

School inspection report

28 to 30 April 2026

West Buckland School

West Buckland

Barnstaple

EX32 0SX

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. Governors provide effective oversight of the school to ensure that the Standards are met. Governors are well informed about what is happening at the school. Governors and leaders work together to devise development plans in line with key priorities to improve the school's provision. Governors and leaders have the appropriate knowledge and skills to fulfil their roles. However, at the time of the inspection, the name and contact details of the school's senior attendance champion were not clearly identifiable in the school's attendance policy. The policy was updated during the inspection.
2. Leaders provide a broad and balanced curriculum with a wide range of supplementary activities and other pursuits for pupils to experience. Teachers deliver well-planned lessons and make use of resources effectively. However, some teaching does not use a range of assessment information to identify what pupils know and can do. When this happens, some teachers do not support pupils precisely enough when they find work too hard or too easy. These pupils do not learn as effectively as they could.
3. Pastoral support across the school promotes positive emotional and physical wellbeing. Leaders provide a personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) curriculum that educates pupils about healthy relationships and how to take care of themselves. Effective systems are in place to promote good behaviour and to manage any occurrence of behaviour that does not meet the school's expectations. Systems and processes are in place to ensure the health and safety of the school site and members of the school community. Leaders maintain effective oversight of fire safety, medical care and pupil supervision.
4. Leaders support pupils' social development effectively. Teachers help pupils to understand important values, such as democracy and respect. Leaders provide a comprehensive careers programme which is delivered through a variety of structured activities. Pupils share their opinions about the school and offer feedback regularly. They contribute to the school and local community.
5. In the early years, leaders provide an effective curriculum, environment and resources to support children's early learning and development. Staff adeptly deliver the curriculum and are attentive to children's individual needs. They help children to develop early reading, writing, communication and number skills, alongside their emotional, physical and social development. Children are ready for the next stage of their education.
6. Leaders ensure that boarders are well cared for. Well-maintained accommodation coupled with supportive staff ensures that the boarding environment is comfortable and cohesive. Boarders have access to a wide range of activities and free time in the evenings and at weekends. They are well settled and supported.
7. Leaders support a robust safeguarding culture and have rigorous systems and processes in place. Staff are well trained and know what to do to safeguard pupils from potential harm as well as what to do if they have a concern. Appropriate checks are made on adults before they work with pupils.

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 teachers use a range of assessment information to identify and support pupils who need further help or challenge, so that all pupils consistently make the progress of which they are capable
- ensure the school's attendance policy accurately reflects up-to-date statutory guidance and the effective practice in the school.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

8. Leaders and governors foster and promote the school's character values of 'resilience, curiosity, kindness, honesty and respect'. These values are integrated into the school's policies and practice. They are actively promoted amongst the pupil body. Leaders and governors take decisions in the best interests of pupils and prioritise their social and emotional wellbeing.
9. Governors provide oversight of policies and procedures to ensure the Standards are met. Leaders provide governors with reports on a regular basis so that they are well informed about the operations of the school. Governors visit the school regularly and meet with pupils, parents and staff. They build positive relationships with pupils and their families and use this information to check on the effectiveness of leaders' work. Governors ensure that leaders have the appropriate knowledge and skills to perform their roles effectively.
10. Leaders engage in a careful process of self-evaluation so that they can determine the key priorities for the school's development. Plans are put in place to realise these priorities and improve the school, for instance in more recent efforts to bring even further connections and integration between older and younger pupils. Leaders consider the views of pupils, staff and parents when bringing about improvements in the school's provision.
11. Leaders devise and implement effective policies so that Standards are met. For example, the school fulfils its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. Leaders implement a suitable accessibility plan, with clear adjustments, for instance, so that all pupils can access the curriculum and the school site. The school's website provides all required information for parents and external agencies.
12. Leaders work in partnership with local agencies, including the local authority and other safeguarding partners. For example, leaders liaise appropriately with the local authority regarding any pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan), including the use of finances and funding. Leaders inform the local authority of any pupils who join or leave the school at non-standard transition points.
13. Staff keep parents well informed about their child's progress through parents' evenings and regular, detailed reports. The school provides several informative events for parents to help support them with emerging issues and other parental matters.
14. The school has a comprehensive system in place to identify and manage risk in order to promote the wellbeing of pupils. Staff devise and implement thorough risk assessments to highlight areas of risk and effectively mitigate against them. These are regularly reviewed to ensure that they continue to be effective. The school makes use of external auditors to assure risk processes and safety across the school site.
15. Leaders provide a complaints procedure that allows parents to raise concerns informally and formally. Leaders ensure that a record of all concerns is kept, with details of how matters have been investigated, the actions taken and the outcome. Governors review these complaints to respond to any learning points taken from them.
16. Leaders are knowledgeable about the way that the youngest children learn and develop. They ensure that staff in the early years are well trained about how best to support children. Staff in the

early years know the children well. Leaders ensure that they adhere to the requirements of the early years foundation stage Framework (EYFS) and provide a calm and nurturing environment.

