

School inspection report

4 to 7 November 2024

Abbey College Cambridge

Homerton Gardens

Purbeck Road

Cambridge

CB2 8EB

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'.

Contents

SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS	3
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS THE STANDARDS.....	4
RECOMMENDED NEXT STEPS	4
SECTION 1: LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE.....	5
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, AND GOVERNANCE	6
SECTION 2: QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	7
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND RECREATION	8
SECTION 3: PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	9
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING	10
SECTION 4: PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY.....	11
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO PUPILS’ SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY	12
SAFEGUARDING	13
THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SCHOOL MEETS STANDARDS RELATING TO SAFEGUARDING	13
SCHOOL DETAILS	14
INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCHOOL.....	15
INSPECTION DETAILS	16

Summary of inspection findings

1. There is a secure, inclusive environment in the school and an effective commitment to safeguarding and pupils' wellbeing. Leaders and staff ensure a supportive atmosphere through structured pastoral care involving tutors, boarding staff, and senior pastoral leaders. The school's comprehensive provision for pupils' physical, emotional, and mental health is supported by leaders' effective links with relevant external agencies, such as the local authority.
2. Governors' monitoring is rigorous and ensures that policies are implemented effectively and that the school complies with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. Leaders manage risk proactively and effectively across school and boarding environments and foster a culture of safeguarding and vigilance. Clear communication with parents and the community builds trust and supports a collaborative approach to education.
3. The curriculum is well-rounded, balancing core academic areas with enrichment activities to meet pupils' diverse needs. Effective teaching, particularly in mathematics and science, supports pupils' development of critical thinking, resilience, and independence. British values, such as democracy and tolerance, are embedded throughout the curriculum, with programmes like 'Abbey Inspires' and enrichment activities promoting respect, responsibility, and inclusivity. Teaching typically enables pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), to learn effectively and make good progress. However, not all teaching meets the learning needs of pupils who have SEND as effectively as possible, due to a lack of targeted support for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder, and inconsistent application of strategies identified in pupils' personal educational plans (PEPs).
4. The school's careers guidance programme prepares pupils for future success, with structured support for the UCAS process, particularly for competitive courses such as medicine and highly competitive universities. Partnerships with local businesses and educational institutions further enrich pupils' exposure to career possibilities, ensuring that pupils, including those who have SEND, have equal access to useful and relevant careers information and resources.
5. A suitable personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and relationships and sex education (RSE) programme is delivered to all pupils and covers an appropriate range of topics. However, the monitoring of the RSE component of this programme does not ensure that all teaching develops pupils' learning in this area as effectively as possible.
6. Leaders and staff promote social responsibility and engagement through community-focused initiatives, with pupils actively participating in local and international service projects. Political education within the curriculum promotes a balanced understanding of democratic values, preparing pupils to become informed, respectful citizens.
7. The school's safeguarding measures are robust, supported by thorough staff training, effectively implemented policies, and collaboration with external agencies.

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 teaching features consistently effective strategies to support pupils who have SEND to learn and progress as well as possible
- strengthen the monitoring of RSE to ensure that the teaching of RSE develops pupils' learning in this area as effectively as possible.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

8. Leaders ensure that measures to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of pupils are effective, embedding support for pupils throughout the school day to create a secure and inclusive environment. Pastoral care is thoughtfully structured, with pupils benefiting from a network of support from staff including tutors, boarding staff, and senior pastoral leaders.
9. Leaders work collaboratively with external professionals and agencies such as counsellors and the local authority to provide additional training to meet the evolving needs of pupils and staff. As a result, pastoral provision is responsive and effectively supports pupils' emotional and mental health.
10. Boarding provision is well managed and effective. There are always at least three members of boarding staff on duty during boarding time to ensure that pupils' needs are met. Leaders provide boarding staff with annual training that equips them to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Communication with parents, guardians and host families is regular and effective and procedures for induction, travel and holidays are all well managed.
11. The governing body rigorously monitors how well leaders meet their responsibilities, through termly governor meetings, on-site visits, and interviews with staff and pupils, thus ensuring that they possess the required skills and knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively. Policies are well designed and consistently implemented.
12. Leaders ensure that the school complies with the Equality Act 2010 through effective application of school policies, such as those regarding employment, and the implementation of a suitable accessibility plan. Leaders utilise learning walks to ensure that teaching and the curriculum reflect an effective commitment to diversity and inclusion.
13. The handling of complaints, including those around boarding provision, is efficient and transparent, with clear procedures in place that encourage open communication between the school, parents, and guardians. Parents are actively encouraged to contact the most relevant person, and this ensures that leaders take prompt and effective action in response to concerns, and maintain a suitable record of complaints and any actions taken in response to these.
14. Risk management procedures are carefully crafted to address identified risks. Leaders regularly review and adapt risk assessments, ensuring that they remain current and effective. Staff, including boarding staff, are trained to identify and manage risks thoroughly and efficiently, and as a result, the school site is well maintained, and risk assessments for trips are thorough and adhered to. Leaders' understanding and management of risk extend beyond physical safety to include contextual, emotional, and social factors that may impact upon pupils' wellbeing.
15. Leaders' communication of required information, policies, aims, and ethos is effective. Information is made accessible to parents, pupils, and the wider community. Leaders communicate the school's values and explain the school's practices clearly. They provide the local authority with required information relating to provision for pupils who have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
16. Leaders evaluate the school's successes and areas for development effectively, making efficient use of internal and external feedback to make timely adjustments to policies and practices where necessary. Consultation with staff is particularly effective, with, for example, the opinions of middle leaders influencing the development of systems to track pupils' progress.

