

School inspection report

13 to 15 January 2026

Little Downsend Leatherhead

13 Epsom Road

Leatherhead

Surrey

KT22 8ST

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. The proprietor collaborates effectively with school leaders to promote the school's aims and ethos successfully. Regular reviews of key aspects of school life ensure that Standards are met and enable the proprietor to provide a well-structured plan for the future development of the school. Leaders respond appropriately to pupils' individual needs to support their progress and build their confidence and self-esteem. A robust approach to risk management ensures the school premises and all educational activities are managed in accordance with the requirements of health and safety legislation. Leaders provide parents with detailed information about school life and policies and report regularly on the progress and attainment of the pupils. Leaders also report to the local authority about pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) and provide information about admissions and attendance, as required.
2. Leaders promote pupils' academic development through the provision of an appropriately wide-ranging curriculum. Well-planned, knowledgeable teaching is evident at all levels which enables pupils to develop understanding of new concepts and apply subject-related skills successfully. A thorough assessment framework enables teachers to gather data about their pupils' progress and attainment and use this to support the pupils' individual needs and plan the next steps in their learning. Beyond the classroom, leaders ensure pupils can access a variety of extra-curricular activities which further develop their interests, skills and knowledge. However, pupils have few opportunities to develop their abilities in art and design. Some schemes of work in Years 1 and 2 are not sufficiently detailed to support teachers' effective planning across the curriculum.
3. Leaders successfully create a calm, warm and friendly atmosphere. In class, through assemblies and a variety of activities, they promote values such as kindness and respect which align with the school's aims. In personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lessons, staff teach pupils about individual differences and the qualities of healthy relationships. Teachers' success in this and their fair, consistent behaviour management result in typically positive pupil conduct. Pupils benefit from a physical education (PE) programme which supports their co-ordination, balance and ball skills. Leaders implement a systematic programme of site maintenance checks to promote the pupils' physical wellbeing.
4. Pupils learn about human rights and democracy and gain practical experience of the electoral process through voting for their representatives on the school and eco-councils. Leaders use the lives of famous people to teach pupils the benefits of honesty, determination and empathy. Pupils throughout the school learn to share, take turns and help others. They take part enthusiastically in activities to support members of the local community. Leaders provide older pupils with opportunities to take on positions of responsibility and make a positive contribution to school life. A well-structured programme of financial and economic education teaches pupils how money is used and ensures that they learn about banks, saving and borrowing, taxation, interest and other key concepts.
5. Consistent proprietorial oversight ensures that leaders with responsibility for safeguarding provide staff with regular, comprehensive safeguarding training. As a result, staff know how they must respond to any concerns about pupils' wellbeing and that they must do so promptly.

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:

- develop schemes of work which are sufficiently detailed to support teachers' planning so that pupils learn key skills and concepts in all subjects
- ensure the curriculum provides greater opportunities for pupils to develop their abilities in art and design.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

6. Effective systems of proprietorial oversight ensure that leaders benefit from appropriate training so that they have the knowledge and skills to act consistently and successfully in the best interests of the pupils. Leaders and managers at all levels actively promote the intellectual, emotional and social wellbeing of the pupils in accordance with the school's aims to encourage and celebrate effort, courage and perseverance. As a result, confident, articulate and well-behaved pupils contribute positively to all aspects of school life.
7. A detailed and robust quality assurance process, which includes lesson observations and reviews of key aspects of school management, such as safeguarding and provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), enables the proprietor to ensure that Standards are met consistently. Senior staff report frequently to the proprietor so that areas where the school does well and those for development are identified. This results in a comprehensive school improvement plan which sets out the priorities for the year ahead and the actions required to attain these objectives.
8. Parents benefit from termly reports and regular, formal meetings with teachers which provide detailed and valuable information about their child's progress and attainment. These reports include targets so that parents know the required next steps which will support their child's learning. Staff are also available at the start and end of the school day for informal discussions with parents and carers.
9. Leaders provide parents and prospective parents with detailed information on the website about school life and policies. Leaders maintain well-established links with external agencies, particularly the local authority. They inform the local authority about pupils who have an EHC plan, including details related to finance and funding. They also report to the local authority those pupils who join or leave the school at times other than the standard transition points.
10. Parents have access to an appropriate complaints policy on the school's website. Leaders take prompt and suitable action in response to any parental concerns and maintain detailed records of any complaints.
11. Leaders ensure there are robust and rigorous systems to assess risk. Suitably trained staff monitor risk regularly. They systematically implement appropriate strategies to manage and mitigate identified risks. Detailed risk assessments cover the school site, activities in school and educational visits and the welfare of pupils with specific needs. A thorough process to monitor and review risk assessments ensures their continuing effectiveness.
12. Enthusiastic and knowledgeable early years leaders provide a calm, stimulating environment and a programme of well-planned activities to engage the children and promote their learning. Staff receive appropriate training so that they understand how to communicate successfully with the children and build their self-confidence and self-esteem. As a result, children are enthusiastic and make good progress.
13. Leaders ensure that pupils who have SEND are well supported so that they can access their education alongside their peers and make good progress. Successful strategies to meet pupils' individual needs and the implementation of an appropriate accessibility plan ensure that the school fulfils its responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010.