17. Boarding leaders ensure that the requirements of the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools (NMS) are met. Boarding staff create a warm and friendly boarding environment so that boarders are supported, safe and cared for.

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

18. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. Leaders design and implement a wide and varied curriculum, supported by detailed plans and schemes of work. The curriculum provides a broad range of experiences. For example, the curriculum for younger pupils provides diverse practical and outdoor learning opportunities, making use of the school's natural surroundings. As they get older, the wide-ranging curriculum provides pupils with a strong foundation in a range of subjects. Leaders ensure that pupils in Years 10 and 11 study a range of GCSE and iGCSE qualifications and other accreditations. Leaders have thought carefully about the curriculum as pupils transition into the sixth form, ensuring there is an appropriate range of A Levels, BTECs and other qualifications that build on pupils' prior learning.
20. Teachers have effective knowledge of the subjects that they teach. They plan lessons that make use of effective resources, resulting in high-quality learning experiences. A range of teaching methods and activities are used so that pupils develop new knowledge and skills and are interested in their work. Teachers make effective use of questioning techniques to aid engagement and provide feedback, which challenges pupils and helps to clarify any misconceptions. However, some teaching does not use a range of assessment information to identify what pupils know and can do. When this happens, pupils are not supported precisely enough when they find work too hard or too easy. These pupils do not learn as effectively as they could.
21. In the early years, the curriculum is thoughtfully designed to promote curiosity and independence and is responsive to children's aptitudes and interests. Teachers and learning support assistants work seamlessly to ensure that activities support children's development of early communication, writing, reading and number skills. For example, staff are adept at supporting children's language through well-timed interactions. They deliver the school's phonics programme well so that children develop a thorough understanding of letters and the sounds that they make. The school day is filled with stories, rhymes and songs that help children to practise new vocabulary. As a result, children develop important skills and knowledge needed to transition successfully into Year 1.
22. Leaders provide an assessment framework to evaluate pupils' work and performance. Teachers regularly discuss pupils' progress and make use of a range of assessment information to determine how to best support pupils. They provide additional support where needed so that pupils do not fall behind. Pupils are provided with feedback on their work and specific targets so that they know what to do to improve. As a result, pupils learn well across subjects and the curriculum. Older pupils achieve well in public examinations and make good progress from their starting points. This enables them to progress onto an appropriate post-16 or post-18 pathway.
23. Leaders identify the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) effectively. Teachers are provided with specific guidance so that they know what adjustments to make when planning lessons. They use a range of strategies to ensure that pupils can access the curriculum well alongside their peers. Where needed, additional support such as personalised learning assistants, provide specific intervention sessions for pupils' specific needs. Leaders work with pupils, parents and external specialist teams to ensure that pupils are getting timely and effective help to learn and develop. As they get older, they are well supported to transition into adulthood.
24. Teachers provide a range of support in lessons to build the language skills of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) and ensure that they can increasingly access the curriculum

successfully. Where needed, pupils access interventions to support with wider ranging needs, especially for pupils in the earliest stages of learning English. Pupils' linguistic skills develop securely so that they learn and achieve well, alongside their peers.

25. Leaders provide an extensive range of activities outside of lessons. For instance, many pupils take part in gardening, dance and a range of sports. Others enjoy clubs that provide academic extension, exploring a specific subject beyond what is learnt in lessons. As a result, pupils develop their confidence, creativity and teamworking skills.
26. Boarders have access to a wide range of activities and free time in the evenings and at weekends. This ensures that boarders maintain a healthy balance between schoolwork and other interests. Boarders are allocated specific time to focus on any work required to be completed outside of lessons and have access to staff for support if they need it.

