

# School inspection report

28 to 30 April 2026

## **Barnard Castle School**

Newgate

Barnard Castle

DL12 8UN

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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## Summary of inspection findings

1. Leaders and governors provide a clear vision for the school that is firmly rooted in its ethos and values. Leaders communicate this vision effectively so that it is well understood by staff, pupils and parents, and consistently reflected in daily practice. Strategic priorities are clearly defined and guide decision-making across all areas of school life, including curriculum development, pastoral care and co-curricular provision.
2. Leaders responsible for boarding provide effective oversight and demonstrate appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure that provision is well managed. They ensure that boarding houses are secure, well organised and supportive environments in which pupils' welfare is prioritised and their personal development is promoted. Clear systems are in place for pastoral care, communication and safeguarding. As a result, boarders benefit from a structured and nurturing environment in which they feel safe.
3. Leaders ensure that appropriate support is planned for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Needs are identified promptly and effective provision is put into place so that pupils are well supported in their learning. As a result, pupils who have SEND make progress in line with their individual targets and are enabled to access the full curriculum.
4. Teaching and learning are generally effective. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and use established routines and strategies to support pupils' engagement and understanding. In many lessons, planning builds knowledge over time and makes effective use of explanation and modelling. However, in some lessons, planning does not consistently match the full range of pupils' levels of prior attainment, which can limit the progress made by pupils.
5. Children in the early years benefit from a well-structured and carefully planned introduction to school life. Staff consistently promote children's communication and language development through effective, purposeful interaction and rich learning opportunities. As a result, children develop secure listening skills, sustained engagement and the confidence to share their ideas and contribute to discussions clearly. Children make good progress within a nurturing and aspirational environment.
6. The co-curricular programme is extensive and provides pupils across the prep and senior schools with opportunities to develop a wide range of interests and skills beyond the classroom. Activities include sport, music, drama, Combined Cadet Force (CCF), The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) scheme and a variety of clubs and societies that promote creativity, teamwork and leadership. In the prep school, pupils benefit from structured activities that build confidence and enjoyment. In the senior school, opportunities such as public speaking, lectern club and competitive sport enable pupils to develop independence and leadership skills. As a result, pupils engage positively in the programme and develop their personal, social and physical skills alongside their academic learning.
7. Leaders provide opportunities through personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) to enable pupils to develop their understanding in a range of areas that prepare them for life beyond school. This provision supports pupils in developing respect, tolerance and awareness of different backgrounds and ways of life within modern society. However, opportunities are not always fully maximised to deepen pupils' understanding of cultural diversity in a consistent and structured way.

8. The prefect system provides pupils with meaningful opportunities to take on positions of responsibility and develop leadership skills across the school. Roles such as head boy, head girl and prefects in the boarding houses enable pupils to contribute to school life through duties, mentoring younger pupils and supporting school events. Pupils are appointed through a structured selection process and are supported in their roles, with opportunities provided to develop their communication and public speaking skills. As a result, pupils demonstrate a well-developed sense of responsibility and contribute positively to the wider school community.
9. Governors and leaders provide effective oversight of safeguarding arrangements and fulfil their responsibilities diligently. Leaders, including those responsible for boarding, review safeguarding practice regularly and ensure that policies and procedures are implemented consistently and effectively across the school. Safeguarding is prioritised in strategic planning and decision-making, including in relation to decisions made in early years and boarding.

## 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 lesson planning consistently takes account of the full range of pupils' levels of prior attainment so that work is always appropriately matched and suitably challenging
- ensure that opportunities across the curriculum, including in personal, social, health and economic education, are systematically planned and consistently maximised to deepen pupils' understanding of cultural diversity and prepare them fully for life in a diverse society beyond school.

## Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

10. Leaders and governors actively promote and communicate the school's ethos, ensuring that its values are clearly understood across the community. Leaders demonstrate the appropriate knowledge and skills needed to embed these principles in all aspects of school life, so that pupils' wellbeing is prioritised, and Standards are met.
11. Through assemblies, pastoral structures and daily interactions, leaders ensure that the aims of the school are not only articulated but reflected in pupils' attitudes and behaviours. As a result, the school's ethos is evident in its inclusive and purposeful culture.
12. Leaders and governors take a strategic approach to planning, ensuring that the curriculum evolves to reflect the needs of the school community. Leaders have introduced a range of new subjects, including BTEC animal management, A-level media studies and AS film studies, alongside Cambridge Technical in business, to broaden the post-16 offer and increase accessibility for a wider range of learners. These developments demonstrate leaders' understanding of pupils' interests, aspirations and future pathways. As a result, the curriculum is inclusive and responsive, enabling pupils to pursue pathways that align with their skills and ambitions.
13. Leaders responsible for the early years take a thoughtful and strategic approach, planning carefully to ensure a well-structured and responsive learning environment. Leaders meet regularly with early years staff to review practice, support professional development and foster a culture of continuous improvement.
14. Policies are effectively implemented and consistently applied across all areas of the school. Leaders maintain up-to-date policies that comply with current statutory requirements and are clearly communicated to staff, pupils and parents. Through regular monitoring and review, leaders ensure that policies are understood and enacted in practice, including in key areas such as safeguarding, behaviour and health and safety. As a result, systems operate efficiently and contribute to an orderly and well-managed environment.
15. Leaders and governors ensure that the school operates a clear and effective complaints procedure, which is implemented consistently and in line with regulatory requirements. Concerns are managed through a structured process that prioritises informal resolution where possible, while ensuring that formal complaints are addressed fairly, promptly and transparently.
16. Risk management is systematic, well-understood and embedded across all areas of school life. Comprehensive risk assessments are in place for day-to-day activities as well as for high-risk areas, such as the open site, subjects such as science, design and technology and sport, and boarding provision and educational visits. Leaders demonstrate appropriate knowledge and skill in identifying potential hazards and implementing effective mitigation strategies, with regular review and oversight at both leadership and governor level.
17. Leaders ensure that the provision of information is comprehensive, accurate and readily accessible to parents and other stakeholders. Key policies and documentation, including those relating to safeguarding, behaviour, admissions, curriculum and complaints, are clearly published and kept up to date. Regular reporting on pupils' progress, attainment and wellbeing enables parents to remain well informed and engaged in their child's education. There is a high level of transparency across the

school, supporting confidence in the leadership and the effective communication of the school's aims and provision.

18. Leaders maintain effective links with external agencies to ensure that pupils receive appropriate and timely support when required. They work closely with local safeguarding partners, health services and specialist providers to meet the needs of pupils and those requiring additional pastoral care. These relationships are well established and are used effectively to inform decision-making, promote safeguarding practice and enhance provision. Pupils, therefore, benefit from co-ordinated support that promotes their wellbeing and ensures that any concerns are addressed promptly and appropriately. Leaders inform the local authority appropriately when pupils join or leave the school at non-standard transition times.
19. Leaders and governors fulfil their responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010, ensuring that the school promotes equality of opportunity and fosters an inclusive environment. They actively monitor provision to ensure that no pupil is disadvantaged and that access to the curriculum and wider school life is equitable for all.

