

School inspection report

24 to 26 February 2026

Sunninghill Preparatory School

South Court

South Walks Road

Dorchester

DT1 1EB

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders successfully promote the school's values of courage, commitment, creativity and compassion, known as the '4Cs', to help pupils develop their emotional wellbeing and make academic progress. Leaders encourage pupils to display these attributes in all aspects of school life, from the way that they approach their work to the way in which they interact with each other.
2. Leaders are well supported by governors. Together, they create suitably ambitious development plans to enhance the pupils' educational experiences. Leaders are responsive to the views of pupils and parents in this process. Governors maintain effective oversight of leaders' work to ensure that policies are implemented well and that Standards are consistently met.
3. Leaders provide a broad and engaging curriculum that motivates pupils to work hard and make good progress. Teachers support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) so that they make consistent progress. Leaders establish a culture of stretch and challenge which is embedded across the curriculum so that pupils extend their learning. Pupils' learning is enhanced through the extra-curricular programme which includes well-designed enrichment activities and sessions based on the '4Cs'. Teachers typically provide feedback within lessons and in their marking of pupils' work so that pupils know how to improve their work. However, this is not consistently the case across all teaching and, as a result, pupils do not always know the specific steps they can take to make further progress.
4. Leaders place the promotion of pupils' emotional wellbeing at the centre of the school's provision. The '4Cs' provide a well-understood framework for developing pupils' moral awareness, self-esteem and resilience. Leaders provide well-planned personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) programmes so that pupils learn to manage their emotions and build positive relationships. Pupils' emotional wellbeing is enhanced through opportunities to interact and collaborate with those in different year groups. This further promotes leadership, empathy and a sense of community, in line with the school's values.
5. Leaders have systems in place to promote health and safety effectively overall. They proactively review the premises and equipment through regular checks and audits. Leaders implement risk assessments consistently and effectively. However, the changing room for male pupils is not maintained to the same standard as other facilities in the school and so does not support the welfare of male pupils as effectively.
6. Leaders ensure that pupils are well prepared to contribute positively to society and develop a mature understanding of their responsibilities as citizens. Teaching promotes respect for diversity, inclusion and equality, enabling pupils to appreciate different cultures, beliefs and backgrounds. Carefully planned PSHE and careers lessons help pupils to understand financial responsibility and future pathways. Leaders enable pupils to develop empathy and social responsibility through meaningful engagement with the local community and pupil-led charitable activities.
7. Leaders implement safeguarding procedures thoroughly and effectively. Staff understand their collective role in promoting pupils' safety and welfare. Training is effective so that staff know how to report concerns. Pupils are confident to seek help and advice from trusted adults if they have any worries or concerns. Leaders respond promptly and supportively to any concerns raised by staff or pupils.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- improve the maintenance of the changing room for male pupils in order to better promote their welfare
- ensure that teachers consistently provide feedback that enables pupils to understand the specific steps they need to take to make further progress.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

8. Leaders successfully implement the school's aims of ensuring that pupils develop academically and pastorally within a nurturing ethos. Leaders promote the school's '4Cs' values so that pupils consider that being 'courageous, committed, creative and compassionate' will help them to succeed academically as well as become caring members of the school community.
9. Leaders actively promote the positive wellbeing of pupils. They develop warm relationships to help pupils feel settled and valued at school. Leaders promote a mantra of 'see me before you teach me' so that staff understand and demonstrate the importance of getting to know pupils as individuals.
10. Governors and leaders work together on the overall strategy for the school. Governors provide appropriate support and challenge for school leaders through visiting the school and scrutinising data and reports. This enables them to maintain effective oversight to ensure that policies are implemented well and that Standards are met consistently. Governors promote professional development opportunities, such as networking meetings, so that leaders can enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding of educational matters and continue to undertake their duties effectively.
11. Leaders have a reflective and responsive approach to the way that they evaluate the school's performance and compile development plans. They implement a process of continuous improvement so that they can enhance the provision for pupils. In the process, leaders consider the views of parents and pupils, such as including more paper-based homework tasks as a result of consultation with parents and redesigning their marking and feedback policy based on pupils' views of what type of feedback is most effective for them.
12. Leaders in the early years ensure that provision consistently meets the needs of young children. Leaders have a clear vision for early years education and ensure that this is well understood and implemented by staff. They provide appropriate guidance, training and support so that staff have a secure understanding of the curriculum and how children learn and develop. Leaders use monitoring, assessment and reflective practice to evaluate the quality of provision and make improvements where needed. As a result, teaching is consistent, children's wellbeing is prioritised and outcomes for children in the early years are positive.
13. Governors and leaders adopt a strategic approach to risk through consideration of different potential hazards that could have an impact on the working of the school. Leaders ensure that there are appropriate risk assessments in place relating to aspects of the school premises, such as the science laboratory and school kitchens, as well as for trips outside of school, such as visiting the local swimming pool and going on residential trips. Leaders involve staff in drawing up, implementing and evaluating risk assessments so that they are aware of their role in mitigating risks.
14. Leaders provide a variety of information on the school's website, including contact details of key people and a suitable range of policies and procedures. Parents receive regular reports that outline their child's progress and targets for further development.
15. Leaders ensure that the school fulfils the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. They implement a suitable accessibility plan that outlines actions taken to make the school site, curriculum and information more readily accessible. Actions include considering how computer technology can be utilised to increase access to the curriculum and ensuring that the school has an accessible entrance.

