

School inspection report

4 to 6 November 2025

St Hugh's School

Carswell Manor

Faringdon

Oxfordshire

SN7 8PT

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders ensure that the school's ethos and values permeate throughout the school so that pupils are supported to be the best versions of themselves in an environment in which they feel safe and can thrive. Leaders have invested in an integrated independent learning and co-curricular programme which supports the personal development of pupils. This has a positive impact on their independence, mental and physical health, as well as their confidence.
2. The proprietor body and leaders are committed to ensuring high safeguarding standards so that pupils from the early years and pre-prep, through to prep, have a safe, supportive and stimulating environment to learn in. Pastoral and safeguarding leaders, as well as staff and governors, receive appropriate training so that the daily safeguarding of pupils is managed effectively. This includes paediatric first aid, food handling and nutrition in early years. Leaders work closely with external specialist agencies to seek advice and act on guidance in a timely manner to support pupils' needs effectively.
3. Proprietors and leaders ensure safer recruitment practices are in place and maintain an accurate single central record of appointments (SCR) with appropriate checks in place for staff who work at the school. However, there has not been sufficient clarity about checking prohibition from teaching for sport coaches working under staff supervision. Misunderstandings were swiftly rectified, were not systemic, and were not reflective of the effective practice in safer recruitment checks.
4. The school provides a rich curriculum and co-curricular offer which develops pupils' academic learning as well as their personal skills and qualities. Leaders are highly reflective and evaluative of the school's educational provision and have well-considered development plans to ensure teaching, learning and pupil welfare are continually improving. Teaching is effective overall and supports the pupils in making good progress.
5. Leaders have made thoughtful plans to develop curriculum content in information, and communication technology (ICT) in older years. However, the ICT curriculum does not fully support pupils in younger years to acquire skills at a suitable age to build a secure foundation for learning required at GCSE level.
6. Relationships between pupils and staff are positive. The importance of community and mutual support are evident in the positive atmosphere at the school. Leaders successfully promote the school's values of kindness, respect, independence, collaboration, courage and curiosity. The curriculum and activities within the school and in the boarding community support the development of pupils' mental, emotional and physical wellbeing.
7. Firm action is taken by leaders to address incidents of unkindness or, more rarely, bullying so that pupils are well supported in school and in their boarding house. Leaders ensure that health and safety, first aid, and fire safety measures are robust. Risk assessments are thorough and reviewed regularly. There are appropriate levels of staff supervision outside lesson times. Admission and attendance procedures are thorough. The boarding accommodation is suitable and meets boarders' needs.
8. Leaders implement a thoughtful and well-planned personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum, alongside a range of wider activities. These include educational trips, visiting speakers, fundraising activities, and assemblies to support pupils to understand the importance of key values,

such as respect and tolerance. Pupils are well supported to develop age-appropriate economic understanding and to understand the importance of service to the local community.

9. Governors take an active interest in the life of the school and visit regularly to meet with senior leaders, staff and parents to understand the school context and situational risks. This enables them to provide appropriate support and challenge, and to hold leaders to account. They regularly review the safeguarding, complaints and health and safety documentation to ensure that leaders have created thorough policies and procedures to provide a safe environment for pupils and staff. At the beginning of the inspection, there was an omission in practice relating to provision of information with reference to the number of formal complaints. This was rectified during the course of inspection.

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 required information related to the number of formal complaints made in the previous academic year is made available
- ensure greater clarity about which pre-employment checks are required for all categories of staff
- strengthen curriculum provision in ICT to ensure that pupils develop suitable, age-appropriate digital skills and experience in technological education.

Material change request

10. Inspectors considered the school's request for a change to the details of its registration to include an increase in the school's age range to 3 to 16 years, commencing with Year 9 day pupils in September 2026. There are no plans to increase boarding.

Inspectors considered the school's request for material change against relevant standards:

- There is a detailed review of safeguarding, supervision and welfare provision, and plans in place are suitable to support pupils' wellbeing.
- Leaders have given careful consideration to ensure that the new management structures in pastoral care will support pupils' wellbeing.
- Leaders have given careful consideration to risk management and suitable risk assessments are in place.
- The plans for premises and accommodation are suitable and make effective use of the school's grounds and building footprint to include a new dining hall, classrooms and laboratories.
- Leaders have made suitable plans to ensure that health and safety, fire safety, and first aid measures are sufficiently robust to support the change.

