



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



Academy	Discovery Special Academy Sandy Flatts Lane Acklam Middlesbrough TS5 7YN
Head/Principal	Ms Jennifer Duncan
IQM Lead	Mrs Ann Titchener
Date of Review	12 th February 2026
Assessor	Ms Emily Greenhalgh-Stone

IQM Cluster Programme

Cluster Group	Inclusivators
Ambassador	Ms Annette Sowden
Next Meeting	24 th March 2026: Caldicotes Primary Academy

Cluster Attendance

Term	Date	Attendance
Autumn 2023	9 th October 2023	Yes
Spring 2024	3 rd May 2024	No
Summer 2024	24 th June 2024	Yes
Autumn 2024	13 th November 2024	Yes
Spring 2025	12 th March 2025	Yes
Summer 2025	3 rd July 2025	No
Autumn 2025	25 th September 2025	Yes

The Impact of the Cluster Group

Discovery Academy have contributed widely to the Cluster Group and, indeed, hosted the last Summer 2025 meeting at their purpose-built specialist academy site. They therefore contribute, network with other school's and share excellent practice across the whole network. At the last Cluster, the academy welcomed other practitioners across the IQM Cluster group, sourced an external speaker and provided a comprehensive tour of the academy, which was very well received by the attendees.

The tour focused on, and highlighted, the strategic and skilled approach the academy utilise to enhance improved communication and sensory regulation for all pupils, as well as the development of purposeful and controlled learning environments.

Throughout the meeting, the academy staff reflected on Discovery's ongoing journey, outlying key developments, achievements and future priorities. The academy also explored the positive impact their academy, alongside the Trust, continue to have on the local community, including the most vulnerable pupils and their families.

The academy staff, on the day of the Cluster group meeting, shared a range of effective practises and collaborative initiatives that support improved outcomes for children and young people. The event provided an incredibly valuable opportunity for professional dialogue, partnership building, and the exchange of expertise, reinforcing, once again, the academy's commitment to continuous improvement and inclusive education at flagship level.

Evidence

- The Academy's Annual Review and Action Planning document
- An extensive tour of the academy
- Ofsted report
- Academy website
- Parental feedback and conversations
- Trust website
- Pupil books and work files
- Previous IQM Reports obtained from the academy website
- Academy policies
- Curriculum planning documents
- The Trust website and prospectus

Meetings held with:

- The Headteacher of the Academy
- The Executive Headteacher
- The IQM Lead
- The Deputy Headteachers
- Parents of children attending the Academy, who also are employed by such
- The Junior Leadership Team
- The Eco Warriors pupil group
- Pupil Family Support Advisor

Evaluation of Annual Progress towards the Flagship Project

Discovery Academy's vision to create an outstanding educational environment which promote the academic, therapeutic, communication, social and emotional development of all pupils at this remarkable academy is, every day, realised.

The academy is committed to enhancing the lives of all the pupils, parents and families, empowering them to secure the best outcomes as they move through their educational career and beyond. Every learning opportunity is carefully crafted, lovingly articulated and appropriately challenging so that every pupil can succeed.

The aim of the Flagship project was to develop the academy environments to ensure that every pupil has access to a provision that fully promotes the academy's preparing for adulthood themes, on a personalised level for each pupil.

Discovery Academy maintains a key focus on social communication and interaction, thereby building on functional skills and self-reliance, sensory experiences and improved well-being. Importantly, the academy has achieved advanced status with the National Autistic Society autism accreditation programme. This recognises the significant contribution and celebrates the ongoing journey of commitment to the academy in the drive forward to support children and young people with autism. This year, the academy has offered significant parental and community support outside of their remit, which has proven results of engagement and improved outcomes for pupils. Now embedded, Discover Academy will continue to offer parent workshops, coffee morning sessions and 'meet and greet' opportunities for parents and professionals, including NAS Early Bird, Early Bird Plus and Teen Life programmes to support the wider community. Parents of pupils in the academy are clear on the impact the supportive offer has had on the life chances of their child, with one parent sharing: 'Finally, I feel that someone else understands.' Understanding and scaffolded support are a core offer at Discovery Academy, where everyone feels they are part of a community of warm, professional trust.