16. Leaders liaise proactively with external agencies to promote the welfare of pupils. They communicate with the local authority attendance office about matters relating to attendance, including about pupils who leave or join the school at non-standard transition times.
17. Leaders implement an effective complaints policy with suitable timescales and opportunities for complaints to be managed informally as well as formally. They keep records of any complaints and consider these to see if any adjustments to provision are required. Governors know their role in the complaints process when they are required.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

- 18. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. Leaders implement a broad and balanced curriculum which meets the needs of individual pupils. Pupils make good progress across the curriculum and develop their knowledge, skills and understanding in a variety of subjects. The curriculum is underpinned by the promotion of what the school terms personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS), such as being creative and reflective, which enable pupils to consider how to be more effective learners. The curriculum is designed to enable pupils to become articulate and numerate, as well as developing their knowledge of science and technology and learning about the world today and in the past. Creative subjects enable pupils to appreciate the aesthetic side of learning. Pupils' achievements in music are of a high standard due to a well-taught and ambitious music curriculum. There is a distinct focus on playing instruments, learning music theory and performing in ensembles. Outdoor education is a key feature of the curriculum for all age groups, including regular gardening sessions on the school grounds and in the local town. This enables pupils to develop their appreciation of the natural world as well as promoting their wellbeing.
20. Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use to plan effective lessons. Learning is sequenced carefully so that pupils can acquire new skills and build on their previous learning. Teachers ensure that they meet the different needs of pupils in their lessons so that they make progress. Leaders are reflective about making changes to the curriculum and teaching as a result of ongoing dialogue with pupils. As a result, teachers have worked with pupils to adapt the way that they provide extension activities to challenge pupils' thinking. This has resulted in a successful process that motivates pupils to take part in challenging activities. Teachers typically provide feedback for pupils to enable them to know how to extend their learning further. However, this is not embedded consistently across all teaching. As a result, pupils do not always understand the actions to take to make further progress.
21. Teachers incorporate a well-chosen range of teaching resources and methods to motivate pupils in lessons. This includes individual research, drama, creating presentations and completing investigations. As a result, lessons are purposeful with pupils deeply engaged in their learning. Pupils behave respectfully in lessons, listening to teachers and peers so that they can learn from each other and extend their thinking.
22. Leaders analyse a broad range of assessment data to closely track pupils' progress. They work with teachers to identify any pupils who are not making sufficient progress so that they can be supported and monitored with tailored action plans. Leaders and teachers use data to look for trends on a whole-school level so that they can amend their provision accordingly. For example, a new spelling programme, introduced as a result of data analysis, has improved the outcomes for pupils in this area.
23. Leaders ensure that provision for pupils who have SEND is well-co-ordinated, positive and inclusive. They promptly identify needs and implement appropriate support plans tailored to pupils' needs. Leaders provide detailed communication for teachers so that they know how to adapt their teaching to support pupils who have SEND. Teachers routinely use resources and strategies that enable pupils who have SEND to access the curriculum and make good progress.

