

School inspection report

21 to 23 April 2026

Earlscliffe

29 Shorncliffe Road

Folkestone

CT20 2NB

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. Governors have recently appointed school leaders who have the skills and knowledge to carry out their duties and to take rigorous action for the benefit of the pupils' overall wellbeing. Leaders publicise the school's aims and ethos widely and make sure that decisions are made in line with these.
2. Leaders have ensured that policies are suitable and meet the requirements of the Standards and the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools (NMS). Recent changes made in procedures and middle management structures are appropriate. However, these are not yet fully embedded and insufficient time has passed for their effectiveness to be evaluated.
3. The school manages complaints appropriately. However, when the inspection commenced, the complaints log did not make as clear as possible the difference between informal and formal complaints, the point at which these are resolved and which complaints relate to boarding. Leaders rectified these issues before the end of the inspection.
4. Leaders have created a curriculum that is focused on the ambitions of international boarding pupils, most of whom are above compulsory school age. The range of subjects offered is narrow, but sufficient to meet the Standards.
5. Almost all the pupils speak English as an additional language (EAL). A major focus of the curriculum, especially for the younger pupils, is on supporting the development of pupils' skills in spoken and written English in preparation for entrance to university. Specialist teaching supports the pupils well so that they become fluent and confident.
6. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are supported effectively so that they make good progress.
7. Typically, teachers are knowledgeable and plan lessons well so that pupils are able to make good progress. However, teaching lacks consistently high expectations and does not always ensure that pupils are engaged and supported to achieve well in all their subjects. Teachers do not always make effective use of assessment data to plan lessons or to support pupils. Relationships between teachers and pupils are cordial and positive. Pupils are self-motivated, ambitious and focus well in lessons.
8. The programme for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) includes relationships and sex education (RSE). The topics covered are appropriate for the age of the pupils and provide them with the information they need. However, teaching on sexual harassment, misogyny and abuse via social media is not fully effective for some male pupils.
9. Behaviour policies are understood by pupils who see that respect for others is essential in the school and boarding community and core to the school's value system. Pupils understand the policies to deter bullying and that bullying in any form is unacceptable. The few instances of bullying are managed appropriately.
10. All arrangements for health and safety are met. Boarding houses provide warm and welcoming accommodation with space for study and socialising, as well as comfortable bedrooms.

11. First aid arrangements are suitable. Current requirements for recording and monitoring admissions and attendance are met, with the relevant authorities contacted as necessary.
12. The curriculum and the international nature of the school encourage pupils to be aware of the rights of all in wider society. Pupils learn about the values that underpin British society. They understand that acceptance of others' beliefs is part of those values and that everyone's right to individual liberty is legally protected.
13. The careers programme provides pupils with advice on future pathways, focused primarily on entrance to university. However, the support provided for pupils aiming for universities overseas is less robust than that for those intending to study at a British university.

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:

- ensure that the complaints log makes clearer the difference between informal and formal complaints, the point at which these are resolved and those that relate to boarding
- strengthen leaders' oversight of teaching to ensure that teaching consistently sets high expectations and makes effective use of assessment data to enable pupils to make good progress
- strengthen teaching in relationships and sex education on misogyny, and abuse via social media, so that all pupils fully understand that this is unacceptable
- strengthen careers education so that pupils have a richer understanding of wider pathways after school and are more effectively supported in applying to universities beyond the United Kingdom.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

