

School inspection report

17 to 19 June 2025

Castle Court School

Knoll Lane

Corfe Mullen

Dorset

BH21 3RF

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 and governors share a common vision for the school. Appropriately informed by rigorous self-evaluation and development planning, they succeed in placing pupils' wellbeing at the heart of their decision-making.
2. However, leaders do not have the knowledge and skills to ensure that Standards are met in relation to recruitment checks. Not all required safeguarding checks on all groups of adults working at the school are carried out appropriately. Governors' oversight of the school's single central record (SCR) is not sufficient to help leaders identify and correct omissions.
3. Leaders have designed the curriculum so that it develops pupils' learning behaviours such as collaboration, independence and leadership alongside their subject knowledge. As a result, pupils are effectively prepared for the next stages of their education.
4. The school's Christian ethos is evident throughout the school. Leaders create a mutually supportive community where pupils reflect and consider matters together. Pupils typically behave well, although leaders do not ensure that all older pupils consistently adhere to the school's expectations.
5. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make good progress across the curriculum as a result of the provision and adjustments that are implemented for them. Teachers work alongside pupils to write summaries of each individual's requirements. These are communicated effectively amongst staff to ensure that pupils' needs are addressed.
6. Teachers enable pupils to access an appropriate balance of indoor and outdoor activities which support their physical and mental health. The character and values education (CAVE) programme provides successful curriculum coverage in a variety of modules, including 'self-care', 'people-care' and 'earth-care'. These incorporate effective coverage of required personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, including age-appropriate relationships and sex education (RSE), which is informed by effective consultation with parents.
7. The school provides an extensive range of extra-curricular clubs and activities which take place before, during and after the formal timetabled school day. From handball and multi-sports to studying ancient Greek and playing in one of the school's two orchestras, these opportunities are effective at broadening pupils' experiences and developing their interests.
8. Leaders encourage pupils to make effective contributions to the improvement of the school and to be active members of their wider community. Principles of democracy, respect, kindness, leadership and justice are promoted successfully throughout all year groups, including as part of 'The Castle Court Way'.
9. Staff manage safeguarding concerns appropriately. They implement their training effectively, listening when matters are voiced and liaising with external agencies as necessary to resolve them, while keeping appropriate records.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are not 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 not met.

Areas for action

The proprietor must ensure that:

- the leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge
- fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the other standards are consistently met and
- they actively promote the wellbeing of the pupils

so that:

- all necessary safeguarding checks are carried out before adults begin work at the school.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- ensure that members of staff apply the measures outlined in the behaviour management policy more consistently to all year groups across the school so that instances of inappropriate behaviour are minimised.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders, managers and governors promote pupils' wellbeing effectively through 'The Castle Court Way', which successfully emphasises endeavour, excellence, respect, pride and leadership within an ethos based on Christian principles.
11. Leaders and managers do not demonstrate appropriate knowledge and skills in order to ensure that all of the Standards are met. Measures taken by governors to assure adherence to all requirements are insufficient. Responsibilities are not fulfilled effectively with regard to carrying out all suitable checks on all groups of adults working at the school.
12. Governors meet regularly both as a board and as sub-committees focusing on areas such as education, strategy and finance. They hold frequent discussions with staff, parents and pupils and receive detailed reports from leaders. As a result, they remain well informed about the impact of leaders' work.
13. Leaders make appropriate use of assessment data and other school measures to create thorough self-evaluation and development planning materials that are shared with governors. Clear, comprehensive and detailed policy documentation is reviewed by leaders and, once any professional challenge made by governors is satisfied, it is approved as required.
14. Leaders and governors have a shared understanding of risk, and appropriate measures are implemented to mitigate risks identified. Staff are appropriately trained in risk assessment, and documentation is reviewed regularly to ensure that appropriate actions are completed.
15. Leaders have formed appropriate links with various local and national agencies such as professional bodies, advisory groups and a consortium of schools which utilise a similar approach to the curriculum. These are used effectively as a source of guidance and support, as well as a valuable resource for the professional development of staff.
16. Leaders of provision for children in the early years liaise regularly with parents about their child's development, which they monitor and assess appropriately to ensure good progress is being made towards the early learning goals. They provide appropriate guidance to their team, who plan activities carefully and resource them well. As a result, children's thinking, learning and communication skills develop effectively as they make discoveries about the world around them through challenging, but age-appropriate, activities and experiences.
17. Leaders ensure necessary information is made available to those who require it through a detailed website and regular reports to parents. Appropriate communications are sent to the local authority concerning education, health and care (EHC) plans, including details of the use of funds.
18. The value placed on diversity by the school community, combined with the accessibility plan which identifies measures to improve both physical and cognitive access to activities, ensures that the school fulfils the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
19. The school's policy and procedures for the handling and resolution of complaints are appropriate and effective. Emphasis is placed on remedying concerns before they escalate to a formal stage, and detailed records are maintained.