24. Leaders assess whether pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) have enough competence and fluency to access the curriculum. They provide additional support when required so that pupils who speak EAL make good progress.
25. Leaders implement a well-planned and coherent curriculum in the early years that reflects children's interests and developmental needs. Staff have a secure understanding of how children learn and use continual assessment effectively to adapt provision and provide appropriate challenge and support. As a result, children make good progress. Staff focus on children's development of oral language and vocabulary, such as during outdoor learning when children use different adjectives to describe what they can see and hear. Staff enable children to develop interest in books through regular 'books and blankets' sessions that promote enjoyment of stories. Staff provide practical activities to develop children's numeracy skills, including counting and comparing objects. Children learn phonics and use these to read and write simple sentences. This enables children to be well-prepared for their transition to Year 1.
26. Leaders provide a range of activities for pupils to experience as part of the extra-curricular programme. This includes enrichment time on Friday afternoons when pupils participate in outdoor activities, such as skiing, sailing and windsurfing. This enables pupils to learn new skills and to develop confidence. Pupils often form new friendships and take on leadership roles within these activities. This is particularly the case during '4Cs' sessions, which are extra-curricular activities that take place within the timetable. At these times, pupils work in mixed-age groups, with older pupils acting as role models for younger pupils.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

- 27. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

28. The school's '4Cs' values provide a suitable framework for pupils to develop their moral awareness. Leaders model these values in the way that they interact with pupils so that pupils learn how to treat each other with compassion. As a result, pupils understand that respect involves considering the needs and feelings of others and treating each other fairly.
29. Leaders enable pupils to develop their spiritual understanding. The school's focus on compassion leads to pupils understanding that they are connected to other members of the school community, united in achieving a common good. Through PSHE lessons, outdoor learning and '4Cs' sessions, pupils practise mindfulness to have quiet moments of contemplation. At church services, pupils reflect on the positive aspects of their lives and how they can make a difference to others.
30. Leaders foster independence and self-esteem from an early age so that pupils develop confidence in their capacity as individuals. Leaders and staff regularly recognise pupils' talents and achievements to boost their self-esteem. Pupils take on leadership roles, such as subject prefects, with confidence. These roles enable them to be role models for younger pupils, further promoting the school's values of community and compassion.
31. Leaders implement an effective PSHE programme which has a positive impact on pupils' emotional wellbeing and physical health. Through well-planned lessons, pupils learn about emotions, such as happiness, anger and disappointment, and how these affect people. They practise strategies to feel relaxed and calm, such as listening to music or colouring. Pupils learn that speaking to an adult is an important action if they have any worries or concerns. They understand how to promote their physical health through learning about healthy diets, personal hygiene and physical exercise.
32. Leaders place a firm emphasis on children's personal and emotional development in the early years. Staff build warm, secure relationships with children, helping them to feel safe, valued and confident. Children are supported to recognise and manage their emotions appropriately through consistent routines, sensitive adult guidance and well-chosen activities. Staff model positive behaviour and encourage children to share, take turns and co-operate with one another, which supports the development of friendships and social skills.
33. Teaching in physical education (PE) is effective. Leaders carefully design the PE programme to promote the development of key skills, such as stamina and co-ordination. Within the PE curriculum, pupils have swimming lessons and learn to play team sports, including netball, football and hockey. When playing in teams sports, pupils develop their teamwork skills and are encouraged to display values such as respect, fairness and resilience.
34. Leaders ensure that children in the early years have frequent and well-planned opportunities to develop their physical skills. Teaching supports both gross and fine motor development effectively through a wide range of activities, including balancing, running and swimming, as well as mark-making, construction and manipulative play. Staff model and encourage safe movement and healthy practices, enabling children to gain confidence, co-ordination and control over their bodies.
35. Leaders provide a well-structured and age-appropriate RSE programme. This enables pupils to understand different types of relationships and what constitutes a healthy relationship. They learn in

an age-appropriate manner about avoiding peer pressure, how to navigate conflicts and the importance of respecting consent. As a result, pupils are equipped with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their wellbeing and relationships in preparation for adult life.

