



Discovery Academy

Accreditation Visit - 4th February 2026

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Genuine Partnerships Charter Gold Accreditation Team

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Genuine Partnerships and the Four Cornerstones

The Four Cornerstones were initially developed as a Charter by Genuine Partnerships, a nationally recognised Rotherham-based team of practitioners, parent carers and young people with a diverse range of experiences working together as equal partners. The team has been supporting schools, settings, services, and whole areas, to truly embed co-production and inclusive practice by building trust within their communities.

The Four Cornerstones are:

WELCOME AND CARE

VALUE AND INCLUDE

COMMUNICATE

WORK IN PARTNERSHIP

The Charter Gold Accreditation Process

The accreditation process is based on a portfolio of evidence and discussions that have taken place involving the Charter Implementation Team, school staff and the Charter Accreditation Team about examples of 'Best Charter Practice'.

The accreditation visit is an opportunity to observe and discuss the evidence that has been presented with staff, parent/carers, and children/young people.



Evidence Considered

- Discussion with the Implementation team and consideration of the Gathering Feedback report (December 2024)
- Portfolio of evidence demonstrating work that has taken place to embed the Four Cornerstones since initial staff training which took place in April 2024
- Accreditation visit 4th February 2026 incorporating:
 - o Tour around the school with Ms Higgins and tour guides Leah and Leonie
 - o Consultation with Executive Head teacher Luci Windle and Charter Champion and Wellbeing/Family Support Lead Jo Higgins
 - o Focus group involving three children from Year Six to Year Ten
 - o Focus group involving five parent/carers who have children and young people attending the school aged between 11 and 14, all of whom are autistic often combined with other needs, for example social, emotional and mental health and/or medical needs impacting on their learning

Summary

Prior to our visit to Discovery Academy, we were told by the Charter Implementation Team that this really was a “lovely school” on many levels. Even so, we had not been prepared for how inspired we would be by the amazing staff, children and young people, and parent carers we encountered. The Four Cornerstones provide a welcoming, inclusive foundation for the school, where strong partnerships in every sense are forged.

This specialist setting for autistic children and young people school serves the city of Sheffield, which is where most pupils live. It has now been open for four years. Many of the children and young people are from communities experiencing a high level of economic deprivation, and where domestic violence and/or gang-related activity is statistically high. However, attendance at school is consistently good, and during our visit we observed an ethos of calm and respectful, caring behaviour – even during the fire drill!

Paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott talked about the mirror-role of care-givers in supporting young children to come into being. Stephen Hymen develops this and writes of schools needing to be emotionally containing environments, where children and young people see themselves through the eyes of the adults around them. At Discovery Academy we witnessed first-hand how time and energy is given to communicating explicitly and genuinely to children and young people that they are loved, which supports



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them to develop a positive sense of identity. Every opportunity is found to say thank you, reinforcing to the children and young people that they are valued human beings, “We say thank you for sharing their heartbeats.” This relational approach is powerful, moving and effective. One young person told us that his favourite thing about school is “most of the staff” who are “welcoming...[and] tell me I’m alright.” A parent carer said to us that the staff work hard at, “...finding different ways to connect with your child.”

Parent carers love that the staff are outside with warm smiles, whatever the weather, greeting their children and young people as they arrive in the morning, and saying goodbye as they leave at the end of the day, modelling care and acceptance. During our visit we also noticed how calmly and fluidly the distress of children who were upset or dysregulated was contained by the staff, the emphasis being on support, de-escalation and being “with” the child.

Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory plays out at Discovery Academy. The theory is based on our best functioning being dependent upon us being given autonomy (freedom to choose), feeling connected (relatedness) and competent (that we can be successful). This also empowers children and young people to forge strong identities and become independent. At Discovery Academy children and young people who find direct demands anxiety-provoking have the security of clear routines and consistent expectations, but within these they are given agency and encouraged to make choices, for example to use one of the many ‘sanctuary spaces’ when needed. This is helping them feel safe first, which for some, who have experience and continue to experience extraordinary trauma outside school, is the initial step to building a positive sense of identity, becoming more motivated and feeling a strong sense of belonging and pride in their school. This was exemplified by one of our tour guides, who talked to us with enthusiasm about having the opportunity to be a dance leader at a festival involving several schools: “I feel proud that I wasn’t scared to teach them.”

