

School inspection report

28 to 30 April 2026

Downside School

Stratton-on-the-Fosse

Radstock

BA3 4RJ

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 successfully promote a positive, reflective and purposeful culture shaped by the school's Benedictine values. As a result, pupils behave courteously, listen respectfully to others and reflect thoughtfully on the non-material aspects of life.
2. Leaders evaluate the school's provision rigorously, identifying priorities for improvement. Leaders understand potential risks to pupils' welfare and put in place suitable measures to manage them. Governors check that leaders implement appropriate policies and procedures so that the Standards are met consistently. However, not all the required policies were made available to parents of current and prospective pupils at the start of the inspection. This was rectified during the inspection.
3. The well-balanced curriculum includes a broad range of subjects, including GCSE, A-level and BTEC courses. Leaders modify the established curriculum where possible so that it takes account of pupils' interests. Teachers are highly knowledgeable. They use a wide range of good-quality resources to stimulate pupils in their learning. However, teaching does not consistently provide opportunities for pupils to develop independence of thought or deepen their knowledge and understanding. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) receive carefully crafted support.
4. Leaders accurately identify and address the needs of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) with specialist, targeted support.
5. The school has effective systems for assessing pupils' progress. Staff give helpful feedback on pupils' work and provide tailored support for pupils who require it. Pupils make good progress from their assessed starting-points, as indicated by their achievement in GCSE, A-level and BTEC examinations. The school provides a rich programme of recreational activity, including during boarding time, to develop pupils' skills and interests.
6. Leaders make pupils' mental health and emotional wellbeing a priority. They ensure that pupils receive a high level of care. Pupils are well informed about how to access help promptly from adults when they require it. The personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) programmes support pupils in developing self-esteem, establishing positive relationships and maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Leaders promote pupils' fitness and physical health through a carefully structured and well-resourced physical education (PE) programme. Pupils uphold high standards of conduct, supported by a suitable behaviour policy. Rigorous procedures are in place to promote health and safety. The school premises, including boarding houses, are well maintained.
7. Pupils are prepared well for life in British society. Leaders provide meaningful opportunities for pupils to learn about a range of cultural and religious traditions. Pupils learn to recognise how people may differ from each other. As a result, pupils show high levels of tolerance and interact respectfully with their peers. Pupils develop a high level of social awareness through opportunities to serve other members of the school community. They extend their understanding of their broader social obligations by volunteering in the local community. Through the curriculum, pupils learn about British values, democratic processes and the role of Parliament and the courts. The school provides effective economic and careers education.
8. Governors provide rigorous oversight of the school's safeguarding procedures. Staff at all levels receive suitable training in safeguarding practice. Staff refer concerns about pupils' welfare promptly

to designated safeguarding leaders. Leaders provide well-considered support for pupils affected by safeguarding issues. Records relating to safeguarding are thorough. Leaders liaise effectively with external agencies, including the local authority and children's services. Suitable internet monitoring and filtering systems are in place. Pupils learn how to stay safe, including online, through the curriculum. Leaders implement effective safer recruitment procedures for new staff and governors.

