

# School inspection report

28 to 30 April 2026

## **Dovecote School**

21 Station Road

Shapwick

Bridgwater

TA7 9NJ

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 develop caring relationships with pupils and focus on meeting their individual needs. Leaders evaluate provision thoughtfully and respond well to pupils' views and changing requirements.
2. Proprietors provide effective oversight in safeguarding, educational outcomes, staff induction and professional development, risk management and strategic planning. However, proprietors do not consistently follow procedures for managing stage three complaints. In particular, they do not always manage these complaints consistently within published timescales or always convene a panel for stage three complaints.
3. Leaders ensure that a variety of information is provided and made available to parents. However, when the inspection commenced, some of the information on the school's website had not been updated. Leaders rectified this during the inspection.
4. All pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and an education, health and care plan (EHC plan). Leaders provide an effective curriculum that is well matched to pupils' highly individual needs. They implement a broad, personalised curriculum that integrates therapeutic approaches into daily practice to support pupils to make good progress.
5. Teaching staff demonstrate a secure understanding of pupils' sensory, emotional and communication profiles and use this knowledge to plan flexible, well-structured lessons. They ensure that teaching is informed by thorough assessment and effective communication with the therapeutic team.
6. Leaders promote pupils' emotional and mental wellbeing effectively through a consistent, nurturing approach that prioritises building warm and constructive relationships with them. Staff provide calm, well-structured routines and enable pupils to develop resilience, independence and self-confidence.
7. Leaders ensure that physical education (PE) provision is well planned for most pupils, supported by additional opportunities such as swimming and outdoor education. Teaching promotes co-ordination, stamina and healthy habits. However, PE provision is less effectively developed for older pupils who are working towards accredited qualifications.
8. Leaders maintain a firm focus on preparing pupils for future wellbeing. Through the curriculum, enrichment activities and carefully supported work experience, pupils learn about respect, community involvement and life beyond school. Practical opportunities, including fundraising, enterprise and work-related activities, enable pupils to develop key life skills and prepare effectively for future education, employment and participation in society.
9. Leaders ensure that safeguarding arrangements are effective and securely embedded across the school. They ensure that staff are well trained, vigilant and clear about their responsibilities, with safeguarding understood as a shared duty. Leaders implement suitable systems for recording and responding to safeguarding concerns. They work proactively with external agencies to secure timely support for pupils and their families. Safer recruitment processes are robust.

## 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 met.

### Areas for action

The proprietor must ensure that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school:

- demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school Standards are consistently met
- fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the independent school Standards are consistently met and
- actively promote the wellbeing of the pupils

so that:

- proprietors manage stage three complaints consistently within published timescales and always convene a panel for stage three complaints.

### Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- ensure that the school's website always contains the most up-to-date versions of policies and key information
- improve the access to physical education for older pupils who are working on public examinations and accredited qualifications to strengthen their engagement in physical activity.

## Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders maintain a consistent vision that places individual needs at the centre of the school's work. They prioritise the development of trusting relationships between staff and pupils, so that pupils feel known and supported. Leaders ensure that therapeutic approaches are thoroughly integrated into daily practice. As a result, pupils develop social and emotional regulation so that they are increasingly ready to engage with learning. Leaders are knowledgeable about how to provide effective support for pupils who have SEND. They consider how statutory guidance should be implemented and ensure that the school has a robust safeguarding culture.
11. Proprietors' oversight does not ensure that leaders have the knowledge and skills to fulfil all their responsibilities. As a result, the school does not meet all of the Standards. In particular, proprietors do not ensure that the complaints procedure is implemented at stage three as required, including not always adhering to published timescales and not consistently convening a panel hearing.
12. Otherwise, leaders ensure that the complaints procedure is shared with parents via the school's website. Leaders are reflective about how they can change their practice in light of complaints, including how they could improve their communication with parents. They maintain a suitable complaints log.
13. Leaders are effective in evaluating the school's work, seeking ways that they can enhance provision. Weekly leadership meetings provide a structured forum to review what is working well and to identify next steps. Leaders' strategic planning demonstrates ambition in how they intend to develop the school's resources and curriculum. Leaders refine the curriculum annually to ensure programmes are personalised and based on pupils' emerging needs. Recent actions include consideration of how the school could provide greater subject-specialist input for older pupils and the further development of creative and exploratory play for younger pupils.
14. Leaders respond promptly and effectively to pupils' needs and views, adapting provision accordingly. Pupils contribute through the school council and pupil surveys. Leaders use pupils' feedback to shape the environment and pupils' broader experience of school. For example, pupils' requests have led to additional outdoor resources such as climbing walls, new social spaces such as a pool table room and an increase in opportunities beyond the classroom, including end-of-year trips for each group. Leaders also respond to pupils' interests by introducing new enrichment activities, such as a lunchtime debating club, and by developing specialist spaces, including additional art provision, with plans for further subject-specific facilities as the school grows.
15. Leaders provide effective induction arrangements for new staff. This includes extensive training to familiarise new staff with the school's policies, procedures and expectations, including those relating to safeguarding, behaviour and meeting pupils' specific individual needs. Leaders ensure that ongoing professional development is well planned and responsive to the needs of the school, such as recent training to address the new guidance on the use of restrictive force.
16. Proprietors and leaders manage risks effectively and ensure the smooth operation of the school. Risk assessments are suitably detailed, regularly reviewed and used to inform daily practice, including for site safety and off-site activities. Leaders implement risk assessments for individual pupils where required, such as for safeguarding or behaviour.

