

School inspection report

10 to 12 February 2026

Milton Abbey School

Milton Abbas

Blandford Forum

Dorset

DT11 0BZ

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 ensure that the promotion of pupils' wellbeing is central to their decision-making. Governors provide effective support and challenge to school leaders through regular contact. Policies, records and plans are scrutinised and discussed at regular intervals. Leaders have a clear vision for the school which is clearly expressed in their self-evaluation. Leaders ensure that staff understand the school's aims and procedures. Staff are provided with an in-depth induction and offered additional support and training on entry to the school.
2. Teaching is effective. Lessons are typically characterised by focused activities that break down learning into manageable chunks. Staff use questioning effectively to provide support and challenge according to their developed knowledge and understanding of pupils' need. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have their particular needs met effectively, primarily in the classroom, complemented by access to well-planned individual support from specialist staff.
3. The school's curriculum is well planned to meet the needs of the broad range of learners that attend the school. Vocational and traditional academic subjects are available, creating a range of flexible options for pupils. Staff actively work with pupils to find the most suitable courses for their interests. Leaders regularly review the courses on offer to ensure they remain appropriate and accessible for pupils.
4. Behaviour management is effective overall and staff and pupils maintain positive relationships with each other. However, there are a few pupils who do not treat each other with respect in boarding and a few pupils who display intolerant attitudes.
5. Leaders ensure that robust health and safety checks are in place and kept under review. The school's premises, including boarding accommodation, are kept in suitable condition and maintenance issues are dealt with swiftly. Risk assessments are regularly reviewed and revised to remain effective and understood by staff. Contextual risks around the site are suitably identified and mitigation put into place.
6. Pupils benefit from a well-structured careers programme that is delivered across all year groups in a range of ways, including through the personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme. Leaders thoughtfully plan and consult with pupils and parents to ensure that careers guidance helps prepare pupils for their next steps in education or employment.
7. The school has effective arrangements in place for safeguarding pupils. Leaders with designated safeguarding responsibilities have required training for their role. They maintain well-established links with the local authority and regularly consult with them to support decision-making. All staff understand their responsibility towards safeguarding and are aware of the appropriate procedures to follow when safeguarding concerns arise. Pupils are made aware of how to report any concerns, including to the independent person in boarding or anonymously.
8. Boarding is well run and staffed with suitably trained and experienced staff. Day and boarding pupils mix well in houses, supported by the option of an extended day for day pupils. As a result, there is extended and effective integration between day and boarding pupils, with opportunities for all pupils to take a full and active part in the leadership and organisation of the houses. Boarders are provided with a high level of support for their physical and emotional needs. Parents are kept informed of their child's progress and as a result are supportive of the leadership of the school.

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 behaviour management to ensure that pupils consistently treat each other with respect in boarding and that no pupils display intolerant attitudes.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Leaders promote an inclusive, personalised and suitable environment and a culture of support for pupils, including in the boarding houses. Leaders communicate clear expectations to both staff and pupils.
10. Leaders have a deep understanding of the effectiveness of the school and areas for future development. Pupils' wellbeing and achievement is at the centre of their planning and development across the curriculum, staffing and the estate. Leaders are visible around the school and actively encourage pupils to share their opinions and suggestions to inform school development planning. In boarding houses, a range of pupil-led committees are encouraged such as food, social and equality, diversity and inclusion which then feed into the whole-school 'Round Table' meetings.
11. Leaders and managers have the required knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that they actively promote the wellbeing of pupils. They consciously provide very regular opportunities for staff to discuss pupils' concerns and agree actions. This results in a caring and responsive pastoral culture in line with the school's ethos.
12. Governors assure themselves that leadership is effective through regular visits, reports and sub-committees on aspects of the school such as health and safety, finance and education. They provide an appropriate level of challenge to school leaders and oversee effective planning to ensure the school's aims and ethos are promoted.
13. The complaints procedure is detailed and records are thorough, including outcomes and reviews. Leaders respond to complaints within the stated timeframe and scrutinise submitted complaints for any patterns. There are mechanisms for boarders to raise complaints should they wish, and these are addressed swiftly by senior leaders through discussion and appropriate action.
14. Leaders demonstrate they have a clear understanding of risk management. They constantly evaluate contextual risk and take mitigating steps, such as in relation to the footpaths through the site and improved signage. Risk assessments for premises, activities and educational visits are comprehensive and drawn up in conjunction with the medical and pastoral teams. Site and curricular risk assessments are reviewed annually and shared with staff.
15. The school fulfils its duties under the Equality Act 2010. Leaders implement a detailed and appropriate accessibility plan that enables all pupils to access the curriculum and facilities, for example by providing assistive technology for learners when required. Leadership of the provision for pupils who have SEND is effective and key to the schools aims and ethos.
16. Parents are provided with access to all required information via the school website or on request, including policies and about pupils' attainment in external examinations. The school has a comprehensive programme of reporting and parent consultations across the year, both online and in person. A monthly school magazine provides details on all aspects of school life to the parent body, the majority of whom are parents of boarders.
17. Leaders maintain links with the local authority and other relevant agencies to promote safeguarding and pupils' wellbeing. The school reviews the provision for pupils with an education and health care plan (EHC plan) annually and provides the local authority with the required information relating to

income and expenditure for funded pupils. The school informs the local authority whenever pupils join or leave the school at non-standard times of transition.

