

# School inspection report

29 April to 1 May 2025

## **St Columba's College**

King Harry Lane

St Albans

AL3 4AW

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 have not demonstrated the necessary knowledge and skills to fulfil the Standards with regard to attendance. The school's attendance policy does not reflect current statutory guidance, such as including a named 'attendance champion'. As a result, practice around attendance does not meet requirements. For example, staff are unaware of the term, 'attendance champion', and its specific role within school. The reporting of 15-day cumulative absence to the local authority was not taking place. This was rectified before the end of the on-site inspection.
2. Leaders do not ensure that there is a clear record of discussions that take place and the decisions that are made. Records of actions taken are not recorded fully and consistently in all cases. As a result, it is not clear that suitable actions are taken in all cases and that concerns are followed up effectively.
3. Developing pupils' education, training and recreation is at the forefront of the school's mission. Throughout the school, the curriculum is suitable and well considered. It is delivered effectively and pupils make good progress.
4. Leaders regularly evaluate the school's effectiveness to help them identify its strengths and areas to develop. They seek feedback from parents, pupils, staff and governors to help them with this.
5. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) make good progress and achieve well. They are given the support they need to access the curriculum fully.
6. Teaching is guided by well-sequenced planning that is appropriate to pupils' ages and aligned with the school's ethos. It results in inclusive and purposeful lessons that support pupils to make good progress. Pupils are given regular opportunities to work together which encourage mutual respect and help them to develop the ability to work as part of a team.
7. Pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. They are respectful of their teachers and one another. They listen to instructions and complete tasks enthusiastically. An ambitious and focused atmosphere is evident, in the sixth form particularly. Sixth-form pupils are keen to seek feedback, ask questions and ensure that they are positive role models for pupils throughout the school.
8. The school provides a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities that suit pupils' ages, abilities and interests. These activities encourage pupils to develop healthy habits, be motivated and develop positive social connections with each other.
9. Health and safety arrangements are robust and managed effectively. First aid arrangements are well supported by nurses and a large number of qualified first aiders. The medical room provides suitable accommodation when needed. The school premises are well maintained and provide a physical environment where pupils can feel safe and make the most of their learning and recreational opportunities.
10. Pupils are given meaningful opportunities to develop leadership skills, such as negotiation and diplomacy. As a result, they learn to make well-balanced decisions effectively and develop a sense of responsibility. This helps pupils to understand some of the challenges and opportunities that leadership can bring.

## 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 not 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:

- the school's attendance policy follows statutory guidance and is implemented fully and consistently
- concerns are consistently recorded with sufficient detail so that leaders' decisions and the rationale for leaders' actions are clear.

### Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- ensure that the checks required for the suitability of staff are undertaken consistently and that all records on the single central record (SCR) are recorded appropriately.

## Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

13. Governors have not ensured that leaders demonstrate good knowledge and skills, and fulfil their roles effectively, so that the Standards are met consistently. Concerns are not consistently recorded in sufficient detail. Leaders have not ensured that statutory guidance about attendance is widely understood and correctly implemented. They have not routinely reported to the local authority when pupils join the school at non-standard times during the year.
14. Leaders promote the school's aims and ethos well. They provide clear messages about the school's values, based on its Catholic ethos. These are widely known and understood by pupils and staff. This is evident in the day-to-day life of the school, such as the way in which pupils and their teachers engage with each other. This creates a supportive and productive environment where pupils feel safe and are ready to learn.
15. Leaders and governors evaluate all aspects of the school's effectiveness regularly and thoroughly. They monitor the quality of provision and identify the school's strengths and areas to be developed. Leaders and governors seek and act on feedback from parents, staff and governors. They use this information to form well-considered improvement plans, which are implemented effectively.
16. Leaders work effectively with local safeguarding partnerships and other agencies to safeguard pupils and protect them from harm. For example, leaders use external organisations to deliver focused training sessions for staff on key topics such as digital wellbeing, suicide prevention and misogyny.
17. All required policies are in place. Typically, they are in line with current guidance and requirements. Policies are shared appropriately and are understood by pupils and staff. The school's attendance policy does not fully reflect current guidance.
18. The school's complaints policy is appropriate and followed consistently. The policy provides clear timings for responding to different levels of complaint, and actions to be taken, which are adhered to closely. Leaders respond to parents in a suitable manner and complaints are recorded appropriately in a centralised log.
19. Leaders meet their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010. They have a suitable plan in place which is well focused on ensuring and improving pupils' access to the school's premises and curriculum. The accessibility plan is suitably resourced and implemented well so that the needs of both pupils and staff with disabilities are catered for effectively.
20. Leaders and managers receive appropriate training about risk assessment so that they have suitable knowledge and skills in this area. They identify a suitable range of risks to do with, for example, premises and activities, both within the school and for educational visits. Leaders are alert to risks that are not immediately obvious. They address risks fully and put suitable control measures in place to mitigate them. Risk assessments are reviewed regularly and updated as necessary.

