ISI Independent Schools Inspectorate

School inspection report

27 to 29 January 2026

Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation

Quarryheads Lane

Durham

County Durham

DH1 4SZ

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 at Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation have the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out their roles effectively. They identify key areas for development that link to the school's aims.

2. Leaders have developed comprehensive self-evaluation processes to ensure that Standards are consistently met, and the wellbeing of pupils is actively promoted.

3. The curriculum is extensive, creative and challenging, delivered through well-planned lessons and activities. Effective teaching across the whole school, including the sixth form, enables pupils to make good progress, and leaders regularly monitor the progress that they make.

4. Leaders ensure that appropriate support is planned for those pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The needs of these pupils are quickly identified and well supported. As a consequence, pupils who have SEND make progress in line with their targets.

5. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are also provided with effective support for their English when required. This enables them to access the curriculum and supports their progress.

6. Children in the early years benefit from a well-structured and carefully planned introduction to school life. Staff consistently and effectively promote children's communication and language skills. As a result, children develop listening skills, sustained engagement and the confidence to contribute to discussions and express their ideas clearly. Children make progress in a nurturing and aspirational environment.

7. Leaders of boarding have established a welcoming and inclusive setting. Pupils are confident and well supported in the boarding houses. There are opportunities for pupils to share their thoughts with boarding leaders so that the pupils can help shape and develop their boarding experience.

8. Leaders actively promote the emotional and physical wellbeing of pupils, including boarders and those in the early years. They respond promptly and supportively to any concerns voiced by pupils and ensure that pupils have a secure understanding of the importance of exercise, rest and healthy eating.

9. The school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, ensuring that pupils have equal access to opportunities and are not subject to discrimination. Choristers and choral scholars of both sexes receive equitable support both within the choral programme and in the wider range of opportunities available within the school and the broader community.

10. Leaders and governors complete risk assessments for the open site and are aware of the contextual risks to pupils. However, actions identified within these assessments are not always implemented promptly.

11. Leaders provide careers information and guidance that builds systematically as pupils move through the school. Through initiatives such as whole-school careers days, pupils have opportunities to explore a wide range of careers and future pathways. This prepares pupils to make informed choices about their next steps.

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12. Appropriate safeguarding arrangements are in place. Staff are suitably trained and receive regular updates, so they know how to report concerns. Pupils have access to a range of appropriate channels to share concerns and know there is a trusted adult they can turn to for support.

13. Policies are implemented effectively and are typically updated in line with statutory guidance. However, when the inspection commenced, the attendance policy and relationships and sex education (RSE) policy did not reflect current statutory guidance. Leaders put this right during the inspection.

14. Leaders and governors maintain oversight of the single central record of appointments (SCR) and associated staff files. However, staff files do not always fully reflect the information recorded on the SCR. This was rectified during the inspection. In addition, prior to the inspection, leaders had identified that some required pre-employment checks had not been completed when required and rectified this before the inspection commenced.

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:

- strengthen the oversight of policies to ensure that these are updated promptly when statutory requirements change
- ensure that all actions identified in risk assessments for the open site are implemented promptly, so that potential risks are always effectively mitigated
- strengthen the oversight of the single central record and staff files to ensure that these are maintained accurately.

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Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

15. Leaders promote and model the school's values effectively. They ensure that the school's aims and expectations are clearly understood across all year groups and that the importance of moral integrity, ambition, respect and kindness is embedded in the daily lives of pupils.

16. Governors maintain effective oversight of the school overall. They make certain that leaders apply good skills and knowledge to fulfil their responsibilities and ensure that the Standards are met and that policies are effectively implemented. However, governors do not ensure that all policies are updated promptly when statutory requirements change. At the start of the inspection, the attendance and RSE policies did not reflect current statutory guidance. The school rectified this during the inspection.

17. Leaders and governors actively promote pupils' wellbeing through effective self-evaluation and strategic planning, which form an integral part of the annual cycle of meetings. This has led to initiatives across the school, including the revision of term dates to allow choristers to take part in educational visits and ski trips. It has also led to the introduction of enhanced music provision through an elite music pathway as part of the support for pupils' personal and educational development.

