

School inspection report

13 to 15 February 2024

St Hilda's School

28 Douglas Road

Harpenden

AL5 2ES

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'.

Contents

SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS	3
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS THE STANDARDS.....	4
RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS.....	4
SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE.....	5
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE.....	5
SECTION 2: QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	6
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	6
SECTION 3: PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	7
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	8
SECTION 4: PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY	9
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY	10
SAFEGUARDING	11
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO SAFEGUARDING	11
SCHOOL DETAILS	12
INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL.....	13
INSPECTION DETAILS	14

Summary of inspection findings

1. Governors provide the necessary oversight to ensure that school leaders fulfil their responsibilities effectively and that the requirements of relevant standards and statutory guidance are met consistently.
2. School leaders promote the wellbeing and achievement of pupils. They ensure pupils are listened to and treated fairly. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are provided with the support they need to help them learn well. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are offered appropriate help to learn English swiftly. Pupils are often given opportunities to extend their learning further to achieve even more.
3. The school's values are at the heart of pupils' daily school life. Pupils are kind and respectful to each other. They demonstrate high levels of resilience and a commitment to their studies. Teachers encourage pupils to share their opinions and ideas both during lessons and in wider school events. Pupils say their ideas are listened to and valued.
4. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to develop skills in leadership and service. Positions on the pupil council, charity committees, playground squad and silver stories programme are highly sought after and pupils speak with real affection and appreciation for their roles and responsibilities. Leaders should now review the impact of these initiatives to ensure both equal and equitable opportunity across the school.
5. Pupils learn well and make good progress across the year groups. Leaders have a thorough process for checking each pupil's progress across each academic year. The information is used to provide targets for further improvement. Although there have been recent improvements to the curriculum, leaders have not yet reviewed the impact of some of these improvements to update and inform their whole school improvement planning.
6. In the early years, generous teacher to child ratios, vocabulary rich environments and a speech and language intervention programme keep all children on track toward their early learning goals. The early years is a safe, happy and inclusive space. Children have the freedom to explore their interests whilst being given individual support for their physical and social development.
7. Leaders communicate clear expectations of pupils' behaviour. Pupils willingly follow these expectations and accept responsibility for their own actions. The behaviour policy is applied consistently and effectively by staff and understood by pupils. Pupils are provided with effective individual support for their behaviour if needed. They co-operate well with each other, showing empathy and sympathy. Incidents of bullying are rare but are dealt with if they do occur.
8. School leaders provide the necessary information to parents. The school's complaints procedure is robust and concerns are dealt with swiftly and effectively.
9. The risk management culture of the school is strong, ensuring that pupils are safe when at school and when on external trips and activities. Leaders ensure that pupils learn about keeping themselves safe when using the internet and other online technologies. Safeguarding arrangements are effective and reflect the requirements of current guidance.

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:

- review the impact of recent curriculum improvements and update school improvement planning
- review the impact of pupil leadership roles both within and outside of the school community.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders and governors have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for further development. Governors visit regularly to check the effectiveness of leaders' actions. They review important documents, attend parent forums and hold meetings with staff. As a result, governors are well informed. They have a close oversight of areas such as safeguarding, health, safety and behaviour.
11. Leaders and managers fulfil their responsibilities so that the Standards are met. Policies to ensure the wellbeing of pupils are implemented effectively and understood by both staff and pupils. The school fulfils its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. In particular, leaders ensure that their predominantly single sex environment in no way prohibits pupils from accessing a broad and balanced curriculum and a wide range of extra-curricular activities and trips which prepare pupils well for their future.
12. Leaders actively promote the school's values of independence, fearlessness, respect, kindness, positivity and resilience. Through house assemblies and charity events, the school champions each value and pupils therefore develop both a personal and collective understanding of each. The centrally displayed values tree is a symbol which celebrates pupils who embody the school ethos. Leaders also promote pupil wellbeing through the house system. Recently, house meetings have become pupil led, regular and affiliated with a local charity. Leaders have not fully reviewed the impact of these new initiatives on improving all pupils' wellbeing or updated their school improvement planning.
13. School leaders carefully identify and manage any risk of harm to pupils. There is a secure risk management culture that influences decisions at all levels, especially in areas of safeguarding and pastoral care. For example, trip risk assessments include additional, contextual control measures and awareness of the needs of pupils who have SEND or specific medical needs.
14. Reports to parents are detailed and allow them to understand their child's progress and attainment. The school's complaints policy complies with statutory guidance and is implemented effectively. Records show timely responses to parental concerns, together with actions taken and lessons learned. During the inspection, the school updated its website to include direct contact details for board members so that its safeguarding and complaints procedures were more easily accessible to parents.
15. Leaders and governors listen to the views of parents and take account of a wide range of views and evidence when planning improvements to the school.

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

16. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

17. Leaders plan the curriculum effectively and flexibly so that pupils undertake varied activities across a wide range of subjects. Pupils receive specialist teaching in languages, science and performing arts and have a broad programme of sport, music and dance both during and after school. Pupils enjoy the opportunities for external trips and residential camps.
18. Leaders have recently introduced a new curriculum approach to teaching mathematics, spelling and personal, social and health education (PSHE). They have also introduced a new process for assessing pupils' achievement. Leaders have not reviewed the impact of these initiatives on pupils' achievement so they can check how well these new processes are working and update their development plans accordingly.
19. The majority of pupils make good progress throughout all year groups, including in the early years. Leaders take time to analyse the information they hold and ensure that pupils are then provided with work which helps them to make even better progress.
20. Pupils are successful in gaining entry to local senior schools, a number of which run a selective admissions process. In the previous academic year, all pupils achieved their first-choice school and almost half did so with a scholarship or award.
21. Across all year groups, including in the early years, pupils work hard and well together which contributes to their successful learning and achievement. There is a positive culture and high expectations in subjects such as English, art and computing where pupils develop habits of refining and reviewing their work, drafting ideas and noticing the improvements they make.
22. Provision for pupils who have SEND is led well. There is a comprehensive SEND register which is used effectively to identify and support pupils who need additional support and leaders of this provision have in-depth knowledge of individuals and cohorts. A programme of interventions is in place and individual pupil progress is reviewed regularly. Leaders oversee support for pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). A programme of early intervention is in place via a speech and language program for children in the early years who have been identified as needing this support.
23. In the early years, children develop their speaking and listening skills through an individually tracked phonics scheme and a daily engagement with stories. The environment is vocabulary rich and the children have regular opportunities to learn technical vocabulary through well-planned role-play activities. For example, using words such as urgent and emergency whilst acting out scenarios that might involve the police or fire service. Children are supported and challenged on an individual basis with the most able engaging with inference and prediction whilst reading.

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

24. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

25. Leaders promote pupils' physical health effectively. Pupils learn to stay healthy through the (PSHE) curriculum, as well as by taking part in a range of sporting and other physical activities. They enjoy and apply themselves well in these lessons. Teachers plan engaging activities and pupils value the opportunities to represent their school in sports fixtures. Children in the early years develop their fine and gross motor skills well through music, dance and outdoor play sessions.
26. School leaders give priority to the pupils' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Regular mindfulness sessions and emotional regulation charts are used to support the children to self-regulate. The promotion of pupil leadership through school council, the house system and the playground squad, helps to build the pupils' self-esteem and confidence. Pupils in some year groups visit a local site where they have opportunity to consider health and safety scenarios.
27. Pupils behave well. Bullying is rare and staff deal with it effectively if it occurs. There are effective supervision routines throughout the day to manage pupils' behaviour and safety. Leaders introduced afternoon form time so that pastoral leaders could listen to any concerns pupils may have and to offer guidance on managing relationships.
28. As a result of school leaders promoting the pupils' physical and mental health and their emotional wellbeing, pupils are self-aware and self-confident young people. All pupils receive age-appropriate relationships education.
29. Staff in the early years model considerate behaviour and kindness, which children observe and seek to emulate. As a result, children learn to respect each other, take turns and share items such as play equipment. Children are well supervised at all times and are kept safe and healthy. The indoor and outdoor learning environment are risk assessed daily, a clear missing child procedure is in place and accidents are logged, with parents informed in a timely manner. The children's physical health and development is prioritised. For example, there are a number of sessions each week of physical education (PE) and an annual visit to a local dentist.
30. The site and buildings are well maintained, and any issues are promptly addressed. The site is secure. Health and safety checks are carried out regularly. Fire drills are logged and appropriate fire prevention measures are monitored by specialist contractors.
31. The admissions register contains the required information, and school leaders follow their procedures for providing information about joiners and leavers. The attendance register is up to date, checked daily and any unexplained absence investigated. Leaders effectively promote high levels of attendance.
32. The first-aid record includes details of any medical needs and allergies. Accidents are suitably recorded and analysed for any trends or patterns. First-aid support is readily accessible and there are adequate facilities for any pupil who falls ill. All staff are first aid trained and all staff in the early years have paediatric training.

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

33. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

34. Pupils can choose their own charity to support within the house system and often choose charities where there are personal or local links. Their engagement with the local community also includes local litter picks and the silver stories programme, which arranges for pupils to read stories to older generations over the phone. Leaders recognise that the school's leadership and service schemes are not accessible to all interested pupils and so seek to review and expand the offering.
35. Pupils consistently demonstrate a culture of tolerance, empathy and understanding. Pupils who have SEND speak openly about aspects of school life they feel challenging. However, with active peer and staff support, pupils can self-regulate and find the resilience and determination to overcome obstacles.
36. In the early years, children interact well together across the age range. As such, the youngest children learn from their older role models who, in turn, develop their own sense of social responsibility. The children have ample indoor and outdoor space and resources are deliberately placed to encourage exploration and teamwork, when learning in subjects such as computing, French and art. Early years leaders seek opportunities to engage with the wider world. For example, recently learning about important people in their local community such as the local fire service. They enjoy visiting the fire station to find out how firefighters help.
37. Pupils develop a good understanding of fundamental British values. The democratic nature of school groups such as pupil council and the house system, alongside pupil surveys and worry boxes, provides pupils with the opportunity to express their views and opinions. Pupils experience visits from local magistrates and bi-annual trips to Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. They develop a deep-seated respect and understanding for British democracy and institutions.
38. Leaders have recently conducted a diversity audit of the school's library collection and English curriculum and added new and different texts for pupils to enjoy. Pupils now have access to a broader range of texts and are sensitive and respectful when debating mature topics such as migration and racism. Leaders support an understanding of other cultures and religions through events such as a recent family Hanukkah day and a Lunar dance workshop during Chinese New Year.
39. Senior leaders prepare children well for life beyond the school. Year 6 children undergo mock interviews, hear from inspiring visiting speakers including an Olympian and Paralympian and plan charity events for the school. Financial education is included within the PSHE scheme of work. Older pupils also benefit from guidance and advice on the risks of gambling and debt as well as the freedom to manage a budget whilst on a residential trip.

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

40. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

41. The head of pastoral care, who is also the SENCo, has recently taken over as the designated safeguarding lead (DSL). There are clear reporting procedures that align pastoral, SEND and safeguarding oversight across the school.
42. The safeguarding policy has been reviewed effectively in line with the latest statutory guidance and the safeguarding team are well known to staff and pupils. Leaders engage closely with relevant local safeguarding partners, including an early help partnership for families in need. Since the last inspection, no cases have reached local thresholds, involved child-on-child abuse or any child absent from education. Nevertheless, leaders remain vigilant and aware of their responsibility to report any person to relevant regulatory bodies if circumstances require it. Low-level concerns are monitored and updated regularly by the DSL team.
43. There is appropriate governor oversight of safeguarding. All members are trained and there is a suitably qualified board member with responsibility for checking that safeguarding processes and procedures are fully in place. Suitable recruitment procedures are in place, and checks are recorded on a single central record.
44. Staff have a secure understanding of their responsibility to take appropriate action if they have any concerns. Staff have an appropriate awareness of the staff code of conduct, whistleblowing and safeguarding procedures. Annual training includes online safety and the latest statutory guidance.
45. Pupils receive guidance on staying safe, especially when using online technologies. Arrangements for the monitoring and filtering of online technology are effective. Pupils have multiple methods for reporting concerns such as a confidential worry boxes in every classroom, speaking to members of the playground squad and, in years 5 and 6, via their additional staff mentor.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

46. **All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	St Hilda's School
Department for Education number	919/6092
Address	St Hilda's School 28 Douglas Road Harpenden Hertfordshire AL5 2ES
Phone number	01582 712307
Email address	office@sthildasharpenden.co.uk
Website	www.sthildasharpenden.co.uk
Proprietor	Mrs Mary Piachaud
Chair	Mrs Mary Piachaud
Headteacher	Mr Daniel Sayers
Age range	2–11
Number of pupils	140
Date of previous inspection	1 to 3 October 2019

Information about the school

47. St Hilda's School, located in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, is a day school for female pupils from Reception to Year 6 with a coeducational Nursery for children aged 2 to 5. It is owned by a proprietor and overseen by a board of governors.
48. The school has identified sixteen pupils who have SEND. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
49. English is an additional language for six pupils.
50. The school states its aims are to nurture and celebrate the individual; foster an inclusive and welcoming school community where mental health and wellbeing are at its heart; engage each child in a challenging and diverse range of learning opportunities and inspire each child to realise their unique talents and reach for their full potential.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

13 to 15 February 2024

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

52. 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 head, 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

53. 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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