21. Parents of current and prospective pupils are provided with a suitable range of information, mainly through the school's website. Parents receive regular updates on their children's progress and achievements. The school reviews the provision for any pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan annually. Leaders provide relevant local authorities with all required information about pupils who have an EHC plan, including a statement of income and expenditure.

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

**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 school's curriculum includes a wide range of subjects and is matched well to pupils' ages and abilities. Leaders have thought carefully about the content of the curriculum in each part of the school. In the prep school, pupils learn about subjects such as English, mathematics, science, social studies, French and music. As they progress through the year groups, some subjects, such as music, science and computing, are taught by specialist staff. In Year 6, the curriculum includes 'future prep', a course designed by the school and covering areas such as reasoning, problem solving and sustainability. The 'big questions' programme in the senior school gives pupils the opportunity to think critically and creatively about topics such as the impact of literature.
24. In the senior school, the curriculum is broadened to include a further range of subjects. For example, physics, chemistry and biology are introduced as discrete subjects alongside business and economics. The curriculum continues to include French, Spanish and Latin. Further subjects, such as politics and psychology, are offered in the sixth form. Pupils are offered a broad range of options at GCSE and A level.
25. Leaders are reflective in the way in which they approach curriculum design. They review and adapt the curriculum to meet pupils' needs, such as the introduction of textiles and 'big questions' for pupils in Years 7 and 8 and food technology in Year 10. As a result, the curriculum provides a range of opportunities to develop skills and knowledge and meets pupils' needs well. Pupils make good progress across the curriculum. Results are above the national average at GCSE level and in line with the national average at A level.
26. Teaching staff plan and deliver high quality and effective lessons, underpinned by secure subject knowledge and thoughtful design. This results in well-structured lessons where pupils are encouraged to take risks and share ideas in a supportive, respectful classroom climate. Teachers manage behaviour well. They reinforce positive attitudes through praise and clear routines. They use well-chosen resources to develop pupils' learning. As a result, pupils feel confident in exploring new content and challenging their own understanding.
27. The early years curriculum is interesting, engaging and appropriate. Skilled staff use 'real world' tasks and role play to support children to develop independence and co-operative problem-solving skills. This also helps children to develop their social skills. Staff focus well on teaching children how to read and write. They learn to match sounds and letters, blending them to read with increasing confidence. They develop early numeracy skills such as counting and matching digits to numbers. Children are prepared well for the move to Year 1.
28. Pupils who have SEND are supported appropriately across the school. Leaders monitor their progress thoroughly and take appropriate actions in response. Pupils are given the support they need in lessons. They also receive additional support in small groups outside of the classroom, where appropriate. This support and the regular review of provision means that pupils who have SEND make good progress.
29. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are supported well. For example, teachers provide pupils with vocabulary lists in advance of units of work and help them to pre-learn key words. This supports their ability to access the curriculum. Pupils receive individual support from adults, where necessary, to help them catch up quickly. Pupils who speak EAL make good progress.

30. Precise and targeted feedback from teachers helps pupils to identify specific areas for development. For example, in English, children are provided with detailed success criteria in advance of a task and are then given specific feedback on their work. This helps them to identify gaps which are subsequently worked on as part of the next lesson. The timely personalised support that is provided helps pupils to make good progress from their individual starting points.
31. Suitable assessment practices are in place across the school. Leaders track pupils' progress regularly. They take prompt and appropriate action, where necessary, in response to assessments. This ensures that pupils are given the support and guidance they need to be successful.
32. The school provides a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities for pupils of all ages. These encourage healthy habits, motivation and social connection. The extra-curricular programme creates a secure, inclusive and health-focused environment. Clubs have high participation rates and pupils take part in a range of activities throughout the week. Pupils benefit from the variety of clubs on offer, ranging from orchestra and basketball to the Japanese mythology samurai club.