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

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

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

28. The school supports pupils' emotional and mental health in a range of ways. Leaders provide a range of staff who support pupils on a daily basis for their everyday needs. Targeted support is provided to pupils based on their specific needs so that their wellbeing is maintained. When needed, this includes additional guidance through counselling services or external specialist mental health services. Boarding provision makes a positive contribution to pupils' wellbeing.
29. Leaders provide a comprehensive and well-structured PSHE curriculum and relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum. Topics such as consent and body image are discussed in an age-appropriate way, so that pupils are well informed about these important topics. Teachers use a range of assessment information to check pupils' understanding of topics covered and adapt the curriculum if required. Other adaptations take place in response to any emerging needs across the school, so that local issues are quickly addressed in an appropriate way.
30. The physical education (PE) curriculum provides pupils with opportunities to engage with a range of different sports, fitness and physical exercise. There is an emphasis on inclusivity and individual challenge, with pupils completing an assessment when they start a new sport, and then at the end before moving to the next, so that they can observe their progress. This develops pupil self-knowledge and confidence.
31. Pupils are given a range of ways in which to reflect and think about the world around them and the importance of respect for others. In the early years, children play in nature and explore the world around them. The curriculum focuses on raising awareness of different religions and traditions. Pupils visit local places of worship and reflection, so that they experience and enhance their understanding and have opportunities to reflect on the beliefs of others. Religious and cultural festivals are celebrated, and parents of different nationalities are invited in to talk to pupils about their cultures and customs.
32. Leaders provide a well-structured approach to behaviour and anti-bullying. These approaches are outlined appropriately in the school's behaviour policy. Behaviour expectations are explicit with consistent routines and positive relationships between staff and pupils. This creates a calm, respectful environment in which pupils feel safe. Pupils are taught about bullying and what to do if they have a concern. The school maintains appropriate logs of incidents of behaviour and bullying and ensures that appropriate actions are taken.
33. The school site and facilities are well maintained, including the accommodation provided for boarders. Regular checks on the site maintenance take place and suitable records are kept. Leaders make use of external professional specialists to ensure health and safety at the school. Leaders comply with relevant safety regulation and fire risk management. Appropriate systems are in place to ensure that boarders are well aware of health and safety, including fire safety, systems to support their safety.
34. Leaders provide suitable provision and accommodation for pupils' medical needs. School medical staff are available throughout the day for pupils that require support. A sufficient number of staff are trained in first aid, with all staff in the early years holding appropriate paediatric first aid

qualifications. Boarders have access to, and know how to seek, support should they become unwell or injured.

35. Leaders ensure that there is suitable supervision throughout the school day, including at breaktimes and lunchtime. Boarding staff know pupils well and ensure they are appropriately supervised and well cared for. In the early years, children are always within sight or hearing of a member of staff and are carefully supervised whilst eating.
36. Leaders maintain suitable admission and attendance registers in line with the requirements of current statutory guidance. There is a robust system in place so that attendance is frequently monitored and actions taken if there is a concern. At the start of the inspection, the school's attendance policy did not clearly identify who the school's senior attendance champion is. This was rectified during the inspection.
37. Boarders are given opportunities to keep personal items secure, have appropriate independent time and are able to contact their families easily. Boarders benefit from a range of social activities, access to school facilities and regular weekend outings
38. Staff in the early years provide children with consistent emotional support and guidance. Staff model and promote positive relationships and self-regulation. This helps children to understand and manage their emotions. Regular opportunities to play and participate in PE, which includes swimming, help develop gross motor skills. Lesson activities, such as 'drawing club' provide engaging activities for children to develop their fine motor skills.

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

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

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

40. Teachers develop pupils' economic knowledge through lessons delivered as part of the PSHE curriculum. This takes place throughout the school. For instance, in the prep school, pupils consider the concept of debt in an age-appropriate way. In the sixth form, pupils study a range of topics related to personal finance, including student finance. This develops an understanding of the economy and prepares them for the future.
41. Leaders provide a careers programme that enables pupils to make informed choices about a range of career options. The curriculum starts for younger pupils, with external speakers introducing pupils to different career options. Older pupils engage with a well-structured wide-ranging programme, for instance using an online system to help them understand what jobs may match with their interests and strengths. Pupils receive appropriate and tailored independent and impartial advice, especially when they begin to consider their options after completing school. Pupils explore a range of possible post-16 and post-18 pathways, and as a result are well supported to apply for next step educational courses, apprenticeships and other opportunities that are in line with their abilities, interests and aspirations.
42. The school has a well-established system that provides meaningful pupil leadership opportunities. Sixth form prefect roles, which include positions associated with boarding, and peer support structures allow pupils to take responsibility and contribute to the school community. Pupils raise concerns and make suggestions to leaders and, as a result, feel heard. Pupils with leadership roles and responsibilities develop skills such as effective communication and how to work as part of a team. In addition to the prefect system and school council, there are other ways for pupils to share their views, for instance, through pupil surveys and a food committee in boarding.
43. Pupils engage with the community through charity work. Pupils decide which local charities they wish to support and organise fundraising events, for example, a music performance event in the local community. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE) and the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) provide additional opportunities to engage with the local community as part of their respective programmes.
44. Leaders ensure that pupils are taught about important values such as democracy, the rule of law and equality. This includes learning about different political parties and their differing viewpoints. The curriculum is enhanced by opportunities for pupils to engage in the democratic process in practice, for example when voting for the school council representatives. Leaders ensure that boarders' views lead to tangible improvements.
45. Teachers ensure that pupils learn about the importance of respecting the diverse beliefs, experiences, faiths and backgrounds of all people. Through the PSHE curriculum, pupils learn about topics such as inclusion and prejudice. The curriculum is enhanced through a variety of activities, which includes raising awareness of the different cultural festivals and events that are celebrated across the country and internationally. Older pupils talk to younger pupils about their own culture and background, helping pupils to appreciate the diversity of the school community.
46. Pupils are taught about the importance of right and wrong. Across all age groups, pupils are taught in an age-appropriate way about the importance of taking responsibility for their actions and the place