18. Early years leadership is effective. Leaders take a thoughtful and strategic approach, planning carefully to ensure a well-structured and responsive learning environment. Leaders meet regularly with early years staff to review practice, support professional development, and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Leaders actively promote children's wellbeing in line with the school's aims, providing proactive pastoral care and a well-planned curriculum, enriched by a broad range of appropriate co-curricular activities.

19. Leaders ensure that boarding provision, including for choristers, is well managed and that National Minimum Standards for boarding schools (NMS) are met and understood by staff. Boarding houses are led by trained and experienced staff who promote the welfare and wellbeing of boarders and choristers in line with the school's aims. Leaders regularly review boarding practice, including risk management, pastoral support and accommodation arrangements, to ensure that all boarders are supported to develop academically and personally.

20. Leaders maintain an accessible and informative website that provides key information for both current and prospective parents. Parents are kept well informed of their child's progress through regular updates from staff and annual written reports.

21. Leaders work closely with external agencies, including local safeguarding partners, to ensure that pupils receive appropriate support when required. Leaders and governors fulfil their statutory responsibilities for pupils who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including those with education, health and care plans (EHC plans), which are reviewed annually in line with statutory requirements. Leaders provide the relevant local authority with timely and accurate information relating to these, including a clear statement on how public funds are utilised to support pupils who have EHC plans.

22. Leaders establish suitable risk assessments across all areas of the school that identify potential hazards and the measures to be taken to mitigate these effectively. However, actions identified

within risk assessments for the open site are not always implemented promptly to guard against unnecessary potential risks.

23. Leaders manage complaints effectively and in line with a clear policy. Procedures are transparent, accessible and communicated to parents and staff. Leaders and staff address concerns promptly and appropriately in line with the policy. Leaders maintain careful records of complaints and review any issues raised so that any improvements to practice, when required, are identified and implemented.

24. The school fulfils its duties under the Equality Act 2010 by ensuring equality of opportunity and ensuring that all pupils can access the full range of curricular and co-curricular activities. The Foundation has supported the adaptation of the way choristers take part in clubs and activities, including Evensong sessions for male and female pupils, to support inclusive participation.

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

25. All the relevant Standards are met.

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Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

26. Leaders ensure that the curriculum is well planned to meet the needs of all pupils. Recent changes include the introduction of a BTEC National Diploma in business, and the removal of the requirement to study modern foreign languages at GCSE, making the curriculum more accessible. Leaders have also considered broadening the vocational offer further to reflect the changing profile of pupils in the sixth form.

27. In the early years, leaders provide a well-planned curriculum that promotes curiosity, independence, and essential early learning skills across all areas of development. Teaching is purposeful and responsive, combining adult-led and child-initiated activities, with staff using observations and learning journals to track progress and inform planning. Targeted support and challenge ensure that children make effective progress towards their early learning goals, developing skills such as early literacy and numeracy, communication and social interaction, and physical co-ordination. Leaders ensure that pupils who have SEND receive well-targeted and effective support. Early identification of individual pupils' specific needs, through screening and detailed learning profiles, combined with carefully planned support and teaching, ensures that pupils' individual needs are addressed effectively. Support from learning assistants, specialist staff, and external agencies is co-ordinated and monitored, and assessment data is used to track progress and adapt provision. These measures enable pupils who have SEND to make good progress from their starting points.

28. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) receive targeted support when required, to enable them to access the curriculum and make good progress in their English. Pupils' needs are identified on entry through assessments, and individual learning plans (ILPs) are developed to meet their language needs. Specialist teaching, small-group sessions, and classroom support help pupils to develop confidence in speaking, listening, reading and writing.