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

20. Standards are not met consistently with regard to the effectiveness of leaders' and governors' oversight of the school's record of safeguarding checks being completed on staff before they commence working at the school.

21. Not all the relevant Standards are met. A schedule of unmet Standards is included in the report.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

22. Leaders have developed a broad and varied curriculum that includes study of modern and classical languages, theology, philosophy and ethics (TPE), and CAVE. The curriculum is academically ambitious. Subjects are planned and delivered with emphasis on six separate traits, including leadership, collaboration and communication, that prepare pupils appropriately to mature as effective, efficient thinkers and learners who can work independently. The curriculum typically emphasises links between different subject areas which are effective in helping pupils broaden their holistic understanding of the world in which they live. For example, study of mountains and plate tectonics connects with investigations into the Shang dynasty, global superpowers, Buddhism and the collaborative study of a novel set in the Himalayas.
23. Teachers make appropriate use of a wide range of both formal and informal assessments to monitor pupils' achievements throughout the school. Teachers use their knowledge of data to influence decisions around provision of additional challenge and support when necessary. As a result, pupils typically make good progress in all curriculum areas, achieve well, are prepared effectively for the next stage of their education and achieve places in various senior schools.
24. The oldest pupils are taught how to complete academic research projects into areas of their own choice independently, including how to communicate their findings. Topics selected include nudge theory, dystopian literature and how superhero mythologies reflect contemporary society. These projects culminate in scholarly essays, informative displays and oral presentations which pupils refine through specific training and practice in public speaking. As a result, pupils develop proficiencies in carrying out research and presenting discoveries that mean they are well prepared for the next stages of their education, and the world beyond school.
25. The school implements effective provision for pupils who have SEND, which enables them to make good progress. Leaders use assessments appropriately to make timely and efficient identifications of pupils who have SEND and then work collaboratively with them to create informative profile documents which include the particular abilities and talents of each individual, alongside clear guidance for staff on the support and adjustments that should be implemented in lessons. These are distributed appropriately amongst adults who teach the pupils concerned, resulting in the implementation of effective measures that facilitate good progress. For example, a teacher may record sound files of instructions and embed them within electronic documentation to assist pupils or use symbols alongside text on pupils' worksheets to improve clarity and understanding.
26. In the early years, children develop their communication and language skills effectively through purposeful discussions with the adults around them, who warmly encourage children to participate as they model appropriate structures in a variety of contexts. Planning capitalises appropriately on children's interests, such as going into the school woodland area on a minibeast hunt in response to a child's fascination with a picture book about bugs. Teachers engage children in discussions about the shapes that they can see on the pathway, such as semi-circles, which the children identify and name correctly. Teachers grasp opportunities for everyone to pick up a stick and practise writing the letter of the week in the soil. In an outdoor 'ice cream area', children talk about preferences, colour, number and size as they process 'orders' for their friends and are reminded appropriately of the importance of taking turns, using polite language and following instructions.

27. Leaders take appropriate steps to identify pupils who speak English as an additional language. Effective tracking and monitoring processes are in place to ensure that these pupils are able to access the curriculum appropriately. Additional support is provided when necessary.
28. Teachers typically plan lessons well and provide appropriate challenge for each pupil. They run activities at an appropriate pace, convey thorough and detailed subject knowledge and utilise resources effectively so that individuals access learning in a manner appropriate to them. Teachers voice an expectation that pupils will participate actively in class activities and discussions. They reward particular achievements enthusiastically and transparently. Pupils enjoy their lessons, apply effort to their work, act responsibly and are highly motivated to succeed.
29. Pupils benefit from a diverse programme of clubs and interest groups which complements and extends the timetabled curriculum. Such activities take place throughout the day, from early-morning sports practices in areas such as swimming, tennis and biathlon through to a wide range of after-school pursuits which include cookery, animation, sugar craft, karate and drama.
30. Parents are appropriately informed of pupils' progress and achievements through consultation events, detailed annual written reports, additional interim progress reports and access to assessment data through an electronic platform.