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

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

## Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

21. Leaders and managers provide a well-structured curriculum that enables pupils to develop knowledge and skills across linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technological, aesthetic and creative areas of learning. They ensure that curriculum content is appropriately adapted to pupils' ages, aptitudes and needs, and supported by effective use of assessment information to inform planning and progression.
22. In the prep school, pupils acquire secure foundational knowledge and skills across all subjects, developing early competence in literacy, numeracy, scientific understanding and creative expression. English and mathematics teaching supports pupils in building confidence in reading, writing, number work and problem solving. In science, humanities and the creative curriculum, pupils develop curiosity, skills of enquiry and an understanding of the world around them. Specialist teaching and practical activities, including sport, music, art and languages, enable pupils to develop co-ordination, communication skills, creativity and an appreciation of different disciplines. As a result, pupils make good progress and are well prepared for the transition to the senior school curriculum.
23. Teaching is well planned and delivered with secure subject knowledge, enabling pupils to make good progress across subjects. Teachers use a range of strategies, including questioning, modelling and carefully selected resources, to engage pupils and support their understanding. However, in some lessons, planning does not consistently match the needs of all pupils, which can result in slower progress for some pupils.
24. Leaders have established a clear focus on the effective use of data as a central driver of school improvement, alongside developing the skills of middle leaders to analyse and apply it effectively. This enables staff at all levels to identify areas for improvement more quickly and implement precise, targeted support, leading to consistent improvements in pupil outcomes across departments in recent years. Assessment is used to inform teaching, with feedback provided through a variety of methods, including verbal guidance and written comments, helping pupils to understand how to improve their work.
25. Pupils who have SEND are identified at an early stage through a range of screening processes, teacher observation and assessment information, enabling their needs to be clearly understood. Leaders ensure that appropriate support plans are put in place and communicated effectively to staff, with guidance provided in relation to suitable classroom strategies and reasonable adjustments. Teaching staff use this information to adapt learning tasks, provide scaffolding and offer targeted support so that pupils can access the curriculum alongside their peers.
26. In the early years, children's communication and language needs are effectively supported through a language-rich environment and purposeful adult interaction. Staff model spoken language consistently, introduce new vocabulary through play and structured activities and use questioning to extend children's responses and thinking. During role play and imaginative activities, adults encourage children to describe their actions and ideas, developing their confidence in spoken communication. Storytime sessions, songs and rhymes are used regularly to build listening skills and support language acquisition, while targeted support is provided for children who require additional help. As a result, children develop increasing confidence in expressing themselves and understanding spoken language within a supportive setting.

27. Pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) are provided with timely and effective support for their English language development, when required. This includes one-to-one support and classroom support, which enables them to access learning across the curriculum and participate fully in school life. Pupils are supported well and make good progress in line with their starting points.

### **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. The school fosters a culture of mutual respect, reflected in the consistently positive relationships between all members of the school community. Through the house system, PSHE provision and structured opportunities such as house meetings and assemblies, pupils are encouraged to reflect on their values, behaviour and personal development, supporting the growth of self-knowledge.
30. The physical education (PE) provision is well structured, and pupils benefit from specialist teaching, which ensures that they develop skills, knowledge and understanding across a broad range of activities. Pupils are provided with opportunities in both curriculum and co-curricular sport, including athletics, cricket, swimming and multi-sports. All pupils are given opportunities to represent the school in team sports, supporting the development of teamwork, co-operation and communication skills. As a result, pupils are engaged and active and demonstrate improving technical competence alongside positive attitudes towards physical activity and healthy lifestyles.
31. Leaders provide a structured programme of PSHE and relationships and sex education (RSE) that supports pupils' personal development and wellbeing. Provision is delivered through timetabled sessions and the 'headspace' programme, which includes contributions from school nurses and visiting speakers and covers topics such as relationships, staying safe, mental health and substance awareness. Pupils demonstrate an age-appropriate understanding of these areas. Teaching is relevant and effective, including discussions on issues such as gambling, addiction and online safety. Systems to review and assess pupils' understanding are in place, although their application is not yet consistent across all year groups.
32. Pupils demonstrate consistently positive behaviour in lessons and around the school, contributing to a calm and purposeful environment. They are courteous in their interactions with one another and with staff and show respect for the school community and its surroundings. Relationships between pupils and staff are characterised by mutual respect, supporting effective learning and positive social development. Pupils understand expectations and respond appropriately to guidance, with systems in place to address the rare instances of poor behaviour.
33. The school has effective anti-bullying strategies in place, underpinned by clear policies, education through the PSHE and pastoral programmes and consistent staff vigilance. As a result, incidents of bullying are rare and, when they do occur, are dealt with promptly and appropriately, with support provided for all pupils involved.
34. In the early years, staff know the children well and provide a safe, nurturing and secure environment in which they are able to develop confidence. Leaders ensure that children are supervised effectively and consistently, with high staff-to-child ratios and close oversight of children both indoors and outdoors. Staff support children's self-regulation through clear routines, the modelling of expectations and gentle guidance, which helps them to manage their emotions and behaviour appropriately. Children in the early years develop growing independence, confidence and positive attitudes to learning within a caring and well-structured setting.
35. The premises and accommodation are well maintained and provide a suitable environment for pupils' learning and development. Classrooms, communal areas and boarding accommodation are welcoming, secure and appropriately resourced, supporting pupils' wellbeing. Leaders ensure that

effective arrangements are in place for the supervision of pupils throughout the school day, including at lesson changeovers, during break and lunchtime, and within boarding provision in the evenings. Staff are appropriately deployed across the site so that pupils are suitably monitored at all times, including during unstructured periods.