29. Teaching across the school is effective in engaging pupils and supporting their progress. Lessons are well planned, with teachers demonstrating good subject knowledge, using targeted questioning and a variety of well-chosen resources to meet pupils' needs. Teachers provide pupils with well-structured and engaging activities that motivate them and help them make steady progress across subjects. For example, in lessons pupils develop their ability to work independently through research tasks and writing assignments, and collaborate with others through group projects, practical experiments, and problem-solving activities.

30. Assessment and feedback are used effectively to support pupils' learning and progress. Leaders ensure that baseline and ongoing assessments, including internal examinations, are used to monitor progress, identify gaps, and inform planning. Pupils receive structured feedback in lessons and through work scrutiny, enabling them to understand their work's strengths and areas for development. Assessment is used to identify where support is needed and to provide this for individuals and groups, including pupils who have SEND, when required.

31. Leaders provide a wide range of co-curricular clubs and activities that support pupils' personal, social and physical development. These include sports, music, drama and creative opportunities, alongside House competitions and events that promote teamwork, leadership skills and engagement across year groups. Activities such as netball matches, the house quiz and school productions help pupils to develop confidence, resilience, and social skills. Choristers benefit from a well-organised timetable that helps them to balance academic work with rehearsals and performances, supporting both their

musical and personal development. The programme is inclusive and age appropriate, enabling pupils to choose activities according to their interests.

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

32. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

33. The personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme, known as 'life and wellbeing education' (LWE), supports pupils' personal, social and emotional development effectively. It provides structured opportunities for pupils to explore mental health, emotional wellbeing, healthy relationships, and ethical decision-making. These themes are reinforced through assemblies, chapel talks, and teaching across different subjects. Pupils engage with topics such as empathy, civil partnerships, and the Kindertransport, helping them to develop confidence, resilience and respect for others.

34. The 'wellbeing room' in the prep school is a consistently staffed, supportive environment. Pupils can access this space to help regulate their emotions and receive timely pastoral support, which contributes positively to their overall wellbeing.

35. Pupils' spiritual and moral development, self-knowledge and respect for others are actively promoted. Pupils participate in assemblies and three-times-weekly chapel services, where they explore ethical, cultural and faith-based topics. For example, junior pupils were asked, 'What would you do with a million pounds?' encouraging reflection on responsibility, generosity and moral decision-making. Roles such as heads of house, wellbeing ambassadors and monitors, alongside co-curricular activities, further develop pupils' confidence and self-esteem.

36. The school's RSE programme, delivered through PSHE and tutor time, provides pupils with age-appropriate guidance on themes such as body image, personal identity, consent and respectful relationships. Pupils engage thoughtfully with sensitive topics in a supportive environment, developing self-awareness, empathy and skills towards informed decision-making. The key messages of RSE are reinforced across the curriculum and through assemblies, supporting the school's values of respect and kindness.

37. Leaders ensure that the physical education (PE) curriculum provides pupils with regular, structured opportunities to develop fitness, physical co-ordination, agility, balance and teamwork skills. Lessons and games are age-appropriate and inclusive, fostering confidence, resilience, strategic thinking and enjoyment of physical activity. Pupils participate in a range of sports, both within lessons and through extra-curricular clubs and competitions, developing skills such as ball control, striking and fielding, swimming techniques, tactical awareness and leadership, all of which support their broader personal development and wellbeing.

38. In the early years, staff know the children well and support them effectively in developing their physical skills. Through planned play activities, both indoors and outdoors, pupils develop their fine and gross motor skills. Pupils make good progress in their physical development over time. Children in the early years also develop their emotional health through regular activities with adults at school, where they learn to identify and manage their feelings.

39. Leaders and staff promote positive behaviour through clear expectations and consistent routines. Pupils demonstrate respect for staff and peers, engage co-operatively in lessons and co-curricular activities, and show self-discipline appropriate to their age. When issues arise, pupils have the opportunity to discuss and learn from their actions. Sanctions are applied effectively, ensuring that pupils understand the impact of their actions.

