

School inspection report

30 September to 2 October 2025

St Mary's School

Bateman Street
Cambridge
Cambridgeshire
CB2 1LY

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 have a clear vision for school development based on effective monitoring and self-evaluation. Governors maintain efficient oversight of the school, enabling them to ensure that leaders fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Leaders have a strategic approach to the management of risk and take effective and appropriate action to mitigate the risks identified.
2. The school's Catholic ethos is central to its approach to promoting pupils' spiritual learning and their sense of social responsibility. The values of the school's founder are prominently promoted throughout the work of the school. As a result, pupils have a growing understanding of faith, ethics and the contribution of women to society.
3. Leaders have created a curriculum that is broad and meets the needs and aptitudes of pupils. Teachers know their pupils well, have good subject knowledge and use a range of activities, resources and feedback to help pupils to learn effectively. They support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) through the provision of additional staff, the adaptation of facilities and appropriate modification of teaching.
4. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) make good progress because of the care that is put into considering the support they receive. Leaders monitor pupils' performance and any issues identified are addressed promptly.
5. The curriculum is complemented by a well-resourced co-curricular programme, which benefits pupils of different ages and abilities. Boarders are provided with a suitable range of activities during the evenings and at weekends. The programme is wide ranging and well co-ordinated. It supports pupils' skills, interests and personal development effectively.
6. From the early years and upwards, pupils show high levels of respect and tolerance. Consequently, behaviour is good and bullying is rare.
7. The programme of physical activities supports pupils' physical and mental wellbeing. The curriculum, together with the co-curriculum and assemblies, actively promotes pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem.
8. Boarding provision is carefully led and managed by knowledgeable and experienced staff. Conscientious supervision and a rigorous approach to safety ensure that boarders feel safe.
9. Leaders have a systematic approach to the management of health and safety, including fire protocols. Appropriate first aid is readily available when required.
10. Pupils are well informed and prepared to make financial decisions. They understand the importance of tolerance and respect for others. Pupils benefit from a well-structured careers education programme at the upper end of the school, which enables them to make informed choices about their next steps. However, this programme is less well developed in the younger years of the senior school.
11. Governors maintain a rigorous oversight of safeguarding practices at the school. Staff understand and implement the school's procedures for reporting any safeguarding concerns that might arise.

Leaders carry out recruitment checks as required by current statutory guidance and these are recorded appropriately. Pupils learn how to keep safe, including when online.

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 careers education in the lower years of the senior school so that these pupils are better informed about options for their next steps.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

12. Leaders and managers have the required knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities effectively, including actively promoting the wellbeing of pupils. Governors assure themselves that the Standards are met by effective scrutiny and monitoring of the school's practice and procedures. They receive detailed reports, regularly visit the school and review documentation. They provide appropriate challenge and support to leaders.
13. Leaders have an accurate view of the effectiveness of the school and areas for further development. They carefully consider the impact that their actions have on pupils' wellbeing and success. They are methodical and detailed in their self-evaluation, which informs their strategic school development planning. This planning focuses on improving the impact on pupils' wellbeing in all areas of the school's provision.
14. Leaders ensure that the school's ethos, which is informed by the values of the founder, is embedded and understood by pupils. Links with the local diocese are effective in supporting the high quality of the moral and spiritual education that the school provides.
15. Leaders manage any parental complaints appropriately and keep thorough records of these and any actions taken by the school in response. Complaints are dealt with within the timeframes stated in the school's policy.
16. Parents receive reports that provide them with information about their child's attainment, progress and attitudes to learning. Required information about the school, including its aims and ethos, is made available to parents, largely through the school's informative website. The school annually reviews the provision for any pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) and provides local authorities with an annual statement of income and expenditure.
17. Leaders ensure that new members of the school undergo an effective induction process, allowing them to settle in quickly and understand the school's expectations and procedures. Boarding routines and practice are well communicated. This enables new pupils to benefit readily from staff who are knowledgeable about boarding provision.
18. Leaders have a comprehensive and robust approach to risk management. They have an effective understanding of physical, welfare and safeguarding risks and respond with urgency and diligence to mitigate areas of potential risk when these are identified. Risk assessments evaluate potential risks thoroughly and detail appropriate steps taken to reduce or remove these. Leaders systematically monitor risk assessments to check their continued effectiveness.
19. Leaders foster close links with external agencies to promote the wellbeing of pupils. In particular, they maintain an effective working relationship with local safeguarding partners.
20. Leaders implement a detailed accessibility plan to enable access to the curriculum and facilities for any pupils who have SEND, for example by developing the acoustics of some classrooms and other spaces to make them calmer. Adaptation of play spaces in the junior school for pupils who have visual impairments ensures that breaktimes are inclusive. The school fulfils its duties under the Equality Act 2010.