14. The proprietor and governors have clear aims for the school and have taken rigorous action to ensure that current school leaders have the required skills and knowledge to discharge their responsibilities. Leaders' competence to do so is evident in the decisive steps recently taken to support the pupils' overall wellbeing.
15. The number of changes in recent years in staffing, leadership structures and timetabling had a negative impact on pupils and their progress. Current school leaders are working hard to re-establish clarity and consistency. School policies have been reviewed so that they fully reflect the requirements of the Standards and that staff understand them. A new middle management structure has been created to support the teaching and learning in the school. These new initiatives are not yet fully embedded, but early signs of their impact are positive. For example, pupils are being better supported academically in some subjects and so are making more consistent progress.
16. School leaders have a deep understanding of the school and publicise its aims and values widely. Their robust analysis of all aspects of school life identifies areas that are working well and those that need attention. Leaders take decisions needed to ensure that the overall wellbeing of pupils is consistently promoted and that Standards are met. Governors receive regular reports from school leaders on academic and pastoral matters. They enrich their understanding of school matters by regular visits and discussions with pupils and staff. This oversight helps them to be confident that the Standards and NMS are being consistently met.
17. The required information is provided or made available to parents, either on the school's website or on request. This includes details of examination results and the most recent inspection reports. Parents are sent regular and helpful reports on their child's progress.
18. Leaders implement a suitable policy on the management of complaints which sets out appropriate timescales for the resolution of issues. However, at the start of the inspection, the record of complaints did not always record the resolution of complaints clearly or identify complaints relating to boarding. Leaders rectified these administrative matters during the inspection.
19. Leaders understand the importance of managing risk and ensure that appropriate risk assessments are in place. For example, leaders are conscious of the potential contextual risks for international boarders of compulsory school age living alongside those who are young adults. There are appropriate risk assessments for the premises, boarding houses and for recreational high-risk activities.
20. Leaders maintain effective links with external agencies. They inform the local authority when pupils join or leave the school outside the usual transition points, or should there be concerns about a pupil's attendance. Links are made with appropriate agencies, including social services and UK visa and immigration services, as needed.
21. Leaders' decisions draw on the school's stated values of community and respect in preparing pupils to be global citizens. Admissions procedures, along with school policies, reiterate leaders' commitment to equality and inclusivity within the school. There is a suitable accessibility plan covering a defined three-year period. It details action to be taken to increase accessibility to the curriculum, the premises and information for those who have disabilities. The requirements of the Equality Act 2010 are met.

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

22. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

23. Leaders have created a curriculum that is tailored to the specific aims of the school and the needs of its pupils. An appropriate range of A-level courses is available, so that pupils can achieve the qualifications they need to proceed to university. This includes qualifications in EAL if necessary.
24. Pupils of compulsory school age enrolled on an intensive one-year GCSE course follow a suitable core curriculum including English, mathematics and science. They also choose from optional courses in humanities, art and computer science. The curriculum for those undertaking the international transition year is primarily focused on developing pupils' English and half of their teaching time is devoted to this. The curriculum at this stage also provides the pupils with experience in mathematics, sciences, humanities and art, but opportunities for technological education are limited.
25. The needs of pupils who have SEND are identified as they join the school. The leaders of provision for pupils who have SEND devise personalised plans for the pupils, setting targets in discussion with them. Teachers plan assiduously, taking into account the needs of those who have SEND, using strategies and resources such as coloured overlays, and fidget devices to help them focus. The effectiveness of strategies is monitored and adjusted as necessary. As a result, pupils who have SEND make good progress from their starting points.
26. Teachers' lesson planning employs useful strategies to support pupils who have EAL. For example, pupils receive lists of the specific technical vocabulary for a subject in advance of the lesson. All pupils have specific lessons to support their English acquisition. Teachers provide frameworks for structuring essays and sentence starters to support pupils' understanding of how to answer essay questions. Pupils make good progress in their language acquisition, so that they become confident and fluent in speech and writing.
27. Most teaching demonstrates firm understanding of academic subjects. Teachers plan lessons that typically engage pupils' interest and effectively build on and reinforce their prior learning. In some subjects, teaching provides challenge for pupils of higher prior attainment with skilful questioning that encourages pupils to think for themselves. This helps to deepen their understanding and enable them to make good progress.
28. However, in a few subjects, pupils' progress is inhibited by some insecure subject knowledge, poor lesson planning and low expectations of pupils. Some lessons use ineffective teaching strategies that are inappropriate for the age and abilities of the pupils. This results in pupils becoming disengaged. Procedures to monitor the standard of teaching are unclear, so that pockets of poor teaching are not identified and rectified. Results in public examinations reflect the inconsistency in teaching and its direct impact on pupils' progress and levels of attainment.
29. Some departments, such as psychology, geography and EAL, have established rigorous and effective systems of assessments that allow for consistent tracking and monitoring of pupils' progress. Any issues with pupils' understanding are quickly identified and supportive action taken. However, there is no consistent schoolwide assessment framework. Most teachers provide feedback to pupils that identifies specifically what has gone well and how to improve further. Teachers upload their marks on pupils' work to a central site but there is no system to ensure that the collected data is analysed and used methodically to support planning and teaching to help ensure that pupils make