of causes and consequences. For example, in the early years, children are taught social skills, such as taking turns and listening. Staff model positive interactions and help children to interact with one another positively, for example in sharing resources and in listening to each other. As a result, children build positive relationships with staff and other children and learn about the importance of apologising when needed.

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

47. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

48. Governors provide effective oversight of safeguarding. Governors undertake appropriate safeguarding training. The governor with responsibility for safeguarding visits the school regularly and meets with leaders, providing oversight of pre-employment checks and leaders' records and documentation. Governors review a range of information, including talking to staff and pupils. They provide challenge and feedback and check appropriately on the effectiveness of leaders' work.
49. Leaders responsible for safeguarding are well trained so that they have the knowledge and skills to maintain effective safeguarding systems and processes. Leaders take appropriate action when managing any safeguarding concern. They maintain suitable confidential records and liaise with local safeguarding partners when such action is appropriate.
50. Staff, including boarding staff, are well trained in a wide range of safeguarding information. For instance, they are trained regularly through the school's 'safeguarding shorts' programme. Staff receive training from the local authority and other external providers. New staff are provided with comprehensive induction training. Staff understand the necessity to report any concerns they have about adults working with pupils. Boarding staff understand the specific contextual risks related to boarding. As a result, staff report concerns appropriately and in a timely way. A suitable record of these concerns, including low-level concerns, is kept.
51. Pupils are taught how to raise any concerns in an age-appropriate way. For example, the youngest children in the early years are taught how to communicate their worries with their key person. Across the school, positive relationships are established so pupils readily raise concerns with staff. Boarders have access to an independent person, which is well advertised, and they can contact them should they wish to raise concerns.
52. The school teaches pupils how to stay safe, including when online. Pupils are taught about safety and wellbeing through the curriculum and tutor sessions so that they know how to keep safe. Leaders also identify and adapt the curriculum to ensure that any new or emerging safeguarding issues are taught to pupils. This helps pupils to be aware of the risks they may be exposed to, for instance on the topic of use of artificial intelligence and the creation of fake material. The school operates a robust internet filtering and monitoring system, which is monitored effectively by leaders. They act swiftly if any concerns are raised.
53. Leaders are appropriately trained in safer recruitment practices. Leaders ensure that appropriate and required pre-employment checks are carried out for all adults working at the school prior to commencing employment. Appropriate documentation of pre-employment checks is well maintained. Appropriate checks on adults living on the school premises but not employed by the school are also in place.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	West Buckland School
Department for Education number	878/6032
Registered charity number	1167545
Address	West Buckland School West Buckland Barnstaple Devon EX32 0SX
Phone number	01598 760000
Email address	enquiries@westbuckland.com
Website	https://westbuckland.com
Proprietor	West Buckland School Governors
Chair	Mr Andrew Jackson
Headteacher	Mrs Helen Lowe
Age range	3 to 19
Number of pupils	501
Number of boarding pupils	58
Date of previous inspection	17 to 18 May 2023

Information about the school

55. West Buckland School is a co-educational day and boarding school located in Barnstaple, Devon. The school consists of a nursery, prep school and senior school which includes a sixth form. The school is a registered charity where trustees take on roles on the board of governors. Since the previous inspection, a new headteacher was appointed in September 2025. A new chair of trustees and governors was also appointed in September 2025.
56. The school offers full, weekly, flexi- and occasional boarding for male and female pupils in Year 7 and above. Boarders are accommodated in one of two boarding houses. One is for pupils in Years 7 to 11, with separate living quarters for males and females. The third boarding house is pupils in the sixth form, with separate living quarters for males and females.
57. There are 22 children in the early years comprising one Nursery class and one Reception class.
58. The school has identified 169 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. A small number of pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
59. The school has identified English as an additional language for 21 pupils.
60. The school states its aims are to provide an outstanding education that nurtures the potential of every individual, promotes personal growth and prepares students for future success and global citizenship in a changing world.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

28 to 30 April 2026

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

62. Inspection activities included:

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

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**.

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For more information, please visit isi.net