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

21. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

22. Leaders set high expectations across the curriculum, ensuring breadth, depth and enrichment. The curriculum covers a balance across the linguistic, mathematical, scientific and creative domains. It is matched to pupils' needs and promotes good progress. Religious Studies (RS) is taught as a compulsory subject to GCSE, reflecting the school's Catholic heritage.
23. In the junior school, structured activities in expressive arts enable progression, with pupils learning about noteworthy artists and developing sketching techniques. Pupils refine their communication skills through debate and discussion, improving their written work. Mathematics is enriched through teaching that is adapted to the prior attainment of pupils and cross-curricular links, such as the exploration of alternative number systems. As a result, pupils make good progress, produce increasingly complex and accurate creative work and demonstrate secure reasoning in mathematics. Pupils develop confidence and clarity in oral and written communication.
24. In the senior school, pupils encounter a rich range of experiences. This includes debate and argument in the humanities, independent art responses on sophisticated themes, robotics, choir performances and discussions linking responsibilities to learning. In drama, structured activities ensure inclusive participation, allowing pupils to explore subtext and directing skills. As a result, pupils build technical and conceptual knowledge, express creativity and gain confidence in speaking, listening and literacy. They show independence, critical thinking and the ability to apply skills across contexts.
25. Leaders ensure that teachers have a high level of knowledge and enthusiasm for their subjects, allowing them to teach lessons that are accessible to pupils of different prior attainment. Teaching enables pupils to make good progress. Teachers' questioning techniques foster debate and critical thinking. Teachers connect learning to pupils' interests and promote independent research in creative subjects. Pupils engage positively with their learning and participate in a range of learning activities that equips them successfully for their future lives. Teachers provide personalised feedback so that pupils know how to improve their work. As a result, pupils develop resilience, confidence and subject knowledge.
26. In the junior school, leaders ensure that teaching methods incorporate collaborative approaches, such as 'learning buddies', to enable pupils to develop social and academic skills. Teachers employ strategies that encourage pupils to take academic risks so that pupils understand that learning from mistakes enhances their progress.
27. Leaders oversee lesson planning consistently with expectations for questioning and adaptation to the needs of pupils. Lessons are well resourced and engaging. Consequently, pupils acquire knowledge and apply it creatively, act responsibly and are motivated. They work with independence and confidence, often directing their own learning.
28. Leaders analyse data to ensure that pupils are making progress relative to their starting points. Patterns are identified across different year groups and individual targets are set. Regular meetings with teachers and pastoral leaders allow for close monitoring of individuals' progress. As a result, teachers identify appropriate methods of support to ensure that pupils make good progress. Pupils are able to take accountability for their own progress as there are clear targets set for them. From

their starting points, pupils make good progress to GCSE and A level. Parents receive suitable information about their child's attainment and progress.

