

School inspection report

2 to 4 June 2026

Dean Close St John's School

Castleford Hill

Tutshill

Chepstow

NP16 7LE

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. Trustees are knowledgeable and provide thorough oversight of school policies and their implementation. This is supported by well-structured review systems and regular visits to the school. During these visits, they offer appropriate support and challenge to help ensure that the Standards are met consistently.
2. Leaders fulfil their roles and responsibilities effectively. They use well-developed self-evaluation processes to identify priorities for school improvement. Staff throughout the school evaluate provision within their areas of responsibility through reviews of subjects and other aspects of school life. These are incorporated into whole-school review and development planning. This strengthens outcomes for pupils and supports their wellbeing.
3. A review of phonics teaching has enhanced provision, particularly in the early years and pre-prep. The well-planned approach enables children to achieve well, as reflected in assessment outcomes when they move from Reception into Year 1.
4. Leaders actively promote support for pupils who have special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND). They provide effective guidance for teachers, who plan carefully and adapt lessons to meet pupils' individual needs. As a result, these pupils make good progress from their starting points.
5. Teachers know their pupils well and plan effectively to meet their needs. A broad range of curriculum opportunities, enhanced by extra-curricular activities, trips and visits, enables pupils to develop a wide range of knowledge and skills and make good progress.
6. Leaders have introduced a revised approach to the management of behaviour and bullying, with rewards and sanctions designed to be meaningful to pupils. However, these are not always applied consistently by staff, and pupils do not always receive timely feedback on concerns they raise. This can reduce their confidence in reporting incidents.
7. Leaders take a comprehensive approach to health and safety across the school, supported by foundation-wide procedures. Records are suitably detailed, and the premises and accommodation, including the boarding house, are well maintained to support pupils' safety and wellbeing.
8. Leaders in the early years promote children's academic and social development effectively. Staff help children learn to interact positively and understand the importance of forming positive friendships.
9. Leaders place an emphasis on respect across the school. Staff model this consistently, and pupils show a secure understanding of fairness and equality, which they actively uphold in school life.
10. Leaders foster a positive safeguarding culture across the school. Staff understand their responsibilities in keeping pupils safe and are supported by regular training and guidance from safeguarding leads within the school and across the foundation.

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:

- improve the monitoring and implementation of the behaviour policy so that pupils understand the process, feel that their views are valued, and experience consistent application by staff.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

11. Leaders, including trustees, have the skills and knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively. They ensure that policies and procedures are generally implemented securely. Robust, foundation-wide systems help to ensure that the Independent School Standards and the National Minimum Standards for boarding are met consistently. These arrangements are supported by a detailed review process by trustees, including regular focused visits to the school.
12. Leaders take a dynamic and determined approach to school improvement, which is centred around the school's aims and values. Leaders evaluate provision effectively to identify priorities which will strengthen provision and support pupils' wellbeing. Leaders oversee the effective implementation of initiatives such as revisions to the marking policy, phonics programme and the arrangements for supporting pupils who have SEND. As a result, pupils benefit from improved provision and well-considered initiatives.
13. Pastoral and academic leaders across the school have appropriate autonomy to develop their areas of responsibility. This supports effective improvement in areas such as subject leadership and the early years. Subject reviews, grounded in self-evaluation, enable leaders to identify priorities and ensure that relevant actions inform whole-school development planning.
14. Leaders in the early years successfully promote children's development. They provide an effective framework for learning, and support staff in their professional development through access to external courses and in-house provision, which includes regular focused meetings and discussions. Leaders understand their responsibilities and ensure that the early years requirements are met.
15. Leaders in boarding are thorough in their approach to ensure that Standards are met consistently. They ensure that suitable induction arrangements are in place for new boarders and that boarders' safety and wellbeing is maintained. This is achieved through a rigorous approach to matters such as health and safety, and by ensuring boarders have access to a range of professional services, such as doctors and dentists.
16. Leaders implement a suitable complaints policy and associated procedures effectively. Suitable records are kept of formal complaints, and the number of such complaints is made available to parents and others on the school website. Leaders monitor informal complaints carefully, recording and categorising them so that any patterns or trends can be identified and appropriate action taken.
17. Leaders promote equality of opportunity effectively. The personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) programme helps pupils develop a secure knowledge and understanding of the importance of challenging discrimination whenever it occurs. Leaders have also established a suitable accessibility plan that addresses access to the site, curriculum and information for all pupils.
18. Leaders take a thorough approach to risk management. They assess the potential impact of decisions and initiatives carefully and review decisions for any unintended consequences. For example, clear guidance was provided for staff prior to introducing changes to the phonics programme so that implementation was effective. Risks identified around the school site are addressed promptly through suitable mitigation measures. This contributes to a comprehensive and secure approach to risk management.