17. Leaders provide and make available a variety of information and policies for parents. However, at the start of the inspection, leaders had not updated the school's website to include the latest versions of the safeguarding and attendance policies. Information about how parents can access the number of complaints during the previous academic year was omitted and pupils' results were out of date. Leaders rectified these issues before the end of the inspection.
18. Leaders ensure that the school complies with the Equality Act 2010. They implement a suitable accessibility plan to increase access to the curriculum, physical environment and information for pupils who have a disability. The accessibility plan is informed by an annual audit so that leaders can consider any required actions. Recent actions include increasing accessibility of toilets by installing handrails, and ensuring that school trips are fully inclusive.
19. Leaders liaise proactively with external agencies. They work with the local authority to review pupils' EHC plans and provide accountability for associated finances. They communicate effectively with the local attendance officer, including sharing information about pupils leaving or joining the school at non-standard transition times.

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

20. Standards are not met consistently with respect to the management of complaints.
21. Standards relating to governance, leadership and management are not met.
- 22. 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

23. The curriculum at Dovecote School is broad and responsive to pupils' different situations. Leaders implement three educational pathways, called 'phases one, two and three', so that they can match learning experiences to pupils' needs. Leaders implement structured plans and schemes of work which map learning over time and prioritise the secure development of core knowledge and skills alongside communication, regulation and independence. Curriculum planning is individualised, considering pupils' aptitudes and needs, including those set out in their EHC plans. Leaders ensure that subject content is enriched through practical experiences and therapeutic approaches, enabling pupils to engage with learning and to apply what they know in different contexts. Pupils can access a broad range of accredited courses, including GCSEs, functional skills and vocational awards, as part of a well-tailored process of preparation for life beyond school.
24. Teaching is carefully adapted to meet pupils' needs, enabling them to make good progress from very varied starting points. Teachers and teaching assistants demonstrate a firm understanding of pupils' sensory, communication, emotional and cognitive needs and skills and use this knowledge to plan effective lessons. They ensure that lessons are structured flexibly, with regular routines and well-judged support, so pupils understand expectations and can make progress. Teachers employ a variety of different teaching methods, ranging from exploratory play that reinforces emerging literacy and numeracy for pupils in phase one, to studying advanced literary techniques such as iambic pentameter for pupils undertaking GCSEs in phase three. Teachers provide effective feedback via a clear framework that enables pupils to understand how to make progress against assessment criteria.
25. Leaders ensure that they meet the pupils' needs through co-ordinated integration of teaching and therapeutic approaches to provide a coherent, needs-led programme that supports pupils' learning and readiness to engage. Therapeutic strategies, including those linked to emotional regulation, communication and physical development, are embedded within daily teaching as well as provided to individuals and small groups, enabling pupils to practise skills in meaningful contexts. Leaders review EHC plans regularly, including during the annual review process, to ensure that pupils are making sufficient progress. They refine approaches where needed and ensure that staff, parents and external agencies are kept up to date.
26. Leaders compile a detailed assessment framework that monitors pupils' holistic development, including social and emotional regulation, independence, life skills and academics. Leaders implement a 'pupil passport' for each pupil so that they can track ongoing progress. Teachers use a range of assessment strategies that accommodate pupils' communication styles and emotional readiness. Leaders, teachers and the therapeutic team carefully review assessment data to inform next steps in pupils' learning and to consider any adjustment of provision. As a result, pupils are supported to build on their successes, develop confidence in their learning and make sustained progress over time.
27. Leaders provide opportunities at break and lunchtimes for pupils to engage in a range of clubs, including football, tabletop role-playing games, wildlife and debating. This enables pupils to pursue their interests, develop new skills and practise socialising with peers in a purposeful context.