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

14. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

15. Leaders provide a broad curriculum which ensures that pupils build their knowledge, skills and understanding across the range of required subject areas. They benefit from the early introduction of French in the Nursery and learn outside in the forest area, in addition to studying English, mathematics, science and the humanities. Study based on carefully selected topics, such as Victorian England, enables effective links to be made across the curriculum. However, opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding and skills in art and design technology are less well developed.
16. Pupils in Years 1 and 2 acquire language skills and learn to analyse and hypothesise in science and mathematics. In English they use their five senses to construct short, fun sentences exemplifying alliteration with phrases such as 'sizzling sausages' and 'carnivorous, cranky, crunchy cookies'. Staff teach pupils to double and halve numbers successfully in mathematics. In science, pupils use the concepts of fair testing and prediction appropriately when exploring how water freezes.
17. Early years staff manage class time positively and effectively and use carefully chosen resources to support the children's learning successfully. Children engage enthusiastically in activities connected to the theme of 'people who help us'. Nursery children take on the role of vets and use modelling clay to make animals whose ailments they need to cure. Well-motivated children in Reception write legible, coherent letters to thank firefighters for giving a presentation about their work in support of the community. Staff challenge children with appropriate questions and engage them in conversation about their activities in order to promote their communication and language skills. Staff use counters and games to develop children's understanding of number to ten and beyond. As a result of their teaching, children are successfully prepared for the next steps in their learning and the move to Year 1.
18. In Years 1 and 2, teachers, who have a clear understanding of the needs and aptitudes of the pupils, develop well-structured lessons and select creative resources to further pupils' learning effectively. Knowledgeable teachers help pupils to collaborate enthusiastically on a cross-curricular project to design machines based on Victorian bathing machines. As a result, they develop creative and practical skills and gain experience of project management. Lively use of photographs, song and a toucan arm puppet enables pupils to learn French vocabulary which they employ confidently to write short sentences describing animals in the rain forest. However, the schemes of work for pupils in Years 1 and 2 are insufficiently detailed to provide appropriate support for teachers' planning in all subjects.
19. Leaders employ an appropriate assessment framework to evaluate pupils' performance and progress. Baseline testing, statutory assessment in the early years, end-of-year assessments and regular marking of pupils' work enable staff to evaluate their attainment and progress. Staff analyse assessment data carefully and ensure this information is used to plan teaching and learning to support the needs of individual pupils.
20. Staff identify pupils who have SEND through assessment on entry and careful monitoring of pupils' progress. Suitably trained staff use assessment data to determine appropriate strategies to support pupils' needs. Individual speech and language support in class and carefully chosen use of equipment such as multi-sensory counters and information technology ensure that pupils who have SEND make progress in line with other pupils in their year group.

21. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are identified on entry to the school and benefit from specific support provided by their teachers. Adults make effective use of bilingual books, pictures and illustrations, small group work involving peer support and the teaching of phonics so that these pupils make rapid progress.
22. Pupils' benefit from a wide-ranging programme of extra-curricular activities which includes storytelling combined with yoga, musical composition and a variety of different sports. Through positive engagement in these activities, pupils successfully develop their abilities and acquire new interests.