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

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

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

34. The school's attendance policy does not match current statutory guidance, and practice does not meet requirements. The school does not have a named 'attendance champion', as required. Staff and pupils are not aware of this term or the purpose of the role. The school does not meet the requirement to report to the local authority when pupils have 15 or more days of absence, cumulatively, during the school year.
35. The admission register contains all the required information and is kept up to date. At the beginning of the inspection, the school had not reported to the local authority pupils who joined the school during the spring term, as they are required to do. This was rectified before the end of the on-site inspection.
36. Pupils' physical health is promoted through a well-developed sporting culture. The physical education curriculum is well planned and delivered effectively. Throughout the school, there is a positive attitude towards physical activity. Pupils have the opportunity to progress through sporting pathways in a variety of sports, with links to professional rugby teams and fencing academies. Pupils compete at a variety of levels and enjoy national success.
37. The school has an effective approach to deterring bullying and incidents are rare. Appropriate and timely responses to bullying ensure pupils receive the right support when incidents do occur. Staff are trained in digital wellbeing. This enables them to confidently support pupils through incidents that can occur when using the internet and working with digital devices.
38. The school provides plentiful opportunities for pupils to develop their spiritual knowledge and understanding. The school's Catholic ethos pervades school life. Pupils take part in religious services and assemblies, and are given opportunities to think deeply, pray and reflect. Pupils are taught about different world faiths and the importance of respecting those with different belief systems to their own.
39. A network of adults including tutors, senior leaders and counsellors provides pupils with pastoral and wellbeing support. Pupils know who they can talk to if they experience mental health difficulties, and they understand the mechanisms that are in place to help them. Pupils know that their emotional wellbeing is of key concern to staff.
40. Pupils take on responsibilities such as becoming a 'buddy', an academic mentor, a prefect or a house captain. Prefects are given clear and appropriate roles and responsibilities. In the sixth form, pupils provide targeted support for younger pupils through mentoring and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme (DofE) activities.
41. Pupils behave well throughout the school. The behaviour policy is implemented fairly and consistently. Pupils respond well to the rewards programme and leaders ensure that this is analysed closely so that it remains relevant.
42. The personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) curriculum is effectively planned to meet pupils' needs in a way which is relevant and age appropriate. It is delivered well by knowledgeable staff. Pupils learn about the ways that people can be different such as race, religion

and sexual orientation. They learn to celebrate those differences and about the importance of mutual respect.

43. The relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum is similarly well developed. Pupils across the school learn about RSE in a way that is appropriate to their age. Parents are notified about the programme and its content. Leaders review the programme regularly and take pupils' views and suggestions into account. For example, lessons on coercive control were added to the RSE programme in response to feedback from pupils.
44. Supervision is effective during both structured and less structured times of the day. Staff maintain a positive presence during break and lunchtimes. This helps to maintain a positive atmosphere, where help is always available and pupils feel safe.
45. Arrangements for the provision of first aid are suitable and effective. An appropriate number of staff throughout the school are trained in first aid. There is suitable accommodation for medical needs. Pupils receive the care they need promptly when they are unwell or accidents occur.
46. The school's premises are well maintained. Health and safety practices, including fire safety, are robust and fulfil the relevant standards. Fire drills are undertaken regularly so that pupils have a clear understanding of the evacuation procedures. Staff are alert to health and safety issues and are aware of how to report concerns. Governors monitor health and safety practices closely to ensure they are effective and implemented consistently.