36. Leaders implement a clear behaviour policy, which is applied consistently by staff. This enables pupils to understand the expectation to treat each other with compassion. Pupils respond positively to rewards, such as house points, and understand that sanctions, such as warnings, enable them to take responsibility for their behaviour. As a result, pupils are well-behaved, polite and supportive of one another. Teachers ensure that pupils gain a secure understanding of different forms of bullying and why it is not acceptable. Bullying is rare and dealt with effectively when it arises.
37. Governors maintain typically effective oversight of health and safety and ensure that leaders have systematic processes in place to promote the welfare of pupils. Leaders commission audits of key areas of health and safety, including a fire risk assessment. They test fire safety equipment and conduct termly fire drills. Governors and leaders regularly review the school premises and accommodation so that maintenance issues can be quickly identified and addressed. However, the changing room for male pupils is not maintained to the same standard as the rest of the school premise, and so does not support the welfare of male pupils to the same extent.
38. Leaders make suitable arrangements to ensure that adults closely supervise the pupils throughout the school day. They maintain appropriate ratios for children in the early years, including when children are eating and drinking.
39. Leaders maintain admission and attendance registers in line with current statutory requirements. They promote the importance of school attendance and work collaboratively with parents if there are any concerns about attendance or absenteeism.
40. The school includes suitable medical facilities to cater for pupils' medical and first aid needs. Leaders ensure that staff training for first aid is updated regularly, including paediatric first aid for staff working in the early years.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

- 41. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

42. Leaders provide pupils with regular and meaningful opportunities to develop their understanding of life in British society. Pupils learn how rules are created and applied fairly, both within school and in wider society. Pupils learn about crime and the role of the police service through a visit from a police community support officer (PCSO). Pupils develop their knowledge of the role of Parliament and explore how the role of the monarchy has changed over time. Through age-appropriate teaching, pupils explore democratic processes, such as having their views listened to and contributing to class and school decision-making. Visits from the local MP and the Mayor and Mayoress enable pupils to learn about democratic elections. Teachers organise debates so that pupils can express their views about recent laws that affect their lives, such as farming taxes and VAT on school fees. Leaders ensure that any political discussions represent balanced views.
43. Leaders enable pupils to develop their cultural understanding and appreciation of the importance of inclusion. In religious education (RE), pupils learn about different world religions and their associated festivals and key beliefs. In history, pupils learn about diverse historical figures, such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Junior, discussing the impact that these figures have had on social justice. Pupils learn about cultural influences in music, such as the origins of steel pans. In English, pupils study texts that illustrate different cultures and backgrounds, including the experiences of political refugees. Pupils in Year 8 are involved in writing a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of inclusion for people with different backgrounds and identities. Within these activities, teachers encourage pupils to challenge discrimination and to reflect on any prejudice that people still experience today.
44. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to develop their social conscience by helping them to develop empathy for others and a commitment to take actions to help those in need. Teachers challenge pupils to consider the difference they can make as an individual. As a result, pupils are engaged in actions to improve the local community and environment, such as recycling and maintaining two flower beds in the local town. They visit local care homes and are assigned a 'buddy' so that they can provide companionships to the residents. At harvest festival, pupils support a local foodbank and homelessness charity. Pupils choose charities to support when participating in charitable activities such as cake sales and selling home-made products at the summer fair.
45. Leaders ensure that pupils develop a clear understanding of the difference between right and wrong and are supported to accept responsibility for their behaviour. Children in the early years and pupils from Year 1 upwards develop their social skills outside of their friendship groups when working with those from other year groups within '4Cs' sessions and at playtimes. This provides opportunities for older pupils to mentor younger pupils to behave respectfully and think about how their actions affect others. During PSHE lessons, pupils discuss moral dilemmas, such as how to react to anti-social behaviour and how to respond to peer pressure. This enables pupils to develop independence and a sense of responsibility for their actions.
46. Leaders provide accurate and impartial careers advice so that pupils develop their knowledge of different career options. Leaders run an annual careers week with a range of different speakers, including engineers, barristers, writers and dentists. Pupils reflect on what they have learned from these talks and consider different career entry pathways, such as apprenticeships and degrees.

Leaders ensure that stereotypes are challenged during discussions about careers so that pupils know that their career options are not limited by their identity.