There is recognition that self-confidence is strengthened, and options opened for young people, by extending their experiences. We were inspired by the beautiful Makaton choir, and the level of care and concentration in the room in which the children and young people were practising. The young people we met told us about participating in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and going to the pantomime. The school environment and



Charter portfolio capture the abundance of inclusive activities the school community enjoys together, most of them also involving staff, and often families. There is a sense of shared fun and playfulness. Being a child and being child-like is encouraged as an essential aspect of learning, making it more likely that children and young people will share feelings of vulnerability. Parent carers told us that they love this “holistic” approach.

Children often transfer to the school after years of parent carers feeling they have needed to battle systems to secure their child’s place, “...they’re already carrying a lot of trauma.” Parent carers described their anxiety, depression and sense of isolation, and how, as a result, there can be low confidence in systems around their children, “You’re a parent and you can’t help it.” This makes it even more remarkable that most of the parent carers we met at Discovery Academy seemed to be firm advocates of the school, telling us, “[the staff] are always there for us”; “nothing is too much trouble” and “[my child] is definitely happy here.” Achieving this level of trust within the culture of a school that has only been open for a few years is a wonderful achievement. Despite the complex needs of their children and young people, there is an understanding that, “They’ll deal with it.”

We were also told by some parent carers how their children have started to thrive emotionally at the school, which has in turn made it possible for them to make friends and to learn, after years, previously, of this feeling impossible: “I didn’t know he could write until he came here”; “[she has been] able to make friends.” We found that encouragement for the children and young people to be aspirational threads through the curriculum and school environment in a myriad of ways, from the photographs on the walls of children sharing their hopes for the future, individual PATHs (on each classroom door, to careers events and strong links with local post-16 providers. The children and young people love securing House points that they can then spend at the school’s ‘shop’ which, “...makes you feel like royalty.” Several children and young people have saved their points to go on a summer camping trip, which will be held at school. This system not only rewards behaviour and a positive attitude to learning, it also involves practical maths and supports the development of the adult skills of delaying gratification and saving. That so many children are enthusiastic about camping at their school in the summer holidays also illustrates that school is a safe base for them, that provides a sense of belonging.

Partnership working is at the heart of Discovery Academy, whether this be links with local



authority and health services, the police, MENCAP which occupies the building next door, post-16 providers, or families. Home to school transport is especially valued, which is important when this is how most children and young people arrive at the school. Warm relationships have been cultivated with the drivers, who were invited into school for bacon sandwiches at Christmas. One young person told us, "My bus driver's amazing!"

Since our initial visit, the Friends of Discovery Academy School (FDAS) parent carer group has been developed and is now seeking charitable status. Raising money for school projects and extending support to families of children with SEND across the city in creative ways (for example by hosting a Santa's grotto), the parent carers involved told us how much they have valued the opportunity, the purpose it has given them, and the practical support they have received from the staff, from reception to the Head teacher, which they describe as going "above and beyond." The same is true of support for individual families. One parent carer told us how she had reached out to the staff for support at home and the "dramatic difference" that had resulted for the family following a long home visit by two of the staff at the end of that school day. Staff will also support parent carers, and children, with medical appointments, navigating complex systems and completing forms, building relationships and trust in doing so.

The voice of children and young people is also prioritised, through the school's 'Parliament' but also by actively involving children and young people in the decisions that are about them, for example what they wish to study in Key Stage Four: "they asked X what he wanted to do and he wanted to do media." Programmes seem highly personalised, for example one young person we met at lunchtime told us that she is the only pupil studying childcare but that it has been made possible for her to do this at another school in the same Academy Trust. Another child with very complex needs has their own area in school, providing respite for their family as well as some connection with a place and people beyond home.

Anybody walking into Discovery Academy, after being greeted with a smile by reception staff, will be immediately awestruck by the wonderful murals painted with love by a former teacher together with some of the children and young people. The library even has columns with books painted on them, each with a child's name and their chosen book title. There are comfortable soft furnishings in many of the communal areas as well as



classrooms, which are creatively immersive without this feeling overwhelming. The environment is busy but contained, adaptive to meet individual sensory needs, and well resourced to invest in skills and learning (the team was impressed by the three dimensional printer in the Design Technology (DT) room!).

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Welcome and Care

In addition, the following points were highlighted as Best Charter Practice:

Parent carers provided clear evidence that Discovery Academy provides a warm, reassuring, and nurturing environment. Throughout the school there are inspirational messages, thank yous and quotes which create a sense of shared values, purpose and hope, for example:

'At Discovery Academy we all play a part.