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 have established a curriculum that enables pupils to study towards a wide array of qualifications. Programmes preparing pupils for BTEC National Diploma and BTEC Firsts are taught alongside GCSE and A-level courses. Land-based studies, hospitality, animal care and enterprise are options alongside English, mathematics, science, the humanities and the creative subjects. Leaders regularly review the curriculum to ensure it meets the needs of the pupils' changing needs. For example, leaders amended the curriculum to offer criminology instead of psychology following their analysis of past results and pupils' interests.
20. Across the school, teachers have good subject knowledge and generally use resources skilfully to deliver engaging lessons that enable pupils to make good progress. Teachers often use detailed information about pupils' learning needs to adapt their teaching methods and the support provided to pupils in class. They provide regular and helpful guidance to pupils about how to improve their work through both written and oral feedback. This enables pupils to reflect on the quality and extent of their own learning and progress.
21. Typically, teaching motivates pupils so that they are attentive in their small classes and respond with curiosity and enthusiasm in lessons. Teachers skilfully use questioning to assess individual pupils' progress and plan their next steps. Teaching enables pupils to become confident communicators both in the classroom and when engaging in other activities in all areas of the school.
22. The needs of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are identified prior to admission and they are provided with in-class or one-to-one support, as required. Effective teaching approaches mean that pupils make good progress with their English fluency. Leaders of provision for pupils who speak EAL track the progress of these pupils and provide guidance to subject teachers about how best to meet their needs. Teachers feed back to the EAL team about how effective the support provided has been.
23. Leaders have established comprehensive systems for assessing pupils who have SEND and staff are sensitive to the changing needs of individual pupils. Staff training ensures that teachers have the skills to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of pupils who have SEND. Leaders of provision for pupils who have SEND are knowledgeable and able to offer individual and ongoing support to both pupils and teachers so that they make good progress from their starting points. Leaders monitor pupils' progress to ensure the effectiveness of the support provided.
24. Leaders provide an extensive co-curricular programme that enriches academic life and fosters personal growth. Pupils are involved in weekly 'Round Square' afternoons, choosing different options ranging from cooking, Combined Cadet Force (CCF) activities or community service projects. New activities are frequently pupil led, such as the recent 'COP30' debate and the reintroduction of Model United Nations, giving opportunities for pupils to develop leadership and organisational skills as well as teamwork and co-operation.
25. Leaders have established a rigorous assessment framework that provides staff and parents with reliable information about pupils' progress and attainment. Leaders collate a large amount of information about pupils' performance from regular assessment and data collection with input from

the learning development team, where appropriate. Baseline data is gathered and used to provide teachers with key information about the most effective way to support pupils to make progress.

26. Pupils can access additional support from their teachers each day to consolidate their learning in subject clinics. Pupils from all year groups can attend clinics in the subjects of their choice and request support or participate in independent study. This promotes a positive working relationship between teacher and pupils and helps enable early identification of any underperformance.

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. Leaders actively encourage pupils' feelings of security and confidence across the school, providing a range of adults for pupils to turn to for support. Weekly 'flagging' meetings between leaders and staff ensure that pupils' concerns and pastoral issues are raised swiftly and managed in a collegiate manner. Pupils are encouraged to celebrate each other's success and work across the year groups on a range of committees. Leaders encourage pupil-led initiatives and support in their realisation. As a result, pupils develop self-confidence and feel able to express their views at school.
29. Pupil leaders are provided with training which enables them to lead confidently and be positive role models across the school community. They meet regularly with the senior leadership team and are clear about their role in the school and in boarding. Pupil leaders are proactive in raising issues with the senior leadership team and subsequently feeding back to peers.
30. Pupils are provided with suitable levels of supervision across the school day and during boarding time. A clear duty rota ensures that staff are always available to meet the needs of the boarders, including overnight when required.
31. Behaviour management is generally effective, so that pupils' behaviour is typically good, with positive, supportive working relationships between staff and pupils. Pupils frequently mix across the age groups, with senior pupils providing support for younger peers. However, some pupils report intolerant attitudes and that boarders do not always treat each other with respect.
32. The school has a clear and consistent anti-bullying policy which is implemented effectively. The rare incidents of bullying are dealt with swiftly, using both sanctions and dialogue designed to help pupils reflect on their actions and find resolution. Logs are monitored by leaders for any patterns and inform future training. Proactive approaches such as 'Girls on Board' are used as necessary when issues between pupils are identified.
33. Leaders ensure that suitable and accurate admission and attendance registers are maintained. Leaders monitor patterns of absence and take action to support pupils should there be any concerns about absenteeism.
34. Buildings are well maintained, including boarding facilities which are refurbished on a rolling programme. Leaders have suitable arrangements in place to systematically manage health and safety procedures, including those relating to fire safety and transport. The Health Centre is well run and meets the needs of the pupils, with the support of twice weekly visits from a local surgery. Staff are suitably trained in first aid, including matrons who are present in houses throughout the day. Accidents are recorded, tracked and reported appropriately. The boarding are staffed by a team of matrons who can provide basic first aid and be on hand to support any pupil who requires support during the day.
35. The school's relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum is thorough and adapted to the learning needs of the pupils. The content is regularly reviewed in consultation with pupils and external speakers and resources are regularly used to promote pupils' learning when this is helpful. Parents are consulted annually on the content of the RSE programme.

