

School inspection report

12 to 14 November 2024

Downe House School

Hermitage Road

Cold Ash

Thatcham

RG18 9JJ

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 understand and fulfil their responsibilities well. They work closely with leaders to promote the aims and values of the school. The wellbeing of pupils underpins all decision making and future planning. Governors ensure that leaders have the appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the Standards consistently. As a result, pupils are successful and well prepared for life after school.
2. Leaders promote a culture where relationships are based on mutual trust and respect. Pupils feel safe and are well cared for. They are courteous, friendly and supportive of each other. Serious misbehaviour and bullying are rare. There is a suitable programme of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, known in the school as the 'learning for life' programme. The programme helps pupils to understand themselves and to form healthy relationships.
3. Leaders provide a wide range of co-curricular activities. Pupils develop their talents and interests through sport, music and drama, and in a variety of academic societies. Pupils understand the need to establish a healthy balance between their academic studies and their co-curricular activities. Boarders enjoy a good range of activities at weekends, as well as finding time to relax and socialise with friends.
4. Pupils make good progress in their academic work and attain highly in public examinations. This is a result of teaching that is well planned and that meets the needs of pupils effectively. Pupils enjoy learning. They are eager to improve their work and act on the helpful feedback offered by teachers.
5. Leaders encourage pupils to be outward looking. Through the global internship and exchange programmes, pupils experience living, working or studying abroad. Year 8 pupils enjoy a term studying in France. As a result, pupils are open-minded and have a mature understanding of other cultures.
6. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage in their lives after school. A comprehensive careers programme for older pupils, including support for university applications, helps pupils feel confident about their futures. However, careers education for pupils in Years 7 to 9 is limited and does not fully meet their needs.
7. Boarding accommodation is of a high standard. Policies and procedures are implemented effectively across the boarding houses. Boarders feel well cared for as a result of the support offered by residential staff and by the medical centre. Leaders regularly seek the views of boarders. Pupils feel that their ideas are valued and considered carefully by staff.
8. The school's safeguarding arrangements are effective. Staff are well trained in safeguarding. They know how to recognise and report any safeguarding concerns. Leaders and staff know the pupils well. Staff deal with any pastoral or safeguarding concerns sensitively and appropriately.

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 provision of careers education for pupils in Years 7 to 9, so that they are well informed about a wide range of subject and career options.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

9. Governors and leaders work closely to ensure the school meets its aims, and to prioritise the wellbeing of pupils. Governors know the school well. They bring expertise and a wide range of skills to the role. Through the various committees, governors offer appropriate support and challenge to school leaders, ensuring that that Standards are met consistently.
10. Governors and leaders share a clear vision for the school's development. The development plan is seen as a live document that is kept under constant review, ensuring that the needs of pupils are prioritised.
11. Governors offer appropriate support and challenge to leaders. They carefully review the educational provision each term. Governors and leaders place a high priority on risk management. Risk strategies are comprehensive and updated when required. This ensures that any contextual risks to pupils are addressed quickly. Governors and leaders fulfil their responsibilities with regard to health and safety legislation effectively.
12. The leadership of boarding is highly effective. Boarding staff have appropriate experience and training, which is reviewed and updated regularly. Policies and procedures are implemented effectively across the boarding houses.
13. Leaders fulfil the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) receive individual support that enables them to access the curriculum effectively. An appropriate accessibility plan is in place which ensures that the wider needs of pupils are addressed within appropriate timescales. Leaders are aware of their responsibilities to report to the local authority about the progress of pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
14. Leaders take any complaint seriously. They ensure that complaints are investigated thoroughly and addressed in a timely manner. Careful records are kept so that any trends can be identified. Leaders respond sensitively to any concerns raised by boarders. Boarders are confident that pastoral leaders deal with any concerns promptly and effectively.
15. The school's website contains up-to-date details for contacting the school. School policies are published on the school's website. Regular reports on pupils' progress are sent to parents.