19. Leaders maintain well-established links with external agencies, including safeguarding partners, healthcare services and educational support professionals. These partnerships support pupils' health needs and promote their physical and emotional wellbeing effectively. Leaders understand their duty to notify the local authority when pupils join or leave the school at non-standard transition points.
20. Leaders ensure that all required information about the school is made available to parents and others, much of it through the school's detailed website, where key policies and information can be accessed readily. Parents receive regular updates on their child's progress, including an annual report at the end of the academic year.

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 have established a suitably broad curriculum that is implemented effectively across all age groups. It enables pupils to develop skills and knowledge across a wide range of areas. In addition to the required areas, leaders include subjects such as Latin and drama. They provide sessions which help pupils understand how they learn best by developing awareness and regulation of their own thought processes.
23. The science curriculum provides pupils with opportunities to develop a range of skills and knowledge. Younger pupils learn about the importance of the lifecycles of plants and animals, whilst older pupils use their knowledge to describe the differences in characteristics between individuals of the same species. The curriculum for subjects such as history and geography is well thought out, often using themes across the school which prompt pupils to not only increase their knowledge but also to reflect on global issues such as climate change and deforestation. Older pupils hone their analytical skills in these lessons, which supports their preparation for learning at their next schools.
24. Leaders provide specialist teaching for subjects such as art, music, computing, French and physical education. This focused teacher knowledge strengthens pupils' learning as shown in the quality of artwork in pupils' sketchbooks and around the school, and in the range of notable musical ensembles and choirs. Pupils make good progress across the curriculum, and this is reflected in their achievements by the time they leave the school.
25. A suitable range of extra-curricular opportunities further enhances the curriculum, including music ensembles, sports such as tennis and cricket, and clubs such as chess, film, book and eco-warriors. Trips and visits also provide valuable opportunities for pupils to broaden their knowledge. Boarders also benefit from an appropriate range of activities, particularly at weekends, through activities such as trampolining, visits to the coast and museums.
26. Subject leaders review curriculum planning to ensure that teaching activities meet pupils' needs, and act where improvement is needed. For example, recent subject audits have led to the introduction of a new phonics scheme and revisions to the science curriculum to ensure that all required content is taught effectively.
27. Leaders identify the needs of pupils who have SEND early through effective communication across departments and through dialogue and co-operation with parents. Strategic learning support, including tailored resources, enables these pupils to make good progress. A robust framework for assessment and review helps to ensure that support strategies have consistent impact. Pupils with identified needs follow a graduated learning path, with early support being a key feature coupled with strategies to support teachers in the classrooms. This ensures that support is timely and well targeted.
28. Leaders ensure that support strategies are in place for pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). Teachers use effective classroom methods and resources, alongside targeted support groups where needed, to help these pupils make good progress. Visual resources are used successfully to extend vocabulary. A suitable assessment framework enables staff to track and monitor pupils' progress carefully.
29. Leaders promote the development of pupils' phonics and communication skills effectively in the early years and pre-prep. Teaching is thorough, and key elements are integrated well across

different areas of learning. As a result, children develop a secure understanding of sounds and word formation, which they apply confidently in their writing as they progress through the school. Older pupils build on these foundations through a secure understanding of grammatical features such as onomatopoeia and hyperbole, applying them effectively when writing for different purposes. For example, they use persuasive techniques in letters of request, and imagery and simile in creative writing.

