

School inspection report

23 to 25 September 2025

Thornton College

Convent of Jesus and Mary

Thornton

Milton Keynes

MK17 0HJ

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 maintain robust oversight of the school. They consider detailed reports at regular committee meetings and challenge school leaders to ensure that they fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Governors visit the school regularly, so they understand the views of pupils, staff and parents.
2. Leaders undertake regular self-evaluation, which includes pupils' and parents' views. They utilise these and the full range of information the school collects about pupils' progress and wellbeing to identify areas for development.
3. The carefully planned curriculum meets pupils' needs. Across the school, the curriculum is adapted to challenge and extend pupils' learning. Pupils access a wide range of qualifications compatible with their needs and interests.
4. Teachers use their secure subject knowledge and keen awareness of pupils' current levels of attainment to plan effective lessons. They adapt their teaching to deepen pupils' learning or to provide additional support as needed. As a result, pupils make rapid progress.
5. Leaders create a culture in which pupils are valued and accepted. Staff model respectful interactions and pupils treat each other with mutual respect. A clear and effectively implemented behaviour policy ensures that behaviour around the school is of a consistently high standard.
6. Opportunities for pupils to express their opinions are embedded into school life. From the early years council to the sixth-form pupil leadership team, pupils know that their views matter and so learn to express them clearly. This ethos underpins pupils' high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence.
7. Leaders embed the school's Catholic foundation into school life. Pupils begin and end the school day with prayers. These provide an opportunity for those of all faiths and none to contemplate the spiritual side of life and to show gratitude. Assemblies and religious studies lessons teach pupils about broader moral topics, such as the ethical use of artificial intelligence, as well as the teachings of other religions.
8. The school is part of a global community of schools. This gives pupils an appreciation of global culture. They build friendships with pupils abroad through online communications. These friendships are strengthened by in-person visits.
9. Leaders use the story of St Claudine to develop pupils' sense of service. Pupils are involved in a variety of charity events, many of which are initiated or led by pupils. Pupils contribute to their local community through collections and donations. There are fewer opportunities for pupils to volunteer off site, which limits their experience to learn in different settings about contributing to wider society.
10. Leaders in the early years create a welcoming and stimulating environment which promotes children's development. Staff encourage the children to learn by exploring interesting indoor and outdoor activities. Children achieve well as a result.

11. Boarders access a welcoming and supportive environment in which pupils' physical and emotional needs are met. The boarding houses provide comfortable accommodation. The Year 13 boarding house supports additional independence which prepares pupils well for life beyond school.
12. Leaders maintain a robust safeguarding culture. The warm relationships between staff and pupils, alongside multiple systems to report concerns, provide pupils with the ability to share any worries at an early stage. Where concerns are raised, staff respond promptly and effectively. As necessary, they liaise with local agencies to provide further guidance to support pupils' wellbeing.

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 the opportunities for pupils to volunteer off site so that they can learn from wider experiences and in different settings about the ways in which they can contribute to their community beyond school.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