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

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

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

17. Leaders provide a broad curriculum. Pupils can study a wide range of modern languages, including Mandarin Chinese. A variety of creative subjects enables pupils to develop their skills in art, photography, design or textiles. In the sixth form, minority subjects, such as ancient Greek, are available, even if few pupils choose them.
18. Teachers are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subjects. Teachers plan carefully to meet the needs of their pupils. Through skilful questioning, teachers promote lively discussions in lessons, challenging pupils to develop their thinking and their communication skills.
19. Pupils enjoy learning. They engage enthusiastically in lessons, often collaborating well with their peers. Pupils have a strong knowledge of previous work, which gives them confidence to take risks in their learning. For example, in science lessons pupils enjoy tackling new work because they have a solid understanding of basic principles. Similarly, in history lessons, pupils skilfully use their background contextual knowledge to answer challenging questions.
20. Teachers offer detailed feedback on pupils' written work. Feedback from teachers often develops into an ongoing academic dialogue, as pupils seek to finesse their work. Consequently, pupils know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve.
21. Senior pupils achieve high levels of attainment in public examinations. The vast majority of them go on to universities with high entrance requirements in the UK or overseas. Academic and pastoral staff closely monitor any pupil whose progress falls below expectations and they are quickly followed up. Teachers are readily available outside of lessons to help pupils with their work. The advice and guidance offered by individual tutors supports pupils' wellbeing as well as their academic progress. Pupils are confident that they are well supported as they tackle the challenges of public examinations.
22. Pupils who have SEND make good progress. Teachers are aware of the needs of pupils who have SEND and plan lessons that meet their needs. For example, teachers often provide guidance on how to structure written answers. Specialist individual teaching for pupils who have SEND further helps them to develop the confidence to access the curriculum effectively.
23. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) receive support from specialist teachers. In lessons, pupils who speak EAL are often paired strategically with a peer for support. In many subjects, teachers provide lists of subject-specific vocabulary. As a result, pupils who speak EAL quickly become fluent in English. They make good progress.
24. Leaders provide a co-curricular programme that is broad and offers opportunities for pupils to experience a wide range of sporting, musical or drama activities. Many pupils attend different clubs and societies. Pupils often take the lead in initiating and running clubs.
25. Boarding pupils are actively involved in devising the extensive programme of weekend house activities. They enjoy opportunities to go off-site, supported by appropriate risk assessments. Equally, boarders enjoy relaxing and spending free time at weekends with their friends in their boarding house.

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

26. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

27. Leaders and staff model good behaviour. They successfully encourage pupils to live out the values of the school, known as the Downe House DNA, in their interactions with others. Leaders expect pupils to behave with courtesy and show respect for others. Pupils respond accordingly. Pupils' behaviour observed around school, in the dining room and in lessons is calm, considered and kind. They seek to collaborate and support one another in lessons, activities and in the boarding houses. Misbehaviour and bullying are rare. The school deals sensitively and proportionately if any incidents of poor or inconsiderate behaviour occur.
28. Leaders promote a sense of trust between staff and pupils, and as a result pupils feel comfortable sharing concerns, seeking advice or asking for academic help. Pupils know how and where to find support if they need it. Boarders are confident that they can discuss any concerns with resident or other staff, who prioritise their physical, social and mental wellbeing.
29. Pupils have a strong spiritual awareness. The chapel, situated in the centre of the school, is open to all pupils. Many pupils attend the voluntary services, such as the weekly communion service. Pupils of all faiths and none value time for reflection in compulsory chapel services, which help them to consider philosophical, ethical and non-material aspects of life.
30. Leaders actively promote the mental wellbeing of pupils. Each pupil enjoys a strong relationship with their individual tutor, who helps them to understand their own personal development, as well as how to manage their time effectively. The wellbeing centre and garden offer pupils a quiet space for personal reflection. Pupils are aware of the importance of maintaining good mental health, and counsellors are available to support this.
31. Leaders have developed a coherent 'learning for life' programme that includes relationships and sex education (RSE). Pupils explore issues of personal identity, relationships and wider social issues, and discuss how such issues relate to the school's Christian values. The programme enables pupils to understand their own personal development and encourages them to be caring members of the school community.
32. Leaders provide an extensive curriculum of physical education (PE). Pupils with a particular sporting talent receive specialist coaching. Other pupils keep fit through regular recreational exercise in the gym or swimming pool. Pupils of all abilities enjoy sporting fixtures with other schools. As a result, pupils understand the value of maintaining physical fitness alongside their academic studies.
33. Pupils understand the importance of a healthy diet. They appreciate the high-quality food available throughout the week and at weekends.
34. Boarding accommodation provides a welcoming and homely environment for boarders. Common rooms are comfortably furnished and provide a variety of games for boarders to use in their free time. House kitchens are well equipped and offer good social spaces for pupils to cook and relax together.

35. The school's medical centre is well equipped and well staffed to support the health of pupils. Boarders have access to external medical professionals when needed. An appropriate number of staff are trained in first aid. The school's medical centre looks after their needs well.
36. Leaders manage the health and safety of pupils effectively. There are regular fire drills in school and in boarding houses so that pupils know what to do if the alarm sounds. Pupils understand how the school's lockdown procedure works, if the need arises.
37. Attendance and admissions registers are kept appropriately and backed up regularly. Leaders monitor attendance and follow up any non-attendance swiftly. Leaders inform the local authority if a pupil joins or leaves the school at a non-standard time.