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

17. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

18. The curriculum is planned to cater for pupils' diverse needs and provide a balanced and engaging experience that equips them well for future pathways. The curriculum encompasses all required areas, with schemes of work designed to enable pupils to explore content beyond what is necessary for examination success. Senior school pupils benefit from a recently expanded range of subjects, while sixth-form pupils can study options tailored to their higher education ambitions. Additionally, well-structured programmes are available for pupils pursuing one-year or foundation courses. Pupils on different pathways contribute to the educational progress of their peers through the many academic enrichment opportunities offered which effectively enhance the curriculum.
19. The curriculum prioritises pupils' linguistic development through an emphasis on oracy and clear communication. Teachers consistently and supportively help pupils to develop their oral and written skills. During form time, pupils enhance their reading skills through the 'wider reading scheme'. Studies in modern foreign languages further broaden pupils' linguistic abilities by enabling pupils to understand grammatical requirements in a different European language, skills they are then able to apply to their understanding of English language.
20. Additional lessons are available for those pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) who need support with English language examinations, subject-specific vocabulary, or broader language skills. These measures ensure that these pupils can fully participate in school life, both in and out of the classroom.
21. Teachers draw on their substantial subject knowledge and utilise a range of resources effectively to support pupils of all ages in progressing and achieving well. Questioning is thorough and encourages pupils to reflect deeply on their knowledge and understanding. Through this reflective process, pupils identify clear connections, both within specific subjects and across the wider curriculum. Both pupils and staff are enthusiastic about exploring ideas beyond the confines of the standard curriculum. Teaching in mathematics and science is particularly effective, engaging pupils deeply while fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. The high expectations for academic rigour promote pupils' self-motivation, independent thinking, and resilience.
22. Teaching typically supports all groups of pupils, including those who have SEND, enabling them to make good progress. The learning needs of pupils who have SEND are identified promptly, and specific support plans are developed to outline strategies for meeting pupils' individual needs in class. These plans are then shared with the relevant staff. However, not all teaching utilises these strategies effectively to optimise learning for this group of pupils.
23. An effective assessment framework enables teachers to monitor progress, make timely adjustments to lesson plans, and provide specific support where necessary. All departments are required to provide a termly update on pupils' progress relative to both their initial starting points and aspirational targets. This information is effectively shared with parents, boarding staff, and guardians. Tutor meetings further ensure that pupils remain on track. This careful oversight, combined with supportive staff, enables pupils to achieve their targets.
24. Beyond the academic curriculum, a wide range of enrichment and recreational activities encourage pupils' well-rounded development. Accessible to both day and boarding pupils, these include weekend programmes and clubs such as volleyball, and mathematics. These enable pupils to

develop their skills and confidence in such areas and to explore their interests. Activities such as the 'happiness club', the walking club and yoga sessions provide pupils with practical strategies for managing stress.