- Leaders have ensured that provision for younger pupils would not be adversely affected by the changes.
- Curriculum planning is in place and aligns with statutory requirements. There are detailed plans for the development of new curriculum content to support a broad GCSE curriculum, including appropriate PSHE, economic and careers education.
- Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and have the necessary training, experience and skills to teach the GCSE curriculum.
- Overall, the school's capacity to implement this material change is secure, with staffing, resources and support structures planned or already in place.

11. It is recommended that the requested material change be approved.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

12. Governors visit the school regularly to understand the life of the school and to monitor, support and challenge the effectiveness of leaders' work. Governors scrutinise policies, review documentation, speak with pupils and staff to ensure they understand the narrative behind the headteacher's reports and can contextualise the information they receive. This allows governors to be confident that leaders have the skills and knowledge to promote pupils' wellbeing consistently.
13. Leaders have the knowledge and training to lead effectively. They ensure the effective safeguarding of pupils and that safer recruitment checks are in place before staff begin work at the school. However, there were gaps in the recruitment checks which, while not systemic, did indicate the need for greater clarity over procedures to ensure consistency.
14. Governors and leaders are collectively reflective and proactive in their self-evaluation and assessment of the school's relative strengths and weaknesses. They are committed to promoting pupils' wellbeing and ensuring the school's values are embedded in future development plans.
15. The proprietor body is committed to ensuring that governors as well as leaders have the appropriate skills and knowledge to exercise their responsibilities effectively. Leaders and staff are well trained in safeguarding, first aid, fire safety, early years and boarding.
16. Senior leaders provide effective oversight of teaching, learning and pupil welfare ensuring that provision is consistently high quality. Regular learning walks, lesson observations, work scrutiny and data analysis enable leaders and subject leaders to identify strengths and areas for development. For example, recent staff training included the topics on providing appropriate challenge in lessons for all pupils and the sharing of best practice to support neurodiversity.
17. The school provides up-to-date and clearly articulated policies, relevant school details and information through its website. For example, the school's future development plans are well documented. There was a minor omission in providing access to information on the numbers of formal complaints. This was remedied in the course of the inspection.
18. The safeguarding policy is thorough, shows awareness of local thresholds and is in line with statutory guidance. Leaders take prompt and effective action in support of pupils' safety and wellbeing. Leaders provide appropriate information to the local authority about pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
19. Information on their child's performance and achievement is shared regularly with parents via an in-person meeting and through regular reporting. Leaders take prompt action in response to parental concerns about their child's academic or sporting performance so that families are confident that their views are heard and their child's best interests are effectively supported.
20. The proprietor body and leaders together ensure that all aspects of health and safety are prioritised and that comprehensive risk assessments are made, updated and adapted as necessary so that pupils are kept safe. For example, fire safety is risk assessed and fire and emergency evacuation drills are practised routinely, including at night, to ensure pupils' and boarders' safety. The school's accessibility plan fulfils leaders' duties under the Equality Act 2010.

21. Leaders have a clear understanding of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework and the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for boarding. They check that practice in the early years reflects the most recent guidance, including a full and comprehensive risk assessment for food and nutrition. In boarding, leaders ensure that boarders are kept safe, have suitable accommodation and a rich and varied experience in which to develop their skills as independent and confident individuals.