consistently good progress. There are limited means for boarders to get help with their academic work in the evenings, as the links between academic and boarding staff are not always as effective as possible.

30. Pupils are motivated, eager to make the most of the experience of living in Britain. Relationships between staff and pupils are positive and friendly. The majority of pupils are ambitious, behave well in lessons and work hard. They take pride in their growing fluency in English and in learning how to interpret and answer examination questions. Those working towards A-level examinations are independent and take responsibility for their own learning. They think for themselves and express their opinions lucidly.
31. Leaders provide an appropriate range of recreational activities appropriate for pupils of this age. Activities during the academic day provide opportunities for physical activity including team games, use of a local gym and yoga. Boarding evening activities include in-house film nights, pancake nights, crafting sessions and trips. At weekends there are organised trips to local venues, cinemas or shopping centres. This provision helps boarding to be an enjoyable experience for the pupils.

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. Pupils develop their understanding of the range of faiths through community forums and informal discussions. Leaders emphasise the importance of respect for others' beliefs and support boarders who wish to practice their faiths, such as by providing late evening meals during Ramadan. In lessons, pupils thoughtfully discuss ethical issues that arise, for example the impact of the Black Power movement on civil rights in America or the social injustices in eighteenth century England that inspired Blake's poetry.
34. Boarders develop considerable self-knowledge and self-assurance through having to take responsibility for managing the practicalities of their daily lives. They develop their fluency in English rapidly, thanks to the focus on teaching for EAL. It is further supported by the care that is taken to ensure a full range of nationalities is represented within each boarding house, so that English becomes the common language. The speed with which pupils become skilled in the idioms and nuances of English also helps to build their self-confidence.
35. The curriculum encourages pupils to be conscious of the importance of a healthy diet and of exercise. In their weekly physical education (PE) lessons, effective coaching helps the younger pupils to develop their physical skills in sports such as table tennis, badminton, hockey and football. Some A-level pupils study for a sports leadership qualification alongside their other academic subjects. Pupils are enthusiastic in using their free time and an activities afternoon for physical exercise. Teams, including football, rugby and basketball, are inclusive and provide equal opportunities for male and female pupils.
36. There are clear policies setting out expectations of pupils' behaviour. Pupils understand the need for rules and see that these link to the core values of respect and community. Leaders and boarding staff emphasise the importance of kindness and sensitivity to others' needs, so that overall relationships between pupils are harmonious and respectful. Misdemeanours are typically managed in line with the school's policies, although there is some inconsistency in the way the sanctions are applied by staff. Pupils are taught that bullying in any form is wrong. The rare use of unacceptable discriminatory language is challenged, with pupils encouraged to engage in dialogue to restore positive relationships and resolve disagreements.
37. Teaching in PSHE and RSE covers appropriate topics, including the risks of substance misuse, risky behaviours, mental health and the need to be alert to the possibility of misinformation or fake news when working online. The course provides sex education suitable to the age of the pupils, including about contraception and maintaining positive sexual health.
38. Lessons in PSHE and RSE teach that online bullying and using social media to hurt or humiliate another is unacceptable, as is misogynistic language. The majority of pupils understand this and are respectful and courteous in their dealings with others. However, the experiences of some female pupils shows that PSHE education is not fully effective for some male pupils, and does not prevent unacceptable behaviours and misogynistic attitudes amongst a few. Leaders take action when such matters are reported to them, but their actions have not been entirely successful in eradicating these attitudes.