Different gifts unite with shining hearts'

'We are brave, open-hearted and beautiful'

'Thank you for spending the day with us'

Children and young people who have struggled to attend school do so full-time, and this is testament to the dedication and resilience of the staff and the holistic approach adopted, "If he wasn't here, he wouldn't be at school."

Individual strengths are nurtured and opportunities area created, for example the display of *Discovery's Got Talent* communicates the joyous nature of this event, at which children, young people and staff are encouraged to show off their skills, from singing, playing an instrument and dance to photography; products the children make in DT are sold at the Christmas fayre.

The pupils shared with us their growing empathy towards other children and young people with complex needs they could find challenging. Although one young person was being irritated and at times upset by another child in their class, he told us, "I just have to be understanding about it."

Parent carers talked about "...the small things" the staff do offer reassurance and allay their worries: "They've got a lot of patience." They are thrilled when their child or young person comes home from school happy, which for some is for the first time, "He's definitely happy here."



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Discovery Academy also has in place the following examples of good practice for *Welcome and Care*:

- ✓ There is a purposeful approach to ensuring that every child, young person and family is welcomed, even if securing a place at the school has been challenging (the school is a third over recommended numbers and most families now need to go to tribunal)
- ✓ Transitions to Discovery Academy are planned with the child or young person and their family, starting with a home visit to ensure that positive connections with staff are made from the start, and a welcome pack
- ✓ Adapting to the new environment and expectations can be especially difficult for children and young people arriving at Discovery Academy and many have had long periods out of school; this is understood and staff are tenacious as they work with the child and young person and their family to create a graduated plan that is more likely to work for them
- ✓ That there is a Wellbeing Team demonstrates the value placed in each member of the school community and a holistic understanding of social and emotional needs – this is a school that cares; Wellbeing/Family Support Lead Jo Higgins is spoken of highly by families and there are plans to facilitate a counsellor to offer parent carers support when needed
- ✓ Discovery#crew is the term often used for the school community to foster a sense of belonging; the classes have names related to the space theme and every child is a member of one of the three House teams (House mascots Billy Believer, Daisy Dreamer and Archie Achiever are on the walls of the assembly hall, named after three of the children in the first cohort at the school), creating a sense of identity and pride
- ✓ It was felt by the staff that if their children and young people show care in school and behave well, then they should be encouraged to demonstrate these skills in their communities to further prepare them for independence in adult life; as a result there are trips to local fast food and other restaurants (the children and young people choose where they go) and there is confidence now that the pupils at Discovery can eat respectfully in public
- ✓ Children and young people are encouraged to thank each other and the staff, who also model this; there is an area in the library where thank you messages are written on stars
- ✓ Familiar, transport drivers are also utilised for school trips, reducing anxieties



- ✓ Every child is allowed to choose their special birthday dish which is cooked by the kitchen staff (one child even chose steak!)

Value and Include

In addition, the following points were highlighted as Best Charter Practice:

Parent carers told us that their children and young people feel secure and connected, which helps them, and their families, develop a sense of belonging to the school. Some young people return to school at weekends to collect and return items such as football equipment that has been lost in the park next door during the week, highlighting that the school is a meaningful place for them.

We were moved to hear from young people, parent carers and the staff at Discovery Academy that every attempt is made to include all the children and young people and avoid suspensions and exclusions. Responses tend to be intuitively low key to minimise anxiety and maintain calm. One of our team noticed a young person moving a bench in the canteen at lunchtime. Rather than reprimand them a member of staff began to help, and asked the other children sitting on the bench to do the same – they then asked the children to thank the young person, skilfully turning an act that could have easily escalated into a positive experience for all.

Diversity and inclusion is celebrated and embedded within the school; the large display on British Values highlighting protected characteristics is impactful, and we noticed that language used by staff and the children and young people was neuroaffirming.

Parent carers told us: "...we are valued and included." The impact of the skills and understanding of the staff and their inclusive approach is evident in the growing confidence of their children and young people: "It's the understanding"; "...she's come on leaps and bounds with her writing"; "I can see by her work." This has been a relief for parent carers who have previously often felt they were the sole advocates for their child's wellbeing and learning: "It takes the pressure off you." This level of trust is due to their confidence in the skills of the staff, "The staff do get that...his needs."