Academy staff are, every single day, delivering exceptional inclusive practice through a modelled and embedded culture of significant co-production, working with other academies in the Trust and the local area to create sustainable change and professional expertise and support to colleagues across the whole of the Tees Valley, and beyond. Experiential learning and quality first teaching, where parents, stakeholders and professionals work together to support the holistic development of the child (in which all therapies are an integral part of pupils' education) are key to the success of the academy. Leaders are strategic and passionate about their vision for the Flagship project and the link with the academy's focus on developing the whole child, constantly 'thinking outside the box' in the approach to achieve success for all. In extensive discussions regarding the Flagship project, the IQM lead, Headteacher and the Senior Leadership Team were reflective and clear about the ongoing progress they have made and where the academy were focused on developing next. This is an academy who never 'sits still,' constantly striving for 'just that little bit better' at every opportunity.

Significant work has been undertaken to enrich and develop the academy's outdoor spaces, creating dynamic learning environments that bring learning to life. Leaders are committed to continuing professional development for all staff, focused on outdoor learning, the implementation of continuous provision and the development of the community garden and allotment. Because of this structured and strategic approach, pupils have gained meaningful opportunities to engage with nature, practice physical skills that develop their fine and gross motor systems, whilst increasing independence and knowledge of the world of work. This approach to 'hands-on' learning has improved pupil's life skills alongside horticultural management and cultivation, allowing all to experience the 'awe and wonder' of the natural world. Whilst there has, indeed, been unparalleled progress in this area, the academy are keen to create a 'gold standard' of outdoor learning. The academy have high expectations of themselves: The excellence and exceptionality already exist.

Linking to the outdoor learning and passion for sustainable practices, the Eco-Warriors Club consists of pupils from across the academy who champion sustainability and lead on academy environmental projects. The initiatives have not only supported pupil

growth and personal development skills, but have fostered a strong connection with local community, the natural environment and mindfulness techniques.

Extensive groundworks on the Academy field have been completed, making the space (for the first time) useable and in good condition. Again, this commitment to using every inch of space to create countless opportunities for learning is joyous to behold. After significant investment, the field is not no longer prone to flooding, with new grass seeds sown, providing a healthy surface with multi-functional use. The initial phased development plan has been collaboratively designed by pupils, parents and staff, ensuring that the space meets educational, recreational and horticultural needs.

The Discovery Academy has designed and developed a comprehensive Key Stage 4 curriculum that balances both semi-formal and informal learning. For semi-formal pupils, subjects are taught discreetly by subject specialists ensuing high-quality academic provision, whilst vocational learning is fully integrated to provide practical real-world experiences. A progressive informal curriculum has been developed and continuously refined to meet the evolving needs and interests of pupils at all key phases. Teaching observed on the day of assessment was incredibly strong, highly inclusive and with the appropriate level of challenge. All pupils, unequivocally, were engaged in the lessons and activities, communicated their progress and were able to experience success in learning.

Careers education is embedded throughout the Academy and is showing unparalleled results in next steps and pathway for adulthood data. Still, in the pursuit of perfection, the academy have identified their next steps in this area and have action plans in place to do even more. From Year 6 onwards pupils participate in the Trust's 'classroom2careers' initiative, overseen carefully by an experienced careers lead. This approach is crucial in building early awareness and understanding of different career pathways, including providing increased aspiration for pupils. At Discovery Academy, anything is possible.

Independent careers advisers support pupils in Key Stage 4, providing tailored guidance to inform their future choices. All pupils undertake paired roles within the academy, whilst Year 10 pupils have already begun to access external work experience opportunities across both the academy and the Trust in areas such as administration, human resources and horticulture, therefore further developing their employability skills. Additionally, every pupil contributes to twice-yearly enterprise events within the academy, gaining experience in teamwork, entrepreneurship and project management. These initiatives, deliberately embedded and crafted into the everyday curriculum, ensure that pupils leave the academy with a well-rounded education combining academic knowledge, vocational skills and practical experience that prepares them for their pathway to adulthood.

Agreed Actions for the Next Steps in the Flagship Project

Leaders have identified a number of key actions and next steps to ensure the flagship project continues to be a recognised success and are committed to working with the wider community to enhance the project further, with steps already being taken to ensure sustainability as the project moved into complete embedding in the academy's core offer. The work the academy has already undertaken has provided significantly improved life chances for all pupils, with the collective staff team not coasting, and continuing to always strive for exceptional practice.

The academy's next steps will expand external work experience placements for Key Stage 4 pupils across the Trust with local businesses. Key employers have already been sought, with more to follow, further embedding vocational learning and refining the semi-formal and informal curriculum models to provide industry links, raising awareness and aspiration for all. The academy are determinate in enhancing careers guidance, with further mentoring, industry visits and personalised pathways for adulthood detailed in the action planning document. The academy plan to provide placements for supported interns, allowing young adults on their pathway to adulthood to gain hands-on experience in SEND provision whilst developing employability skills.