36. Personal, social, health and economic education lessons are delivered by a specialist team across the school. Pupils are taught about a range of relevant topics such as social media, toxic masculinity and mental health. Pupils are regularly surveyed on themes and areas they feel should be included and, as a result, the lessons are relevant and useful to them. Topics covered in PSHE lessons also influence discussions across the school in tutor sessions and assemblies.
37. Pupils learn about a wide range of different religions, including through assemblies that explore diverse faiths and their spiritual ideas. Leaders also make use of the abbey situated adjacent to the school which provides a spiritual place for the school to gather and sing. Pupil-led services are held twice weekly with guidance from the chaplain. Pupils are also able to worship and reflect spiritually in other areas of the school. Assembly, tutor sessions and house conversations led by the chaplain contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the pupils.
38. Leaders ensure that boarding is well managed. Boarders receive a supportive induction programme, and houses provide boarders with much information, such as menus, activities and where to turn to for support should they have a concern. Boarding accommodation, including for sleeping, is of good quality and any maintenance issues are swiftly addressed. Boarders are well supported in their houses and have a consistent house team who are easily contacted at night. There is a suitable balance of activity and relaxation in the boarding programme, with a range of weekend options available to all.
39. Pupils benefit from a broad and flexible sporting provision with an emphasis placed on 'sport for all'. Team sports and less conventional activities such as mountain biking, clay pigeon shooting and polo provide pupils with the opportunity to represent their school. Sport and the physical education (PE) curriculum help pupils to lead a healthy lifestyle and develop their co-ordination and physical skills. A very large proportion of pupils are involved in representative sport of some kind, with sports such as basketball being added as a result of pupils' demand.

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

40. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

41. The school carefully plans the careers guidance that pupils receive throughout their time at the school. Vocational course options from Year 10 result in many pupils studying careers as part of their courses. All pupils complete a career profiling tool, and this helps guide staff's individual conversations with them and their parents about their future. The careers programme contributes well to pupils' readiness for adult life. Enterprise competitions, business plan development and exposure to professionals develop entrepreneurial thinking and practical understanding of the workplace. Personal, social, health and economic education lessons are planned by the head of careers and include how to complete an application, interview skills and trips to careers and apprenticeship fairs. A highly structured and supportive system is in place for the university application process. Destinations for leavers are varied. The careers guidance emphasises the importance of choosing future paths that match the pupils' skills and aptitudes well.
42. Pupils are taught about the importance of law, civic responsibility and democracy as part of the PSHE curriculum and a range of annual events. These include, for example, participation in the Dorset Youth Parliament elections, safer internet day and opportunities to examine democracies outside the UK, such as a visit to the site of the first parliament in Iceland. Leaders weave British values, such as the importance of mutual respect and individual liberty, through the curriculum and pupils are taught about the rule of law and public institutions in the UK as preparation for their future lives beyond school. Leaders and staff ensure that any discussions containing political content are conducted impartially.
43. Community-focused initiatives, including cultural events and presentations from visiting speakers, strengthen pupils' awareness of ethical issues such as global inequality, conflict and social justice. Teachers and pupils discuss themes of identity, prejudice and representation, including through the use of well-chosen curriculum texts. A number of subjects actively promote understanding of how societies function, how laws and governance develop and how individuals can contribute positively to society. Pupils develop their awareness of the protections provided by the Equality Act 2010.
44. The pupil-led equality, diversity and inclusion committees at house and whole-school level are central to the promotion of cultural awareness across the community. The curriculum supports an appreciation of diverse cultures. For example, the BTEC National Diploma in Food course focuses on a range of food from around the world and provides the opportunity for pupils to explore international dishes. Leaders actively encourage pupils to debate equality, diversity and inclusion issues.
45. Pupils display a clear understanding of the school's ethos of 'learning differently' and as a result accept that anyone may require different support in order to learn and develop. Leaders consciously encourage pupils to ask for the support that they feel they need and work hard to provide an individualised response both academically and socially.
46. Leaders encourage pupils to take on responsibility and make a positive contribution to the school. The food committee and 'Round Table' are examples of pupil-led groups who gather views and feedback to leaders on topics that are important to pupils. As a result of the wide range of opportunities to represent their peers on committees, pupils have their views heard and are able to see results, such as menu changes and new activities being offered.