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

25. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

26. The PSHE programme supports pupils' emotional wellbeing through sessions on topics such as managing stress, mindfulness, understanding neurodiversity, and recognising the importance of mental health. The programme also explores themes such as integrity, compassion, and peer pressure. Additional activities, such as the 'happiness club', yoga sessions, and the walking club, provide practical strategies for managing stress and emotions.
27. The RSE component of the PSHE programme is effective overall. It contains appropriate content in line with current statutory guidance, such as the importance of consent, different types of healthy sexual relationships and toxic masculinity. However, the monitoring of RSE does not make certain that all teaching of RSE enables pupils to learn about RSE themes as effectively as possible.
28. The school emphasises the development of pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem through structured and informal opportunities. Leadership roles, such as planning induction days, hosting conferences, and organising events like the Christmas ball, help pupils develop organisational and public speaking skills. Regular constructive feedback from teachers highlights individual strengths and areas for growth, informing pupils' self-awareness and reinforcing their self-confidence. Work in various subjects, such as art projects, allows pupils to explore personal identity and cultural expression, enhancing their understanding of the relationship between themselves and the wider world.
29. The physical education (PE) programme promotes physical health through activities such as fitness routines, group sports, and teaching positive health practices like maintaining hydration and warm-up exercises. Pupils develop skills such as improving co-ordination, teamwork and building resilience. Science and PE lessons develop pupils' understanding of nutrition, the benefits of exercise, and the relationship between physical and mental wellbeing.
30. Pupils' spiritual development is fostered through regular opportunities for self-reflection and the study of major world faiths and religions. Pupils' study of the values and practices of diverse religions contributes to their understanding of the importance of mutual respect, and appreciation of diversity.
31. High behavioural standards are maintained through clear expectations communicated by leaders and staff. The behaviour management strategy incorporates fair and consistent sanctions, with staff teaching pupils the consequences of poor behaviour. Restorative conversations help pupils reflect on their actions, promoting accountability and personal growth. The school's anti-bullying strategy is effective and well communicated. Any issues are promptly addressed, and staff monitor interactions vigilantly. The PSHE curriculum includes lessons on empathy, kindness, and conflict resolution, equipping pupils with essential relationship skills.
32. Supervision throughout the school day is effective, with staff maintaining a visible presence, particularly during breaktimes and lunchtimes. They engage with pupils proactively and model respectful behaviour. Strategic positioning and active involvement ensure potential issues are addressed swiftly, creating a calm and orderly environment conducive to learning.

33. The school premises meet all regulatory requirements, offering well-maintained facilities, including suitable toilets, changing accommodation, and suitable medical facilities. Boarding accommodation is comfortable and well maintained. Boarders receive effective support at the start and end of each day and over weekends.
34. Leaders make effective use of external audits to ensure the suitability of health and safety arrangements. Checks and maintenance are carried out regularly and methodically. Fire safety measures feature regular fire evacuation drills, including termly drills during boarding hours. Staff and pupils are trained in safety protocols.
35. First aid provision is comprehensive, with a dedicated medical centre led by a full-time trained staff. Most staff, including boarding staff, are trained in first aid. Boarders benefit from tailored arrangements, including access to counsellors and local doctors
36. The school maintains appropriate admissions and attendance registers. Leaders track attendance rigorously and follow up any absenteeism effectively, so that rates of attendance remain very high. Leaders inform the local authority whenever pupils join or leave the school at non-standard times of transition.
37. The prefect system provides structured leadership opportunities. Prefects uphold behaviour standards, support their peers and contribute to school events.

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

38. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

39. The curriculum promotes and explains the importance of British values, such as respect for the law, democracy, and cultural diversity and explores such themes in everyday learning. The PSHE programme and visits from external professionals explore how British law and democracy work, and enable pupils to ask questions and develop their understanding of topics such as fake news, homophobia and discrimination, artificial intelligence, constructive disagreement, integrity, and compassion. The 'Abbey Inspires' programme deepens pupils' understanding of issues in areas such as medical ethics, eating disorders, politics and ethical accountancy and the responsibilities of citizens towards society. Enrichment activities further reinforce these values, fostering a sense of social responsibility and helping to prepare pupils to contribute constructively within their communities. Staff ensure that any discussions which contain political content are carried out fairly and without bias.
40. Through the PSHE curriculum, pupils learn to discern right from wrong by discussing topics such as extremism, democracy, and forgiveness. Discussions on friendship, empathy and peer pressure help pupils take responsibility for their actions. Activities such as preparing for the Remembrance Day ceremony, participating in the lesbian, gay and bisexual, transgender (LGBT) history month, and organising pupil-led conferences on themes like equality and social justice, promote the importance of mutual respect and encourage pupils to value diversity. The PSHE programme emphasises respect for peoples' protected characteristics, including age, disability, race, religion, and sexual orientation. It also provides opportunities for pupils to engage with social and political issues while respecting diverse viewpoints. Together with these activities, the PSHE programme helps pupils develop their understanding of individual rights and responsibilities.
41. The school supports pupils' economic wellbeing by equipping them with essential skills for future success. In PSHE, pupils learn, for example, to distinguish between different types of debt, how to manage a credit card and how to balance a budget. Economics lessons include debates on ethical economic practice and financial responsibility.
42. The careers guidance programme enables pupils to explore a wide range of potential career paths and identify personal strengths that might align with these. Careers lessons from Years 9 to 13 progressively deepen pupils' understanding of career options and the qualifications required. Weekly tutorials offer guided support, helping pupils make informed choices about possible career paths that might reflect their interests and strengths. Additional sessions on writing CVs, composing letters of application, and developing interview skills are integrated into PSHE and applied practically when pupils apply for roles of responsibility within the school. Partnerships with local businesses and educational institutions offer pupils pertinent and up to date insights into the world of work, while visits to local career fairs ensure they are aware of opportunities such as apprenticeships and direct entry into employment, with appropriate support provided as needed. Pupils are well prepared for their next steps in education or employment.
43. Focused guidance on the UCAS process ensures that those pupils who intend to study at university are provided with effective preparation for their applications. Pupils are provided with extra guidance for competitive fields like medicine or Oxbridge applications. All pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), have access to career resources and appropriate guidance.