The whole school community has been involved in school events, trips and activities so care is taken to implement the individualised preparation and adjustments needed for these to happen. This includes financial support for families where necessary so that all the children and young people can participate. A residential stay is being organised with support from FSAS to ensure that costs and equipment are affordable. Trips and events, like the whole school attending the pantomime at Christmas, are special

times celebrated by the children and young people, parent carers and staff, captured in the photographs on the walls and in the Charter portfolio. They also create happy memories and were referred to by several of the children and young people we met.

When the FDAS parent carers group facilitated Santa's grotto all the children in lower school were able to meet Santa (some for the first time) and any young people in upper school who wanted to do so; every child in school received a gift. Some children and young people were involved in helping. Opportunities are seized to actively involve the children and young people in activities, developing their skills and boosting their self-esteem. Following the FDAS jumble sale held one weekend there were so many donations left over that the children were asked to take over the jumble sale the following Monday, drawing upon their enterprise skills! In D&T the children and young people make items to sell at the Christmas Fayre, telling us, "...sometimes we sell a lot of stuff!"

The school environment and surrounding area are also utilised to support activity and growth. There is a secure gate to Norfolk Park which is used for the daily mile and the younger children go each day "rain or shine" in their wellies. The café there is also used to support extending experiences and social interventions.

Discovery Academy also has in place the following examples of good practice for *Value and Include*:

- ✓ Children and young people enjoy the clubs at lunchtimes, for example Dungeons and Dragons ('D&D' club)
- ✓ A 'Girls Group' has been set up which is a valued safe space for female children and young people to learn to make choices and grow in confidence; the Impact Statement in the portfolio highlights a focus on 'girlpower'
- ✓ There is emphasis on children and young people knowing their rights, which will be helpful to them in the context of abuse and exploitation
- ✓ Bob'sWorry#Crew is made up of a group of pupils who will try to help if somebody has a concern; it is well advertised through school and slips are available in each classroom
- ✓ There is sensitivity to the social and emotional needs of the children and young people and an art therapist is on site once a week
- ✓ Care is taken to address physical needs, for example the building is extremely hot in the summer months and there is a plan to introduce air conditioning throughout the building to avoid discomfort

- ✓ It is accepted that each child or young person will have different sensory needs and there is a quieter room where they can choose to eat lunch.
 - The art room is a particularly effective sensory space, balancing the immersive with contained zones
 - There are sensory rooms on each floor
- ✓ Staff receive a high level of training, for example on trauma-informed practice; however, approaches are evaluated and changed in response to the needs of the pupils at the school
- ✓ The 'sanctuary spaces' put in place in response to children and young people voicing that they sometimes need a quiet area to go are all different (one is by a window and is a favourite for a young person who calms when he sees the trams go by, another has soft seating and there is also a room without any decoration and padded walls, which was a favourite for one of our tour guides); the children and young people can choose which suits them best
- ✓ Every opportunity is taken to celebrate achievements; at Friday assemblies stars of the week and learners of the week from each class receive certificates and there are attendance awards, the mascots also come and present certificates at sports days and curriculum days
- ✓ There is equipment to support children and young people to pursue their strengths and interests, for example there is a well-resourced gym, and FDAS are funding the creation of a horticulture area and a plan to grow vegetables that can be used in cooking; the outdoor space has a wide range of equipment in zoned areas the children and young people can choose to use and when the drivers donated a drum kit to the school one child was so enthused he has bought his own drum sticks and is encouraged to play them
- ✓ Some children at the school experience very complex needs and these are accommodated sensitively in very individualised ways; one parent carer commented positively about the school's ability to make adjustments without hesitation: "Allowing my child to roam and move around the school was not seen as problematic."
- ✓ Throughout the school day and after school staff are committed to being responsive to the individual and collective needs of the children and young people, which can be physically and emotionally exhausting – group supervision is offered in partnership with similar schools from Nexus Trust by a practitioner with a Social Care background

Communication

In addition, the following points were highlighted as Best Charter Practice:

The visit identified communication as a strength, particularly the way staff adapt and personalise interactions. Parent carers expressed that staff excel at finding flexible and child-centred ways to communicate. There was also shared relief from parent carers that the staff at Discovery Academy only communicate with them about significant issues. There is trust they have the skills to contain most incidents involving their child, which has often not been their previous experience: "I'm glad that they don't phone me for every little thing he's done"; "...they seem to deal with it." Parent carers shared with us how when their children had attended other schools they were often asked to come and collect their child and take them home, which is a rare occurrence at Discovery Academy.