40. Leaders implement a clear approach to preventing and addressing bullying. When the rare incidents of bullying occur, they are managed effectively in line with the school's policy, ensuring timely and appropriate responses. Staff monitor behaviour consistently, and leaders continue to evaluate practice to maintain consistency in behaviour management across the school. Leaders and staff encourage pupils to feel confident to report concerns and support them to resolve any issues respectfully.

41. Boarding accommodation, including sleeping and washing areas, is comfortable and well equipped, with controlled access and clear boundaries between pupils' areas and staff accommodation. Pupils receive high-quality meals, structured routines and thorough induction. An independent person is available to support boarders, and pastoral care and supervision are carefully managed to ensure a supportive environment.

42. Effective health and safety and fire safety procedures are consistently applied, and staff ensure that pupils understand and follow safety procedures. Regular training, clear protocols and prompt responses to maintenance or health and safety issues ensure that the premises and accommodation are well maintained and conducive to pupils' wellbeing and readiness to learn. Leaders respond to the findings of regular fire risk assessments and ensure that all fire safety equipment is suitably maintained. There are regular fire evacuation drills, including during boarding time.

43. Pupils are appropriately supervised throughout the school day, during extra-curricular activities for day pupils and boarders, and during boarding time. Supervision is well planned, clearly timetabled and carried out by staff who know the pupils well, ensuring that pupils feel safe and supported. Leaders regularly review supervision arrangements, taking account of pupil numbers, activities and times of day, to ensure that arrangements remain suitable and effective. Appropriate staff-to-child ratios are maintained at all times in the early years. First aid and medication are administered promptly and suitably when required. Staff are trained appropriately to respond to accidents or medical needs. Staff in the early years are appropriately trained in paediatric first aid, ensuring that children are cared for safely and effectively at all times, including when eating. The medical accommodation is suitable and contains appropriate facilities.

44. Admissions and attendance registers are accurate, up to date and managed effectively and in line with current statutory requirements. Leaders monitor attendance closely to identify trends or concerns. They notify the local authority whenever pupils join or leave the school at non-standard times.

45. Leaders provide a clearly defined prefect system, giving pupils responsibilities that support daily routines, pastoral care and induction of younger pupils. Monitors receive training to understand their roles, and pupils report they can raise concerns if duties become excessive. The system promotes leadership skills, accountability and a sense of community across the school and within the house system.

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

46. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

47. The school develops pupils' appreciation of diversity and respect for others through lessons, chapel, PSHE and a comprehensive religious education programme, which explores a wide range of world religions, beliefs and ethical perspectives. This helps pupils understand different cultural and faith traditions, reflect on moral and spiritual issues and engage respectfully with diverse viewpoints. Ambassadorial roles, charity work and collaborative projects further reinforce the importance of individual liberty, responsibility and other British values such as the rule of law.

48. The school fosters a positive culture that promotes respect, consideration and inclusion across all year groups. In the senior school, the house system encourages pupils to engage collaboratively across different ages, developing respect, understanding and appreciation of diversity. From an early age, children are taught the importance of positive social behaviours. They learn to share, co-operate and communicate kindly with peers, laying the foundations for responsible and empathetic participation in school life and beyond.

49. The school prepares pupils effectively for future careers and transitions at every stage of their education. In the early years, children develop independence, confidence and social skills that support smooth progression to the next phase of learning. As pupils move through the school, they are introduced to a broad range of career pathways through careers talks, alumni mentoring, work experience and workshops. Careers guidance is tailored to individual aspirations, helping pupils make informed choices, including applications for universities and apprenticeships.

50. Pupils develop a clear understanding of British institutions, including Parliament, the monarchy and the legal system. They learn about the importance of democratic participation. Pupils in the prep and senior schools have meaningful opportunities to vote and contribute through classroom councils, house activities, ambassador and monitor roles, and school and food councils, fostering responsibility, respect and leadership. Pupils also develop an understanding of how different countries are governed and engage in balanced, impartial discussions about political systems and ideas, enabling them to respect a range of viewpoints.