44. Pupils actively engage in community-oriented initiatives which foster their sense of social responsibility and commitment to service. Enrichment programmes and curriculum activities connect pupils with the local community through visits to primary schools to support literacy programmes, organising sporting events for other schools, providing resources to food banks, and assisting at local hospitals through patient visits. During school holidays, pupils further extend their community involvement by contributing to projects in countries such as Kenya, Myanmar, and Zanzibar. These contributions include participating in health education initiatives for local populations, organising activity programmes for children, and volunteering for national and international charities, such as the Red Cross

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

45. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

46. Safeguarding arrangements are effective, supported by suitable policies and procedures and an understanding across the school of the importance of safeguarding. Leaders actively foster a culture of vigilance and accountability, guided by the principle that 'it could happen here'. Leaders prioritise safeguarding, including through comprehensive and appropriate staff training, including when staff join the school and through regular updates thereafter. Those with designated safeguarding responsibilities receive specialised training to equip them for their role.
47. Governors effectively monitor safeguarding procedures effectively, through termly visits, regular online meetings, and an annual review of the safeguarding policy. Through the PSHE curriculum and other areas such as assemblies and tutor meetings, pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe, including when online. Appropriate monitoring and filtering systems both in the school and in boarding accommodation are in place to support pupils' safety while using the internet.
48. Leaders respond appropriately whenever any safeguarding concerns arise, including through working closely with relevant external agencies and referring concerns to them when required. Pupils affected by safeguarding issues receive appropriate support in a timely manner.
49. Staff have a thorough understanding of safeguarding procedures and issues, including contextual risks such as e-safety, radicalisation, and extremism and apply the relevant policies effectively. They are vigilant in monitoring attendance and any changes in pupils' behaviour and remain alert to any potential concerns, promptly reporting them through appropriate channels.
50. Boarding staff demonstrate an equally comprehensive understanding of safeguarding procedures, effectively applying their knowledge effectively to the specific context of boarding life and the unique situations faced by boarding pupils. Consistent staffing levels ensure that a dedicated member of the boarding team is always on duty, providing enhanced oversight and ensuring that boarders always have a member of staff available to talk to.
51. The school carries out all safer recruitment checks required by current statutory guidance. Checks are recorded on the single central record of appointments (SCR) which is meticulously maintained and is regularly reviewed by leaders and governors. Leaders are well trained in the recruitment process and ensure the suitability of staff and governors including those involved in the boarding community.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	Abbey College Cambridge
Department for Education number	873/6049
Address	Abbey College Cambridge Homerton Gardens Purbeck Road Cambridge CB2 8EB
Phone number	01223 578280
Email address	admincam@abbeycambridge.co.uk
Website	http://www.abbeycambridge.co.uk
Proprietor	Abbey DLD Colleges Ltd
Chair	Mr Tim Haynes
Principal	Dr Elena Hesse
Age range	13 to 21
Number of pupils	427
Number of boarding pupils	418
Date of previous inspection	14 to 17 September 2021

Information about the school

53. Abbey College Cambridge is an independent co-educational day and boarding school. It is overseen by a group of governors and is part of the Abbey DLD Group of Colleges. The school opened in 1994 and moved to its current purpose-built campus in 2016.
54. Boarders are accommodated in four boarding houses or can choose to stay in college-arranged lodgings with local host families.
55. The school has identified three pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Very few pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
56. English is an additional language for 418 pupils.
57. The school states its aims are for its pupils to excel in a broad range of subjects and to make the best of their abilities and increase their chances of employability in today's global world. The school aims to enable pupils to make a difference in the world, ready to engage with global issues meaningfully, and ready to take on the challenges ahead of them with wisdom and resilience.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

4 to 7 November 2024

58. A team of six inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

59. 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 head, 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.

60. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

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For more information, please visit isi.net