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

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

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

24. Leaders ensure that a culture of kindness and mutual respect prevails throughout the school. Through PSHE lessons, the regular assembly programme and special activities such as 'Global Be Well Day', which focuses on mental health, leaders support pupils' personal, social and moral development. Pupils learn about differences between people, the importance of appreciating the variety of individual needs and the purpose and value of rules in daily life. In early years, staff teach children to work together constructively and show kindness to each other. At all levels, staff focus consistently on the school values of 'thrive, innovate and endeavour' and celebrate when pupils' conduct and achievements reflect these values. As a result, pupils develop high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence.
25. Leaders consult with parents about the carefully structured relationships and sex education (RSE) programme which is taught effectively through the PSHE syllabus. Pupils learn about privacy, consent, misogyny and different family relationships. Regular consultation with staff and information from pupil surveys enable leaders to modify the programme so that the pupils' knowledge and understanding are enhanced.
26. Staff benefit from training which supports their consistent application of the clear code of conduct which is firmly based on kindness and respect for others. If a pupil misbehaves, teachers liaise promptly with parents and provide the pupil with guidance about how their behaviour could be beneficially modified. Staff teach pupils that the use of language based on any kind of prejudice is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. As a result of this approach, instances of poor behaviour or bullying are rare and pupils maintain good relationships with each other.
27. Effective staff supervision before and after school and during breaktimes and extra-curricular activities supports pupils' play and recreation. This enhances pupils' self-confidence and sense of security and contributes positively to the typically good pupil behaviour evident throughout the school. Early years leaders ensure that the required adult-to-child ratios are maintained in the Nursery and Reception and that children are always within sight or sound of an adult.
28. Through religious studies, PSHE lessons and education in the forest area, staff promote understanding of different faiths, spiritual awareness and wonder at the natural world. Pupils learn about the principal beliefs of the world's major religions in class and through presentations by representatives from different faiths. Activities such as den-building using logs and twigs and examination under microscopes of worms and leaves discovered in the forest area stimulate pupils' knowledge of and excitement at these features of the natural world.
29. A range of activities successfully promotes the physical development of early years children and pupils in Years 1 and 2. Children in the early years develop spatial awareness through dance and negotiating obstacle courses. Leaders plan children's play so that both fine and gross motor skills are promoted. Children practise cutting, sticking, drawing and writing and enjoy riding trikes and building with planks. They learn ball skills through PE lessons and benefit from swimming lessons from Reception onwards. Pupils in Years 1 and 2 build skills of teamwork and tactical thinking through PE lessons which teach them the technical skills required to play competitive sports such as cricket, football and netball. Staff teach pupils how the body works and the positive links between physical and mental wellbeing.

30. Leaders ensure that the admission and attendance registers are accurately maintained, in line with statutory guidance. Staff analyse attendance data carefully, share information with the local authority as required, and provide prompt effective support to parents if their child's absence levels cause concern.
31. Leaders provide suitable accommodation to support pupils' medical needs and ensure any medicines are stored safely. Staff suitably qualified in first aid, including paediatric first aid, provide appropriate first aid and medical support to any pupils who are injured or unwell. Staff maintain accurate records of the administration of first aid and medication.
32. Leaders ensure that the premises are suitably maintained. The management of health and safety is rigorous. Regular fire evacuation drills ensure that pupils know how to respond appropriately to an emergency. Leaders implement regular checks and maintenance, including of fire safety equipment and electrical systems.

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

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

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

34. Leaders successfully promote pupils' understanding of key values such as kindness, tolerance and freedom through a well-planned PSHE programme, assemblies and the religious education curriculum. Pupils learn about respect, fairness and individual responsibility and are taught to accept and celebrate differences. As a result, pupils understand how discrimination and prejudice can harm communities.
35. Pupils learn about the key features of democracy through PSHE lessons and their wider participation in school life. They learn about human rights and understand that children have the right to learn and play. Pupils elect members of the school council and the eco-council, and staff explain how this process of voting is similar to elections to Parliament. Through these school councils, pupils influence developments within school, such as the creation of a mindfulness garden using recycled materials.
36. Early years staff support children in learning the difference between right and wrong. Story books are selected to highlight the importance of honesty and caring for others. Adults teach children to share, take turns and co-operate successfully when engaged in learning through play. They reinforce these values with pupils in Years 1 and 2 by focusing on people who help us and considering the ways in which people may exemplify kindness and resilience. Staff consistently link these ideas to the school's values in order to teach pupils to behave correctly.
37. Leaders ensure that pupils' understanding of financial and economic matters and entrepreneurship are successfully promoted. Early years children learn about money and benefit from opportunities to use coins in role play shops and cafés. Staff also introduce the use of credit cards and reward cards in an early years coffee shop. Children visit a local supermarket to purchase vegetables related to the book they are reading and pay using real money. Older pupils learn how to budget and then put these skills into practice when completing the online purchase of ingredients for cookery. Year 2 pupils collaborate effectively to complete an entrepreneurship challenge and successfully develop their understanding of project management. Through a scheme provided by a national bank, pupils learn about key financial concepts including salaries, taxation, mortgages and savings.
38. Staff provide opportunities for pupils to learn about the local community and contribute to it. Pupils study the importance of Remembrance Day and take part in the ceremony organised at a local memorial to mark this occasion. Leaders organise regular visits to a nearby home for retired people so that pupils can talk to the residents and entertain them with choral singing. Pupils also work with some of the residents who visit the school to read to early years children. Through these collaborative activities, leaders successfully begin the process of preparing pupils for life in wider British society.
39. Pupils benefit from opportunities to take on roles of responsibility in school life. Early years children function as line-leaders when they move to different activities around the school. Each of the pupils in Year 2 has a responsibility, such as house captain, and they support children in Reception in the playground during breaktimes. Year 2 pupils successfully edit and produce a termly newsletter about different school activities and have chosen to use funds raised from the sale of copies to sponsor an animal through an international wildlife charity.