13. Governors maintain close oversight of the quality of education that the school provides. They scrutinise regular reports on the school's operations in committees and at full board meetings. Governors visit the school regularly, taking account of the views of pupils and staff. They use their knowledge of the school to challenge and support school leaders to continue to improve. This ensures that leaders fulfil their roles effectively, so that the school meets the Standards consistently.
14. Leaders evaluate the school's performance, seeking pupils' and parents' opinions on all aspects of the school's operations. They collect detailed information about pupils' progress and wellbeing. They use this alongside their own observations to identify improvement actions, for instance, in the introduction of a programme to encourage pupils' curiosity and intellectual creativity.
15. The school provides parents with detailed and regular information. The school's website provides a full range of school policies, as well as information about the curricular and extra-curricular opportunities available to pupils. The headteacher's weekly newsletter provides parents with further information about their children's lives at school. It also offers responses to any common questions. Annual 'moving up' evenings help parents to understand each year group's curriculum and how the school monitors pupils' progress. Regular reports give parents helpful information about their children's academic achievements.
16. Leaders take a robust and strategic approach to risk assessment. Pupils' wellbeing is promoted thoughtfully. Termly committee meetings, which include the headteacher and a governor, identify priority areas of risk and mitigating actions. Staff implement the comprehensive risk assessment strategy effectively. They assess areas of potential risk and put in place appropriate risk assessments. Leaders ensure that suitable checks are conducted on any off-site activities pupils are involved in, such as attending outdoor activity centres.
17. Leaders with responsibility for boarding understand their responsibilities. They manage boarding areas so that pupils feel comfortable and safe. Systems for caring for boarders' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are highly effective. The National Minimum Standards for boarding schools are met.
18. In the early years, staff are well trained. They plan interesting activities so that children are motivated to learn and achieve well. For example, specific training in outdoor learning developed the skills staff have to support children's learning on the new outdoor equipment.
19. Leaders maintain close links with external agencies, including the local authority and children's services. They take part in training, seek advice and make referrals where necessary to promote the wellbeing of day pupils and boarders.
20. The school fulfils its duties under the Equality Act 2010. Its accessibility plan is implemented effectively. Leaders adapt the curriculum successfully to meet individual pupils' academic and pastoral needs so that they play a full part in school life.
21. Leaders have drawn up a suitable complaints policy which they implement effectively. They respond swiftly and appropriately to any complaints submitted. Leaders and governors carefully consider any complaints as part of the school's self-evaluation.

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

22. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

23. Throughout the school, pupils study a comprehensive and carefully planned curriculum which is well matched to their age and abilities. Leaders regularly review the curriculum in discussion with parents and pupils, adapting it appropriately, as required, to better meet pupils' needs. An extended school day for younger pupils, for example, incorporates more performing arts and creative activities. A new 'electives programme' allows Year 10 pupils to combine volunteering, for example, or a Higher Project Qualification (HPQ) with their GCSEs. In the sixth form, the curriculum includes A levels, BTEC National awards and Cambridge technical qualifications. The breadth of subjects and qualifications offered ensures that pupils' needs are met. Pupils achieve well across the curriculum and in public examinations.
24. Teachers in the early years promote children's learning through exploration and discovery. They encourage interaction and collaboration with others. As a result, children develop high-quality speaking and communication skills. At the end of the Reception class, they achieve well in all aspects of their learning.
25. Teachers in the prep school plan lessons which enhance pupils' learning and depth of thinking. In the senior school, teachers encourage pupils to think beyond superficial answers. They use their secure subject knowledge to probe pupils' understanding through questioning and discussion. The consistency of this approach is supported by teachers across the school, for instance, to deliver specialist lessons for children in the early years and pre-prep. As a result, pupils gain the skills and confidence to tackle challenging tasks. They make good progress over their time in school.
26. Throughout the school, teachers promote pupils' speaking, reading and writing knowledge and skills. In the early years and Year 1, teachers group children according to their needs when teaching phonics. This means that teaching of early reading is well matched to children's current understanding, so they match letters to sounds quickly. As pupils progress through the school, a range of effective strategies are introduced to support their literacy, for example, in the use of personal dictionaries. Pupils deepen their linguistic skills through the opportunity to study a foreign language from the early years to the end of Year 13.
27. Mathematics teachers use a range of engaging activities to develop pupils' numerical skills. Teachers use their knowledge of the pupils' current level of attainment to produce resources tailored to pupils' different abilities and to promote further progress. Pupils enjoy finding their own solutions to tasks. After-school clubs enhance pupils' scientific and engineering knowledge.
28. Music and drama play a central role in the life of the school. Pupils sing together throughout the week, demonstrating high levels of skill in a range of choirs. A variety of music ensembles provide opportunities for pupils to play together using well-established knowledge and skills. Pupils develop high-level acting and performance skills. They go on to attain well in external speaking and acting qualifications. These skills come together in the school's regular musical productions which showcase the pupils' impressive individual and collaborative abilities.
29. Pupils further improve their artistic and creative skills in lessons and after-school clubs. In lessons, pupils explore art, design, textiles and photography. This range enables them to develop skills which cross disciplines and allow them to produce creative and imaginative portfolios. Clubs provide opportunities to further their interests, such as developing their architectural sketching or creating

new forms in origami. These clubs extend into boarding time, giving boarders a full programme of recreational activities.