The next steps will see the academy introducing additional enterprise projects to develop leadership, teamwork, resilience and entrepreneurial skills, gaining pupil voice whilst managing, monitoring and evaluating pupil engagement. Progression and outcome tracking data will be used to inform ongoing curriculum development, whilst continuing to work and develop the curriculum offer alongside the National Autism Society to further enhance provision for pupils with autism.

In the external areas of the academy, work continues to be underway and developed by a specialist team. Specific action planning, with measurable and timely outcomes, is evident in the supporting paperwork provided by senior leaders and frequently discussed in the academy improvement and development plan. The garden area, back-field, allotment and polytunnels will have extra facilities added, with zoning spaces, play equipment and wellbeing areas. Whilst the current outdoor areas are already exceptional, the academy have a dream to add even more to their core offer. As with all dreams at Discovery Academy, they will be realised.

The academy plan on utilising their current pupil leadership models, alongside community links strengthened with workshops and inter-generational craft sessions, to enhance provision through Eco-Warrior Club and Horticultural ambassador roles, further increasing pupil's resilience and independent skills. Harnessing community and multi-generational volunteering to work with pupils, parents and carers to enhance the already transformative sustainable and eco-practices across the academy, will be key to the project's ongoing success. Alongside collaboration with The Sawdust Project, there are plans to improve composting, rainwater harvesting and recycling facilities along with horticulture zones, fencing, and animal areas. Academy staff have received, and continue to have access to, specific and rigorous continuing professional development to ensure cross-department collaboration which enhanced outdoor learning whilst providing clear personal development and improved wellbeing aims, fostering a

connection and grounding with the earth, improving resilience and fostering a real community with the local area.

Sharing best practice to support others in the community to develop their skills and knowledge relating to SEN and inclusion is what this forward-facing academy do best, and without question. Leaders plan to train and mentor volunteers, developing and sharing resources to give advice and support to others in the Trust, thereby improving outcomes for all pupils, regardless of the academy they attend. Collaboration with other academies and organisations through workshops and resource sharing is already underway, with the academy held in high esteem by the local authority SEN teams in the vicinity and by many other academies in the area. A colleague, part of the local SENCo network, describes the academy as 'paramount to providing high quality education in the local area for pupils with additional needs.' Another states: 'Discovery Academy are consistently the best of its kind in the area. The knowledge the staff team possess is second to none.' Collaborative work and partnerships with multiple agencies is also where exceptional practice can be seen, evidenced by the further development of the academy's offer as partner with the National Autism Society, moderating other academies and organisations by utilising and drawing on the collective staff experience and national advanced status.

Never halting in their pursuit of exceptionality, Discovery Academy are continually developing and maximising the curriculum offer for all pupils, ensuring it meets individual and collective needs across all in the academy. Part of the offer is to expand the range of residential visits to build pupil's independence, social skills and broaden life experiences. The academy has previously attended extended visits to Sheffield, the Beamish Open Air Museum and London, including pupils experiencing the theatre at the West End and across the country and a river cruise on the Thames, alongside multiple trips to museums, restaurants and galleries. Pupils relayed their experiences enthusiastically and are grateful and thankful for the opportunities presented to them by their staff team. ArtsAward and the Duke of Edinburgh accreditations will further enhance the core curriculum offer, with accreditation expertly woven through an already carefully constructed, challenging and ambitious curriculum implementation.

Leaders have developed academy passports, highly adapted to meet pupil need and linked expertly through the semi and informal curriculum implementation, which will allow children to gain experiences, labelled: '20 things to discover at Discovery.' Over the course of the coming year, the passports will be embedded deeply into curriculum opportunities using lessons co-constructed across departments and subjects by the staff team and the wider Trust. The pupil cultural passports are closely linked to the academy values, thereby pupils will be awarded when they achieve these social, cultural and personal development milestones, giving all a sense of pride, ownership and a lifelong appreciation of the Arts.