40. Leaders organise activities and visits to promote pupils' knowledge and understanding of different careers. The focus on people who help us and talks given by professionals such as veterinary surgeons and doctors enable pupils to learn about different jobs. Staff teach pupils to avoid any career stereotypes by focusing, for example, on the importance of women in sport, particularly football, and the work of female scientists and explorers.

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

41. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

42. Leaders manage all aspects of safeguarding rigorously and robustly. Appropriately trained leaders with responsibility for safeguarding ensure that all members of staff, including support staff, receive comprehensive and regular training, including at induction. Leaders provide staff with regular updates, including weekly quizzes, on safeguarding issues. Staff recognise that safeguarding is the responsibility of all adults working at the school. They know how to respond to any concerns about pupils, including pupil disclosures or allegations against adults working at the school, and understand they must do so promptly. Through the use of worry boxes and circle time discussions, pupils share concerns with trusted adults who maintain a culture of vigilance in respect of any safeguarding issues.
43. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding liaise effectively with external agencies, including the local authority and children’s services. They respond appropriately to any concerns and make referrals to external agencies promptly, thus providing pupils with the support they need. Leaders maintain detailed safeguarding records securely.
44. The proprietor ensures that those responsible for school governance benefit from appropriate safeguarding training. The proprietor’s regional safeguarding director visits the school regularly to meet leaders responsible for safeguarding, review procedures and documentation and consider any significant cases. In addition, the regional safeguarding director receives a monthly safeguarding report from school leaders which provides valuable data about safeguarding at the school. Leaders responsible for safeguarding report termly to the governing board. The proprietor commissions an annual safeguarding audit which includes a review of the safeguarding policy to ensure it is updated in accordance with statutory guidance.
45. Staff teach pupils how to stay safe online, and leaders implement and review the effectiveness of the systems for filtering and monitoring the school’s internet and digital devices. Leaders respond promptly to any notifications of potentially inappropriate use.
46. Appropriately trained leaders implement safer recruitment procedures effectively. Leaders ensure that the required pre-employment checks are completed before any adult begins working at the school. Leaders maintain an accurate single central record which is consistent with the safeguarding information held in personnel files. Senior leaders and a member of the governance board review the single central record and personnel files regularly to ensure they are properly maintained.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	Little Downsend Leatherhead
Department for Education number	936/6435
Address	Little Downsend Leatherhead 13 Epsom Road Leatherhead Surrey KT22 8ST
Phone number	01372 385437
Email address	leatherheadpre-prep@downsend.co.uk
Website	www.downsend.co.uk
Proprietor	Cognita Schools Ltd
Chair	Mr Michael Drake
Headteacher	Mrs Rebecca Tear
Age range	2 to 7
Number of pupils	168
Date of previous inspection	7 to 9 March 2023

Information about the school

48. Little Downsend Leatherhead is a co-educational day school located in the town of Leatherhead in Surrey. It comprises a Nursery for children aged two to four years old and a pre-prep for pupils aged four to seven. The school is one of four in the Downsend Schools family. It is owned by Cognita Schools Limited and the chair of governors is the managing director for the United Kingdom. Since the previous inspection, a new headteacher was appointed in January 2026.
49. There are 136 pupils in the early years comprising six Nursery classes and two Reception classes.
50. The school has identified ten pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. A small number of pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
51. The school has identified English as an additional language for 21 pupils.
52. The school states its aims are to encourage emotional intelligence and resilience so that children thrive academically, emotionally and socially, embrace innovation and change and celebrate effort, perseverance and courage.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

13 to 15 January 2026

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

54. 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
- 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.

55. 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.
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