

School inspection report

11 to 13 November 2025

Canford School

Canford Magna

Wimborne

Dorset

BH21 3AD

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 establish a positive environment in which boarders and day pupils integrate well into a purposeful school community. Pupils' wellbeing is at the heart of leaders' decision-making and leaders have successfully embedded the school's values into all aspects of the school's provision.
2. Governors are ambitious for the school and maintain a knowledgeable oversight of all areas of school life. They ensure that leaders fulfil their responsibilities in meeting regulatory requirements. Leaders monitor the school's implementation of policies systematically so that the Standards are consistently met.
3. Leaders implement a broad curriculum that develops pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding across a wide range of subjects, with an effective focus on cross-curricular links. The curriculum is thoughtfully designed to give teachers scope to extend pupils' knowledge and deepen their learning.
4. Teachers use their good subject knowledge skilfully to engage pupils in thought-provoking teaching. Lessons are well resourced. An effective assessment framework is in place across all subjects. Heads of department analyse data effectively and use this to ensure that teaching provides pupils with appropriate support and challenge. As a result, pupils make good progress and achieve well in GCSE and A level examinations.
5. Staff support pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Teaching is matched to their needs and enables pupils who have SEND to make good progress. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are well supported to extend their fluency so that they can access the curriculum confidently.
6. Leaders are aspirational for pupils to develop the leadership skills and attributes they need to make a positive contribution to their school and local community. Through the opportunities and programmes run by the school, pupils develop mature leadership skills, confidence and a sense of responsibility in preparation for their adult lives. They are active participants in their school and in the local community and undertake a wide range of meaningful roles and responsibilities. Pupils actively make a difference to the lives of their peers and others. Leaders ensure that pupils' opinions are an integral part of their decision-making. This is a significant strength of the school.
7. The leadership of boarding is effective. Leaders prioritise fostering boarders' sense of belonging to their house and the wider school community. Boarders are well cared for in comfortable, secure and well-maintained accommodation. They have access to appropriate medical provision and good-quality meals with suitable choice. Leaders organise boarding time thoughtfully to enable boarders to study, take part in house activities or enjoy free time.
8. The careers programme aims to give pupils the tools and information to be prepared for life beyond school. However, the careers provision within the school lacks sufficient structure and cohesion and, as a result, pupils do not feel fully informed when choosing examination subjects and post-18 opportunities for life and work.
9. The school encourages pupils to recognise the importance of respecting all people, regardless of their individual identity and pupils demonstrate respect for others in their daily lives. Through the curriculum and speaker programme, pupils learn about inclusion, cultural diversity and different faiths. As a result, they engage well with wider social, political and cultural issues.

10. There is a positive culture of safeguarding across the school with effective training. Appropriate measures are in place to promote and secure the welfare and safeguarding of pupils. Leaders forge effective links with external agencies as sources of advice, guidance and support. Governors and leaders maintain vigilant oversight of safeguarding procedures.

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 so that they have a greater understanding of the options available to them and can make informed choices.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

11. Leaders prioritise pupils' wellbeing in their decision-making. They establish a positive culture built on the school's values of courageous attitude, gracious leadership, humble ambition and purposeful engagement. Leaders consistently model these values, and, in turn, the pupils reflect them in their daily conduct, upholding high standards of behaviour and mutual respect.
12. Governors provide effective oversight of the school and assure themselves that school leaders have the appropriate skills and knowledge to perform their duties effectively. Members of the governing body have a wide range of skills relevant to their role. Nominated governors oversee areas of expertise, make regular visits to the school and report back to the main board. This ensures that leaders fulfil their responsibilities and that the school consistently meets the Standards.
13. Leaders are ambitious for the pupils and the school. They regularly consider aspects of school life that may need developing, including boarding. They devise and implement action plans to support the further development of the school and provision for pupils. Leaders take pupils' views into account as part of this process and act on their suggestions where appropriate. For example, in response to pupils' feedback, seating was carefully considered in the newly constructed sixth-form 'Hub' building.
14. Leaders ensure that policies and procedures meet statutory requirements and are effectively monitored and implemented. They analyse teaching, learning and resource allocation through observations and department reviews, including learning walks, to shape the provision for pupils to meet their needs. Leaders actively seek pupils' feedback to inform their decision-making through pupil surveys as well as the academic pupil leaders' group.
15. Leaders understand the school's contextual risks, such as those associated with the nature of its large site. Risk assessments are comprehensive in identifying potential hazards and the actions taken to minimise these. Risk assessments are in place for pupils' educational experiences, including for overseas trips. Staff receive appropriate training on completing risk assessments.
16. The leadership of boarding is effective. Boarders receive induction and boarding staff are suitably trained. Appropriate policies relating to boarding are in place. As a result, boarders are well cared for. Boarding houses are well managed and boarding leaders successfully foster a sense of belonging and community spirit in their houses.
17. A range of appropriate information is provided on the school's website. The policies provided are up to date and are implemented correctly within the school. Leaders ensure that parents are well informed about their child's progress. Parents regularly receive information about their child's attainment, progress and effort. Leaders provide suitable opportunities for parents to discuss their child's progress with staff.
18. The school implements an appropriate policy for handling complaints. Leaders are accessible to parents and communicate with them regularly. They address any complaints promptly and effectively. Leaders keep detailed records of all concerns and how these are followed up.
19. Leaders are proactive in engaging with external agencies which enables them to keep up to date with the latest developments and promote pupils' wellbeing effectively. Leaders report any pupils who join or leave the school at non-standard transition times to the local authority.