Overview

The Discovery Academy preparing for adulthood themes fall into four categories: Employment; Friends, Community, and Relationships; Independent living, and Good Health. Leaders work tirelessly to ensure pupils can effectively communicate their needs, remain safe, self-advocate and create change in a world that can, at times, be challenging for them to negotiate. The academy's mission is to deliver educational excellence for all its pupils by fostering a culture of creativity, curiosity, care, courage, and commitment through all they do, including (but not limited to) the surrounding environment. In regard to this environment, academy leaders have expertly and unapologetically created it. Every single opportunity to allow pupils to excel and succeed is woven into the ethos and culture of the academy, permeating all who enter the physical building, and the lovingly created outdoor space.

Warmth exudes from this academy. Upon entering the premises, the visitor is met with accessible parking bays, bright and colourful planting, a warm and inclusive greeting from the reception team, superbly appointed and well-kept buildings and colourful, thoughtful displays showcasing pupil work. The academy newsletter is available for all to see, with easy-to-read formatting and showing a celebratory focus on pupils' personal and academic achievements. Multicultural and national flags are raised in the shared space, allowing pupils to remember and celebrate their heritage, whilst recognising the collective connection in sharing British values and universal human values together in the academy community.

The overarching theme of the curriculum throughout the academy is Preparing for Adulthood (PFA), with leaders and staff at all levels advocating equal life chances for all pupils as they move into adulthood and the next phase of their education, employment or training. Leaders are relentless in their determination to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all and allows children to have a strong post-16 pathway already in consideration. Upon speaking to a parent of a young person in the upper academy, they shared 'the academy are brilliant. I can't imagine my child anywhere else, but we feel incredibly well prepared, when that time comes.' Staff determination in providing an enhanced transition thorough multi-agency working alongside the local authority in which the young person resides, means that all pupils can thrive and feel secure that the adults who work with them to keep them safe, can do so. Staff are careful to promote role models as working life not as an aspiration, but as something that is realised. Discovery Academy give all a life of purpose and constant successes.

With diverse challenges, and diversity of need, the academy's focus is effective communication, which is the golden thread that runs through all interactions within the academy. Communication is key at Discovery Academy, with the academy doggedly determined to use the latest technology and research, ensuring all pupils have access to communication approaches that meet their needs and allow them autonomy and choice. Every classroom door is furnished with pen portraits for every student, now/next boards, and visual information where needed. Makaton is widely used, with pupils conversing during the assessment in a confident and articulate manner, taking interest in visitors and the academy community with reciprocal conversation and communication.

Undertaking a full communication audit annually, there is an ongoing commitment from leaders to ensure not one pupil is left behind. Leaders and staff switch effortlessly through varying communication methods; they know each child individually, know each and every pupil name, and have a relentless energy in improving every single interaction through connection and expertise. Increased and improved communication techniques have specific time allocated for all new staff at their induction into the academy as a priority, allowing clear and effective language sharing to take place immediately. At Discovery Academy, every second counts and staff do not waste any opportunity to improve pupil's communication at all levels.

Pupil behaviour at Discovery Academy is exemplary. Because pupils feel safe, they are respectful, keen to share their learning journey and overwhelmingly proud of their achievements. Bullying is incredibly rare. Restorative conversations take priority, where staff are mindful that pupils do not experience shame at any point in their academy career. Relationships between staff and pupils are warm, nurturing and joyous to encounter. Every pupil spoke of their love for staff with humour, sharing anecdotes of their lives together and their collective connection. Pupils at this highly inclusive academy look after themselves, each other and care deeply about their staff team.

Where pupils find regulation difficult, purposely designed sensory regulation and learning environments are available for all, used carefully and specifically to improve outcomes and are in excellent condition. Sensory needs are well catered for and are always offered at times of dysregulation, including specialist occupational therapy, sensory integration rooms and light rooms. Leaders are aware of every minute detail of the academy and use every possible opportunity to ensure pupils are regulated, safe and ready to learn. For example, transition points during lesson changeover, or movement of pupils around the academy having been identified as a time of dysregulation, leaders implemented fish tanks to support calm regulation, along with vibrating wall panels on corridors. This evidences the lengths the staff team, along with the Trust, will extend to in order to ensure a calm and purposeful environment for all pupils.

Adults and stakeholders of the organisation are also considered at every possible point. Parental communication is strong, with solid key relationships formed quickly, whereby support and guidance is available for all. The academy has utilised other agencies and third sector charities to provide Christmas and festive presents to those who may need them, holidays in a local caravan, support with household items and necessary toiletries where required. Discovery Academy is a welcoming academy who recognise the challenges parents face when their child has an additional and complex need. Parents speak of 'feeling very lucky' that their child can attend the academy and are grateful of the opportunities staff provide for their child to be healthy and successful.