30. A range of support is in place for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The head of learning development oversees a suitable assessment programme to identify pupils who need support. Teachers understand pupils' needs and adapt their lessons sensitively, for instance by providing tailored resources. Teaching assistants provide effective support where necessary.
31. Teachers adapt their lessons effectively to support pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL). They provide additional support which results in pupils' full integration in the learning experience. Where necessary, additional specialist teaching is available so that pupils develop their English language skills quickly.
32. A comprehensive framework tracks pupils' progress throughout the school. Teachers monitor pupils' performance against expectations. They give pupils clear feedback on the work they produce. Consequently, pupils understand their current level of attainment and what they need to do to improve.

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 ambition that every individual is valued, listened to, and accepted is successfully promoted. Staff model a respectful approach in all their interactions and pupils show respect for each other. The warm relationships pupils have with staff mean that they share any concerns early, either in person or through online reporting tools. Staff intervene quickly to support pupils and to promote their wellbeing.
35. Leadership opportunities, for example, as prefects, as part of the school council and the sixth-form pupil leadership team, promote pupils' confidence, leadership and communication skills. Children in the early years take part in the early years foundation stage (EYFS) council, contributing to decisions about school resources. The headteacher chairs the formal meetings of the school council every half term, responding to suggestions and often changing school policy as a result. Pupils learn to express their opinion and listen to those of others across year groups. Consequently, they gain high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence.
36. The school's aims and its Catholic ethos ensure that pupils develop their moral and spiritual understanding. Pupils begin the school day with prayers. The day ends with time for gratitude and reflection. In religious studies lessons and assemblies, pupils learn about broader ethical and moral topics, as well as the spiritual teaching of other religions. In assemblies, pupils celebrate festivals from a range of faiths and link them to their own lives, for instance, through ideas of renewal around the Jewish New Year. Staff in boarding support pupils in observing festivals in their own faith, for instance, by changing mealtimes during Ramadan.
37. The physical education (PE) programme is carefully sequenced to develop pupils' skills and fitness as they move through the school. In the early years, activities such as the woodwork area, tyres and bikes develop the children's strength and motor skills. Pupils in the prep and senior schools study a range of sports, such as hockey, badminton and football, which they also play competitively in matches. Pupils gain an awareness of the links between different sports and common skills such as managing their body position. Pupils in Year 11 learn to design and lead fitness sessions, gaining leadership skills, as they build strength and stamina. Teachers link knowledge from PE to wider ideas of health. Consequently, pupils understand the importance of hydration and diet, for example, to their physical and mental performance.
38. Leaders have designed a suitable programme for pupils' personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE). Appropriate content is targeted to meet each year group's needs. Pupils learn how to stay physically and mentally healthy. The PSHE curriculum includes all required content for relationships and sex education. It covers topics such as healthy relationships and an understanding of puberty in an age-appropriate way. Leaders keep parents informed of what pupils are studying. They consider any feedback from parents or pupils carefully.
39. Staff and pupils understand the clear behaviour policies. Teachers encourage good behaviour through praise and encouragement. Pupils' behaviour is calm, considerate and respectful both inside and outside of lessons. Teachers support any pupils who misjudge their behaviour, so pupils learn from their mistakes. Rewards and sanctions are used appropriately.