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

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

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

32. Leaders take effective steps to promote pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing. They capitalise on the school's rural location, which provides opportunities for many lessons to take place outside. These include daily sport for pupils in the main part of the school, which helps to develop pupils' physical fitness through activities such as football, hockey, netball, cricket, rugby, swimming and athletics, enhanced by additional pursuits such as multi-sports, sailing and golf. As a result, pupils enjoy being active and understand the link between fitness and health. Furthermore, lessons in a range of subjects, especially in science and the 'self-care' and 'people-care' elements of CAVE, extend pupils' understanding of the importance of healthy eating and nutrition.
33. The CAVE curriculum includes appropriate promotion of strategies that pupils can use to manage their mental health, including opportunities for them to work in the woodland and outdoor classroom areas to foster their sense of calm through interactions with nature. In addition, teachers deliver specific additional activities to support pupils' emotional wellbeing when necessary, such as the 'draw and talk' programme, in which pupils have opportunities to discuss worries and concerns as they engage in creative art.
34. Teachers deliver required elements of the PSHE curriculum through CAVE lessons, which incorporate topics about health and global citizenship. A suitable RSE programme has been developed following required consultations with parents. The programme is successful in fostering pupils' understanding of key areas such as the changes that come with puberty and important concepts such as consent.
35. In the early years, staff make effective use of the school's indoor and outdoor environments. They engage children in activities that support their physical development, such as playing hopscotch to foster throwing, developing jumping and hopping skills while reinforcing counting, use of number sequences and turn-taking. Healthy habits are promoted through ongoing discussions and practice, including meeting members of the wider community, such as a visiting dentist. Children predicted how much sugar was in different foods and made decisions about whether each item would be better as a snack or part of a meal. They were successful at making 'more or less' comparisons between different foods and drinks based on the sugar content, and then wrote sentences about how they could look after their teeth.
36. Pupils' spirituality is developed effectively through the school's Christian foundation and ethos, which places value on empathising with others. Opportunities are provided for individuals to lead acts of worship, such as saying grace and writing prayers to recognise key points in the Christian year such as Easter and the harvest festival. A varied programme of assemblies and topics in religious studies and TPE lessons includes a focus on areas such as Armistice Day, Diwali and Buddhism to extend spirituality both into studies of other religions and through consideration of secular matters.
37. Pupils typically behave well, demonstrating the school's key principles of compassion and courtesy. Leaders have designed a programme for behaviour management which celebrates positive learning traits alongside identification of inappropriate conduct. At its best, the system is applied continuously and transparently by staff. However, this does not happen consistently throughout the school. Fewer points are allocated to the oldest cohorts, and teachers' use of sanctions varies. As a result, there are some infrequent occurrences of misbehaviour by older pupils.

38. The school implements effective anti-bullying strategies which emphasise kindness and respect and are regularly reviewed in consultation with pupils. Detailed records of incidents are kept. These demonstrate the success of measures implemented because incidents typically do not recur.
39. Pupils develop their self-knowledge well because they receive detailed feedback on their work. As a result, teachers are successful in telling pupils what they are doing well and the next steps they can take in order to improve. Additionally, tutors meet with pupils regularly to discuss behaviour award points. This is effective in facilitating consideration of a range of activities but is dependent upon consistency in the awarding of points and pupils' faith in their reliability.
40. In addition to the awarding of points for good work and conduct, teachers develop pupils' self-esteem and self-confidence effectively through regular performances in plays, concerts and recitals, participation in sports fixtures and opportunities to be ambassadors for the school, for example by guiding visitors around the campus. Additionally, pupils in the oldest cohort act as appropriate role models for their younger peers as they undertake a range of leadership activities, for example as school leaders, house leaders, wellbeing leaders and media leaders.
41. Pupils are supervised appropriately by adults throughout the school day. They know how they can access effective help when they need it, including through the use of worry boxes in which concerns can be expressed in writing should they ever feel hesitant about approaching a teacher in person.
42. The school site is well maintained, and includes appropriate accommodation for first aid and medical care that is staffed by a qualified nurse. Due attention is paid to health and safety matters, including staff training in paediatric and general first aid and food hygiene. Leaders undertake appropriately regular fire evacuation drills and complete action plans generated by annual general risk assessments on health and safety matters, in addition to specific fire prevention documentation.
43. The school maintains admission and attendance registers appropriately and in line with current statutory guidance. Leaders promote and monitor high levels of attendance, notifying the local authority as required when pupils leave and join the school at non-standard transition points.