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

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

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

39. Leaders encourage pupils to be aspirational and outward facing. The school's global internship and exchange programmes enable older pupils to live, work or study abroad. Younger pupils spend a term at the school's residential centre in France. Within school, pupils from different countries celebrate their cultural heritage in assemblies and house events. As a result, pupils develop a sensitive and personal understanding of different cultures which helps them to reflect with maturity on their own cultural background.
40. Pupils have a good understanding of British society and the rule of law. Through their 'learning for life' lessons, and in subjects such as history, geography and politics, pupils discuss democracy and the merits of different political systems. Pupils regularly practise democracy when voting for representatives to pupil councils or in mock elections. Pupils have a good awareness of right and wrong and were actively involved in discussions that led to the creation of a new system of rewards and sanctions in the school.
41. Relationships between pupils and staff are underpinned by an appropriate level of mutual trust and respect. Pupils enjoy expressing their opinions and suggesting ideas in the school council. Boarders know that their views are respected and that pastoral leaders will respond positively to reasonable requests to change routines or enhance facilities.
42. In their 'learning for life' lessons, pupils learn about personal finance, such as how to manage a bank account. Older pupils consider the importance of budgeting and interest rates in preparation for life after school. In various academic subjects, pupils study the implications of national and global economic policies. Through their charitable work, pupils experience fund raising and learn to appreciate how charities often rely on financial donations.
43. Pupils are keen to serve others in and out of school. Pupil leaders act as respect ambassadors in houses, offering a listening ear for younger pupils. Other senior pupils serve in chapel or as leaders of societies. In response to the school's aim of promoting service in the community, pupils of all ages are actively involved in fund raising. They often choose to support charities where they have a close personal connection. Pupils of all ages enjoy competing between houses to raise funds for the local foodbank.
44. Senior pupils volunteer in local care homes or in primary schools. Pupils eagerly participate in the school's annual 'make a difference' day, when pupils find ways to volunteer in the local community. Through serving others, pupils gain a sense of fulfilment and a broader perspective on life.
45. Pupils naturally seek to collaborate and support one another in school. Pupils are accepting of difference and, consequently, pupils are confident to be themselves. Leaders promote a culture of inclusivity and pupils from different backgrounds form firm friendships within boarding houses and across the school.
46. A comprehensive programme of careers education helps GCSE and A-level pupils to make wise subject choices and consider a broad range of career options. Pupils in their final year are supported by knowledgeable staff, who help them with applications for university or employment. Careers education for younger pupils in Years 7 to 9, however, is limited and does not fully meet their needs.

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

47. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

48. Suitable arrangements are in place to safeguard the welfare of pupils. Leaders and governors promote a culture of transparency in which staff share information through clear channels of communication. In this way, leaders ensure that the safety and welfare of pupils is a priority for all staff.
49. Pupils are confident to speak to an adult about any concerns. An anonymous reporting system allows pupils to share concerns about other pupils. Pupils know that staff take all safeguarding concerns seriously, keeping careful notes and taking suitable action if required. Boarders maintain regular contact with their parents and guardians.
50. Leaders are knowledgeable and well trained in safeguarding. They make timely referrals to the local authority designated officer (LADO), if required. Staff receive regular training and know how to recognise and report any safeguarding concerns. Leaders have created a clear system for staff to report any low-level concerns in school. New staff receive formal training on the school's safeguarding procedures as part of their induction.
51. The training of boarding staff is comprehensive and up to date. Clear policies are in place to ensure the wellbeing of boarders. Systems and procedures for the safety and care of boarders are thoroughly and consistently applied. This means that boarders feel safe and well looked after.
52. Governors exercise an effective oversight of safeguarding. The governor with responsibility for safeguarding checks the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements through audits, and in discussions with staff and pupils.
53. Leaders understand the need to train staff with regard to the 'Prevent' duty. They understand how to recognise signs of radicalisation and how to report any concerns. Leaders have assessed the local contextual risks to pupils, such as political radicalisation, and keep the risks under constant review.
54. Pupils are taught how to stay safe online through the 'learning for life' programme. An effective system is in place to filter and monitor internet use in school. Leaders actively follow up any concerns that arise.
55. An accurate single central record of governor, staff and volunteer appointments is kept. The record is checked each term by leaders and a governor.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	Downe House School
Department for Education number	869/6002
Registered charity number	1015059
Address	Downe House School Cold Ash Thatcham Berkshire RG18 9JJ
Phone number	01635 200286
Email address	correspondence@downehouse.net
Website	www.downehouse.net
Proprietor	Downe House School
Chair	Ms Fru Hazlitt
Headteacher	Mrs Emma McKendrick
Age range	11 to 18
Number of pupils	550
Number of boarding pupils	504
Date of previous inspection	15 September 2021

Information about the school

57. Downe House School is an independent day and boarding school for female pupils situated in Thatcham, Berkshire. Founded in 1907, the school moved to its present location in 1922. The school is a charitable company limited by guarantee, of which the governing body are trustees.
58. Boarders are accommodated in 12 boarding houses situated on the school site. Boarders come mainly from the south of England and from countries overseas.
59. The school has identified 166 pupils as having SEND. A very small proportion of pupils in the school has an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
60. English is an additional language for 69 pupils.
61. The school states its aims are to encourage pupils to strive for excellence in all they do and to enable them to develop their talents to the full, so that they can become effective global citizens. It seeks to help pupils to develop a strong set of values, underpinned by the school's Christian ethos.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

12 to 14 November 2024

62. A team of 7 inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

63. 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
- discussion with the vice-chair of governors
- discussions with the head, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for PE
- 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.

64. 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**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

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For more information, please visit isi.net