20. Leaders and governors ensure that the school complies with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. The school has a suitable and detailed accessibility plan which is regularly reviewed.

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. Pupils experience a curriculum which is both comprehensive and balanced and caters to their different ages and abilities. Leaders carefully plan the curriculum so that pupils develop the essential knowledge and skills they need, as well as an enthusiasm for learning. It develops pupils' knowledge over time across a wide range of subjects including science, technology, mathematics, languages, humanities and the arts. The curriculum offers pupils a suitable range of GCSE options and has a focus on cross-curricular projects on pertinent themes, such as migration and robotics. This enables pupils to apply knowledge learnt in one subject to their understanding in others. The sixth-form curriculum is academically ambitious and offers A levels and the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ).
23. Teachers across all subjects have good levels of subject knowledge and make effective use of well-chosen resources. A culture of regular learning walks allows for the sharing of effective practice within the school. Teaching methods and curriculum planning ensure that different groups of pupils make good progress. Well-planned lessons include a variety of effective teaching methods, such as role play, group work and independent learning. This enables pupils to develop their knowledge and skills and to progress well. The variety of tasks engages pupils and contributes to their motivation to learn.
24. There are many opportunities for pupils to develop linguistic, creative, scientific and numeracy skills. In English, pupils' writing and reading skills evolve effectively through creative writing and regular use of the library. Pupils analyse language and intention when studying texts such as *The Great Gatsby* and apply literary devices in their own writing. Older pupils further develop their speaking and listening skills through participating in house debates and the annual 'festival of ideas' speaker event. Teachers provide pupils with regular opportunities to become fluent in calculations and apply their knowledge in solving complex mathematical problems, such as proving differentiation results and calculating compound interest in real life scenarios. Pupils show well-developed creative skills reflected in the vibrant artwork they create.
25. Leaders implement a suitable assessment framework that informs teachers about pupils' progress. Teachers give pupils both written and verbal feedback that helps them to understand the areas that require further development. This enables pupils to extend their thinking and further improve their work.
26. Provision for pupils who have SEND is robust. Leaders oversee how pupils are identified, monitored and supported. Pupils who have SEND have their needs identified early and are directly involved in creating personalised pupil passports to support their learning. Key information is shared effectively with teachers who take these needs into account. The impact of provision is monitored through regular analysis of assessment data. Pupils who have SEND have access to specialist sessions and subject clinics to help them with their learning. As a result, pupils who have SEND make good progress.
27. Pupils who speak EAL are supported well. Teachers adapt their teaching to provide them with effective help, including reinforcement of key subject terminology. Support is provided within lessons and, where appropriate, through individual tuition. Pupils make good progress across the curriculum.

28. Boarders have access to quiet places to study. They can approach a team of boarding staff representing different subject areas and can seek support in their learning throughout the day or during prep after school. Pupils are able to access the library and teaching rooms outside of the main school day. As a result, boarders' learning is well supported.

29. A rich and stimulating range of co-curricular opportunities, such as kayaking, theatre technical club, chamber choir, the production of a pupil-led magazine, Combined Cadet Force (CCF) and The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE) enable pupils to develop their individual interests and skills. Leaders monitor individual pupils' participation and make changes to the programme in response to feedback, such as the addition of chess club.