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

44. All the relevant Standards are met.

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

45. Leaders take appropriate steps to ensure that 'The Castle Court Way' is effectively promoted throughout the school. Through specific reference to excellence, respect, pride and leadership, it is successful at promoting the school's aims effectively. For example, teachers' frequent reminders to pupils that they should 'do the right thing – even when no-one is looking' reinforce their understanding of the moral purpose that is integral to the school's ethos.
46. Staff who work with early years classes use effective role-modelling, discussion and questioning to develop a clear sense of right and wrong in children who listen to, and respect, the views of their friends and teachers. Through relevant conversations at pertinent moments, such as how a request for a glue stick to be shared could most appropriately be phrased, children are guided effectively into making appropriate decisions for themselves and taking responsibility for their actions in order to become confident, socially adept members of their community.
47. Staff are successful at encouraging respect for the democratic process, the rule of law and public institutions such as Parliament through frequent opportunities for pupils to make collaborative decisions by casting votes. These decisions, ranging in significance from the election of representatives on the school council through to the number of minutes a class is given to spend on a mathematics exercise, enable pupils to appreciate the importance of the majority view within the requirements of rules and laws. These are reinforced through events such as Parliament Week, in which pupils meet their local member of parliament and engage in debates.
48. Teachers develop pupils' financial understanding successfully throughout the school, from rudimentary calculations of money through to explorations of bank accounts, interest calculations, salaries, payslips, overdrafts, tax, budgeting and business plans. The oldest pupils implement their financial understanding when they create and run their own enterprises in aid of charity.
49. Teachers place appropriate emphasis on thoughtful, reasoned discussions across the curriculum, including English, CAVE, TPE and assemblies. These are successful in developing pupils' respect for diversity as they appreciate the importance of empathising with views that are informed by a variety of opinions, backgrounds and prior experiences.
50. Leaders make arrangements for representatives of a wide variety of careers including politics, theatre, film and journalism to visit the school and talk to pupils about their roles and responsibilities. This, combined with valuable insights and experiences provided by a comprehensive electronic platform, gives pupils access to stimulating careers guidance as they begin to consider pathways for their future lives.
51. Leaders monitor teachers' planning appropriately to ensure a balanced perspective is presented on political issues, and a rigorous set of protocols and procedures is in place to ensure that the content of visiting speakers' presentations is appropriate.
52. Leaders have made links with various institutions in the local community, including the local foodbank, care home, churches and charities. These enable interaction between pupils of all ages and members of society, fostering an appreciation of how they can improve the lives of others and providing effective preparation for life in British society.