When issues are serious, parent carers value being informed before their child arrives home on the bus. They also welcome the reassuring way the conversation is delivered, often referring to the child or young person's positive achievements which brings hope and helps parent carers to put incidents in context.

Discovery Academy also has in place the following examples of good practice for *Communicate*:

- ✓ There seems to be confidence from parent carers that once an issue has been raised, staff listen, there will be a prompt response and action taken: "I know that Miss Nee will get back to me at 7am"
- ✓ The Seesaw digital communication platform is highly valued as a means of communicating successes, sharing the weekly 'Friday feeling' video in which children and staff dance and sing, and as well as a route for parent carers to communicate issues with staff; when issues have been urgent some parent carers have received responses in the evening; there is also a school Facebook page which is well utilised
- ✓ Over the last year there has been a reduction in parent carers feeling they need to make complaints, communicating that most parent carers are satisfied with their child's school
- ✓ As already indicated, displays around school are effective, motivational and inspiring; they are also used to provide information and to reassure children and young people, for example if they have a worry the information about Bob'sWorry#Crew is in every area, as well as signposting to organisations if



children do not feel safe, in the D&T room there is accessible Health and Safety information and in classrooms there are key word pyramids in classrooms to support language development and retention

- ✓ Parent carers, children and young people are given information about local organisations and community activities to encourage them to engage in positive participation, in so doing also supporting families, for example the MENCAP youth club and 'SNIPS' activities (via Social Care), as well as Nexus Trust extended activities in the summer, which are also supported by Discovery Academy staff
- ✓ The staff wear purple hoodies which makes them clearly visible

Partnership:

In addition, the following points were highlighted as Best Charter Practice:

Strong community partnerships are a core feature of Discovery's success. Relationships with local organisations such as Mencap and FDAS are strong. FDAS is functioning independently and expanding its role into the wider community with good support from all the school staff, particularly Wellbeing/Family Support Jo Higgins. In return there is amazing support from the group for the school; recently £10,000 was raised through grant funding.

There is also liaison with other parent groups, external agencies such as Social Care, CAMHS and the police, and families at an individual level, strengthening the connections. One parent carer commented on the sense of supporting her child being partnership with school: "I've got to work with them with my child...they've got to work with me with my child." Some parent carers also talked to us about the opportunities they have been afforded to make connections with other parents, which they have valued and has been different to some of their previous experiences: "...other parents don't judge you."

These partnerships enhance consistency, community engagement, and shared ownership of pupils' success. The children and young people, equally, are encouraged to "own" the aspects of the school for which they are entrusted with being responsible (for example the 'sanctuary spaces', and their decision-making, which, is encouraged.

Discovery Academy also has in place the following examples of good practice for *Partnership*:

- ✓ There is a family feel and a shared sense of fun and enjoyment cultivated through the shared activities and events, and 'Friday feeling' videos
- ✓ During our visit one of the governors was skilfully supporting the Makaton choir together with the teacher; we noticed that she had a warm relationship with the children as a familiar adult
- ✓ Partnerships with local charities, post 16 providers, Nexus schools and some local mainstream schools around events and activities bring children and young people into contact with children and young people from other schools and areas, creating connections, nurturing new relationships, and confidence

Next Steps

These suggestions offer the potential for further collaboration with children, young people and families:

- The young people we met said that they would like more drama within their lessons
- Some young people told us that they would rather their classrooms had numbers than space themes
- Consider with FDAS how parent carers might be involved in more collaborative work to feed into school practice, for example how families can best be informed about choices and pathways for children and young people in Key Stage Four
- Parent carers expressed that they would like the school to offer post-16 provision
- One parent carer voiced worry that she did not receive a call in time to be prepared when her child arrived home; she is concerned that he has been increasingly dysregulated since his transition to his new class, suggesting that a more graduated approach may have been helpful

Well done Discovery Academy. Encouraging your children and young people to be confident and kind human beings who are reaching for the stars is your golden thread. We were told about the importance at the school of "...the moments of kindness and the acts of kindness." This was evident in the caring relationships we witnessed. Together with your families and wide range of partners, you are collectively creating a vibrant, optimistic and aspirational community despite the challenges of your context.



Feel proud of all you have achieved and will go on to achieve. Please do enjoy your celebrations!!

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Charter Gold Accreditation Team
6th February 2026