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

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

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

48. Leaders promote British values well through, for example, assemblies and tutor times dedicated to the 'topic of the week'. Topics include areas such as respect for other cultures, and democracy. Pupils learn about public institutions, such as the police and the National Health Service, and their importance to society. Pupils learn to link the school's values and ethos to British values and think about how this links more widely to British society. For example, pupils make connections between the school's rules and the country's laws.
49. Diversity is a central thread that underpins the school's planning and development. This is closely linked to the school's ethos and fostering social awareness. Workshops encourage respect for individual differences and enhance moral and social development. The school's 'three Cs' of courage, courtesy, and compassion, are widely known and understood. These values are consistently reinforced through dialogue that promotes empathy and cultural sensitivity, as well as exploring wider issues such as misogyny through respectful discussions.
50. Economic education is well developed. Pupils in the prep school learn about economic matters through mathematics and PSHE. In the senior school, Year 8 pupils undertake a course in financial education covering aspects such as banking, interest and credit. The school offers business as a GCSE option and business and economics as separate A levels in the sixth form.
51. The school's 'SHAPE' framework (service, house, academic, physical and extra-curricular) provides pupils with multiple opportunities to contribute to the school and wider community. Opportunities for fundraising and charity work are always associated with an educational purpose. The school holds an annual 'sleep out' in the school grounds which coincides with a themed week that incorporates developing pupils' understanding of the issues of homelessness. This is part of a programme which helps pupils experience and understand what other people's lives can be like and the challenges they face. Pupils learn how, through acts of service, they can make positive contributions to wider society.
52. The school provides comprehensive careers education that supports pupils' long-term planning and encourages ambition. The school's careers education is guided by reference to national benchmarks. The curriculum integrates various pathways, including vocational routes, apprenticeships and university preparation, ensuring that pupils are well prepared for a variety of future options. In the prep school, the 'future prep' programme helps pupils to focus on essential career skills such as communication, adaptability and decision making. Pupils in Year 3 participate in work experience taster days, where they explore careers in various fields such as catering, finance, law and marketing. In the senior school, focused careers days enable pupils from all year groups to explore different fields, such as engineering and healthcare, so that they understand the variety of career opportunities available to them.
53. The school uses a Catholic social teaching model to teach key values such as kindness, fairness and responsibility. These are embedded in classroom expectations and reward systems, preparing pupils to interact positively with others and to develop personal integrity and leadership. In the early years, children develop social responsibility and teamwork by collaborating with peers during their investigations. They share tools and learn to value the environment. This lays the foundation for active and respectful citizenship.

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

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

## Safeguarding

55. There are weaknesses in the quality and consistency of record keeping, meaning that statutory guidance is not followed in full. Concerns and how these are followed up are not always documented in sufficient detail as required by statutory guidance. The school has a centralised system for recording low-level concerns about adults but this system is not used effectively. Records of low-level concerns do not consistently identify how concerns are followed up and actions taken as a result.
56. Safer recruitment processes are generally robust. Checks on the suitability of staff are carried out, as required, before staff begin working at the school. The single central record of pre-appointment checks contains the required information. However, in a small number of cases there are inconsistencies in the way reference and qualification checks are recorded.
57. Staff are well trained in safeguarding and know about possible signs of abuse and neglect. They have a good understanding of procedures and know that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Relationships between staff and pupils are positive. Staff are vigilant and alert to pupils' needs. They know how to raise concerns appropriately and do so promptly, when necessary.
58. The school has effective internet filtering and monitoring processes in place. Leaders ensure that all concerns raised through the filtering system are followed up in a timely manner. The system is checked regularly to ensure that it is working properly. Pupils learn how to stay safe online. They receive appropriate updates and communication about online safety through PSHE lessons and in assemblies.
59. Staff are aware of relevant contextual risks for the school. They receive regular training about the 'Prevent' duty. They know about possible signs of extremism and radicalisation and the importance of reporting these promptly.

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

- 60. 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
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.

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

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

Paragraph number	Standard
Part 3, paragraph 15	The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that an admission and attendance register is maintained in accordance with the School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024.

### Safeguarding

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

Paragraph number	Standard
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.

## School details

<b>School</b>	St Columba's College
<b>Department for Education number</b>	919/6136
<b>Registered charity number</b>	1088480
<b>Address</b>	St Columba's College King Harry Lane St Albans Hertfordshire AL3 4AW
<b>Phone number</b>	01727 855185
<b>Email address</b>	head@stcolumbascollege.org
<b>Website</b>	www.stcolumbascollege.org
<b>Proprietor</b>	Brothers of the Sacred Heart
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs Barbara Elliott
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mr Karl Guest
<b>Age range</b>	4 to 18
<b>Number of pupils</b>	830
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	May 2022

## Information about the school

61. St Columba's College is a co-educational Catholic day school located in St Albans, Hertfordshire. The school is a registered charity governed by the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. The current headteacher took up his appointment in September 2023.
62. There are 23 pupils in the early years, comprising one Reception class.
63. The school has identified 374 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). A very small proportion of pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
64. The school has identified 138 pupils as speaking English as an additional language.
65. The school states its aims are to provide a holistic education that is rooted in religious values, structured through friendly discipline, nurtured by personal attention and committed to academic excellence.

## Inspection details

### Inspection dates

29 April – 1 May 2025

66. A team of eight inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

67. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some 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 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.

68. 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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