



QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEW

REVIEW REPORT FOR EXETER ROYAL ACADEMY FOR DEAF EDUCATION

Name of School:	Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education
Principal/CEO:	Sylvan Dewing
Hub:	London Special and AP Hub
School phase:	Non-maintained residential special school
MAT (if applicable):	N/A

Overall Peer Evaluation Estimate at this QA Review:	Effective
Date of this Review:	09/03/2026
Overall Estimate at last QA Review:	N/A
Date of last QA Review:	27/11/2024
Grade at last Ofsted inspection:	Good
Date of last Ofsted inspection:	23/02/2023

Quality Assurance Review

The review team, comprising host school leaders and visiting reviewers, agrees that evidence indicates these areas are evaluated as follows:

Leadership at all levels	Effective
Quality of provision and outcomes	Effective
AND	
Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and/or pupils with additional needs	Effective
Area of excellence	N/A
Previously accredited valid areas of excellence	Communication for All: how inspired implementation of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) leads to independence and learning for all. 27/11/2024
Overall peer evaluation estimate	Effective

Important information

- The QA Review provides a peer evaluation of a school's practice in curriculum, teaching and learning, and leadership. It is a voluntary and developmental process, and the peer review team can evaluate and offer 'peer evaluation estimates' based only on what the school chooses to share with them.
- The QA Review estimates are not equivalent to Ofsted grades. The QA Review uses a different framework to Ofsted, and the review is developmental not judgmental.
- The QA Review report is primarily for the school's internal use to support the school's continuing improvement. If you choose to share this report, or extracts thereof, externally (e.g. on your website or with parents), please ensure that it is accompanied with the following text:

Challenge Partners is a charity working to advance education for the public benefit. We are not a statutory accountability body. The QA Review does not audit schools' safeguarding or behaviour policies and practices. However, Lead Reviewers and visiting reviewers are expected to follow Challenge Partners' safeguarding policy and report any concerns as set out in the procedures.

1. Context and character of the school

Exeter Royal Academy for Deaf Education is a non-maintained residential special school and specialist independent provider, located in Exmouth, East Devon. The provision includes a school for students aged nine to 16, a college for 16 to 18 year-olds and adult learning centres for 19 to 25 year-olds. About half of students are residential and there is also a children's home for four students. The school is run by a charitable trust, with a board of trustees and a governing body.

The 79 students come from 26 different local authorities across the United Kingdom, with two fifths of students from Devon. There are 210 staff on roll, of which about 15% are Deaf.

All students are Deaf or have an auditory processing disorder and have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or a statement of need if they are from outside of England. They also have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Almost half have social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (SEMH). Almost half have a multi-sensory impairment (MSI), including Deaf/blind. A quarter have autism and over a third of students have learning difficulties. In addition, many students have complex medical profiles. A small number are PEG fed.

The leadership team includes an established principal and two assistant principals who serve as the respective heads of the school and the college.

The academy is a multi-modal, purpose-built campus providing a range of communication strategies, including spoken English and British Sign Language (BSL). Additionally, Sign Support English (SSE) and augmentative and alternative communication devices (AAC).

The school's mission is in 'the enabling of Deaf people to acquire language, achieve independence, develop socially and emotionally, and excel educationally.'

2.1 Leadership at all levels - What went well

- Exeter Royal Academy Deaf Education is an intrinsically visionary, values-driven culture where leaders and staff are unified by a profound commitment to the Deaf community. Leaders state that a signature approach comprises a collaborative, strategic co-construction across all teams.
- Professional development is a core organisational priority, fuelling staff ambition and refining pedagogical practice. As confident, self-directed professionals, staff actively pursue learning opportunities that directly enhance their impact on their classroom environment.