39. Health and safety measures are meticulous so that the premises are well maintained, clean and protected from preventable risk. Measures for the prevention of fire are thorough and regular fire evacuation drills are carried out, including in boarding time when boarders are asleep. Appropriate numbers of staff are trained in first aid. A qualified nurse manages the medical needs of pupils.
40. The boarding houses provide welcoming, comfortable accommodation for sleeping and socialising. Across the school, there are suitable numbers of staff on duty during the day to supervise pupils. There is always at least one adult sleeping overnight in each boarding house and accessible to boarders. Boarders are provided with nourishing and appetising meals, with menus that reflect the diverse cultural tastes and dietary needs of the pupils. However, house managers rely on informal and chance chats with boarders to check that they are receiving appropriate care and support from their guardians and do not record these conversations to form a rounded view of boarders' experiences.
41. Those responsible for overseeing procedures for admissions and attendance understand the most recent requirements for these and ensure that they are met. Leaders work sensitively with pupils and parents should any pupils find attendance difficult. Contact is made with the local authority and the UK visa and immigration service as required.

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

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

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

43. The curriculum encourages pupils to reflect on the way in which human society has developed and changed over time. Pupils draw on the breadth of their different nationalities and experiences when discussing different social and political systems. There is a Model United Nations (MUN) in which pupils discuss global issues. The pupil-initiated political society is evidence of the pupils' awareness of different political systems and their interest in how political decisions impact on a country's people. Leaders plan international days in conjunction with pupils, celebrating the independence days of different countries, including Hungary, Nigeria and Japan.
44. Pupils learn about British values, such as the rule of law and individual liberty, and understand that these ensure the right of all to their own opinions and to free speech within an expectation of mutual respect. They see that the values of respect and tolerance are essential to creating the school community and relate these to wider society. Pupils learn in PSHE lessons that the British legal system protects the rights of all individuals to equal treatment regardless of differences such as gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity.
45. Pupils are enabled to become politically aware and understand how democracy has developed within Britain and other countries. They experience democracy in campaigning for roles as pupil leaders and voting for their choice. Leaders take pupils' opinions into account, such as in their response to requests to create a girls' football team and to provide a salad bar at lunch time.
46. Pupils learn that civilised societies depend on respect for the law. Their typically responsible behaviour, which helps to create a friendly and trusting school community, is based on their principled understanding of the difference between right and wrong.
47. Leaders encourage pupils to contribute to the local community. Pupils are involved in a local nature conservation society and in initiatives to improve sustainability in the school and local area. They visit a local care home and help to organise an annual community event for local residents living close to the boarding houses. They have raised money for a charity in Rwanda.
48. Suitable careers education is provided in school that draws on the wider resources of the proprietorial group and provides a framework for developing the pupils' readiness for university. Younger pupils use an online platform that helps them to consider their own interests and aptitudes and provides impartial suggestions on potential careers. Careers education intensifies for pupils in Year 12 with more tailored advice on the university application process. This is primarily focused on applications to universities in Britain and support for those wishing to apply to universities elsewhere or alternative routes, such as apprenticeships, is less robust.
49. The experience of boarding helps pupils to develop the financial acumen to manage their own finances. The PSHE programme includes units on employment rights and the responsibilities of employees. In PSHE lessons and in business and economics studies, pupils develop their understanding of financial matters at a political level, for example considering how government fiscal policies are financed. Staff ensure that any discussions which feature political themes or content are conducted impartially and without bias.