51. The foundation develops pupils' financial literacy from an early age through practical, real-life activities. In the prep school, pupils apply mathematical skills to cost materials for design and construction projects, such as building a carousel, and can apply for 'bank loans' to manage budgets. In the senior school, financial awareness is reinforced through applied learning in subjects such as economics, personal finance workshops, budgeting exercises and enrichment initiatives like financial Fridays, where pupils explore topics including value for money, debt, savings and ethical spending. These experiences help pupils develop confidence in managing money.

52. The foundation enhances pupils' social development and sense of responsibility by enabling them to contribute to the community beyond the school. Across the school, pupils engage in local initiatives, such as fundraising activities and community projects that develop teamwork, empathy and citizenship. In the senior school, pupils take part in more complex charitable projects and collaborations with local organisations, including the Red Sky Foundation and the Great Northern Air Ambulance, as well as performing as choristers at Cathedral services.

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

53. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

54. Safeguarding policies and procedures reflect current statutory guidance.

55. Leaders ensure that all staff clearly understand the safeguarding policy and apply it consistently. All new staff, including part-time staff and external activity providers, receive suitable safeguarding induction. Leaders provide ongoing safeguarding training and regular updates for all staff. Staff understand their safeguarding duties and follow established procedures, including how to report any concerns or allegations about adults.

56. Members of the safeguarding team are suitably trained for their role. They respond promptly and effectively to any concerns. Effective working relationships are maintained with external agencies, and referrals, when required, are made in a timely and appropriate manner. Leaders keep clear, accurate and comprehensive safeguarding records, including detailed accounts of actions taken by the school.

57. Leaders typically carry out all required pre-employment checks. However, before the inspection commenced, leaders had identified that some required pre-employment checks had not been completed when required. Leaders rectified this before the inspection took place. In addition, staff files do not always fully match the information recorded on the SCR. This was amended during the inspection.

58. The foundation ensures that pupils are informed about the channels available to report concerns or seek support. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to raise concerns anonymously. Pupils understand how to access and use these systems appropriately, and staff respond swiftly and effectively to any concerns.

59. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, including online, through PSHE and wider teaching. The school has effective internet filtering and monitoring systems in place, and leaders respond promptly and decisively to any alerts or concerns.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

60. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation
Department for Education number	840/6000
Registered charity number	1023407
Address	Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation Quarryheads Lane Durham County Durham DH1 4SZ
Phone number	0191 731 9270
Email address	principal@dcsf.co.uk
Website	www.dcsf.org.uk
Proprietor	Durham School
Chair	Mr Simon Dobson
Headteacher	Dr Michael Alderson
Age range	3 to 18
Number of pupils	674
Number of boarding pupils	81
Date of previous inspection	14 to 16 March 2023

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Information about the school

61. Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation is an independent co-educational day and boarding school**,** formed in 2021 by the merger of Durham School and The Chorister School and governed by a charitable trust. The school operates on two sites within the centre of Durham. The department on the Chorister School site caters for pupils aged 3 to 11 years, and the Durham School site caters for pupils aged 11 to 18 years. The current headteacher took up his position in September 2025, and the current chair of governors took up his appointment in September 2024.

62. The school operates three single-sex boarding houses for pupils aged 11 to 18: two for male pupils and one for female pupils. In addition, boarding accommodation is provided in one house at the Chorister School site for male and female pupils aged 7 to 13 years who are Cathedral choristers. This house also provides flexi boarding, when required, for chorister pupils aged 7 to 11 years.

63. The early years comprises 32 children in one Nursery and two Reception classes.

64. The school has identified 145 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. 13 pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.

65. The school has identified English as an additional language for 105 pupils.

66. The school states its aims are to nurture academic excellence and personal growth, and to develop in pupils the values of moral integrity, ambition, responsibility, and kindness. It intends to support choristers to fulfil their musical and educational roles, and all pupils to engage fully in school and community life.

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Inspection details

Inspection dates	27 to 29 January 2026

67. A team of seven inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

68. 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
- visits to boarding houses accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

69. 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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