40. An appropriate anti-bullying strategy is implemented effectively. Pupils are proud to be anti-bullying ambassadors. They support other pupils to understand about bullying. Any rare instances of bullying are responded to promptly. The thoughtful actions taken promote positive resolution of concerns.
41. A well-resourced medical centre and a robust network of pastoral support mean that staff support pupils' physical, mental and emotional health needs well. Leaders ensure that sufficient appropriately qualified first aid staff are available, including staff with paediatric first aid training in the early years. Any medication is safely stored. Accurate records of medications are kept. Staff support boarders in accessing any medical services they may require.
42. Leaders ensure that the premises provide an environment which enhances pupils' development. Premises are constantly updated in response to pupils' needs. The outdoor area in the early years provides a space where children can explore safely. Leaders involve pupils in school improvement decisions, for instance, in the recent redesign of the school's gym to provide a space suited to developing their strength and fitness. Boarding areas provide good-quality sleeping and living accommodation. Boarders are encouraged to personalise their own spaces, so they feel at home. Access to boarding areas is restricted and appropriately supervised.
43. Leaders promote pupils' physical wellbeing through effective management of health and safety and fire safety. Staff commission external audits, for instance to check fire risk. They ensure compliance with health and safety regulations. Staff keep clear records of training and ongoing work. These are reviewed regularly by leaders. Regular fire evacuation drills, including during boarding time, ensure that pupils know how to respond in the case of an emergency.
44. Staff maintain accurate admissions and attendance registers, with due regard to current statutory guidance. They implement clear procedures for requesting and authorising absence effectively. Leaders monitor and evaluate attendance carefully. They take appropriate action in response to concerns. Leaders inform the local authority of any pupils who leave or join the school outside of usual transition points.

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

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

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

46. Leaders have developed deep links with schools around the world, many of which are part of the community of Jesus and Mary schools. Pupils learn about their partner schools. They develop friendships with their peers from abroad, for instance schools in Spain, America and Lebanon. Pupils travel to other countries on school trips. They share their understanding of the heritage and traditions they have experienced. As a result, pupils build their appreciation of global culture.
47. Leaders use the example of the school's founder, St Claudine, to develop pupils' sense of service. Pupils raise money for a variety of charities every year, the majority of which they choose independently. Some of these are annual events, others are pupil-led responses to global issues. Pupils contribute to their local community, for instance, by collecting for local food banks or donating books to primary schools. However, there are fewer opportunities for pupils to volunteer off site. This limits their experience of the ways in which they can contribute to their local community.
48. Pupils explore themes such as diversity and discrimination in assemblies, form time and PSHE lessons. Leader's approach to inclusion is rooted in the school's Catholic foundation. Pupils learn the importance of respecting and valuing each individual. Pupils in the prep school learn about human rights and the rights of the child. Older pupils learn about more sophisticated topics such as direct and indirect discrimination and the impact these have on individuals and society. The pupil-led equalities committee puts on a range of events which promote inclusion.
49. Pupils learn about democratic systems through subjects such as PSHE, history and politics. Pupils visit Parliament. They understand how democracy functions in Britain. Pupils take part in Model United Nations conferences where they discuss different viewpoints on current topics. They put themselves forward for election to the school council and prefect positions, as well as voting regularly in school surveys.
50. Teachers prepare pupils well for life beyond school. Pupils in Year 10 study a 'key skills award' which helps them to develop collaborative and research skills. The 'tower' programme in Year 12 helps pupils create a plan for their own development to prepare for applications to university or other institutions. The Year 13 boarding house provides additional independence for older boarders in preparation for adulthood.
51. The careers programme gives pupils access to up to date, impartial careers guidance. In the prep school pupils learn about links between the topics they are studying and future careers. In the senior school events such as the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) event and the 'lit fest' enable pupils to learn about these careers. Smaller events such as the alumni networking event and regular spotlight talks give pupils the opportunity to hear about career pathways. Individual sessions with careers advisors give pupils support and guidance in choosing their sixth-form subjects and next steps beyond school. As a result, pupils understand the range of options open to them and how to best prepare for the future.
52. Leaders ensure that pupils develop an understanding of financial and economic matters. Pupils in the prep school learn to calculate with amounts of money, for instance by calculating the change owed from a purchase or converting currencies. Older pupils learn about the role of money in

society and how financial issues may become problematic. In PSHE lessons, pupils learn to link their financial choices to their values, for instance, how the choices they make affect the environment. Pupils in the sixth form learn practical budgeting when spending in the on-site café. Teachers prepare them to manage bank accounts and credit cards.

