 1 May 2025

Overall effectiveness	Good
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The quality of education	Good
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Behaviour and attitudes	Good
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Personal development	Good
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Leadership and management	Good
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Sixth-form provision	Good
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Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good
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Does the school meet the independent school standards?	Yes
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What is it like to attend this school?

At Options Higford, pupils are happy and enjoy learning. Positive relationships with staff ensure pupils are safe and well cared for. Staff know individual pupils well. They are well trained to support pupils to manage their behaviour and to engage with their learning. Embedded routines support pupils throughout the school day and in lessons. This helps to establish a calm and purposeful ethos, which allows pupils to flourish.

The school has high aspirations for pupils. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The school's curriculum prioritises a therapeutic approach, as well as academic support so that pupils settle quickly. Staff know and understand the individual needs of pupils in detail and ensure that they achieve well.

The school has prioritised pupils' communication and interaction skills so that all pupils can communicate their wishes and feelings. For example, at lunchtime, the school uses a range of ways that pupils can choose their lunch, such as talking menus and picture cues.

The school therapy dog, called 'Toodles', is a key support for pupils. He is used well to help reduce pupils' anxiety and help them to manage their emotions. He clearly brings joy to the pupils at the school.

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

Leaders, staff and the proprietor are committed to ensuring pupils learn a broad range of subjects and are prepared for the next stage of their education. The school is ambitious for pupils, many of whom have profound and multiple learning difficulties. The school has accurately identified that the cohort of pupils they are asked to admit is changing. Many of the pupils who have recently joined the school need a more academic curriculum. The school has responded by refining the curriculum to have increasingly ambitious end points across the curriculum pathways. The school has ensured that the curriculum in each pathway builds pupils' knowledge and understanding logically. Staff provide plentiful opportunities to revisit learning. For example, pupils are taught about different aspects of managing personal hygiene and keeping healthy across all pathways and age ranges.

The school has focused on developing pupils' communication skills, including reading. Pupils use communication devices confidently to learn. Pupils frequently practise communication, language and reading skills. This enables them to make choices, express themselves and develop their independence. Staff have been well trained in the school's approach to phonics. Pupils working at the pre-phonics stage are supported through appropriate activities, such as identifying environmental sounds and developing listening and attention skills. All pupils love sharing books and listening to stories. The books pupils read are chosen carefully to support pupils' word reading and understanding of the world around them.

Staff know the pupils well. All pupils have education, health and care (EHC) plans. When pupils arrive at the school, staff take the time to get to know the pupils' likes and dislikes, and what they can and cannot already do. Staff ensure that each pupil's individual learning pathway is adapted so that pupils work at the right level. However, at times, some of the learning activities that staff plan and the questions they ask pupils do not deepen learning well enough.

Staff are effective in helping pupils to improve their behaviour over time. Pupils typically arrive at the school finding it difficult to manage their behaviour. Skilled staff help pupils to recognise what they find difficult and how best to respond. As a result, there is a notable improvement in pupils' behaviour from the moment they start at the school.

Preparation for adulthood is prioritised. This begins as soon as pupils start in the school. Staff teach pupils the importance of consent, positive relationships and keeping physically and mentally healthy in a way that is appropriate to pupils' needs and understanding. This ensures pupils are prepared for their next steps in education and life.

Students on the post-16 pathway receive impartial information to help them consider their future careers. However, at times, some pupils are not clear about their next steps and what options are available to them. Although leaders have mapped out a well-structured careers programme, it is not yet fully realised.

Staff are proud to work at the school, with one member of staff summarising many views by calling it 'my happy place'. Leaders are considerate about staff's workload and well-being. The proprietor ensures there are effective systems to hold leaders to account. The proprietor has ensured that all the independent school standards are consistently met. The school complies with schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve? (Information for the school and proprietor)

- Staff do not consistently provide learning activities or support in lessons that deepens pupils' learning. As a result, sometimes pupils are not challenged to think deeply and to move on to the next step in learning effectively. The school should ensure staff provide effective activities and support so that pupils learn consistently well.
- Some aspects of the school's careers advice and education are new and not fully embedded. This means that, sometimes, pupils are unclear about their next steps and what options are available to them. The school should strengthen the quality of the careers education programme so that pupils, alongside their parents, can make informed decisions about their next steps.

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.

School details

Unique reference number	135445
DfE registration number	893/6106
Local authority	Shropshire
Inspection number	10374903
Type of school	Other independent special school
School category	Independent school
Age range of pupils	5 to 19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	57
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form	8
Number of part-time pupils	0
Proprietor	Richard Power
Chair	Chris Groom
Headteacher	Samantha Denniss
Annual fees (day pupils)	£64,000 to £94,000
Telephone number	01952 630 600
Website	www.optionsgroup.co.uk
Email address	higford@optionsautism.co.uk
Dates of previous inspection	26 to 28 July 2022

Information about this school

- Options Higford is an independent special school within the Outcomes First Group. The school provides education for pupils who are diagnosed with autism. All pupils have an EHC plan. Many have attended several schools, and some have missed a significant proportion of their education.
- The school is registered to provide full-time education for boys and girls aged eight to 19.
- The school's last standard inspection was in July 2022, when it was judged to be good overall. The school had a material change inspection in June 2023. The Department for Education approved a change in age range for pupils. The school now admits pupils between the ages of five to 19. The school also increased capacity to 60.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. The purpose of the inspection is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.

The school meets the independent school standards. These are the requirements set out in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education provision.
- Inspectors discussed any continued impact of the pandemic with leaders and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with a representative of the proprietor body, the chair of governors the headteacher, deputy headteacher and other members of staff.
- The school was being covered by an acting headteacher during the inspection.
- Inspectors spoke to pupils at different times throughout the inspection.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: communication and language, thinking skills, including mathematics, personal, social and health education and physical development. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, looked at curriculum plans, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, 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' interests first.

- Inspectors carried out other activities to check that the school meets the independent school standards. These included a check of the school premises and wider work to comply with health and safety laws (including fire safety). Inspectors considered the school's approach to risk management. Inspectors also checked the relevant policies and the school's website.
- Inspectors considered the responses to Ofsted's online survey for staff and the responses to Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments.

Inspection team

Eve Morris, lead inspector

His Majesty's Inspector

Russell Hinton

Ofsted Inspector

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