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 all required policies are made available to parents or prospective parents so that they are able to form a proper picture of the school
- ensure that teachers consistently challenge pupils to apply their previous learning independently, so that they are able to develop their knowledge and understanding to the full, across the curriculum.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Governors provide effective oversight of the school in assuring themselves that the Standards are met consistently. They check that leaders have good skills and knowledge appropriate to their roles and actively promote pupils' wellbeing effectively across all areas of school life. Governors hold leaders to account through meetings and detailed scrutiny of reports on key areas. They visit the school regularly and discuss the school's provision with staff, parents and pupils to inform their understanding of leaders' work. Governors question leaders' decision-making where necessary and check that leaders complete any required actions promptly.
10. Leaders prioritise pupils' wellbeing in their decision-making. They consistently promote the school's values, which place clear emphasis on teaching and learning, humility, personal discipline, reverence, active listening and service to others. Leaders model these values in their daily interactions with pupils and staff, so that pupils understand them clearly and apply them in their relationships with others. As a result, pupils feel supported and uphold high standards of mutual respect and personal conduct.
11. Leaders are ambitious for the success of the school. They evaluate the school's work rigorously, drawing on a wide range of evidence to identify priorities for improvement. Leaders use this evaluation effectively to enhance provision. For example, they have recently restructured the senior leadership team to improve the co-ordination of leaders' work, enabling them to collaborate more effectively to support pupils' academic progress and wellbeing. Following a review of boarding arrangements, leaders have revised provision for boarders in Years 7 to 9, so that they develop a deeper sense of community.
12. Leaders maintain a clear understanding of contextual risks. They identify potential hazards to pupils' wellbeing, including risks relating to educational trips, on-site vehicular movement, boarding houses and individual pupils' welfare. Leaders implement a systematic strategy for managing these risks, supported by comprehensive written risk assessments which are reviewed regularly for their effectiveness. Staff receive suitable training in managing risk. Leaders check how well staff understand the strategies for mitigating risk.
13. The leadership of boarding is effective. Leaders establish clear routines to support boarders' wellbeing. They work closely with safeguarding, pastoral and healthcare teams to identify boarders' individual needs and provide appropriate support when necessary. As a result, boarders feel supported and benefit from a well-ordered boarding environment.
14. Parents regularly receive informative reports about their child's achievement and conduct. The school typically provides or makes available all required policies and procedures to parents and prospective parents. However, at the beginning of the inspection, the school's policy on provision for pupils who speak EAL was not made available. This was rectified during the inspection.
15. Leaders ensure that policies reflect current statutory guidance. They review policies regularly and amend them promptly when requirements change. Leaders communicate these changes clearly to staff and check that staff understand how to apply policies and procedures in their daily work.
16. Leaders maintain effective relationships with external agencies, including children's services and the local authority, to promote pupils' wellbeing. Leaders ensure staff notify the local authority when pupils join or leave the school at non-standard times of transition.

17. Leaders demonstrate a deep commitment to inclusion. They maintain a suitable accessibility plan to improve pupils' access to the curriculum, the school's premises and information. The school meets its obligations under the Equality Act 2010.
18. Leaders implement a suitable complaints procedure. They adhere to the published timeframes and maintain a suitable record of concerns they receive. Leaders review outcomes studiously, including when a complaint is not upheld, to determine whether changes to the school's policies and procedures are required.

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

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

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

20. Leaders maintain a broad, flexible and balanced curriculum. Staff draw up suitable schemes of work in a wide range of academic subjects, including languages such as French, Spanish, Italian, Latin and classical Greek. The curriculum develops pupils' creative and aesthetic skills through subjects such as design and technology, art and music. Where possible, leaders provide subjects that reflect pupils' personal interests and cultural backgrounds, such as Polish and Cantonese. The curriculum includes opportunities for pupils to extend their learning through structured independent research projects. The sixth-form curriculum offers an extensive range of A-level and BTEC courses, including environmental science and enterprise.
21. Leaders evaluate the curriculum regularly to check that it meets pupils' needs. Following recent review, leaders have adjusted the curriculum in Years 10 and 11 so that it provides a more effective balance between breadth of study and depth of learning.
22. Teachers display high levels of subject knowledge and a detailed knowledge of pupils and their needs. They encourage pupils to show mutual respect, express a range of views and listen respectfully to diverse perspectives. This enables them to promote a constructive learning environment characterised by high expectations, good behaviour and positive relationships.
23. Teachers make effective use of good-quality resources, including interactive software, multimedia materials and subject-specific equipment. They provide appropriate apparatus in science, specialist tools and materials in design and technology, and a suitable range of media in art to develop pupils' knowledge and skills. Pupils develop a clear appreciation of drama, music, literature and art. A wide range of dramatic productions develops pupils' appreciation of diverse theatrical traditions and promotes their collaborative skills and creativity. Leaders provide structured opportunities for pupils to take part in musical activity, including through choirs, orchestras and ensembles, such as the big band. A broad range of activities deepens pupils' aesthetic awareness, including in design and technology and art.
24. Most teachers plan lessons that use a variety of strategies that respond well to pupils' individual needs and develop their knowledge and skills effectively. However, in some lessons, teachers do not manage time effectively to challenge pupils to think independently or become fully engaged in their learning. When this happens, pupils do not extend their learning to the full because planning does not include opportunities for them to apply and develop their knowledge and understanding.
25. Leaders oversee an effective system for assessing pupils' progress. Staff analyse statistical information, including data from termly assessments, to devise strategies that help pupils sustain good progress. They provide tailored support for pupils to improve their performance when needed. Pupils receive well-considered targets that enable them to build on their progress. Teachers apply the school's marking policy consistently and provide helpful, personalised feedback about pupils' work. Pupils benefit from structured opportunities to reflect on the quality of their work and develop their own strategies for improvement. As a result of the support they receive, pupils make good progress from their assessed starting points and achieve well in GCSE, A-level and BTEC examinations.
26. Leaders make effective use of a range of sources to identify the needs of pupils who have SEND. Specialist staff prepare well-considered individual learning plans (ILPs) that set out clear strategies to