36. Appropriate arrangements for first aid and health and safety are in place and implemented effectively across the school and boarding provision. Pupils know how to access support and can identify key staff and locations, including medical and wellbeing facilities, with care available throughout the day. Health and safety policies are supported by regular checks, risk assessments and appropriate record-keeping. Pupils are aware of expected safety procedures, including site restrictions and emergency drills, while leaders maintain oversight of premises security and recognise the importance of continued vigilance.
37. Boarding provision provides a supportive environment in which pupils feel safe, secure and well cared for. Accommodation is welcoming, well-maintained and secure, contributing to a calm and homely atmosphere in which boarders can relax and study effectively. Leaders with responsibility for boarding prioritise the health, welfare and wellbeing of pupils, ensuring that pastoral care, supervision and daily routines are carefully structured to meet individual needs. Boarding houses are inclusive and friendly, with positive relationships between pupils and staff fostering a sense of community and belonging. The range of evening and weekend activities, alongside consistent support systems, promotes pupils' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing while also encouraging independence and personal responsibility.
38. Admission and attendance procedures are managed and monitored effectively. Registers are maintained accurately, in line with statutory requirements, with absences followed up promptly and attendance data analysed by leaders to identify patterns. Clear systems are in place for communication with parents, and staff members with defined responsibilities, including an attendance lead, provide oversight and accountability.

### **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. The curriculum promotes mutual respect and supports pupils' understanding of difference and inclusion through a range of academic subjects, pastoral provision and enrichment activities. In PSHE, assemblies and 'headspace' sessions, pupils explore themes such as equality, fairness and respect for others, enabling them to consider different perspectives within society. In subjects such as history and art, pupils encounter a range of cultures and contexts, including the study of aboriginal art and revised historical content that reflects a broader viewpoint.
41. Pupils benefit from occasional whole-school activities linked to cultural events and the local community, which support their awareness of diversity and belonging. However, opportunities to explicitly celebrate the culture of others and promote understanding of diversity are not consistently and deliberately planned for all pupils across the curriculum.
42. Leaders promote financial literacy through age-appropriate opportunities across the school. In the early years, children develop financial awareness through play-based activities linked to buying and selling. In the prep school, pupils build on this through initiatives such as 'moneywise', which explores budgeting, saving and financial decision-making. In the senior school, pupils further develop their understanding through PSHE, 'headspace' and life skills workshops focused on banking, budgeting and preparing for independence, enabling them to develop a secure understanding of financial concepts in preparation for life beyond school.
43. Careers guidance is well structured and delivered through a range of activities that support pupils in making informed decisions about their future pathways. In the senior school, pupils receive support through tutor time and 'headspace' sessions, with visiting speakers providing insights into different careers and life skills, such as finance and employment. Across the school, careers education is further enhanced through links with former students and exposure to a range of post-16 and post-18 destinations. As a result, pupils are appropriately prepared for their next steps in education, training or employment.
44. The school promotes pupils' understanding of right and wrong through a consistent approach to behaviour expectations, pastoral support and curriculum provision. Pupils learn about fairness, responsibility and consequences through PSHE, assemblies and restorative approaches, including structured reflection and systems such as the 'four-part apology', where pupils learn to take responsibility for their actions. This encourages reflection, accountability and positive resolution. Pupils develop an understanding of democracy through experiences such as voting for school council and prefect roles, as well as through participation in discussions and debates in subjects such as English, history and politics, where different viewpoints are explored in a structured and respectful way. Wider themes of law, respect and tolerance are reinforced through 'headspace' sessions and the pastoral programme, which includes topics such as relationships, online safety and social responsibility. Through this, pupils develop an appropriate understanding of moral behaviour alongside an awareness of values that support life in modern society.
45. The school makes effective use of its locality to enhance pupils' learning and personal development. Through the academic enrichment programme, pupils engage with local landmarks and institutions, including the Bowes Museum and HMP Young Offenders Institution, using these as inspiration for

independent study and research projects. Pupils also contribute to local heritage through activities such as archival work and exploration of the school's historical links to the area.