47. Financial education is embedded within PSHE and enterprise activities, ensuring pupils develop an understanding of saving, budgeting and money management. Topics such as how to open a bank account, calculate interest and compare credit cards are included. Economic literacy is actively developed through enterprise competitions, business-planning exercises and visits from industry professionals. These initiatives promote entrepreneurial thinking, financial awareness and economic awareness in preparation for adult life.
48. Members of the school make an active contribution to their local community through fundraising and involvement in volunteer projects. Pupils develop a sense of civic responsibility by organising fundraising events such as supporting local commemorations and the annual remembrance service and assisting with sporting festivals for children with disabilities. Whole-school events such as 'mental health awareness day', a 24-hour swim in open water and participation in the 'Oceans Seven' and 'Peaks Challenge' contribute to pupils' sense of community.

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. The school has appropriate safeguarding arrangements in place for boarders and day pupils. Governors have appropriate safeguarding training, with safeguarding a standing item on each meeting agenda. They maintain an effective overview of the safeguarding policy and procedures through regular meetings with the safeguarding team. The comprehensive safeguarding policy is written in line with statutory and local guidance.
51. Staff responsible for recruitment have the appropriate skills and knowledge. Leaders ensure that all appropriate safer recruitment checks on adults who work with pupils or reside on site are made in a timely manner. Leaders maintain an accurate single central record of appointments (SCR) and this is routinely checked by leaders and governors. Leaders diligently conduct appropriate checks on visiting speakers.
52. Safeguarding induction and training for staff is thorough and regular. Staff are provided with regular updates and a staff training session on an aspect of safeguarding at the start of each term to ensure their knowledge is current. Staff are encouraged to highlight concerns both online and in person to member of the safeguarding team. The safeguarding and housemaster team are all trained to an appropriate level for their role, with lead house staff also receiving equivalent training. Leaders ensure that safeguarding pupils is seen as a school-wide responsibility and staff are confident in managing disclosures or reporting concerns.
53. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, including online, through PSHE, assemblies and presentations from visiting speakers. Pupil 'digital leaders' regularly address the school to highlight issues such as artificial intelligence and safe online behaviour. A robust internet filtering and monitoring system is in place and regularly tested by the school. Alerts are immediately reviewed by the safeguarding team and followed up appropriately with pupils.
54. Leaders respond to safeguarding concerns promptly. They consult with external safeguarding partners and complete referrals where appropriate. Suitable arrangements for handling allegations or low-level concerns against staff or senior leaders are in place and well understood by staff.
55. Pupils are well supported with a range of adults whom they can approach for help, including house staff, matrons, tutors and the nursing team. All pupils have access to an anonymous online reporting system, and boarders can contact an independent person who visits at the start of each term to ensure he is known to them.
56. Leaders are aware of contextual risks, both in and out of school, including those of radicalisation and extremism, and take appropriate measures to mitigate these.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

57. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Milton Abbey School
Department for Education number	838/6015
Registered charity number	306318
Address	Milton Abbey School Milton Abbas Blandford Forum Dorset DT11 0BZ
Phone number	01258 880484
Email address	info@miltonabbey.co.uk
Website	www.miltonabbey.co.uk
Proprietor	Council of Milton Abbey School
Chair	Dr Ian Bromilow
Headteacher	Mr James Watson
Age range	13 to 19
Number of pupils	190
Number of boarding pupils	171
Date of previous inspection	14 to 16 March 2023

Information about the school

58. Milton Abbey is an independent co-educational day and boarding school situated in rural Dorset. It was founded in 1954 as a boarding school for male pupils and became fully co-educational in 2014. The school is a charitable trust administered by a board of governors.
59. Boarders are accommodated in five boarding houses, three for male pupils and two for female pupils, situated on the school site.
60. The school has identified 118 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. Eleven pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
61. The school has identified English as an additional language for 49 pupils.
62. The school states its aims are to provide pupils with a transformational learning environment and the opportunity to 'learn differently' through a personalised curriculum.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

10 to 12 February 2026

63. A team of five 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 vice-chair and boarding governor
- 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.

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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