30. Leaders successfully implement schemes of work which enable pupils to develop a secure understanding of mathematics. Staff in the early years provide activities such as sorting and matching which support children's early understanding effectively. Children recognise and work confidently with numbers beyond ten and perform basic calculations accurately. This confidence in number is evident when pre-prep pupils use beaded number lines to solve problems. Older pupils successfully utilise their understanding of complex number problems when constructing circles using given radii and diameters.
31. Teachers know their pupils well and plan lessons carefully to meet the range of needs in each class. As a result, pupils make good progress from their different starting points. Teachers use class time effectively and provide a range of activities that engage the pupils. As a result, pupils are eager learners who behave responsibly. Teachers demonstrate secure subject knowledge and use resources effectively to engage and stimulate pupils. Prompt, focused feedback helps pupils understand how to improve their work. Teachers are cognisant of their responsibilities and actively promote fundamental British values which are effectively integrated into the schemes of work.
32. Leaders implement a robust assessment framework which enables teachers to evaluate the impact of the curriculum and pupils' progress effectively. Teachers adapt planning so that lessons provide opportunities for all pupils to make good progress from their prior levels of attainment.

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. The physical education curriculum is well planned and supports the progressive development of pupils' skills from Nursery to Year 8. In gymnastics, for example, younger children begin by developing balance and counterbalance, while older pupils extend these skills through an acrobatic gymnastics programme, including the construction of small human pyramids. The curriculum is enhanced by a suitable range of extra-curricular sports clubs. Specialist teaching makes a positive contribution to pupils' knowledge and understanding. Leaders make effective use of both the school's own facilities and local provision, including sports fields and swimming pools. In addition, collaboration with other preparatory schools within the foundation broadens pupils' opportunities for competitive sport and further skill development.
35. Leaders have established a suitable PSHE curriculum that provides pupils with opportunities to develop an understanding of themselves and the world around them. Subject leaders deliver the programme effectively, ensuring consistency in provision. Specific units, for example, support pupils' moral and spiritual understanding alongside regular assemblies, cross-curricular links and educational visits to a range of places of worship.
36. Relationships and sex education (RSE) requirements are integrated successfully into the PSHE scheme of work. Pupils develop secure self-knowledge and a clear understanding of the importance of positive, supportive relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Pupils understand that forming positive relationships requires making careful decisions and being reflective about the needs of others. Leaders ensure that parents are appropriately consulted about the content of the programme so that they can support their children at home.
37. Pupils' self-confidence, particularly for those who have SEND, is developed through clear, timely feedback, immediate marking and appropriately challenging next steps. Pupils value the pastoral and academic support provided by staff, who offer clear guidance and practical suggestions to help them improve. In the early years and pre-prep, teachers use age-appropriate praise and encouragement to build pupils' confidence effectively. Opportunities to take on roles and responsibilities support pupils' personal development and promote their self-esteem by helping them understand the importance of responsibility and making a positive contribution to the school community.
38. Leaders have established well-structured behaviour and anti-bullying policies, supported by clear procedures, expectations, rewards and sanctions. Staff receive appropriate training, and the electronic recording system is used effectively to record and monitor behaviour concerns. However, implementation is not always consistent, particularly in the management and follow-up of low-level incidents. As a result, pupils are not always confident that their concerns are addressed or understand the action taken and its impact.
39. Leaders take a rigorous approach to health and safety, fire procedures and first aid. Staff are appropriately trained in these areas and regular emergency evacuation drills are undertaken. Leaders in the early years ensure that there is a range of staff who hold suitable childcare first aid certification and that these staff are suitably deployed. The trustees maintain clear oversight of protocols and procedures. Leaders undertake regular monitoring, appropriate staff training, and robust maintenance and record-keeping to ensure a safe environment for pupils. Suitable

supervision is maintained through the effective deployment of staff, including at the start and end of the school day, and during break and lunchtimes.