47. Leaders prepare pupils thoroughly for the next stage in their education. For younger pupils, leaders arrange transition sessions so that they are ready for the next year group. Teachers prepare older pupils for a wide variety of senior school destinations through interview practice and examination preparation. This leads to pupils being successful in their entrance examinations, with some pupils achieving scholarships in the process.
48. Well-planned lessons in PSHE enable pupils to develop their economic wellbeing. Younger pupils learn where money comes from and how to keep it safe. Older pupils consider the importance of budgeting and the dangers of unmanaged debt and gambling. Pupils apply their knowledge of finances when buying items at school, such as at the cake sale. Pupils in Year 8 take part in an enterprise project that requires them to create a business plan and develop a product to sell at the summer fair. This enhances their understanding of how to manage finances and how businesses operate.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

- 49. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Safeguarding

50. Governors oversee safeguarding well and ensure that policies and procedures are implemented effectively. They check that leaders remain up to date in their knowledge so that policy and practice remain firmly based on current statutory guidance.
51. Leaders promote a robust safeguarding culture by ensuring that staff understand the importance of safeguarding. They provide effective and ongoing training, including at induction, so that everyone understands that safeguarding is a collective responsibility. Staff receive detailed training that is updated regularly through meetings and weekly emails. This equips them with the knowledge and skills to report any concerns about pupils. Training enables staff to understand the importance of whistleblowing, should the need arise.
52. Leaders provide information for staff so that they have a well-developed understanding of how to conduct themselves. Staff undertake training so that they know what constitutes a low-level concern and how to raise any concerns or allegations about adults working with the pupils. Leaders keep a log of any such concerns and take appropriate action when required, including reporting to the local authority.
53. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding fulfil their roles effectively and collaborate well with each other. They maintain a working relationship with the local authority safeguarding team so that they can understand local risks and thresholds for concern. The safeguarding team responds appropriately to concerns about pupils, taking suitable actions to promote their welfare. They ensure that any pupils affected by safeguarding issues receive effective support, involving liaison with external agencies and compiling risk assessments when required.
54. Leaders implement systematic procedures for safer recruitment which are reviewed by governors. Leaders use their knowledge of safer recruitment requirements to undertake all necessary pre-employment checks of the suitability of staff before they commence working at the school. Checks are accurately recorded on the single central record of appointments (SCR).
55. Staff develop caring relationships with the pupils so that pupils are confident to speak to them about any worries or concerns. Pupils know the members of the safeguarding team and also know that they can approach any adult at school about concerns. Pupils have access to worry boxes if they do not want to raise their concern face-to-face. Staff listen to pupils and respond appropriately whenever pupils voice any worries.
56. Through well-structured lessons in PSHE and computing, leaders ensure that pupils develop their understanding of internet safety. Pupils know how to be careful when online, such as protecting their passwords and taking care not to share personal information. Pupils know that they should approach an adult if anything online makes them concerned. Leaders implement suitable internet filtering and monitoring systems to protect pupils when working online at school. These systems are regularly tested to ensure that they remain effective.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

57. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Sunninghill Preparatory School
Department for Education number	838/6029
Registered early years number	2813369
Address	Sunninghill Preparatory School South Court South Walks Road Dorchester Dorset DT1 1EB
Phone number	01305 262306
Email address	receptionist@sunninghill.dorset.sch.uk
Website	https://sunninghillprep.co.uk
Proprietor	Inspired Learning Group (UK) Ltd
Chair	Mr Amit Mehta
Headteacher	Mr David Newberry
Age range	6 months to 13 years
Number of pupils	187
Number of children in the early years registered setting	98
Date of previous inspection	28 February to 2 March 2023

Information about the school

58. Sunninghill Preparatory School is an independent co-educational day school located in Dorchester. The school was founded in 1939 and moved to its current site in 1997. In December 2023, the school became part of the Inspired Learning Group. Governance is provided by the proprietor, supported by an advisory board. The school comprises three sections: the early years, for children aged from six months to four years; the junior prep, for children aged four to nine years and the senior prep school, for pupils aged nine to thirteen years.
59. There are 106 children in the early years, comprising 98 children in the registered early years setting and eight children in one Reception class. The registered early years setting was not included in this inspection and was inspected separately by Ofsted in December 2025.
60. The school has identified 20 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
61. The school has identified English as an additional language for a very small proportion of pupils.
62. The school states its aims are to create opportunities for all children to succeed by cultivating an environment full of opportunities and experiences for children to enjoy. It seeks to enable children to develop their talents and discover new ones, academically, pastorally and through extra-curricular opportunities, and to maintain a community full of heart within school but also that looks beyond to the wider community and globally.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

24 to 26 February 2026

63. A team of three inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

64. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair and other governors
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

65. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

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