



## Rotherham Charter Gold

15<sup>th</sup> March 2022

Dear Luci, Wayne, Sarah and everyone at Abbey,

It is with immense pleasure that we are able to confirm that your status as a Charter school remains firmly secure and, once again, we are reaccrediting you with Rotherham Charter Gold. Members of the Rotherham Charter team visited school on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022. They met with students, parents, grandparents, a parent governor and staff. From the mascots at the school entrance, symbols of your four core values which in turn represent the Four Cornerstones of Coproduction, to your furry receptionist Narla, there was a warm welcome right from the very outset. Within minutes we knew we were in for something very special. There's a feeling you get when you walk into somewhere that gives you an indication of what's in store. Walking into Abbey you can't help but smile. It oozes positivity. Happy staff give off positive vibes which rubs off on students and visitors alike.

Staff standing to one side, our morning was conducted by ace students Joseph, who we were told basically runs Abbey, and Jacob, school PA. We were treated to welcome refreshments followed by a tour of the school in two groups, later meeting back again to look at school's Charter portfolio and see video and PowerPoint evidence of Abbey's journey since the Charter team's last visit back in June 2019. What a three years it has been and yet, despite COVID having dominated for the most part, Abbey managed to carry on and keep each and every one of its families in mind. Irrespective of postcode, families received as a minimum a daily letter and a weekly phone call, home visits took place, and food parcels were delivered. But more than that, Abbey went the extra mile and also made sure that its students received fun packages too. The team love that fun is a core theme that seems to run through everything. Staff and students share jokes. There is an air of mischief and pranks are actively encouraged. Staff genuinely love going to work. Students sense and replicate this enthusiasm.

Staff know students and their families really well and relationships are strong. Walking around school it was a joy to witness staff not only giving out hugs and praise but students volunteering hugs themselves. There's an equal partnership and a mutual care and respect which seems to come naturally, but we know is down to dedication and tireless effort behind the scenes. Students feel valued. Child voice is heard. When the Charter team first visited, the phrase #TeamAbbey dominated and, although still strong and wonderfully abundant on Twitter, there's a softer, earnest and even warmer approach now which seems to reflect a deeper reality which is that those who together make up Abbey are more than a team, they are a 'family'.

Abbey has always excelled at making the extraordinary ordinary. Walking around school is a magical sensory experience. Music from Radio Abbey, chosen by the students, fills the corridors and lifts the soul. Each classroom has its own scent which ties in with that term's class topic. All of these things help to create a calm atmosphere. There's a sense of



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no limits and students are both encouraged to aim high and supported in setting realistic goals. At no point during our visit were we conscious that we were in a specialist setting other than it being apparent that the resources, both human and physical, were very special. It appears that the sky is the limit and STEAM Street is the perfect example with a brilliantly equipped gym, ICT suite, food and design technology rooms, radio station and shop. We can't possibly list here every resource or intervention that impressed us. There is so much new since our last visit; the number of changes and improvements is staggering. But what we can do, is tell you the impact all these things combined had on us.

The energy and creativeness of staff is what jumps out the most. In the words of Jill Newbolt, one of the Assistant Headteachers, *"We ask students to step out of their comfort zones all of the time so why shouldn't we do the same?"* Staff are continually striving to come up with new and innovative ideas to inspire and engage students. And there is a clear focus around supporting independence and building careers for the future right from Class L1, something sadly missing in many of our mainstream schools: 84% of Abbey's last year's Year 11 leavers went into paid employment as a result of this drive and 16% onto further education. But, to school's credit, students aren't subject to pressure. They feel safe in the familiar palm of Abbey and constantly are reminded, and remind each other, that they are loved and valued; at the same time knowing that they have permission to make mistakes. Executive Headteacher Luci Windle jokes that they don't permanently exclude because they don't know how to work it out...and they have no intention of fathoming the system out either. The school puts children and young people at the heart. It doesn't matter what they have done. Issues are forgotten and every day is a new day.

But school sees its responsibility being broader than just supporting its students at Abbey. Families are encouraged to help school in any way they can, from clearing leaves to utilising whatever skills they have that can be of benefit. In return they can access a wealth of resources and take home a bag of shopping at the end of the week if needed, their dignity intact and self-esteem boosted. A true example of partnership in its fullest sense. In recognition of the hardship some families have experienced as a result of the pandemic, staff are endeavouring to support parents back into work by helping them write CVs and providing references; whatever it takes. In the words of more than one parent, school is just *"amazing"*. They go *"above and beyond"*.

We heard a lot of emotive stories. Parents and grandparents fought back tears as they recounted their child's journey. One family told us that when they received their child's diagnosis everything felt bleak but, since joining Abbey, they have changed so much they just can't believe the difference in them. It seems that when families pass their worries onto staff, this alleviates their concern. One parent whose child struggles with change explained it just gets dealt with now, *"I don't have to think about that [anymore]."* Success is not always immediate either but there is a strong commitment to persevere which parents recognise too: *"It's been a hard journey. I can't praise them enough for what they have done. He loves it here."*





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When we awarded you Charter Gold in 2019 you assured us you would never rest or become complacent. If anything, it has served as just another catalyst for that burning passion for improvement we experienced that is your everyday. From day one, the Four Cornerstones of Coproduction have been at the heart of your school development plan and your SEF and it is clear this way of working is now deep-rooted in your culture. You embody everything that the Charter is and we are delighted and proud to be able to boast that you are one of our Charter schools. As Luci explains, *“The charter can’t just be an add on, it has to run through everything...it means a lot to us.”*

A friend and supporter of school asked us if the Charter Team ever awarded ‘platinum’ and, were there to be such a thing, you would absolutely be deserving of that. It was a privilege to visit your amazing setting once again and witness first-hand the Four Cornerstones in action. Well done Abbey School for a great team effort!

Kind regards

*Lisa Morris, Eva Ogden, Alison Durber & Lisa Nelson*

**On behalf of the Rotherham Charter & Genuine Partnerships Team**



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