

Summary Report of Independent Investigation Undertaken for the Board of Governors of Holland Park School

4th May 2022

Introduction

When the Board of Governors of Holland Park School was reconstituted in autumn 2021, it had to deal with a large number of serious, widespread, historic allegations made by former students, parents and staff about the conduct of some senior leaders at the school and about how the school was run.

The Department for Education also made an intervention when it issued the school with a Notice to Improve in November 2021, highlighting financial mismanagement, failure to ensure regularity and propriety in use of its funds, leaders' excessive salaries and failure to seek prior approval from the Government for "novel and contentious" expenditure.

The issues the Board inherited had been ongoing for many years and had never been resolved, either when the school was run until 2013 by the local authority (Kensington and Chelsea) or as a single academy trust. The complaints from students and staff include misleading of Ofsted inspectors, safeguarding flaws that risked the welfare of students, and bullying of students and staff.

The new Board resolved to tackle these matters so that the school could once again be fit for purpose. This included instructing an independent investigator, Jessica Joels, of B3sixty, to undertake an investigation into the complaints raised. The investigation began on 22nd November 2021.

The investigation was a two-stage process:

- Stage 1 – where staff and students were invited to send details of complaints to the investigation for review. A schedule of all complaints was compiled, together with supporting evidence. This was contained in an interim report delivered to the Board of Governors on 11th January 2022. More than 100 individuals submitted evidence.
- Stage 2 – where participants identified from Stage 1 were invited to be interviewed.

A number of members of the Holland Park School senior leadership team (SLT) declined to be interviewed, as did the former Chair of Governors.

The complaints investigated were:

- Breaches of safeguarding in respect of both students and staff;
- Bullying, discrimination and inequality towards both students and staff;
- Discrimination against protected characteristics;
- Ineffective leadership and management;
- Withholding of completed staff questionnaires in respect of the Ofsted inspection of January 2020; and
- Any further allegations/complaints that arose from testimony

The complaints and evidence span from 2004, when the school was under the control of the local authority (Kensington and Chelsea) to September 2013 when it became a Single Academy Trust, and then from September 2013 to December 2021. The individuals interviewed are staff who worked at the school at some point from 2007 to December 2021 as well as students who have attended the school variously from 2012 to December 2021.

The evidence was compiled from written complaints and interviews with complainants, many of whom are still traumatised by their experiences at Holland Park School. One individual withdrew from

the investigation for fear of reprisal. At times interviewees were extremely distressed in having to revisit their time at Holland Park School and were visibly shaken.

In all the interviews, the investigator was impressed by the strength of character shown by each person who at times had to discuss matters of an intimate nature and would highly commend those students who came forward to share their experiences. It was also clear that teachers were highly committed to their vocation, and unstinting in their praise of the children they taught at Holland Park School.

The investigation also received eight emails in support of Holland Park School following an email sent by the school on 17th December 2021 inviting all interested parties to communicate with the investigator by 31st December 2021. All these have been taken into consideration.

The full report is 554 pages long and, as previously stated, will not be published in full to protect the identities of staff and students who gave evidence. However, the Board committed to providing a summary with as much information as possible that could be shared. This summary contains the report's findings and the core evidence that underpins those findings.

Findings

The investigator's view, based upon extensive and corroborative evidence provided during interviews, is that on the balance of probabilities every complaint is found to have happened.

The investigation found that:

- 1. There were breaches of safeguarding in respect of both students and staff and which included failure to support students who had been victims of peer-on-peer sexual abuse:**
 - There were inappropriate responses to the case of a teacher who was found to have had a relationship with a pupil.
 - There was exploitation within some teacher/student relationships.
 - The behaviour policy for students was unclear, with shouting being the preferred option combined with public humiliation.
 - There was on occasions inappropriate use of the isolation room.
 - Very little support was provided to students following traumatic events such as the Grenfell tragedy and the suicide of a student.
 - Staff were subjected to changes in their working structure and to detriment when they took steps to leave the school for employment elsewhere.
 - There was very little regard for staff welfare.
- 2. There was bullying, discrimination and inequality towards both students and staff:**
 - Evidence referred to the control that the SLT (the composition of which changed from year to year) exerted over the school.
 - There was a culture of fear, favouritism and inequality. Some students were subject to favouritism including nominations for the school's awards evening (Perfect Tense) and being singled out for special attention. There was a grace and favour system in place for staff. At the same time there was bullying including the misuse of support plans, performance capability and disciplinary intervention, lack of Union representation and the inability to voice opinions.
 - Personal appearance and work ethic were openly discussed at staff meetings and staff were treated like children.
- 3. There was discrimination against protected characteristics including overt sexism, Islamophobia, and racism, while there was also a lack of knowledge around mental health and medical and physical issues for both staff and students.**

4. **There was ineffective leadership and management** including:
 - Rapid promotion of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) to positions of senior leadership without appropriate training or experience.
 - Sharing of confidential information inappropriately.
 - Deliberate tactics to ensure lack of cohesion amongst both staff and SLT, lack of cohesion amongst the SLT themselves, and over-employment of NQTs.
5. **Ofsted inspectors were misled by senior leaders:**
 - Some staff questionnaires relating to the Ofsted inspection of January 2020 were destroyed at the instigation of some senior leaders.
 - Some Ofsted staff questionnaires were specifically produced by some SLT members at the direction of some senior leaders, and were then submitted for use in the Ofsted inspection of January 2020.
 - Certain students were taken off site or told not to attend school during the Ofsted inspection.
6. **There were breaches of the Government's COVID-19 lockdown guidelines; and vulnerable/key worker children were not accommodated at HPS during lockdown periods.**

The Board is deeply committed to ensuring that the findings in this investigation and the evidence of those that have come forward to testify will lead to lasting cultural change.