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. The school provides a rich curriculum offer which develops pupils' academic learning as well as their personal skills and qualities. The curriculum is well structured and supportive of high intellectual effort. Secure teacher subject knowledge, clear learning intentions, and effective methodology enable pupils to acquire new knowledge, develop skills and make good progress.
24. Leaders ensure the curriculum is suitably broad and challenging in most subject areas. Pupils are able to think deeply about challenging mathematical and scientific concepts and to solve problems exploring a variety of methods. In music, they use technology effectively to create imaginative compositions. In design and technology, pupils develop their creative skills by using a range of tools, for example, design software, power drills and sewing machines, to design and make their own products. However, while the curriculum in ICT includes teaching on the use of some digital tools, this is narrow in scope and not fully effective in creating a secure foundation for later learning at GCSE.
25. Leaders and teachers have developed an integrated framework for independent learning across the school which provides pupils with a variety of opportunities to work independently across many subjects. This is having a positive and growing impact on pupils' personal development. Speaking, listening, literacy and numeracy are consistently embedded across the curriculum, with pupils applying their learning independently, creatively and collaboratively. Pupils show a high level of personal confidence, maturity and independence beginning from nursery onwards. For example, in early years, children's suggestions were incorporated to create an engaging activity on rhythm and tempo of music. Older pupils displayed resilience and perseverance when responding to challenging tasks in lessons.
26. Teaching is well planned by enthusiast subject specialists who motivate pupils to become independent thinkers and to aim high. Positive teacher and pupil relationships help to create a safe environment in which pupils are confident to offer opinions, ask questions and provide solutions even when unsure of their answer. They see making mistakes as a route to deeper learning and understanding. Pupils are motivated and respond well to their teachers, allowing them to choose for themselves which tasks to undertake from a range of options. As a result, they make good progress and reach good levels of attainment by the time they reach Year 8. Pupils progress to the senior school of their choice and some win scholarship awards across many areas. In the early years, children make good progress and reach the expected level of development by the end of reception.
27. Provision for pupils who have specific educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is effective, with established systems and expertise in place to meet diverse needs. Teachers' understanding of pupils' prior attainment levels helps them to plan lessons with suitable adjustments. The 'learning success' department helps to provide targeted support to enable pupils across the ability range to make good progress. Teachers' strategies enable those who have SEND to access learning and participate fully.
28. Pupils identified by the school as speaking English as an additional language (EAL) have high levels of language proficiency and are supported effectively within lessons. They benefit from targeted support from their subject teachers that is adapted to their needs. This supports them to acquire appropriate linguistic skills and to access the curriculum with fluency.

29. In the early years, communication, language, early literacy and numeracy needs are met effectively through playful, practical, engaging and well-resourced activities. Teachers adapt planning to meet the needs and interests of the children. For example, in Reception, children practise their fine motor skills through role play in an imaginary hair salon. Children are given opportunities to lead learning such as identifying shapes in mathematics. The teaching of phonics encourages children to sound out letters, read simple words and practise writing new letters, enabling them to make good progress in their reading and writing.
30. Leaders ensure a robust assessment framework throughout the school that is used effectively to monitor pupils' progress as well as to inform strategies to support and challenge as relevant. Time for pupils to reflect on their teachers' feedback on their work is built into lessons for all age groups. Pupils respond to this by adding in their own comments and targets and by making corrections. This develops their self-assessment skills, self-discipline and self-confidence. Teachers share pupils' performance with parents through in-person meetings and annual summative written reports, as well as regular interim reports. In early years, an online platform is used to share with parents their child's physical development and learning.
31. The co-curricular programme is extensive and closely linked to the school's aims and values. This provides pupils with opportunities to explore their passions and develop their talents in sport, music, the creative arts and debating. Pupils benefit from talks and activities by visiting speakers. Similarly, the boarding programme is structured to promote holistic development. Boarders benefit from a wide choice of activities, including a sports programme, recreational cooking, laser tag and quiz nights.

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. Leaders develop pupils' resilience, emotional and physical wellbeing, as well as their self-esteem and confidence, through an active co-curricular programme that is focused on pupils' personal development and wider leadership skills.
34. Pupils gain rich opportunities through a varied sports, games and fixtures programme to develop their physical skills and wellbeing. Leaders are committed to developing pupils' health and pupils learn about healthy lifestyle choices and nutrition in lessons. Pupils understand the importance of a daily balanced diet.
35. Pupils' behaviour is good and incidents of bullying are rare and addressed effectively. The school fosters a culture of openness, kindness and mutual respect. Pupils feel safe as teachers respond promptly to any concerns. Leaders reinforce the school's positive ethos through their management of behaviour incidents. They are used to reinforce and enhance the message of acceptance and tolerance embedded by the school values.
36. Pupils learn to celebrate difference and to understand their own unique identities in cultural background, first language, religion, gender and physical attributes. For example, PSHE lessons in Years 4 and 5 cover protected characteristics in an age-appropriate way and build on school assembly themes covering British values, respect and tolerance. Skilled teaching and questioning enable pupils to explore their own identity and to express their ideas thoughtfully and with consideration for one another. In early years, the children learn about the 'colour monster' as a way to identify, label and understand their own feelings.
37. Pupils are well supervised for on- and off-site activities. This includes recreational areas for older pupils during breaktimes and at all times for the youngest children in the early years. In boarding, emergency telephone lines are available in the dormitories, and corridors are alarmed to alert residential staff to when boarders might need help in the night. Leaders provide pupils with a range of opportunities to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness. Pupils learn about different faiths and cultures through assemblies, visiting different places of worship and religious education lessons. For example, in early years, children learn about diya lamps in the home of a Hindu family and explore a Diwali family celebration through role play. Boarders show appreciation and respect for their peers who come from different cultural backgrounds. The celebration of events, such as International Languages Day, supports boarders to learn about the language, food and culture of different countries. It also enables international boarders or flexi-boarders with family connections to those countries to share their experiences of other cultures with the wider school community, to the benefit of all.
38. Leaders keep the PSHE programme under regular review. They adjust lesson content in light of emerging contextual risks and topical issues. Visiting speakers are organised to support the effective delivery of PSHE content so that pupils are equipped with the knowledge and understanding they need. In relationships and sex education (RSE) lessons, pupils learn the importance of making informed choices and to avoid behaviour that may place them at risk.
39. Provision for pupils' welfare and emotional wellbeing is embedded within strong pastoral systems and supported by clear structures which support good communications between pupils and staff.