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- For example, they are proud of their commitment to developing teachers' specialised pedagogy. This is reflected in the growing number of Qualified Teachers of the Deaf, (QToD) now totalling four, who expertly bridge communication barriers to foster student independence.
- The leadership culture is evolving well. Through a targeted development programme informed by skills audits, middle leaders are mastering key competencies in project management, strategic priority alignment, and coaching. These leaders now play a pivotal role in planning and evaluation processes. This maturity is reflected through full engagement in a rigorous, collaborative review process. Staff were candid, and reflective: professional dialogue was characterised by intellectual humility and a shared, unwavering commitment to organisational progress.
- A newly inducted leadership tier with teaching and learning responsibilities (TLRs) is successfully developing a nuanced assessment framework. By creating a 'small steps to success' model, they are supporting how the Academy tracks progress in mathematics, reading, writing, and BSL. Pooling research and diverse perspectives, the team adopts an inspiring, collaborative approach. They prioritise ongoing dialogue with staff, recognising that an iterative process is essential to refining a meaningful, accurate 'progress narrative' for every student.
- The ambitious Education Improvement Plan integrates assessment, pedagogy, and curriculum into a cohesive strategy. Senior leaders are ensuring staff understand that these interconnected priorities provide vital strategic clarity. By aligning these focus areas, the team has established a unified framework that is driving improvement across all learning environments.
- In steering the pedagogical culture, leaders have progressed from exploration to a cycle of trialling, embedding, and refining. By anchoring practice in incisive Deaf pedagogical principles, leaders ensure that teaching remains both consistent and purposeful. To maintain ambitious standards, quality assurance processes are now highly collaborative and cyclical. Staff focus on the precision of communication strategies, the relevance of the learning environment, and the seamless integration of therapy targets to maximise students' progress.
- The setting fosters a culture of emotional stability, mutual responsibility, and respect. This culture empowers students to approach both classroom and vocational learning with profound optimism. Year 12 students actively demonstrate this growth by reflecting on their increased confidence and future aspirations, while engaging in employability skills lessons, work experiences and opportunities for self-advocacy. They speak deeply about the impact of their time at the academy and describe the confidence they now have to apply for permanent work, volunteer and plan for college places.

- By providing thoughtful, constructive feedback around nuanced shifts to extra curricula days they identified how these changes would better manage sensory and emotional load. In these meetings they play an active role in the college's ongoing development.

2.2 Leadership at all levels - Even better if...

- ... senior leaders aligned every strategy to clear root causes, precise success metrics, and a plan that explicitly celebrates students' growth and academic progress.
- ... leaders continue to implement an assessment strategy, linked to the developing curriculum that is linguistically accessible for Deaf students, sets high academic expectations, and uses frequent monitoring to measure and celebrate the small steps toward success.

3.1 Quality of provision and outcomes - What went well

- Relational pedagogy is central to organisational success. Consequently, the mission is palpable. Staff express the 'joy of the job,' giving examples of times where they had not experienced this level of workplace wellbeing and strive in service to the students.
- Staff build strong rapport, creating a secure classroom climate where students feel safe to explore and take risks. Educators maintain consistent expectations rooted in a nuanced understanding of each student's emotional, learning, and communication needs. The daily 'Welcome' session fosters social connection; for instance, a student recently shared how she 'fixed' her own broken cochlear implant, celebrating this success with peers and staff.
- As a result of the consistent expectations of staff, considered planning and assured pacing within sessions for specific learners, students are well regulated, and engage successfully in purposeful learning activities. In an Entry Level 1 mathematics session, Year 9 -11 students demonstrated increased autonomy by independently selecting problem-solving strategies.
- Using personalised oral and BSL communication, learners engage in peer assessment by 'marking' each other's work. This collaborative approach minimises staff intervention and maximises learning opportunities. As a result, a culture of academic independence is developing.

- A wealth of inclusive, informed planning, a continually evolving staff expertise and high-quality resources are impacting on a developing consistent learning environment. Routines are embedded, and learning spaces are individualised through effective deployment of staff and personalised communication programmes and resource.
- This high-level communicative environment is dynamic and builds linguistic confidence. Where this purpose-built, multi-modal environment is used to capacity, it acts as an extension of the teaching and learning staff.
- Impactful teaching is rooted in an intimate understanding of individual needs, where academic and therapeutic goals are integrated into lived experience rather than isolated sessions. Educators function as facilitators, nurturing metacognition through the consistent application of the student independence scale. When a student's reading level hindered his mathematical conceptualisation, his teacher acted with analytical precision. By moving to personalised concrete resources and fluidly adapting BSL, expressive cues, and AAC tools, she balanced communication needs with academic challenge. This resulted in significant academic progress.
- Experienced Learning Leaders (LLs) orchestrate student success through expert, multi-modal instruction. By integrating BSL and AAC tools with curriculum passion, they astutely balance celebrating incremental gains with providing academic challenge. This approach fosters student agency, creating dynamic classrooms where leaders strategically withdraw scaffolding, empowering students to transition into independent thinkers and making self-reliance a fundamental developmental milestone.
- Teachers use a research-based blend of visual phonics and 'See and Learn' and 'Talk for Reading' and 'Talk for Writing' methodologies. Teachers provide opportunities for progress through precision one-to-one teaching and small-group instruction to meet students' diverse needs. This effective model has significantly boosted literacy skill progression. Students in a focused session read with accuracy, progressing from decoding individual words to independently reading and illustrating full sentences.
- The evolving curriculum weaves therapeutic and academic provisions seamlessly. As a result, students are active and engaged learners. Part of this holistic approach centres on teaching and learning staff and leaders undertaking a forensic analysis of attendance to identify barriers and address needs. Targeted interventions, including holiday support, parental engagement, and BSL-trained staffing, transform 'high challenge' into hope.