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

53. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

54. Leaders maintain a robust safeguarding culture throughout the school. The safeguarding policy and procedures are in line with current statutory guidance. These procedures are understood by staff and implemented effectively.
55. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding undertake regular training. They understand their safeguarding role. Their engagement in local and national safeguarding networks means that they are aware of any emerging safeguarding issues.
56. Leaders provide effective training for staff throughout the school. In addition to termly training, the weekly briefing minutes to staff include a safeguarding question, with answers shared the following week. This means that staff understand their responsibilities. They fulfil them effectively, including in reporting any low-level concerns. Leaders also work in partnership with parents to help them to understand current safeguarding matters.
57. Any potential risks are identified early, including in the boarding setting. Appropriate systems allow staff to report their concerns about pupils. Staff identify any such concerns quickly and report them promptly. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding monitor these reports and respond effectively whenever concerns are raised.
58. The safeguarding team maintains effective links with external agencies, including the local authority and children's services. Where necessary, leaders make prompt referrals to these agencies. They maintain detailed records of concerns, including the school's response and details of further action taken.
59. Pupils understand how to stay safe, including when online. Leaders update this aspect of pupils' learning in response to new concerns and pupils' requests. This means that pupils understand how to navigate the online world safely.
60. Pupils have access to an effectively filtered internet connection. Their online activity is monitored appropriately. Staff respond in a timely manner to any inappropriate online access. Leaders monitor these records for any trends. They provide effective support for individual pupils about online safety and appropriate internet use, as well offering additional guidance through the curriculum.
61. The procedures for ensuring the suitability of staff in the school are effective. Checks are completed before new staff join the school and are accurately recorded in a single central record of appointments.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

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

School details

School	Thornton College
Department for Education number	825/6010
Registered charity number	247358
Address	Thornton College Thornton Milton Keynes Buckinghamshire MK17 0HJ
Phone number	01280 812610
Email address	office@thorntoncollege.com
Website	www.thorntoncollege.com
Proprietor	The Community of the Religious of Jesus and Mary
Chair	Sister Helen Mary Haigh
Headteacher	Dr Louise Shaw
Age range	3 to 19
Number of pupils	323
Number of boarding pupils	50
Date of previous inspection	13 to 15 September 2022

Information about the school

63. Thornton College is an independent Catholic day and boarding school for girls aged 3 to 19 years. The school is located on the outskirts of Milton Keynes in north Buckinghamshire. The school consists of a pre-prep, prep and senior school, which includes a sixth form. The school is a charitable trust overseen by a board of governors with delegated responsibilities.
64. Boarding accommodation is provided in the main school building and a separate house in the school grounds for Year 13 pupils.
65. There are 7 children in the early years comprising a combined a Pre-reception and Reception class.
66. The school has identified 27 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). No pupils in the school have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
67. The school has identified English as an additional language (EAL) for 41 pupils.
68. The school states its aims are to foster the academic, physical and spiritual growth of each pupil in order to develop happy, confident pupils who are well prepared for life in a rapidly changing world. The school aims to help pupils discover their true potential and work towards their full development, encouraging them to recognise their place and purpose in the wider community. Rooted in the values of Christ's Gospel, the school seeks to educate the pupils to meet the challenges of life courageously, to use their talents fully, and to grow in the knowledge and love of God through service to others.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

23 to 25 September 2025

69. A team of five inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

70. 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.

71. 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**.

Independent Schools Inspectorate

CAP House, 9-12 Long Lane, London, EC1A 9HA

For more information, please visit isi.net