46. In the early years and prep school, pupils benefit from visits to local amenities, including garden centres, and take part in activities such as planting bulbs in Barnard Castle, which support their understanding of the environment and community. In addition, links with local care homes and schools provide opportunities for service and community engagement, helping pupils to develop a sense of social responsibility and belonging within their local area.

### **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. Arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils are effective. Leaders, managers and governors ensure that safeguarding has a high profile and is well embedded across the whole school community, including in the early years and boarding provision. Policies are comprehensive, reflect current statutory guidance and are reviewed regularly.
49. Staff receive appropriate induction and regular, effective training, including updates on safeguarding, online safety, child-on-child abuse and low-level concerns, which enables them to respond appropriately and promptly to any issues that arise.
50. Relationships between pupils and staff are open, trusting and respectful. Pupils know that they can approach adults with concerns or worries. All pupils, including those in the boarding houses, know that concerns are listened to and acted upon. Pupils who board have appropriate access to an independent person. Leaders have established effective systems for listening to and responding to pupils' views, which contributes positively to their physical and emotional wellbeing.
51. Safeguarding records are detailed and maintained appropriately. Concerns are identified swiftly, recorded accurately and monitored carefully by designated safeguarding leaders. Leaders work effectively with external agencies and safeguarding partners when necessary, and referrals are made in a timely manner. Record-keeping demonstrates appropriate follow-up and effective oversight. Confidential information is stored securely and shared appropriately to protect pupils' welfare and ensure continuity of support.
52. The school implements suitable safer recruitment procedures and carries out the required checks on staff, governors, volunteers and visitors before they begin work. The single central record of appointments (SCR) is maintained accurately and monitored regularly by leaders and governors.
53. The school has effective systems to promote pupils' safety online. An appropriate internet filtering and monitoring system is in place and is reviewed regularly. Pupils are taught how to stay safe online, including understanding risks associated with social media and technology. As a result, pupils demonstrate a secure understanding of how to keep themselves safe online and in the wider community.

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

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

## School details

<b>School</b>	Barnard Castle School
<b>Department for Education number</b>	840/6003
<b>Registered charity number</b>	1125375
<b>Address</b>	Barnard Castle School Newgate Barnard Castle County Durham DL12 8UN
<b>Phone number</b>	01833 690222
<b>Email address</b>	genoffice@barneyschool.org.uk
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.barnardcastleschool.org.uk">www.barnardcastleschool.org.uk</a>
<b>Proprietor</b>	Governors of Barnard Castle School
<b>Chair</b>	Mrs Catherine Sunley
<b>Headteacher</b>	Mr David Cresswell
<b>Age range</b>	4 to 19
<b>Number of pupils</b>	559
<b>Number of boarding pupils</b>	114
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	25 April 2023

## Information about the school

55. Barnard Castle School is a co-educational, independent day and boarding school for pupils aged 4 to 19, located in County Durham on a 65-acre rural campus. The current headteacher took up post in September 2024. The school consists of an early years, prep school, senior school and a sixth form. It operates under the Barnard Castle School Charitable Trust.
56. Barnard Castle School has four boarding houses. York House and Northumberland House are for senior male pupils, while Longfield House is for senior female pupils. Old Courts House accommodates younger male and female boarders, aged approximately 7 to 13.
57. The school has one Reception class.
58. The school has identified 179 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. Eight pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.
59. The school has identified English as an additional language for 15 pupils.
60. The school states that its aims are rooted in its core values of community, character and ambition, which are embedded in daily practice and understood by pupils, staff and parents as guiding principles. The school aims to provide a supportive, inclusive environment in which every pupil is known, valued and appropriately challenged, with relationships fostering confidence, wellbeing and belonging. Through an emphasis on character education, leaders strive for pupils to be encouraged to develop humility, integrity, resilience, tolerance and service, supported by a moral and spiritual framework. Alongside this, the school aims to promote ambition, enabling pupils to achieve their personal best academically, grow in independence and leadership, and leave as well-rounded, well-grounded young adults prepared for higher education and life beyond school.

## Inspection details

### Inspection dates

28 to 30 April 2026

61. A team of eight 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](http://www.isi.net)**.

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