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

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

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

29. Pupils' understanding of the importance of respecting others is developed coherently through the school's ethos and through the curriculum for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE). Staff consistently model courteous language, attentive listening and calm disagreement. They take time to explain how words and actions can affect others, helping pupils to recognise different needs and perspectives. This work is enhanced by planned opportunities to learn about diverse faiths and cultures, including assemblies that increase pupils' awareness of individual backgrounds and by clear expectations about personal boundaries and consent.
30. Leaders help pupils to develop their spiritual understanding through opportunities to reflect, develop self-awareness and consider experiences beyond the everyday. Within PSHE, pupils learn practical approaches such as 'mindfulness' techniques and breathing exercises, helping them to appreciate the connection between body and mind. Teachers build quiet moments for reflection into the school day, enabling pupils to pause, consider their choices and articulate what they notice about themselves and others.
31. The school develops pupils' confidence and self-esteem effectively through a sustained focus on supportive relationships and recognition. Staff build trusting and individual connections so that pupils develop their sense of belonging. Leaders celebrate achievements, for example through frequent, specific praise in lessons and through postcards sent home to recognise efforts and progress. Teachers encourage pupils to consider their own development through structured journalling, where question-prompts enable pupils to identify what they do well and what they wish to achieve.
32. Leaders provide an effective PSHE programme to support pupils' emotional wellbeing. Pupils learn about different emotions and how to be resilient. Pupils practise coping strategies such as breathing and mindfulness which are reinforced through calm, predictable routines. Leaders routinely provide access to therapy dogs, the sensory garden and the school's farm to support pupils' emotional regulation. Targeted support from the mental health and 'thrive' teams, alongside external support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), where appropriate, ensures that pupils receive timely and personalised support.
33. Leaders typically promote pupils' physical health effectively through a well-structured programme that is adapted to individual needs. Leaders provide regular timetabled PE lessons including activities such as badminton. This is complemented by additional opportunities such as outdoor education, swimming and trampolining, together with a range of clubs that encourage pupils to be active and develop co-ordination and stamina. Teaching in PSHE reinforces key messages about physical health, including healthy eating, unsafe substances and personal hygiene. However, the PE programme for older pupils who are working on public examinations and accredited qualifications is not as well developed as for other pupils and these pupils do not always engage in routine physical activity.
34. Leaders ensure that the relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum is effective and adapted thoughtfully to meet pupils' individual needs. Teaching is carefully sequenced and enables pupils to develop a secure understanding of friendships, family relationships and respectful behaviour. Pupils learn about suitable themes such as puberty, personal boundaries and consent, and how to recognise and report behaviours that make them feel unsafe. As a result, pupils gain increasing

confidence to talk about relationships, to make informed choices and to seek help from trusted adults when they need support.

35. Leaders emphasise the importance of positive behaviour and the prevention of bullying, underpinned by comprehensive policies that are implemented consistently by staff. Pupils understand the school's expectations as articulated through the 'response highway', including the managed checking-in of mobile phones. Leaders involve pupils in developing expectations for behaviour through creating lists of 'negotiables' and 'non-negotiables'. Leaders analyse behaviour and bullying information to identify patterns and act promptly to address any emerging concerns. Every pupil has an individual behaviour plan, which supports a consistent approach and helps pupils to regulate their behaviour. Leaders implement support plans when required for pupils who have demonstrated any challenging behaviour. Leaders are reflective in their response to any behavioural incidents, reviewing practice to enhance provision and sustain a respectful culture.
36. Leaders ensure that suitable arrangements for health and safety are implemented consistently to support pupils' welfare. The premises are well maintained with effective systems in place to test and service equipment. Leaders maintain clear records relating to routine checks of fire equipment and conduct regular fire drills.
37. Leaders provide effective supervision of pupils. They deploy staff appropriately to meet pupils' individual needs throughout the day, including during less structured times such as arrival, breaks, lunchtimes and transitions between rooms and buildings.
38. Leaders maintain up-to-date admission and attendance registers in line with statutory requirements. They promote the importance of regular attendance at school and are proactive at working with pupils and their families about any attendance issues. They monitor attendance patterns and liaise effectively with the local attendance officer.
39. Leaders ensure that a suitable number of staff have first aid training, so that they can look after pupils who are injured or unwell. They provide an appropriate medical room to store medication safely and to offer first aid support in a comfortable and discreet environment.