40. Boarding accommodation is suitably maintained, and health and safety arrangements reflect the rigorous approach seen across the school. The accommodation is of good quality and provides appropriate privacy, with separate provision for male and female boarders. Laundry arrangements are effective, and boarders have suitable storage for clothing and personal belongings. Boarders take their main meals in the school dining room and have appropriate access to snacks and drinks in the boarding house during evenings and at weekends. Leaders provide boarders with suitable access to healthcare professionals when needed, with appropriate care in place for those who are unwell. Suitable numbers of staff supervise boarders during the evenings and overnight, and regular evacuation drills include times when boarders may be asleep. Appropriate arrangements are in place to enable boarders to contact their parents.
41. Leaders promote pupils' attendance effectively. They monitor pupils' absences carefully, involving parents when pupils' attendance falls below expected levels, and informing the local authority when necessary. Leaders maintain an admissions register that contains the required information and is securely stored for the appropriate period of time.
42. Leaders in the early years actively promote children's personal and emotional development. Leaders model positive behaviours which encourage children to show mutual respect through listening, helping and supporting one another. Staff provide children with regular encouragement and show an interest in their views, which helps to develop children's self-esteem and self-confidence.

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. In the early years and pre-prep, pupils benefit from a carefully planned range of activities that promote social development through teamwork, sharing and communication. Staff model kindness and consideration effectively. Lessons and activities provide regular opportunities for pupils to develop their social skills and to learn to distinguish right from wrong.
45. Staff throughout the school promote British values effectively within the curriculum and in wider school activities. Pupils acquire a secure understanding of the principles and importance of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect. These values are evident in pupils' attitudes to learning and in their relationships with others, preparing them well for life in modern British society. Children in the early years engage in the democratic process, for example by voting on books to be read. Older pupils learn about the voting process through PSHE modules on local and national elections and the importance of representation.
46. Leaders ensure that equality and individuality are actively promoted across the school and are well understood by all pupils. Boarding staff reinforce this during boarding time. This contributes to a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment where pupils are encouraged to feel valued and accepted. Pupils demonstrate respect for others, helping to create a school culture in which diversity is recognised, respected and celebrated. Older pupils utilise podcasts to discuss issues such as discrimination and how these impact on individuals' sense of belonging.
47. Leaders promote pupils' cultural awareness effectively through a range of curriculum activities and themes. In the early years, children learn about the world around them, including different cultures, religions and traditions. Leaders provide opportunities for pupils to strengthen their cultural understanding by integrating specific events into the curriculum such as the exchange programme with pupils from South Africa, welcoming Chinese visitors to the school, and through a French history trip. Pupils build on this through activities such as 'Geography Wow' day, which broadens their understanding of lifestyles and perspectives beyond their own.
48. Leaders promote the development of pupils' economic understanding through curriculum themes and topics. In the pre-prep, pupils learn about budgeting, for example when planning a feast at a castle, and explore the cost implications of supplying water to remote areas. Older pupils extend their understanding through learning about salaries, mortgages and house purchases. They also consider how financial decisions, including the use of credit and the risk of debt, can affect wellbeing. This knowledge prepares pupils well for future decision-making.
49. Leaders ensure that pupils develop a clear understanding of ways in which they can contribute to the local community through both the curriculum and wider school life. Pupils support local charities through fundraising and contribute to a local foodbank, which helps them understand the differing needs of people in the community. Through work with a local community centre, pupils learn how to use public transport safely. Visits from local services, such as the veterinary centre and dentists, further strengthen pupils' understanding of the support available in their area. Leaders place an importance on involving pupils in activities that focus on supporting others around the country and internationally. Through a range of fundraising activities for charitable causes, pupils' awareness of their responsibilities is heightened.

50. Leaders have established a well-planned careers programme that develops progressively over time so that pupils build a secure knowledge of a wide range of options by the time they leave the school. Pupils' learning begins in the early years, where children learn about people who help us. Curriculum modules provide opportunities for pre-prep and prep pupils to extend their knowledge of jobs and careers through visits from a range of professions such as musicians and a pilot. Leaders link such visits with events such as International Women's Week to challenge any role that may present as gender stereotypical. Older pupils benefit from a dedicated careers morning, during which visitors such as a nuclear engineer, a tree surgeon and zoo staff share insights into their work. Pupils also learn about apprenticeships. Leaders further broaden pupils' understanding of potential career pathways through visits to events such as a local science festival.
51. The PSHE scheme of work promotes pupils' understanding of right and wrong effectively. Teachers plan activities which help pupils to consider aspects such as consequences and reflections and to develop an understanding of accountability. Pupils consider moral dilemmas and the importance of taking responsibility for the choices that they make. This supports their understanding of the importance of rules and laws in society. Older pupils build on this through learning about the legal process and the role of different courts.