support pupils' learning. Teachers use these plans to make practical adjustments to their planning, including seating arrangements that help pupils to focus and step-by-step modelling for those who benefit from this approach.

27. Pupils who speak EAL receive support that addresses their needs. Leaders identify pupils' language skills promptly and provide specialist lessons where required to develop their linguistic competence. Specialist staff provide helpful advice to teachers on how to support pupils who need help with spoken or written English, including in acquiring subject-specific technical vocabulary.
28. The school's wide-ranging recreational programme extends pupils' interests and skills effectively. Pupils participate in activities such as The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE), the Combined Cadet Force (CCF), choirs and orchestras. They also take part in a range of clubs and societies, including computer coding, biblical Greek, art and science. Leaders organise a stimulating programme of weekend activities for boarders, including visits to Bath, cinema trips, pony trekking, bowling and other sporting pursuits. Boarders receive effective academic support from house staff when required during boarding time.

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

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

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

30. Leaders prioritise pupils' pastoral care and implement systems to help pupils feel well supported, develop self-esteem and grow in confidence. They put measures in place to enable pupils to seek timely help from adults, including tutors, house staff, counsellors and health-centre staff. Suitable arrangements are in place for boarders to discuss concerns with an independent person, external to the school. The well-structured PSHE programme helps pupils to develop practical strategies for managing their wellbeing. Leaders check the effectiveness of these arrangements through an annual questionnaire.
31. The school's Benedictine foundation places a clear emphasis on spiritual reflection. Leaders provide meaningful opportunities for pupils to pray and reflect through daily routines, regular services in the adjacent abbey church, hymn practices and trips, such as pilgrimages to Lourdes. The school makes appropriate arrangements for pupils from different faith backgrounds to observe the tenets of their faith. Through religious studies (RS), pupils acquire a secure knowledge of different religions and spiritual practices, enabling them to develop respect for others who hold different beliefs from their own.
32. The school's well-structured RSE programme provides opportunities for pupils to learn about topics such as consent, coercive behaviour and the characteristics of healthy relationships. Leaders ensure that teachers of RSE are suitably trained to teach sensitive topics with confidence. Teachers check pupils' understanding and elicit their views on the effectiveness of the programme. Leaders review this feedback carefully, adjusting the programme where required.
33. Leaders provide a curriculum and activities which provide pupils with effective health education. The PSHE programme, implemented in well-planned lessons, helps pupils learn how to make informed decisions that support a healthy lifestyle, including nutrition and diet. Leaders promote pupils' physical development through a well-planned programme of PE. This develops pupils' understanding of their bodies and of how strength, endurance and core stability contribute to physical fitness. An inclusive and extensive co-curricular programme of team and individual sports further develops pupils' agility, tactical awareness and movement skills.
34. The school's behaviour policy sets out expectations, rewards and sanctions clearly. Staff implement the policy fairly and consistently. As a consequence, pupils behave well and understand the importance of taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Leaders provide purposeful opportunities for pupils to reflect on any conduct that does not uphold the school's values.
35. Staff implement the anti-bullying policy effectively, and incidents of bullying are few in number. Leaders maintain detailed records of any incidents and respond suitably to any emerging patterns. Pupils learn about different types of bullying through the PSHE programme and assemblies. They understand their responsibility to act on and report any instances of bullying that they might encounter.
36. Prefects receive suitable training and understand their responsibilities. They contribute positively to school life by promoting good behaviour, supporting their peers and modelling mature conduct for younger pupils.