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

30. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

31. Leaders create an ethos that focuses on building positive and trusting relationships based on mutual respect and kindness. Close liaison between boarding and day houses, and teaching and pastoral staff, ensures that pupils receive a high level of care. Surveys and feedback mechanisms, in person or by using a dedicated online tool, provide pupils with the opportunity to report on their welfare.
32. A well-structured programme of personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), including relationships and sex education (RSE) is in place. Leaders ensure that topics are age-appropriate and suitable for pupils' needs. Pupils explore appropriate topics such as body image, consent and respectful relationships, substance abuse and online safety, through meaningful discussion. The school's wellbeing curriculum, which includes units on sleep education and nutrition, is effective in teaching pupils how to be healthy, manage their mental health and seek support when needed. Staff assess understanding and provide feedback to keep the provision effective and relevant.
33. The curriculum for physical education (PE) enables pupils to explore a wide variety of sports and activities, including rowing, squash, dance and swimming. Pupils develop their skills and strategy in a range of competitive and team sports, including sporting fixtures, tournaments and coaching sessions. Leaders adapt the curriculum to take into account pupils' feedback, such as by introducing girls' rugby and football. Pupils learn about the importance of a healthy and balanced diet in maintaining their overall physical health.
34. The school develops pupils' spiritual and moral understanding effectively. Pupils learn about different religions and traditions through philosophy and theology lessons, chapel services, Bible study groups and assemblies. Pupils have access to a multi-faith prayer room. Discussion forums, such as the 'heretics' group, enable pupils to debate philosophical topics such as 'does morality really exist?'. The provision facilitates a culture of respect and contemplation in which pupils are encouraged to explore different beliefs, ask thoughtful questions and reflect on their own beliefs.
35. Pupils behave well at school. Leaders and staff promote clear and consistent expectations through their teaching and daily contact. They encourage pupils to reflect on behaviour that falls below the school's high expectations. Leaders carefully record any incidents which enables them to track and manage pupils' behaviour. As a result, pupils display respect and courtesy in their daily lives, including in boarding.
36. Bullying is rare and leaders respond quickly and effectively whenever any incidents occur. The school teaches about anti-bullying and the harm caused by inappropriate use of language through the curriculum and assemblies. Staff encourage pupils to feel confident to report any concerns about behaviour or bullying that they might have.
37. Boarding accommodation is comfortable and of good quality. Boarders are able to personalise their own spaces and have secure storage for their possessions. Staff implement a clear induction procedure, organise peer mentoring and promote house activities to foster boarders' sense of belonging. They arrange for pupils to share rooms with different pupils on a rotational basis to help them build and manage friendships. Boarders can always contact a member of staff, including at night. There is a genuine culture of mutual respect within the boarding community.

38. Staff effectively supervise pupils during meals, breaktimes, recreational activities and in boarding houses. This facilitates calm and sensible behaviour and ensures pupils have access to a range of trusted adults from whom they can seek support if needed.
39. Leaders ensure that health and safety measures are implemented appropriately. Staff are suitably trained in health and safety. Fire safety is well managed, including in boarding houses. The school has appropriate risk assessments in place for site security. First aid and medical arrangements are suitable, including the administration of medicine. Appropriate arrangements are in place for the medical care of boarders.
40. The admission and attendance policy is implemented effectively in line with statutory requirements. Leaders review pupils' attendance regularly and take appropriate action when concerns arise.

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

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

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

42. Through the 'beyond the gates' PSHE and wellbeing programme, as well as assemblies and the wider curriculum, pupils learn how to recognise and respect differences. In PE lessons, pupils consider how cricket activities can be adapted for people to meet their individual needs. During Black History Month, pupils delve into studies about the life and impact of lesser-known important historical figures who represent different ethnicities and backgrounds. The school fosters appreciation of other cultures by serving food that reflects the different traditions of the community, promoting cultural and religious celebrations and organising trips abroad. As a result, pupils become respectful and tolerant young people, accepting of others.
43. Pupils develop an awareness of the importance of contributing to their school by taking an active role in helping others and instigating improvements in their school. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils in all years to develop their leadership skills and make meaningful contributions to their school. Pupils are appointed to leadership positions in a wide range of committees such as sustainability, community service, enrichment, co-curricular and house forums. Through these, they influence decisions leaders make with regard to their school. Pupils develop confidence and organisational skills when leading activities, house events and sports teams and when making proposals which leaders put into place to improve the life of the school.
44. The school has formed partnerships with the local community through its community action programme that encourages pupils to develop a sense of social responsibility and philanthropy. Pupils successfully volunteer in places such as local libraries, schools or care homes. Pupils give concerts in day centres and provide tutoring in local schools. Participation rates in the community activities are very high. Pupils are actively involved in raising funds for chosen charities through a charity walk and also support the local foodbank. Within the school community, senior pupils mentor younger pupils and support them through the day and boarding house structures. This upholds the school's aims of developing young people who engage purposefully with their community and seek to make a difference to the lives of others.
45. Lessons, assemblies and the wider curriculum present pupils with scenarios exploring moral and ethical dilemmas. Pupils are encouraged to see things from different points of view and listen carefully to the opinions and ideas of others. Pupils learn to debate respectfully in house competitions where they debate topics such as 'this house believes globalisation perpetuates social inequality'. Staff ensure that any discussions with political content or on political themes are conducted impartially and without bias.
46. Leaders ensure that pupils understand the democratic process. They gain deeper insight into democracy through participation in mock elections and the selection process for pupil leaders. Leaders ensure that fundamental British values are promoted throughout the curriculum and that teaching does not undermine them.
47. The school ensures that pupils develop a secure understanding of personal finance so that they are well prepared to manage future financial responsibilities. Through the curriculum and talks given by speakers, pupils explore themes such as budgeting, loans, mortgages, identity theft, scams and the use of credit cards. This helps them to develop a real-world understanding of managing finances.