- By strengthening family bonds and improving attendance, the academy successfully raises student aspirations. This is exemplified by a long-struggling student who attended their annual review in person to share their ambition of becoming a chef.
- Due to the multi-faceted provision, students consistently exceed EHCP milestones, developing academic fluency and an empowered voice. By mastering multi-modal communication, they balance self-advocacy with social responsibility. This transition prepares them for genuine independence; graduates enter society as interns, volunteers, and skilled professionals. This culture of high expectation was exemplified by an intern's confident presentation focused on teaching a beginner's use of sign to visitors.

3.2 Quality of provision and outcomes - Even better if...

- ... those who teach across the semi-formal pathway ensured learning objectives were appropriately adapted to student ability and levels of experience, and where appropriate link to individual targets.
- ... all staff developed a learning conversation with their students that focused directly on progress and increasing levels of independence.
- ... the 'Levels of Support' framework was securely embedded so that students were able to complete tasks with the least amount of support possible.

4.1 Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and/or pupils with additional needs - What went well

- The lead therapist serves as an inspirational figure, exuding professional confidence and a clear strategic vision. Through exceptional collaboration with senior leadership and staff, she ensures the seamless implementation of specialised programmes. The Therapy Team is both systematic and agile, reviewing interventions promptly and empowering teaching staff to integrate clinical advice into the classroom effectively.
- A culture of rigorous accountability defines the team, anchored by the lead therapist's termly quality reviews. Progress is meticulously tracked against long-term EHCP outcomes to ensure a holistic view of each student's journey. This approach addresses a broad spectrum of needs, including the unique complexities of boarding and home environments.

- By centralising family contributions, the team accelerates progress. For example, one student moved from one-to-one sessions to small group work, mastering the use of cutlery to gain independence at school, at home, and in the community.
- The team employs a dynamic, collaborative approach to goal setting, actively involving students, families, teachers, and therapists. This 'team around the student' model extends support to the entire family unit.
- When barriers arise, the team pivots to provide practical solutions, such as scheduling meetings around family commitments or hosting online BSL weekends. By removing these hurdles, the team ensures that every stakeholder remains a valued contributor to the student's success.
- The work of this team is integral to each student's 'daily flow.' For example, sensory and occupational therapy circuits are not 'add-ons' but are inclusive and impactful components of the provision. Contribution to the 'All About Me' sessions are structured as transitional periods that regulate students' sensory systems for the day ahead.
- The transition process is a multi-phase, data-driven journey providing a bespoke education and welfare pathway. A multi-disciplinary team undertakes pre-assessment and assessment days, observing the student to build a comprehensive, individual profile. Once placed, students access integrated support from a range of staff with a formal six-week review where family input is integral to future planning. This commitment to understanding the student continues throughout their education, supported by three years of post-graduate destination data to track employment sustainability.

4.2 Quality of provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and/or pupils with additional needs - Even better if...

None identified during this review.

5. Area of Excellence

N/A

Following the QA Review

The review report is primarily for the school's internal use to support the school's continuing improvement. However, we encourage you to share the main findings with your hub/hub manager so that they can support your hub's activity planning. Challenge Partners will also collate and analyse content reports from across the partnership of schools and trusts including using AI tools to create an aggregate picture of what is going on across the sector (sharing these with the partnership) each year.

The QA Review reports remain confidential to Challenge Partners and the host school. This ensures that schools embrace the review as a development process, acting as a catalyst for their ongoing improvement. This is the primary purpose of the QA review. However, our aim is that the thematic analysis will demonstrate the additional value of a sector wide overview, illustrated with real-life examples.

For further support following your QA Review, schools can access the School Support Directory; the Challenge Partners online tool that enables schools to connect with other schools in your hub and across the national partnership of schools. The School Support Directory can be accessed via the Challenge Partners website (<https://www.challengepartners.org/>).

Finally, following the QA Review, schools may find it useful to refer to research such as the EEF toolkit to help inform their approach to tackling the EBIs identified in the report (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit>).