The academy is intuitive and reflective, understanding the barriers faced in the local and national sphere. Those identified barriers are unashamedly tackled relentlessly by an energetic and professional team of leaders and staff at all levels across the organisation and Trust. Leaders are acutely aware of the stretch of public services, making general entitlements out of reach for their pupils and families. As a consequence to little, if no respite facilities for families, the academy have developed the HAF programme, providing a consistent staff team to ensure pupil regulation and a high of ratio support over and above allocation. Parent voice is unanimously supportive of the lengths the

academy go to ensure the lives of carers are made easier, with wrap-around care. As one parent said: 'There's always someone to talk to, who has the answer to our problems. We're not alone.'

Maintaining good health and physical wellbeing is fundamental to the offer at Discovery Academy. Hearing from parents regarding the lack of accessible car parking at the local hospital, and the strain on the family to attend numerous healthcare appointments, the Consultant Paediatrician now runs their clinic in academy itself, allowing more children to have access to highly specialised medical care. The academy's focus on improving health outcomes and offering their site extend even further, with Autism-friendly NHS eyesight tests available for pupils, support through sleep champions (in which academy staff were successful in supporting twelve families obtain appropriate beds), an incontinence service support and a vital tooth brushing wrap-around offer which is embedded into the academy's personal, social and health curriculum. The highly specialised Cleveland Unit are based in the academy building and integrate into the site, using all facilities to enhance the life chances of the most complex children. In sharing the space, leaders recognise the support and expertise health care staff can give, including further insight into the needs of the pupils they serve.

Pupils attending Discovery Academy love to read. The library is a wonder to behold, a relaxing but 'buzzing' environment where diversity is at the core of the books on offer. The academy considers all pupils, and, with a high number of readers for whom English is not their first language, dual language books at every level are available and on display in the purpose built and inviting space. All pupils are encouraged to take books home and enjoy them with their family. High quality murals depicting literary characters and stories are evident across academy corridors, providing pupils an opportunity to engage in reading and word recognition. Where reading at home may be problematic, QR codes are provided on the front of each book, scanned at home by parent's mobile devices, leading to the story book being read to by a member of staff from academy. This thoughtful approach allows pupils to recognise staff voice, intonation and dialect, providing comfort and connection to the team around them whilst in the home environment.

The Trust-wide staff charter offers purposeful and bespoke continuing professional development for all. A comprehensive induction pack and programme of integration to the team is readily available and directed towards ensuring pupils have access to quality first teaching and communication preferences. Leaders operate an open-door policy, which was evidenced through purposeful and warm conversations on assessment day consistently. Staff wellbeing support, including having access to their own wellbeing garden, is prioritised by leaders, whilst ensuring pupils do not 'miss out.' PPA time is covered by specialist instruction in French, Music, Arts Award and Drama, during which time class teachers can plan their core curriculum effectively in the knowledge pupils have access to further quality first teaching. There are clear routes of progression for staff enhancement, supported by the Trust, in which staff can, and frequently do, excel. The academy's children's psychotherapist joined initially as a teaching assistant, completing further study and being allowed the opportunity to progress into the role, where they have brought new ideas into the academy due to knowing pupils well. An increasing number of support staff, looking to return to work now that the academy have provided a settled placement for their child, are employed by the academy.

Employment has provided a transformative approach for the whole family and raised aspiration for all. Indeed, the impact Discovery Academy has, and continues to make on the families it serves is to be commended and recognised nationally.

It is abundantly clear that the staff team at Discovery continue to be fully committed to, and experts in, inclusive practice. Leaders are relentless in their continuation to drive the academy forward to improve the outcomes for all pupils. They have proved their commitment to inclusion over the years of IQM accreditation and they continue to have the passion and expertise to continue to drive the inclusion agenda in their own academy and beyond. This is an academy who are supremely organised and not afraid to challenge, question and consider all approaches to ensure all pupils are successful in their setting.

The academy continues to move from strength to strength in terms of its superb inclusive practice and I am firmly of the opinion that the academy fully meets the standard required by the Inclusion Quality Mark to maintain its status as a Flagship School. I therefore recommend that the school retains its Flagship Status and is reviewed again in 12 months. The next review will look closely at how the academy has interacted with its Inclusion Cluster and promoted continuing outreach. Evidence of cluster working will underpin the capacity for the school to maintain its Flagship Status.

Assessor: Ms Emily Greenhalgh-Stone

Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:



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Joe McCann MBA NPQH
Director of Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd