



ISI Independent
Schools
Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Report

Our Lady's Abingdon School

May 2023

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School's Details

School College	Our Lady's Abingdon		
DfE number	931/6076		
Registered charity number	1120372		
Address	Our Lady's Abingdon Radley Road Abingdon Oxfordshire OX14 3PS		
Telephone number	01235 524658		
Email address	headspa@ola.org.uk		
Head	Mr Daniel Gibbons		
Chair of governors	Mr Fady El Turk		
Proprietor	Institute of Our Lady of Mercy		
Age range	7 to 18		
Number of pupils on roll	373		
	Juniors		36
	Seniors	269	Sixth Form 68
Inspection dates	3 to 5 May 2023		

1. Background Information

About the school

- 1.1 Our Lady's Abingdon is an independent coeducational day school. It was founded in 1860 and is located in the centre of Abingdon. The school is overseen by a board of governors who are the trustees. Since the previous inspection a new head and a new chair of governors have been appointed and the school no longer educates pupils below the age of 7.

What the school seeks to do

- 1.2 The school aims to provide an educational journey for each child in a loving and caring community in which all may grow as children of God. The ethos of the school is driven by its mission statement, "To each according to their needs". It aims to promote an individual approach to each child, unlocking their full potential and developing skills for life to enable them to thrive academically and as people. The school seeks to instil values of integrity, compassion, openness, forgiveness and reconciliation, co-operation and courage regardless of background beliefs or ability. It encourages each pupil to discover and explore their personal gifts, and to make the most of these gifts in all areas of school life in fulfilment of the school motto: "whatever you do, do it well".

About the pupils

- 1.3 The majority of pupils come from the local area and there is a small number of international pupils spread throughout the school. Nationally standardised test data provided by the school indicate that the ability of pupils is overall average or above for those taking similar tests nationally. The school has identified 130 pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) of whom 8 receive specialist support. There are no pupils in the school with an education, health and care plan. There are 24 pupils identified as having English as an additional language, of whom 7 receive additional support in this regard. The curriculum is modified for those pupils identified as the most able.

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is approved by the Secretary of State to inspect schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and report on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Additionally, inspections report on the school's accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996. Inspections also comment on the progress made to meet any compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

ISI inspections are also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

This is a FOCUSED COMPLIANCE INSPECTION which was combined with an inspection of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. The FOCUSED COMPLIANCE inspection reports only on the school's compliance with the standards. The standards represent minimum requirements and judgements are given either as **met** or as **not met**. All schools are required to meet all the standards applicable to them. Where the minimum requirements are not met, this is clearly indicated in the relevant section of the report and the school is required to take the actions specified. In this focused compliance inspection, key standards have been inspected in detail. These are the standards on safeguarding; measures to guard against bullying; arrangements for pupils' health and safety; arrangements to check the suitability of staff; the provision of information; the handling of parents' complaints; and other related aspects of leadership and management. The remaining standards and requirements are deemed to continue to be met unless evidence to the contrary has been found.

Inspections do not include matters that are outside of the regulatory framework described above, such as: an exhaustive health and safety audit; compliance with data protection requirements; an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features; contractual arrangements with parents; an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to specifically in published reports in this document but will have been considered by the team in reaching its judgements.

Links to the standards and requirements can be found here: [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#).

Key findings

- 2.1 The school meets the standards in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 and associated requirements, and no further action is required as a result of this inspection.**

PART 1 – Quality of education provided.

- 2.2 In the junior school the school's own framework for assessment confirms that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.3 In the senior school, the school's GCSE and A-level results in the years 2019 to 2022 confirm that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 2.4 The curriculum is documented, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work for the pupils and covers the required breadth of material. The teaching enables pupils to make good progress, encompasses effective behaviour management and is supported by suitable resources. A suitable framework for the assessment of pupils' performance is in place.
- 2.5 Pupils receive relationships education in the junior school and relationships and sex education in the senior school, except in so far as they are lawfully excused. The school has consulted parents and published a written statement of its policy which has regard to the relevant statutory guidance.
- 2.6 The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.**

PART 2 – Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

- 2.7 Principles and values are actively promoted which facilitate the personal development of pupils as responsible, tolerant, law-abiding citizens.
- 2.8 The standard relating to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development [paragraph 5] is met.**

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 2.9 Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils by means that pay due regard to current statutory guidance; good behaviour is promoted; bullying is prevented so far as reasonably practicable; health and safety requirements are met, including those relating to fire safety; provision is made for first aid. Pupils are properly supervised; admission and attendance registers are maintained, as required, and there is a strategic approach to risk assessment. A disability access plan is in place.
- 2.10 The standards relating to welfare, health and safety [paragraphs 6–16], the requirement of Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010, and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996 are met.**

PART 4 – Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

- 2.11 The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.
- 2.12 The standards relating to the suitability of those in contact with pupils at the school [paragraphs 17–21] are met.**

PART 5 – Premises of and accommodation at schools

2.13 Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. The premises are maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety; acoustics and lighting are appropriate; water provision is adequate. Suitable outdoor space is provided for physical education and outdoor play.

2.14 The standards relating to the premises and accommodation [paragraphs 22–31] are met.

PART 6 – Provision of information

2.15 A range of information is published, provided or made available to parents, inspectors and the Department for Education. This includes details about the proprietor, the ethos of the school and the curriculum, and of the school's arrangements for admission, behaviour and exclusions, bullying, health and safety, first aid, details of the complaints procedure, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year, and the provision for any with education, health and care plans or English as an additional language. It also includes particulars of the school's academic performance during the preceding school year, inspection reports and (for parents only) a report at least annually of their own child's progress. The safeguarding policy is posted on the school's website.

2.16 The standard relating to the provision of information [paragraph 32] is met.

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled.

2.17 Parental complaints, if any, are handled effectively through a three-stage process, (informal, formal and a hearing before a panel of three, one of whom is independent of the school). Each stage has clear time scales, and at the third stage the panel can make findings and recommendations which are communicated to the complainant. Records are kept appropriately, including of any action taken, whether or not a complaint is successful.

2.18 The standard relating to the handling of complaints [paragraph 33] is met.

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

2.19 The proprietor ensures that the leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge, and fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the other standards are consistently met, and they actively promote the wellbeing of the pupils.

2.20 The standard relating to leadership and management of the school [paragraph 34] is met.

3. Educational Quality Inspection

Preface

The **EDUCATIONAL QUALITY** inspection reports on the quality of the school's work. It focuses on the two key outcomes:

- The achievement of the pupils, including their academic development, and
- The personal development of the pupils.

The headline judgements apply one of the ISI descriptors 'excellent', 'good', 'sound' or 'unsatisfactory'.

Key findings

3.1 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.

- Pupils of all abilities, including those with SEND and EAL, attain good standards and make good progress.
- Pupils have a positive attitude to their studies and a good work ethic.
- Pupils are collaborative and empathetic and have excellent verbal communication skills.
- Pupils do not always achieve as well as they might because opportunities for challenge and high expectations of their achievement are not consistent across the curriculum and in teaching.

3.2 The quality of the pupils' personal development is good.

- Pupils demonstrate a strong sense of community.
- Pupils show excellent maturity in their relationships with each other and the staff.
- Pupils take responsibility for their own actions and behaviour but their development of leadership skills is hindered by limited opportunities to take the initiative.
- Pupils enjoy and respond well to the opportunities that they have to work together collaboratively in shared endeavours.

Recommendations

3.3 The school is advised to make the following improvements.

- To raise the achievement of all pupils from their starting point by increasing the levels of challenge and ambition promoted in lessons and maintaining the highest expectations of pupils at all times.
- To ensure that the pupils have more opportunities to develop leadership skills by serving others both inside the school and in the wider community.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.

3.5 Pupils demonstrate good knowledge, skills and understanding and apply themselves readily to tasks, working diligently. They show good levels of prior learning, and their skills develop well over time. In the most successful lessons, creative teaching, high expectations and effective planning ensure all pupils demonstrate good knowledge and understanding or better. For example, Year 8 pupils developed their knowledge of numbers in French through a challenging and interactive task based on the components of a French breakfast. Year 6 pupils were able to use a range of vocabulary accurately

such as disgust, anxious, fascinated, intrigued, overwhelmed and respectful, to explain their motivations and experiences in an English lesson. This was because 'hot seating' was used to help pupils make inferences about a character. In a range of subjects, more able pupils demonstrate good understanding and a positive approach to their own learning. In some groups of lower ability pupils, the pupils' rate of progress was limited at times by a lack of targeted teaching strategies and insufficient focus on the differing needs of the group.

- 3.6 In practical activities such as art, drama, textiles, food, and design and technology (DT) pupils display good and at times excellent technical ability. For example, in Year 10 pupils used tools in the DT workshop to explore their design ideas in card prototypes with confidence. In a Year 10 textiles lesson, pupils measured the additional seam allowance for a garment with precision.
- 3.7 Pupils' attainment at GCSE in 2022 was good with the majority of the results achieving the top grades, 9 to 7. Similarly, at A level the number of results achieving the top grade was above the national average in 2022 and the majority of the grades were A to A*. Pupils with SEND and EAL make similar progress to other pupils over time with many exceeding their target grades. This good level of attainment is a consequence of the pupils' good attitude to learning, a systematic approach to tracking progress and the support and constructive criticism provided by teachers. Pupils make good progress when teaching is focused and challenging as seen in a Year 9 physics lesson where pupils were able to solve circuit problems confidently and accurately, including problems which matched, or even exceeded, GCSE expectations. However, such challenge is not consistent across all subjects, inhibiting achievement.
- 3.8 Pupils are good and often excellent, verbal communicators. In most interviews, pupils showed themselves to have excellent verbal communication skills, describing their experience of school life and their personal achievements with clarity and detail. Pupils develop confidence in oracy because small classes and safe classroom environments encourage group work and collaboration, giving opportunities for all pupils to develop these skills. In class, pupils are able to answer teachers' questions with clear use of technical language, though they demonstrate more extended oral contributions less frequently because of limited opportunities to do so. Pupils use their verbal communication skills to enhance their interactions with each other. This was seen when Year 13 pupils showed excellent verbal communication skills both in terms of their interactions with each other and in the delivery of their A Level devised drama inspired by Stephen Poliakoff.
- 3.9 Pupils develop good reading skills because reading is encouraged through extensive use of the library by tutor and subject groups and in lessons. For example, in an English lesson in Year 3 pupils with EAL demonstrated a good, accurate level of reading aloud with a high degree of fluency. Year 9 pupils showed good ability to engage with independent and quiet individual reading in English. They responded to the task respectfully and promptly. In their written work, many pupils write accurately and with a sense of purpose. The most able pupils write with considerable flair. Pupils complete extended written work competently in some subjects, for example religious studies (RS) and English. Some junior age pupils demonstrated an excellent ability to write with flair and accuracy in their creative work, using a range of high-level vocabulary such as penumbra, and constructing complex and effective sentences. Such writing is not consistently the case across all curriculum areas.
- 3.10 Pupils have good numeracy skills and apply them confidently across the curriculum. They develop their skills well from an early age and make good progress as they go through the school. In a Year 5 mathematics lesson, some pupils could confidently explain how they could check their subtraction of ninety-five from three hundred by completing the inverse operation. In Year 9, pupils demonstrated confidence in a number of key techniques in good work on Pythagoras calculations. Pupils in a Year 11 mathematics lesson showed the high level of recall of previous skills needed in questions on trigonometric equations. Pupils in some lower ability groups show less confidence and a lack of detailed feedback on their progress and an overreliance on calculators impedes their progress. Pupils use their numeracy skills extensively across the curriculum. Year 11 pupils plotted graphs accurately

in physics and, in a business lesson in Year 12, pupils worked successfully on examination questions requiring a variety of calculations and formulae.

- 3.11 Pupils display good information and communications technology (ICT) skills in their computer science lessons and are very aware of the need to evaluate all sources of information on the internet carefully. Pupils enjoy using ICT for research when given the opportunity, as seen in a Year 6 geography lesson, where pupils used online resources effectively to discover how humans have affected coastal erosion. Pupils made good progress using an online activity as a revision tool in a Year 9 biology lesson. In general, pupils demonstrate good ICT skills, independently researching for articles and video clips to further their understanding.
- 3.12 Starting from when they join the school, pupils begin to develop good study skills. In a Year 5 English lesson, pupils were able to work independently, selecting appropriate information when researching different animals whose features would inform their description of their own creature. Pupils were able to complete their own research, use suggested links online or use written sources. In a Year 10 textiles lesson, pupils showed great enthusiasm when explaining the 'design and make' process with reference to their own individual work. Year 12 pupils annotated a text effectively in response to reading source material in history. In subjects where research is part of the curriculum, pupils enjoy and respond successfully to the opportunity to research and develop their study skills. For example, in the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) pupils present projects such as 'Does dyslexia affect academic potential' and 'The effects of smoking in adolescence' analytically. In some subjects there are limited opportunities for pupils to develop skills of analysis, synthesis and hypothesis.
- 3.13 Some pupils develop a wide range of interests outside the classroom through the provision of clubs and activities provided by the school. They enter a variety of competitions in which they achieve notable success. These include the UK Space Design Competition; mathematics and science challenges and Olympiads; a writing competition for those in Years 7 to 9, English Speaking Board (ESB) and Irish dancing competitions; and a national competition on biodiversity. Sports teams consistently achieve success in regional and local competitions in football, cross country, swimming and badminton. Many pupils gain bronze and silver awards in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) scheme. Pupils participate successfully in many musical activities through choirs, orchestras, bands and ensembles and in ABRSM examinations. They achieve well in drama in LAMDA lessons and examinations and enjoy participating in drama productions in school which are eagerly anticipated and well supported.
- 3.14 During the inspection, it was clear that pupils enjoyed working together to undertake collaborative activities. It was suggested by pupils that paired and collaborative activity takes place regularly in some subjects. Evidence from observations supports this view: pupils at the school are used to working successfully together. Most parents responding to the pre-inspection questionnaire, noted that pupils gain the teamworking, collaborative and research skills they will need in later life. Pupils have a positive approach to their studies, they come to lessons well prepared and settle to work quickly. In a Year 10 food lesson, pupils settled well to initial preparation and showed confidence in their use of kitchen apparatus. In a media lesson in Year 12, pupils were clearly engaged in and enjoyed an online quiz. In an assembly for Years 3 to 6 pupils demonstrated an excellent attitude when discussing the scenario of what would happen if there were suddenly no computers, tablets or phones anywhere on earth. Pupils demonstrate focus and are attentive in lessons, particularly when individual needs are planned for and supported appropriately. In a few lessons, low-level disruption by a small number of pupils hindered the progress of others.

The Quality of the pupils' personal development

- 3.15 The quality of the pupils' personal development is good.
- 3.16 Pupils flourish and grow in response to the supportive community within the school and a strong pastoral system. They demonstrate good levels of self-understanding and positive self-esteem. These attributes are supported by small class sizes and the positive relationships between staff and the

pupils. In interviews, pupils explained that they feel that their teachers know them well and that they create a safe space within the classroom environment. Pupils feel this allows them to feel able to express themselves comfortably, bounce back from setbacks and be their true selves. In Year 11 tutor time, pupils reflected on their forthcoming examinations with a good understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and effectively identified areas for extra work. Year 13 pupils showed excellent self-knowledge and leadership of their learning by choosing their own areas to work on in chemistry. They identified their own weaknesses effectively, guiding their own revision while the teacher supported them circulating and answering questions. Pupils with SEND and EAL develop their self-confidence equally well, aided by learning support staff who work closely with the pastoral leaders to ensure holistic support.

- 3.17 Pupils respond well to encouragement to make good decisions in a safe environment whether making a choice of subjects for GCSE or decisions related to personal relationships in friendship groups. Pupils are aware that mistakes may be made but that they are part of an important learning process. The close friendships that pupils form serve as a constant sounding board for their own ideas and potential decisions. They value the supportive relationship they have with staff in academic and pastoral situations. In a Year 13 economics lesson, pupils were able to make a choice of which essay question they needed to practise, showing a good understanding of which areas needed more time and attention. Junior pupils in a building blocks construction club made considered decisions about how to solve the challenges set. However, outside of the classroom pupils have fewer opportunities to make decisions about their life in the school. There are limited school leadership roles or activities where pupils can demonstrate their initiative and independence.
- 3.18 Pupils display a good understanding of spiritual matters, both religious and non-religious. Pupils of all faiths and none are comfortable in the school. All pupils attend mass on key feast days and important occasions on the understanding that they do not have to take part, but show their respect for those that do. The chapel provides a quiet area for spiritual reflection within the school day. Pupils develop their understanding of spirituality through compulsory RS lessons in Years 3 to 11 and in a fortnightly lesson in the sixth form on topics of ethics and spirituality. They also respond positively to regular assemblies where Catholic values often feature in presentations by senior leaders or heads of section. Pupils' written work includes reflective prayers and poems on topics such as vocation, kindness and compassion which further explore their interests.
- 3.19 Pupils show a good appreciation of other non-material aspects of life and enjoy discussions in this area in personal, social and health education (PSHE) and across the curriculum. They develop their interest in these areas further in clubs such as yoga and mindfulness. Pupils' written work includes reflective prayers and poems on topics such as vocation, kindness and compassion which further explore their interest. Junior pupils begin to think philosophically and reflect on non-material aspects of life through whole-school book projects each term. Year 12 pupils discussed the religious context for the moral treatment of others in a deep and effective way during tutor time. Artwork throughout the school shows a perceptive understanding of the non-material aspects of life. A piece of artwork by the sixth form based on their reflections on the work of Anselm Kiefer is particularly thought provoking.
- 3.20 Pupils have a strong understanding of what is right and wrong and take effective responsibility for their own behaviour. Almost all parents stated in response to questionnaires that the school actively promotes good behaviour. While a minority of pupils in their questionnaire responses disagreed that pupils are kind and respect each other, pupils commented in discussions that instances of poor behaviour are rare at the school and that the community spirit of the school is, to a large extent, responsible for this. Inspection evidence, including records of any poor behaviour, support this view. In a discussion in tutor time, Year 11 pupils discussed moral decision-making with a good level of understanding of the meaning of right and wrong, and the challenges which can be faced when seeking justice. Pupils are respectful and courteous to each other as observed at break times when pupils are outside sharing the school's grounds. In a whole school assembly, older pupils respectfully listened to younger pupils' presentation on the coronation. Pupils show a mature understanding of the need for

sanctions and in discussion commented that incidents of poor behaviour are dealt with quickly and appropriately. Rewards for all aspects of school life are appreciated by the pupils and support the aims of the school to develop a sense of worth in each pupil.

- 3.21 Pupils enjoy every opportunity they have to work together and there is a strong sense of community in the school. Pupils form productive relationships with each other and collaborate well in lessons when given the opportunity to do so. For example, in a Year 8 Spanish lesson pupils readily worked together in pairs to discuss the activities that they would like to do in their summer holidays, showing good skills of co-operation. In a PSHE lesson, pupils in Years 3 and 4 worked together effectively, listening and sharing ideas, when deciding on the possible family roles shown in a photograph of a family group.
- 3.22 Pupils' social awareness is good. Pupils understand the importance of the community in school and in the wider world. They interact with others confidently, enjoy each other's company and have excellent relationships with staff in school. Pupils raise money for charity, contribute to food banks and volunteer as part of the DofE programme. Sixth formers take on positions as prefects and house captains in which they are role models for the younger pupils and other pupils have the opportunity to be form representatives. In discussion, pupils said they felt that the opportunities for pupils to lead and contribute to decisions affecting the running of the school could be significantly enhanced. The school council in Years 3 to 6 meets regularly and junior pupils are working on fundraising ideas to purchase new playground equipment. However, senior school pupils feel that their council is not effective and there are few other opportunities for pupils to put forward their views and develop their leadership skills. The school is aware of this.
- 3.23 Pupils show high levels of respect and inclusivity for different faiths and cultures, and there is a strong sense that all belong within the school community. Pupils genuinely value the diversity in their community. They treat each other, and are themselves treated, with respect. They are positive about the range of discussions which take place in assemblies and lessons, including the study of a range of other faiths as part of compulsory RS lessons. In discussion, pupils were very supportive of their peers who fasted during Ramadan, demonstrating a genuine interest and awareness of this act of faith. Pupils in Years 3 to 6 have led assemblies about their own cultural experiences such as Chinese New Year and completed ESB presentations on their own cultural background and beliefs.
- 3.24 Pupils have a good understanding of the importance of staying both mentally and physically healthy. Pupils feel safe in the school environment, both physically and emotionally. In responses to the questionnaire the overwhelming majority of parents and a large majority of pupils stated that they feel that the school is a safe environment. This is because the school has an excellent pastoral care system in place, which includes counselling and mental health support and safeguarding pupils is given the highest priority. Pupils are confident that any concerns that they might raise related to issues in school or outside school will be listened to and dealt with appropriately and discreetly. Pupils have a well-developed understanding of mental health and maintaining a balance in life in response to the regular discussion of these topics in the school's PSHE programme. A clear code of behaviour based on respect and tolerance in the digital space is appreciated and followed by pupils, both in person and online. This is in response to significant and effective initiatives launched by senior leaders and governors to promote safety in the digital space. Pupils understand how to stay safe online. Pupils know what constitutes a balanced diet as they are encouraged to make sensible choices from the range of foods available at mealtimes. Their understanding is supported by PSHE, food and science lessons where they learn about nutrition.

4. Inspection Evidence

4.1 The inspectors observed lessons, had discussions with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with a governor, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended form meetings and assemblies. Inspectors visited the learning support and educational resource areas. Inspectors considered the responses of parents, staff and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires. The inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Dr Ruth Weeks	Reporting inspector
Mr Peter Sharp	Compliance team inspector (Former deputy head, HMC school)
Mr John Bond	Team inspector (Head of juniors, HMC school)
Mr James Dhal	Team inspector (Head, HMC school)
Mrs Caroline Pellereau	Team inspector (Former head of department, HMC school)