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

50. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

51. Leaders have established a positive culture of safeguarding. There are suitable policies and procedures in place that reflect regulatory guidance. Governors undertake an annual formal review of policy and practice, so that they can be confident that leaders are safeguarding pupils effectively and responding appropriately to their needs.
52. Safeguarding leaders are appropriately trained, including in mental health awareness, and provide appropriate points of contact across the school site. They undertake additional training to ensure they are up to date with contextual risks to the pupils, such as those presented by extremist views. Safeguarding leaders provide annual formal training for staff on safeguarding as well as informal updates. Regular quizzes check on staff understanding of safeguarding procedures.
53. Staff understand the importance of safeguarding and are conscious of their duty to ensure that the pupils' wellbeing is protected. They know the pupils well and are alert to changes in behaviour. They understand their responsibility to report any concerns relating to pupils or to adults working in the school. Staff know to whom to report and understand the procedures to follow. Teachers and house managers are sensitive to the extra vulnerabilities of the boarders who come to the school from a range of different cultural backgrounds and experiences.
54. Suitable safeguarding logs record concerns and action taken in response to them. Records are confidential and securely stored. Safeguarding leaders work with local agencies, such as social service and the police, as necessary to provide appropriate support to pupils. They refer concerns to the appropriate authorities when appropriate.
55. Governors and leaders take suitable steps to protect pupils from accessing inappropriate material or being placed at risk while using the internet. They have established robust measures to filter internet access and monitor its usage consistently to identify patterns. They also ensure that levels of filtering do not present unnecessary barriers to pupils' ability to research for academic purposes.
56. Pupils know that the rules on internet usage are there to protect them. They learn about risks, such as encountering phishing or misinformation. Pupils know how to approach staff for help should they have worries about material they encounter.
57. Pupils know the names of the safeguarding leaders and that they can approach them, their house managers or any member of staff should they need support. They know that staff care about them and will do their best to help. Leaders take appropriate actions to deal with inappropriate behaviour or misuse of social media by pupils. However, some pupils' experience is that these have not always been managed with sufficient speed or sensitivity.
58. Processes for safer recruitment of staff are rigorous. Centralised support from the proprietorial body helps to ensure that all required suitability checks are carried out in advance of allowing someone to start work at the school and that these are correctly recorded on the single central record of appointments (SCR). The SCR is regularly checked by governors to ensure themselves of its accuracy.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

59. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Earlscliffe
Department for Education number	886/6138
Address	Earlscliffe 29 Shorncliffe Road Folkestone Kent CT20 2NB
Phone number	01303 253951
Email address	admissions@earlscliffe.co.uk
Website	www.earlscliffe.co.uk
Proprietor	Dukes Education Group Ltd
Chair	Mr Aatif Hassan
Headteacher	Mr Toby Mullins
Age range	14 to 19
Number of pupils	98
Number of boarding pupils	97
Date of previous inspection	7 to 8 June 2023

Information about the school

60. Earlscliffe is an independent co-educational boarding and day school for international pupils aged 14 to 19 years. Almost all pupils are boarders. The school offers an international transition year and a one-year intensive GCSE course for pupils of compulsory school age. It offers A levels and other courses in preparation for university entrance. The school occupies a number of buildings in the suburbs of Folkstone in Kent. The current interim headteacher has been in post since January 2026.
61. All boarders are accommodated in one of the five single-sex houses, all within walking distance of the main teaching building.
62. The school has identified 25 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
63. The school has identified English as an additional language for 92 pupils.
64. The school states its aims are to encourage pupils to develop a love of learning as they mature into responsible global citizens with the skills to contribute to an increasingly interconnected world. The school states that its core values are aspiration, community, curiosity, personal development and respect.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

21 to 23 April 2026

65. A team of four inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

66. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons
- observation of registration periods
- 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 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.

67. 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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For more information, please visit isi.net