Pupils learn in PSHE lessons about mental health and physical wellbeing, as well as how to stay safe online. They learn about collaboration through outdoor play and through activities in lessons. They also learn about friendships and how to repair relationships. Pupils and boarders benefit from access to a school and independent listener.

40. Admission and attendance registers are closely maintained and leaders work closely with relevant external agencies when there are concerns about pupils' attendance. There is timely reporting to the local authority for any pupils who join or leave the school at non-standard transition points.
41. Leaders ensure that the school's extensive grounds are well maintained in line with health and safety standards and fire safety regulations. School leaders are assiduous in their attention to making the school as safe an environment as possible for pupils and staff. Coherent policies and systems ensure that high-risk areas are suitably covered by effective supervision and risk assessments. Appropriate provision for first aid and medical accommodation by trained staff ensure pupils and boarders who are ill or injured receive the care and attention they need.
42. The school provides a homely and welcoming boarding environment where boarders feel safe, secure and comfortable and where their privacy is respected. They enjoy their boarding friendships and activities which build their personal and social skills. Boarders develop caring and respectful relationships with their teachers, house parents and peers, as well as their confidence and self-esteem. Boarding accommodation is comfortable and of good quality. There are sufficient toilet and washing facilities. Accommodation is well lit, clean and suitably well maintained. There is a staff duty rota in each dormitory so boarders know who to contact.

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

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

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

44. The school effectively promotes its core values of mutual respect and tolerance, and prepares pupils for informed participation in society through a well-planned curriculum. For example, in English lessons, pupils explore diverse texts, including a specific focus on Black history. This allows links to wider social issues to be drawn and encourages acceptance of different cultures and perspectives. In geography, pupils gain deeper social understanding through a study of globalisation, fostering critical thinking about complex real-world issues.
45. Pupils develop a secure understanding of economic concepts and financial responsibility through planned activities within PSHE, mathematics and cross-curricular projects. Pupils explore themes such as earnings, simple and compound interest, and the value of money. They apply learning through practical opportunities. For example, pupils in Year 8 run a café as part of their leavers' programme, managing budgets and donating profits to charities. Younger pupils engage in role play that introduces money handling in meaningful contexts.
46. Pupils undertake a variety of responsibilities to contribute to their school community. Roles such as head boy and head girl, house captain and house mentor promote confidence, responsibility and independence. Boarding prefects co-ordinate activities for younger boarders who view them as role models. Pupils undertake these roles in positive ways and show a maturity that is beyond their years.
47. Pupils contribute positively to the local community. Activities include volunteering at local care homes and supporting local and international charities. Pupils, as part of the bi-annual sports tour to Barbados, complete a fundraising challenge for a Barbados charity. These experiences help pupils to develop social responsibility and empathy for others.
48. Pupils have a clear values framework which is embedded in school life and communicated in an age-appropriate manner. The school ethos supports pupils with their understanding of right from wrong. For example, pupils were able to express their clear understanding of why bullying is wrong. Boarders demonstrate personal responsibility by taking immediate action to clean up a spillage without being prompted.
49. Pupils learn to respect the law, British courts and justice systems. Re-enactments of the trials of historical figures such as Guy Fawkes make imaginative use of a historical event to help pupils explore the use of courts and the Crown Prosecution Service to bring people to justice. Pupils learn about democracy through voting for senior prefects and by representing fellow pupils at school council. Pupils practise their democratic rights in voting on the question of 'meat-free Mondays' and helping to select their new school uniform.
50. Careers education is delivered through the PSHE curriculum, supported by professional talks and parental engagement. The provision is impartial, age appropriate and the impact is evident in pupils' emerging understanding of career options and possibilities.