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

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

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

41. Leaders provide opportunities across the curriculum to actively promote British values and prepare pupils appropriately for life in modern Britain. Through a coherent PSHE programme and daily routines that emphasise fairness and consideration for others, pupils learn to respect difference, through learning about a variety of cultures and religions. Leaders provide regular opportunities for pupils to exercise their views, for example through school council, which helps pupils to understand democratic processes and the importance of shared rules. Teaching within history further promotes understanding of democracy and the rule of law when pupils learn about topics such as Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot. Teaching promotes an informed understanding of rights and responsibilities, including personal safety, consent and the need to seek support from trusted adults and public services when appropriate.
42. Leaders encourage pupils to make a positive contribution to charitable causes and the local community through well-planned opportunities to develop empathy and responsibility towards others. Pupils take increasing ownership of fundraising, for example by organising raffles and proposing events, such as a sponsored run for Red Nose Day and a bake sale for Children in Need. Practical acts of service, including delivering donated food packages to the local foodbank, help pupils to appreciate the needs of others. Older pupils can participate in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE), which involves community service at venues such as local charity shops, care homes and schools.
43. Leaders place a consistent emphasis on developing pupils' social skills through well-judged adult support. Staff explicitly model and rehearse turn-taking, sharing and conversational skills across the day. This includes lunchtimes, when adults sit alongside pupils to prompt and sustain appropriate interaction and to help them interpret social cues. Staff help pupils to work on personalised targets relating to social skills within pupils' EHC plans through therapeutic work, including 'thrive' sessions for those who need additional help. As a result, pupils grow in confidence when working and socialising with others and typically become increasingly able to initiate and maintain positive relationships.
44. Careers education is planned to reflect pupils' starting points and current needs and to raise aspirations. Leaders provide structured opportunities for pupils to explore potential future pathways, including further education, training and employment, and ensure that guidance is presented in small steps with practical outcomes. Pupils develop an understanding of different roles and workplaces through visiting speakers and experiences beyond the classroom, supported by careful preparation to help pupils manage change and unfamiliar environments. Staff help pupils to recognise and build on their aptitudes and interests, while also developing transferable skills such as communication, teamwork and resilience. Staff help pupils to develop life skills such as preparation for interviews, cooking and independent travel. As pupils move through the school, careers activities contribute effectively to their readiness for the next stage of education and adult life.
45. The school supports pupils' economic wellbeing effectively by providing meaningful, practical experiences alongside the carefully sequenced PSHE programme. Pupils benefit from opportunities to take on supported work experience, including placements at the school's café and farm, where they practise workplace routines, develop appropriate professional behaviours and begin to understand the relationship between work, earnings and personal responsibility. Enterprise

activities, such as making and selling products at school fairs, help pupils to experience the planning required to price items, manage resources and interact confidently with members of the community. In PSHE lessons, pupils build secure knowledge of budgeting, saving and spending, financial risk and debt.