29. Leaders ensure that provision for pupils who have SEND is well coordinated across the junior and senior schools so that those pupils are readily identified and supported. Leaders deploy specialist teaching staff who demonstrate good subject knowledge and adapt activities to accommodate specific needs of pupils. The provision of detailed information about pupils' needs allows teachers to plan appropriate lessons with suitable support in place for those pupils. As a result, pupils who have SEND gain confidence and make good progress.
30. Leaders implement strategies to ensure pupils who speak EAL are able to make progress. The provision of a dedicated team allows pupils to have access to small-group English classes and to have specialist support in their lessons. In the early years, teaching incorporates the use of home languages, songs and rhymes, and a variety of pictorial resources to help children count. In lessons, teaching incorporates inclusive practices such as subtitles on video materials and whilst teachers are talking. This enables pupils who speak EAL to use the resources provided to support their learning.
31. Children in the early years have well-structured and appropriately paced lessons that develop their language, mathematical, expressive art and design skills. These ensure that children from a young age learn to read and write successfully and show a high level of independence in creative design, using a range of media. Teachers introduce and model language in all tasks, echoing and improving the children's responses so that children make good progress.
32. Leaders provide a broad range of additional activities for pupils, including those that develop creative and aesthetic knowledge and skills. Activities include choir, environmental projects and cookery. There are sports fixtures in football, netball, swimming, cross country and hockey. In boarding, there are regular trips and excursions. Boarders access a varied evening and weekend enrichment programme. As a result, pupils develop resilience, and collaborative and leadership skills. They gain cultural experiences and a balance of activities beyond the classroom that benefit their physical and mental wellbeing.

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

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

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

34. School leaders actively promote the values of the founder of freedom, joy, justice, love and truth. This starts in the junior school with 'Mary Ward ambassadors' (named after the founder) and the school council. This is built upon in the senior school in tutor times and through the wellbeing committee. Senior boarders support younger boarders when they arrive. As a result, pupils listen and respond appropriately and demonstrate respect in their interactions with others.
35. Leaders promote the development of pupils' moral and spiritual understanding. Collective worship encourages pupils to value others and provides time for them to reflect on their own spirituality. Lessons in RS enable pupils to engage with wider learning and debate around philosophical and moral issues.
36. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to develop their self-esteem and confidence. Speech and drama lessons, music concerts and sports fixtures enable pupils to reflect on their development as a person and their own achievements. As a result, pupils develop a sense of worth and pride.
37. The importance of physical health is promoted by school leaders through the curriculum and through opportunities for pupils to engage in physical activities. This includes food and nutrition lessons and assemblies on healthy eating to support pupils to make healthy choices. Physical education lessons match pupils' prior levels of skill so that pupils develop their physical skills. For example, pupils develop their ball placement in hockey so that they are able to progress to passes on the move more quickly. As a result of this targeted approach, pupils have the opportunity to develop their skills.
38. School leadership has provided relevant resources for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE). In lessons on mental health, pupils discuss feelings and how to communicate them. The importance of sharing concerns is promoted. Pupils have access to people who can support their mental health, such as the school nurses and counsellors.
39. The school leadership ensures that there is an effective relationships and sex education (RSE) programme in place. This programme is adapted to meet the needs of pupils and incorporates pupils' views. Through the age-appropriate study of topics such as families, relationships, puberty and contraception, pupils are well informed to make decisions, are able to build positive relationships and know how to stay healthy.
40. Leaders set high standards for behaviour and expectations are regularly reinforced during assemblies and form time. Behaviour is monitored through the careful recording and tracking of incidents. Patterns of any poor behaviour are identified and resolved through equitable sanctions. Pupils treat each other with respect and behave in a calm manner around the building.
41. Leaders have an effective anti-bullying strategy that is understood well by pupils. Staff respond quickly to resolve any incidences of bullying. In PSHE, pupils learn about the different types and effects of bullying and why bullying is not acceptable. Leaders provide suitable support for those involved in or affected by bullying.