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

51. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

52. There is a robust culture of safeguarding in the school. The proprietor body and leaders are knowledgeable about their responsibilities and ensure that arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils of all ages are effective. Governors undertake regular visits to the school, talk with pupils and staff, and review documentation. Leaders prepare detailed termly reports to support the governors' review of safeguarding and ensure that the safeguarding policy is in line with statutory requirements and available on the school's website.
53. The school's designated safeguarding leads and a number of pastoral leaders are trained to higher levels in safeguarding. Leaders remain vigilant about pupils' wellbeing and are proactive in assessing their ongoing contextual safeguarding risks and put suitable mitigations in place. Leaders reflect on incidents that have happened in order to improve practice and use them as opportunities for wider staff learning. Staff are well trained on safeguarding including online safety and low-level concerns and know how to report and to self-refer as appropriate. Staff are aware of the importance of logging issues on the school's confidential systems.
54. Leaders and managers ensure that there are swift and effective measures in place to respond to concerns about pupils. They understand local safeguarding thresholds and work closely with a range of external agencies, such as the local safeguarding networks and the local authority children's services, including and the local authority designated officer (LADO). They seek advice and make timely referrals, when needed.
55. Pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, including online. They know the range of adults they can talk to, and the ways in which they can report their concerns. They are confident to use these systems, which are well advertised throughout the school and in boarding, and by staff. Effective internet filtering and monitoring systems are in place with regular testing and weekly reports provided to the designated safeguarding leads, who include this information in reports to governors. Suitable action is taken to manage any emerging concerns.
56. Clear and compliant protocols are established for managing educational guardianship arrangements made by parents, ensuring the welfare of boarders is promoted. The independent listener cultivates a supportive environment for boarders to raise concerns and is accessible to them.
57. Leaders maintain an accurate single central record detailing the checks carried out for staff employed at the school. Staff suitability is ensured through organised and thorough recruitment-checking processes. However, there has not been clarity about checking prohibition from teaching for sport coaches working under staff supervision. This was swiftly rectified and was neither systemic nor reflective of the overall robust practice in recruitment checks.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	St Hugh's School
Department for Education number	931/6078
Registered charity number	309640
Address	St Hugh's School Carswell Manor Faringdon Oxfordshire SN7 8PT
Phone number	01367 870700
Email address	headspa@st-hughs.co.uk
Website	www.st-hughs.co.uk
Proprietor	St Hugh's School (Carswell) Trust Limited
Chair	Mr Neill Lawson-Smith
Headteacher	Mr David Griffiths
Age range	3 to 13
Number of pupils	308
Number of boarding pupils	41
Number of children in the early years registered setting	43
Date of previous inspection	22 to 24 November 2022

Information about the school

59. St Hugh's is a co-educational day school with weekly and flexi-boarding. It was founded in 1906 in Kent and moved to Carswell Manor in Oxfordshire in 1945. Since becoming a Trust in 1967, the school is overseen by a board of governors who are also trustees. Boarders are accommodated in the main school house within the campus. The current headteacher took up position in September 2023.
60. There are 41 boarders in total, the vast majority of whom are flexi-boarders.
61. There are 43 pupils in the early years setting made up of 19 pupils in Nursery and 24 pupils in Reception.
62. The school has identified 67 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Three pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan).
63. The school has identified English as an additional language for 16 pupils.
64. The school states its two important aims are to ensure children's academic wellbeing is supported by providing a firm academic foundation for pupils of all abilities and ensuring that pupils' pastoral wellbeing is supported. They aim to help pupils become self-assured and resilient learners. The school also aims to prioritise pupils' wellbeing by creating a culture where all feel valued, respected and safe as they are prepared for the next stage of their education.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

4 to 6 November 2025

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

66. 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.

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