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

53. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

54. Leaders' knowledge of the extent of prohibition checks required for certain groups of adults is insufficient and consequently not all necessary checks have been carried out as required by the Standards.
55. Governors, including a designated safeguarding governor, receive safeguarding training. They are aware of their responsibility to oversee the school's SCR, but their practice is insufficiently effective to recognise or remedy omitted pre-appointment checks. Leaders are not challenged about safeguarding sufficiently by the proprietor to ensure Standards are met.
56. Leaders implement a programme for staff safeguarding training, both during induction to the school and through regular refresher sessions. This is effective at communicating what procedures should be followed when handling matters of concern. It includes the national 'Prevent' duty to safeguard against the dangers of extremism and radicalisation. As a result, the school workforce is confident and competent at dealing with situations as they arise. Appropriate use is made of an electronic platform which ensures matters are communicated between staff members efficiently and comprehensively. Staff are aware that they must question and challenge each other to verify that necessary steps are taken whenever concerns are raised.
57. Members of the staff safeguarding team are managed by an appropriately senior leader and have sufficient time to complete their responsibilities thoroughly. They receive higher-level training which is up to date and in line with requirements. Consequently, they work effectively alongside section leaders, the wider pastoral team and other members of staff to ensure timely, thoughtful and thorough responses to safeguarding concerns. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding ensure that comprehensive records are kept. They liaise appropriately with the local authority whenever necessary.
58. Staff understand the school's expectations, policies and procedures for their behaviour, such as whistleblowing mechanisms and their use of mobile telephones.
59. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding ensure that appropriate arrangements are implemented for filtering pupils' use of the internet and ensuring that all systems used to monitor the school's online activities are effective and thorough. They monitor concerns that arise and ensure these are resolved.
60. Pupils are taught about personal safety in a range of curriculum areas including CAVE and computing as well as during the assembly programme and through a variety of visiting speakers. As a result, they understand and apply a range of strategies for keeping themselves safe, including when they are online. They are aware of the various ways in which they can raise a concern or worry with members of staff.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

61. Standards are not met consistently regarding the completion of all necessary pre-appointment checks being carried out on staff in a timely manner.
- 62. Not all the relevant Standards are met. A schedule of unmet Standards is included in the report.**

Schedule of unmet Standards

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

The following Standards in this section of the Framework are not met.

Paragraph number	Standard
ISSR ¹ Part 8, paragraph 34(1)	The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school –
34(1)(a)	demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently
34(1)(b)	fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards are met consistently; and
34(1)(c)	actively promote the wellbeing of pupils.

Safeguarding

The following Standards in this section of the Framework are not met.

Paragraph number	Standard
ISSR Part 3, paragraph 7	The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that –
7(a)	arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils at the school; and
7(b)	such arrangements have regard to any guidance issued by the Secretary of State.
18(3)	The checks referred to in sub-paragraphs (2)(c) and (except where sub-paragraph (4) applies) (2)(e) must be completed before a person's appointment.
EYFS ² 3.9	Providers must ensure that people looking after children are suitable; they must have the relevant qualifications, training and have passed any required checks to fulfil their roles. Providers must take appropriate steps to verify qualifications, including in cases where physical evidence cannot be produced. Providers must also ensure that any person who may have regular contact with children (for example, someone living or working on the same premises the early years provision is provided) is suitable.

¹ The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('ISSR')

² Early years foundation stage statutory framework ('EYFS')

School details

School	Castle Court School
Department for Education number	838/6023
Registered charity number	325028
Address	Castle Court School Knoll Lane Corfe Mullen Dorset BH21 3RF
Phone number	01202 694438
Email address	office@castlecourt.com
Website	http://www.castlecourt.com
Proprietor	Castle Court School Educational Trust Limited
Chair	Mr Ian Johnston
Headteacher	Mrs Katie Johnson
Age range	2 to 13
Number of pupils	261
Date of previous inspection	7 to 10 June 2022

Information about the school

63. Castle Court School is a co-educational day preparatory school situated near the village of Corfe Mullen, between Wimborne and Poole in Dorset. The school was founded in Parkstone in 1948 and moved to its current location in 1968. It is a registered charity, run by a limited company trust and directed by a governing body. Since the last inspection, a new chair of governors was appointed in February 2024 and a new headteacher in March 2024.
64. There are 56 children in the early years comprising 39 in the Nursery and 17 in the Reception classes.
65. The school has identified 43 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A very small number of pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
66. The school has identified English as an additional language (EAL) for six pupils.
67. The school states it has the Christian faith at the centre of its foundation and aims to place children's learning and wellbeing at the heart of all it does, offering an educational experience that is knowledge-rich, rigorous and well-balanced. It aspires for academic expectations to be consistently exceeded, with each child nurtured through outstanding pastoral care which enables them to flourish both inside and outside the classroom. The school states that its aim is to provide every pupil with a strong foundation and a moral compass for life, equipping them with the skills needed for success in a global world.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

17 to 19 June 2025

68. A team of three 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 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
- 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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