37. Leaders maintain high standards of health and safety and implement rigorous systems to ensure the school premises are maintained to a high standard. Leaders implement an up-to-date fire risk assessment and schedule regular fire-evacuation drills, including during boarding time. They ensure that the required checks and maintenance are undertaken across the school site. Leaders provide staff with regular training in health and safety matters and guidance about how to report any defects that may arise. Leaders respond promptly to matters raised and keep comprehensive records relating to health and safety.
38. A well-staffed health centre provides a high standard of accommodation for unwell or injured pupils. An appropriate number of staff, including staff who care for boarders, hold suitable first aid qualifications. Medicines are stored securely and administered effectively. Records relating to pupils' medical needs and incidents are thorough.
39. Leaders deploy staff effectively to supervise pupils across the site, including during non-teaching and boarding times.
40. Staff maintain admission and attendance registers in accordance with current statutory guidance. Leaders review attendance records diligently. They implement appropriate plans to support pupils who need help in improving their attendance.
41. Boarding accommodation is well appointed and of good quality. Boarders have access to suitable sanitary facilities and comfortable spaces for study and recreation. They can personalise areas of their accommodation and have secure storage facilities for their personal possessions. Boarders receive nutritious meals, which include appropriate options for those who have dietary requirements.

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. Leaders prepare pupils effectively for life in British society. They ensure that pupils learn to respect and value people from different backgrounds, cultures and religions, in keeping with the Benedictine philosophy of loving others for who they are. The curriculum provides a range of opportunities for pupils to explore different national identities, cultures and ways of life. In Year 8 English, for example, pupils consider how writers present themes linked to racial and social divisions in South Africa. Similarly, in art, pupils study artworks from around the world and draw on the ideas they represent in their own pieces. Through PSHE lessons, pupils learn about the impact of gender, disability and racial discrimination.
44. Leaders broaden pupils' understanding of diversity through events that celebrate the traditions, religious festivals and food of different cultures, such as Chilean National Day, Nigerian Day and Ramadan. The school arranges opportunities for pupils to meet people from other parts of the world, including through regular visits from pupils at a Mexican school. Pupils widen their understanding of the varying backgrounds of their peers through assemblies where pupils share aspects of their own national cultures and religions.
45. The school encourages pupils to develop a high level of social responsibility, reflecting the Benedictine imperative to serve others. Pupils serve the school community through a wide range of leadership opportunities. Older pupils help new pupils settle into school life. Leaders arrange meaningful opportunities for pupils to contribute to the wider community. Pupils support a charity for homeless people in Bath, visit residents in a local care home and help teach sport at a local school for disabled pupils.
46. Through the PSHE programme, assemblies and presentations by visiting speakers, pupils develop a clear understanding of democratic participation and the role of Parliament. They learn about the role of the police and how courts and tribunals uphold the rule of law. They develop an understanding of values such as individual liberty and mutual respect, including how these support responsible conduct in wider society. Activities such as debating club and Model United Nations give pupils insight into geopolitical sensitivities and contemporary civic issues, including proposals to lower the voting age. Leaders check that discussions of political themes are balanced and do not promote partisan views.
47. Teachers help to develop their moral understanding through challenging and engaging activities throughout the curriculum. For example, in RS pupils consider ethical questions relating to the sanctity of life, forgiveness, justice and the treatment of people who are vulnerable. In mathematics, pupils explore the moral issues that arise when lenders take advantage of borrowers in financial difficulty. In history, pupils examine the ethical questions raised by political repression and the treatment of prisoners in the Soviet gulags.
48. Pupils receive suitable economic education. Through the PSHE programme, they learn about budgeting, saving and managing bank accounts. Sixth-form pupils develop their understanding further by learning about exchange rates, the effect of taxation on businesses and how to manage their personal finances in higher education.