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

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

Safeguarding

53. Leaders foster a positive safeguarding culture that supports the wellbeing of both day and boarding pupils. A comprehensive training programme is in place for all staff, including those with specific safeguarding responsibilities. This includes regular updates from safeguarding leads and online training in areas such as the 'Prevent' duty, which helps staff understand the risks of extremism and radicalisation.
54. Staff understand their safeguarding responsibilities and know how to record concerns about pupils appropriately. They are aware of contextual safeguarding issues due to the school's geographical location, such as different arrangements which may exist for families who live in either Wales or England. Leaders with safeguarding responsibility maintain careful records of any matters raised. They act promptly when concerns are raised and act in the best interest of the pupils.
55. Staff understand the importance of the code of conduct in keeping both themselves and pupils safe. They know how to use the whistleblowing procedures should concerns arise about the school's safeguarding arrangements. Leaders actively encourage staff to raise concerns about the conduct of colleagues where necessary. Such concerns are recorded appropriately and followed up promptly.
56. Safeguarding leads work effectively with external safeguarding partners to secure early help and support for pupils and families when needed. This includes liaison with children's services and medical professionals.
57. Trustees provide effective oversight of safeguarding through regular review and appropriate support and challenge to the school's safeguarding leads. Arrangements are further strengthened by liaison across the Dean Close Foundation, where forums enable the sharing of professional expertise and access to guidance.
58. Leaders promote internet safety effectively through computing lessons and the PSHE curriculum. As a result, pupils understand how to stay safe online. Appropriate filtering arrangements are in place and are monitored regularly. Leaders track pupils' use of technology effectively to ensure that suitable support is provided where needed.
59. Leaders follow safer recruitment procedures diligently, ensuring that all required checks are completed before any member of staff begins work at the school. The recruitment process is supported by detailed staff files, and all checks are recorded accurately on the single central record.
60. Safeguarding arrangements for boarders are secure. Leaders support the wellbeing of boarders through the effective implementation of clear policies and procedures. Leaders focus on ensuring boarders are well supported and that they have suitable mechanisms to raise any concerns or worries that they may have. They also provide contact details of an independent person should boarders wish to discuss any matters with someone not on the school staff.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	Dean Close St John's School
Department for Education number	916/6014
Registered charity number	1086829
Address	Dean Close St John's School Castleford Hill Tutshill Chepstow Monmouthshire NP16 7LE
Phone number	01291 622045
Email address	office@deanclosestjohns.org.uk
Website	www.deanclosestjohns.org.uk
Proprietor	The Dean Close Foundation
Chair	Mrs Kathryn Carden
Headteacher	Mr Tom Rainer
Age range	3 to 14
Number of pupils	117
Number of flexi-boarding pupils	15
Date of previous inspection	14 to 15 June 2023

Information about the school

62. Dean Close St John's is a co-educational day and boarding preparatory school located in Chepstow. It is part of the Dean Close Foundation, whose board of trustees act as governors. The school comprises a pre-prep which accommodates an early years section and Years 1 and 2, a junior section for Year 3 to 6 and a senior section for pupils in Years 7 and 8.
63. Pupils may board from Year 3 and are accommodated in one boarding house on the school site.
64. There are 29 children in the early years. They are accommodated in one Nursery class, known in the school as Kindergarten, and one Reception class. The Foundation provides an early years foundation stage setting in the school grounds which was not visited as part of this inspection.
65. The school has identified 31 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. No pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
66. The school has identified English as an additional language for eight pupils.
67. The school states its aims are to nurture every pupil so that they flourish, achieving their full potential in a safe, inclusive, and values-led environment, guided by a Christian ethos. It aims to promote academic excellence, personal growth, and respect for others, encouraging pupils to act with courage, integrity, and compassion within the school and the wider community.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

2 to 4 June 2026

68. A team of four inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

69. 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 link trustee and one other in a governance role
- 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 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.

70. 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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