42. Leaders provide well-maintained and suitable premises and accommodation, including in the boarding house, to promote the welfare of pupils. Leaders ensure there is an efficient response to any maintenance issues that arise.
43. Leaders ensure that effective supervision arrangements are maintained. Staff are visible and attentive so that they can support pupils' needs. Leaders of boarding make regular checks on pupils' whereabouts at weekends and there are well-known procedures if a boarder were to be missing. Pupils feel safe and respected, with trusted staff always available.
44. Leaders ensure that suitable and accurate admission and attendance registers are maintained. Patterns of absence are monitored and resolved where required. Leaders inform the local authority about any attendance concerns and about pupils who leave and join the school at non-standard transition points. This helps to promote the safety and wellbeing of pupils.
45. Leaders support the wellbeing of pupils and staff through robust management of health and safety, led by suitably qualified staff. Health and safety induction training is carried out for all staff.
46. Suitable arrangements for fire safety are in place. The fire risk assessment is reviewed and updated annually. Fire drills occur in both the junior and senior schools and in the boarding house when boarders are sleeping.
47. Leaders ensure that first aid is administered in a timely and competent manner. Suitable written records are kept of accidents and the administration of medicine. Medical facilities are suitable for pupils who become unwell or have specific medical needs. Staff receive first aid training and all staff in the early years are trained in paediatric first aid.
48. Leaders ensure that the boarding house is well supervised. Boarders' induction programme welcomes them to the community and gives them suitable information about the guidance on offer. Boarders can locate boarding staff and know how to contact them overnight. Boarding accommodation is of good quality. The rooms provide a space to sleep, study and socialise. This results in boarders being able to live confidently in their environment.
49. Leaders encourage pupils to develop leadership skills through becoming prefects in school or the boarding house. This enables pupils to experience leadership at varying levels. As a result, pupils develop personal skills such as collaboration, negotiation and empathy.
50. Leaders provide children in the early years with suitable activities to promote their physical and emotional development. Children develop their motor skills effectively, such as when using modelling materials. Children become independent in their learning by choosing activities to access and by taking responsibility for dressing and personal care.

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

51. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

52. Leaders ensure that there are embedded opportunities in the curriculum and through educational visits for pupils to learn about global awareness, fairness and justice. Pupils demonstrate critical thinking, respect for global responsibility and confidence in applying knowledge to a range of social contexts. Pupil-led initiatives, where pupils raise money, collect items, or volunteer within the community, encourage their sense of generosity, social responsibility and a practical awareness of inequality.
53. The PSHE programme focuses on developing pupils' understanding of economic wellbeing. This is supported by practical activities, such as pupils in the junior school learning about savings from visitors from a bank. Pupils in the sixth form are provided with a specialist economic programme to prepare them for the next stage in their lives. Teaching includes budgeting at university and the impact of the global and national economic climate on individuals. This enables pupils to develop their understanding of economic concepts and personal finance.
54. Assemblies and events celebrate diversity and inclusion, reinforcing pupils' understanding of equality. Pupils learn about different religions and practices in RS lessons and this fosters respect and understanding. Black History Month, Pride Month and the Lunar New Year are marked to promote further understanding of diversity. Pupils are valued and supported through the tolerance and respect that is shown for different backgrounds and perspectives.
55. Leaders embed the promotion of British values across the curriculum alongside those of the school's founders. The school council, 'Mary Ward ambassadors' and charity work develop pupils' practical understanding of democracy and their sense of responsibility. As a result, pupils develop an understanding of freedom and demonstrate active citizenship.
56. Leaders ensure that the school's ethos reflecting its Catholic heritage is communicated and embedded throughout the school as part of its provision for pupils' moral development. As a result, pupils are aware of right from wrong and understand how the school's values and ethos are reflected in their actions.
57. Leaders have implemented comprehensive careers guidance within PSHE lessons, assemblies and subject teaching. This provision is well developed in Years 10 to 13. This ensures that pupils in these year groups are well informed of options for their future careers and develop essential skills such as interview techniques, financial literacy and career planning. Younger pupils learn about employability skills. The provision for younger years in the senior school is effective but less detailed in its content and less systematic in its delivery.
58. Leaders oversee a coherent life skills programme to equip pupils to be ready for life in British society. This includes guidance sessions, personal safety workshops and regular input from alumni, parents and university staff. The provision of house kitchens and laundry facilities allows boarders to become familiar with these practical aspects of everyday life. As a result, pupils are prepared well for independent living and life beyond school.
59. Leaders empower pupils to influence school life through democratic structures and positions of responsibility. This includes the school council, which acts as an elected body to represent its peers.

A variety of other leadership roles provide practical assistance for musical productions, sports events, pupils' wellbeing and the school environment. As a result, numerous pupils support school improvement through responsibilities that develop their individual leadership skills. Pupils engage with democratic processes, see their views acted upon and develop responsibility for their community.