48. Pupils receive careers guidance that follows nationally available benchmarks. The programme includes the use of an online platform, a careers convention, advice on making applications as well as undertaking work placements. However, a lack of overall structure in the programme means that pupils are not fully prepared when choosing examination subjects or career paths in preparation for life beyond school.

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

49. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

50. Leaders have established clear and effective systems to safeguard pupils. They understand the range of safeguarding risks to pupils, including contextual risks and put in place appropriate strategies to manage them. The school's safeguarding policy is implemented consistently and reflects the latest statutory requirements.
51. Governors place safeguarding at the heart of their decision-making. They scrutinise safeguarding arrangements at the school, including in boarding, through regular visits and analysis of reports at governors' meetings and discussions with the safeguarding team. Governors maintain effective oversight, checking that leaders prioritise the wellbeing of pupils.
52. Staff understand that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Appropriate and comprehensive safeguarding training, including at induction, ensures that staff are knowledgeable about potential safeguarding issues and how to respond to these. All staff and governors receive suitable ongoing training throughout the year, with regular updates. As a result, staff are vigilant to pupils' wellbeing and record all concerns in a timely and secure way.
53. The safeguarding team works closely with external agencies, refers concerns when appropriate and seeks advice when needed. The team holds fortnightly meetings to review concerns, monitor trends and implement support if required. They take effective action to ensure that pupils are safeguarded and protected from harm.
54. Pupils are confident to speak to adults in school if they have any worries or concerns. They know that adults will listen and take appropriate action. Pupils know how to express their concerns by speaking to trusted adults or using the dedicated online system to report concerns. An independent person is available for boarders to speak to should they wish.
55. Leaders ensure that appropriate systems for internet filtering and monitoring are in place and that such systems are regularly tested. The school teaches pupils how to keep themselves safe when online.
56. Leaders conduct thorough recruitment practices on all adults before they work with pupils. All the necessary pre-appointment checks are undertaken and appropriately recorded on the school's single central record. This record is accurately maintained and regularly quality assured by leaders and governors.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

57. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Canford School
Department for Education number	839/6000
Registered charity number	306315
Address	Canford School Canford Magna Wimborne BH21 3AD
Phone number	01202 841254
Email address	office@canford.com
Website	www.canford.com
Proprietor	Canford School Limited
Chair	Sir Gary Coward
Headteacher	Mr Chris Wheeler
Age range	13 to 18
Number of pupils	649
Number of boarding pupils	385
Date of previous inspection	18 to 20 May 2022

Information about the school

58. Canford School is an independent co-educational day and boarding school, on a 250-acre site beside the river Stour near Wimborne, Dorset. It was established in 1923. The school is a registered charity, governed by a board of trustees. Since the previous inspection, a new chair of governors was appointed in November 2022 and the current headteacher took up his post in September 2025.
59. The school has four boys' boarding houses and three girls' boarding houses which are located within the school grounds. All boarders are full boarding with a number of opportunities to spend Saturday night at home each term.
60. The school has identified 240 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
61. The school has identified English as an additional language for nine pupils.
62. The school states its aims are to be a community which inspires students to explore, empowers them to express themselves, and challenges them to excel, all within a supportive and inclusive community. The school sets out to build a community of open-minded individuals and motivating them to embrace learning and make a positive difference in their lives and the lives of others.

Inspection details

Inspection dates	11 to 13 November 2025
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63. A team of eight inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

64. 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.

65. 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