49. Staff implement a well-structured careers programme which takes account of national benchmarks for careers education. This enables pupils to explore their future choices effectively. Pupils learn about a wide range of professions through careers fairs and presentations by visiting speakers, including former pupils. Older pupils receive high-quality, personalised guidance on careers and higher-education options, including degree apprenticeships and university courses in the UK and abroad.

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. Governors place safeguarding at the centre of their oversight. They check that procedures are secure through regular reviews of safeguarding practice and discussions with leaders, pupils, staff and parents. Governors study relevant data and carefully consider local safeguarding protocols. They receive appropriate training in safeguarding and keep their knowledge current through regular updates.
52. Leaders maintain robust systems to safeguard pupils. They ensure the school's safeguarding policy and procedures align with current statutory guidance. Leaders foster a culture in which staff remain alert to pupils' needs and understand their responsibilities to protect them from harm.
53. Leaders are well informed of contextual safeguarding risks to pupils, and implement suitable measures to manage them. Suitable safeguarding arrangements are in place when external organisations use the school site.
54. Leaders with designated safeguarding responsibilities have the required training for their roles. Staff receive suitable training in safeguarding. Leaders check how well staff understand safeguarding issues and provide further training if required. Staff are vigilant about pupils' welfare and report concerns in line with the school's safeguarding procedures.
55. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding work effectively with healthcare, boarding and pastoral teams to monitor concerns and assess potential risks to pupils' wellbeing. They implement thoughtfully designed plans to support pupils affected by safeguarding issues. Records relating to safeguarding matters are comprehensive and include reasons for decisions. Leaders liaise effectively and promptly with external agencies, including children's services and the local authority when necessary.
56. Staff understand their responsibility to refer concerns about the conduct of adults working at, or residing in, the school. Leaders operate suitable procedures for managing any concerns. They maintain detailed records and review them to identify any patterns that require further action.
57. The school has suitable internet monitoring and filtering systems in place to protect pupils from accessing inappropriate, harmful or illegal online content. Leaders test the systems regularly for their effectiveness and adjust them if required.
58. Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe, including online, through the PSHE programme and assemblies. They are taught about how to protect their personal information, use privacy settings appropriately and block users who may cause harm. Leaders make sure that pupils are well informed about how to report concerns to adults when required.
59. All required safer recruitment checks are completed for staff, governors and contractors. Leaders complete appropriate checks on adults who are not employed by the school but live on the school premises. The single central record of appointments (SCR) is maintained diligently.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

60. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Downside School
Department for Education number	933/6021
Registered charity number	1184700
Address	Downside School Stratton-on-the-Fosse Radstock Somerset BA3 4RJ
Phone number	01761 235100
Email address	reception@downside.co.uk
Website	www.downside.co.uk
Proprietor	Downside School
Chair	Mr John Ludlow
Headteacher	Mr Michael Randall
Age range	11 to 18
Number of pupils	256
Number of boarding pupils	165
Date of previous inspection	21 to 22 June 2023

Information about the school

61. Downside School is an independent co-educational day and boarding school located in Stratton-on-the-Fosse, near Radstock in Somerset. The school is overseen by a charitable trust, administered by a board of governors. The current headteacher took up his responsibilities in September 2025. Since the previous inspection, the school has reduced the number of houses for male boarders from four to three.
62. The school has five boarding houses, which are located on the school site. Three houses accommodate male boarders and two are for female boarders.
63. The school has identified 75 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. No pupil in the school has an education, health and care plan.
64. The school has identified English as an additional language for 95 pupils.
65. The school states its aims are to guide pupils to encounter Christ through experience of a Benedictine community of faith. It aims to be uncompromising in the pursuit of academic excellence. The school seeks to foster a culture of unselfish love, integrity, humility and leadership through service, and to develop the character and confidence of young people through sport and co-curricular opportunities.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

28 to 30 April 2026

66. A team of five inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

67. 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.

68. 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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