60. Leaders capitalise on the school's Cambridge location by providing a comprehensive programme of speakers from the university, with pupils in the sixth form benefiting from talks by university professors. This provision successfully develops pupils' academic curiosity and prepares pupils for life after St Mary's.
61. Leaders ensure that children in the early years have many opportunities to develop social skills through shared creative projects, teamwork and the communication and language curriculum. Staff model language effectively, introducing subject-specific vocabulary. This results in children being able to express ideas, stories and questions. They play well and regularly work collaboratively to solve problems. Leaders provide opportunities for children to learn from visitors to the school and to make links to the curriculum when visiting locations away from the school site. Leaders ensure that the curriculum in the early years reflects the school's values and learning behaviours. Consequently, children show kindness as they play together and respond to a variety of staff.
62. Leaders ensure that the curriculum enables pupils to explore current affairs, identity formation and inequality. Staff present balanced perspectives through ground rules and the use of impartial sources. As a result, pupils develop an understanding of different viewpoints on political issues.

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

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

Safeguarding

64. Safeguarding arrangements are effective and reflect the requirements of current statutory guidance. Leaders with designated safeguarding responsibilities respond promptly and appropriately to any safeguarding concerns that arise. They consult with external safeguarding partners and refer safeguarding concerns to them when appropriate. Suitable arrangements for the handling of concerns about adults are in place. These are well understood by staff and followed when required. Leaders keep suitable records of safeguarding concerns, including the decisions and actions taken in response to these.
65. Governors maintain an effective overview of the safeguarding policy and procedures. They conduct thorough reviews of safeguarding practice at the school. All governors undertake appropriate training in safeguarding.
66. Safeguarding induction and training for staff, including that for the safeguarding team, are thorough, regular and in line with local requirements. Leaders provide safeguarding updates and scenario-based training for all staff. Staff understand their safeguarding responsibilities and know how to escalate concerns when required.
67. Leaders are aware of the contextual risks and challenges facing pupils beyond the school, including risks relating to radicalisation and extremism. This understanding is used to inform staff training and the development of the PSHE curriculum.
68. Leaders provide a number of ways for pupils to raise any concerns that they might have. Pupils know who they can approach should they wish to share any concerns. The availability and the role of the school's independent person are known to boarders.
69. Leaders ensure that all appropriate safer recruitment checks on adults who work with pupils or reside in boarding houses are made in a timely manner. These are accurately recorded in a suitable single central record of appointments (SCR).
70. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe, including when online. Suitable internet filtering and monitoring procedures are in place. These systems are tested regularly by the school. Any alerts are immediately reviewed by members of the safeguarding team, who respond as required.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	St Mary's School
Department for Education number	873/6001
Registered charity number	290180
Address	St Mary's School Bateman Street Cambridge Cambridgeshire CB2 1LY
Phone number	01223 353253
Email address	enquiries@stmaryscambridge.co.uk
Website	www.stmaryscambridge.co.uk
Proprietor	St Mary's School Cambridge
Chair	Mr Jeremy Pyne
Headteacher	Mrs Hannah Helliard
Age range	3 to 19
Number of pupils	510
Number of boarding pupils	55
Date of previous inspection	10 to 13 May 2022

Information about the school

72. St Mary's School, Cambridge is an independent day and boarding school for female pupils. It admits pupils of all faiths and none. It is situated in an urban area close to the city centre. The school was founded in 1898 by the Congregation of Jesus. The school consists of a junior school which includes the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) setting and a senior school incorporating a sixth form. Since the previous inspection, the headteacher was appointed in September 2024. The chair of governors took up his role in May 2025.
73. Boarding is in one house, located a short distance away from the school.
74. There are 17 children in the early years, comprising one Nursery and one Reception class.
75. The school has identified 138 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Three pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
76. The school has identified English as an additional language for 91 pupils.
77. The school states its aims are to inspire its pupils to aim high, to be courageous, compassionate, generous and confident in challenging injustice in the world and that each pupil is valued, upheld and listened to.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

30 September to 2 October 2025

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

79. 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 of governors
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the facilities for physical education
- visits to the boarding house accompanied by pupils and staff
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

80. 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