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

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

## Safeguarding

47. Proprietors have effective oversight of safeguarding. They work with leaders to ensure that safeguarding is embedded effectively within the school's day-to-day culture. Leaders ensure that safeguarding arrangements have appropriate regard to statutory guidance and are reviewed regularly to reflect changes in national expectations and local safeguarding priorities. Leaders promote a shared understanding that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and ensure that concerns are recorded and followed up.
48. Leaders provide appropriate safeguarding training so that staff understand current risks and the procedures to follow if they have a concern. Induction processes ensure that new staff are familiar with the school's systems, key personnel and expectations. Training is reinforced through regular reminders and discussion, enabling staff to apply guidance confidently in practice. Consequently, staff are alert to indicators of harm and take timely action when pupils' presentation or circumstances give cause for concern. Staff know the procedures for reporting low-level concerns or allegations about adults should these arise.
49. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding are effective due to their up-to-date training and knowledge about local and national risks. They ensure that staff record concerns promptly and that information is reviewed with appropriate urgency, with actions and decisions clearly documented. Where thresholds are met, leaders make referrals without delay and maintain oversight to ensure that pupils receive appropriate help in a timely fashion. Leaders also take suitable steps to work with families when appropriate, maintaining emphasis on pupils' welfare. Pupils' individual needs are reflected in plans and risk assessments, so that protective strategies are understood and implemented consistently.
50. Leaders work effectively with external agencies to reinforce safeguarding arrangements and to secure support for pupils and families. They liaise appropriately with children's services, the police and health services and contribute relevant information to multi-agency meetings and reviews. Leaders challenge and escalate appropriately when they are concerned that pupils might not be receiving timely input.
51. Leaders implement suitable safer recruitment procedures. They complete the required pre-employment checks and maintain an accurate single central record of appointments (SCR). Recruitment processes include appropriate scrutiny of applicants' suitability to work with children, including through interview questioning and the taking of references. Those involved in recruitment have relevant training and understand their responsibilities.
52. Leaders and staff know pupils well and build trusting relationships so that pupils feel confident to share worries. Staff provide consistent expectations and a calm environment to support pupils' sense of safety, particularly for those who find change and uncertainty difficult.
53. Leaders ensure that pupils learn about online risks in an age-appropriate way, including how to recognise unsafe content, the importance of privacy and how to seek help from trusted adults. Staff supervise pupils' use of technology carefully and apply consistent routines for managing devices. Leaders ensure that internet filtering and monitoring systems are effective and tested regularly.
54. Leaders identify and manage safeguarding risks appropriately, including those linked to pupils' individual needs and to their experiences beyond school. Risk assessments and behaviour plans

reflect known triggers and vulnerabilities and staff apply agreed strategies to reduce the likelihood of harm. Leaders monitor patterns in concerns, behaviour and attendance and use this information to improve practice and target support. This helps ensure that safeguarding provision remains responsive as pupils' needs change.

### **The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding**

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

## 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 <sup>1</sup> Part 7, paragraph 33	The standard about the manner in which complaints are handled is met if the proprietor ensures that a complaints procedure is drawn up and effectively implemented which deals with the handling of complaints from parents of pupils and which –
33(c)	sets out clear time scales for the management of a complaint
33(f)	where the parent is not satisfied with the response to the complaint made in accordance with sub-paragraph (e), makes provision for a hearing before a panel appointed by or on behalf of the proprietor and consisting of at least three people who were not directly involved in the matters detailed in the complaint
ISSR 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014 ('ISSR')

## School details

<b>School</b>	Dovecote School
<b>Department for Education number</b>	933/6020
<b>Address</b>	Dovecote School 21 Station Road Shapwick Bridgwater Somerset TA7 9NJ
<b>Phone number</b>	01458 333127
<b>Email address</b>	reception@dovecoteschool.co.uk
<b>Website</b>	www.dovecoteschool.co.uk
<b>Proprietor</b>	Cavendish Education Ltd
<b>Chair</b>	Mr Aatif Hassan
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mr Neil Gage
<b>Age range</b>	5 to 19
<b>Number of pupils</b>	96
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	26 to 28 April 2023

## Information about the school

56. Dovecote School is an independent co-educational special day school located in Shapwick, Somerset. The school caters for pupils with a range of needs including Autism, anxiety and associated conditions. Since the previous inspection, in February 2025, the school opened a new building, a short walk from the main school site, to accommodate teaching areas for pupils in the 'phase three' educational pathway. The school became part of Cavendish Education Limited in October 2025. Governance is undertaken by the directors of the company. Since the previous inspection, the school has extended its age range from five to 18 years to five to 19 years and increased the maximum number of pupils it can cater for from 90 to 130.
57. The previous inspection of the school was by Ofsted. This is the first inspection of the school by ISI.
58. The school has identified all pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. All pupils have an education, health and care plan.
59. The school has not identified English as an additional language for any pupils.
60. The school states its aims are to deliver a therapeutic curriculum that engenders pride, resilience, and aspiration for every pupil, preparing them to lead safe, independent lives and to be active members of their community.

## Inspection details

### Inspection dates

28 to 30 April 2026

61. A team of three inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

62. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the chair of governors
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support areas and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

63. 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](http://www.isi.net)**.

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For more information, please visit [isi.net](http://isi.net)