

St Mary's VA CofE Lower School

Address: High Street, Clophill, Bedfordshire, MK45 4BE

Unique reference number (URN): 109617

Inspection report: 3 March 2026

Exceptional	
Strong standard	
Expected standard	
Needs attention	
Urgent improvement	

Safeguarding standards met

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, pupils are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect schools for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- Met: The school has an open and positive culture of safeguarding. All legal requirements are met.
- Not met: The school has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.

Strong standard ●

Attendance and behaviour

Strong standard ●

Leaders promote the importance of regular attendance from the moment children join the Nursery Year. They scrutinise attendance information meticulously and act swiftly to support any pupils whose attendance drops. The support which leaders offer is personalised and tailored to meet the needs of pupils and their families. Consequently, attendance is above the national averages, including for groups such as pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils.

From the early years to Year 4, staff establish clear routines that support pupils' impeccable behaviour. Leaders and staff promote positive conduct by acting as role models. There is a strong sense of community and mutual respect. The school's values, such as 'love and caring', help pupils develop into kind, courteous, well-mannered individuals. Pupils' attitudes to learning are excellent. They engage enthusiastically in lessons. Staff use minimal reminders to keep pupils focused. At breaktime, pupils play safely and harmoniously. Incidents of bullying and discrimination are very rare. Staff act sensitively and promptly to resolve any minor conflicts that arise. Some pupils struggle to demonstrate the expected level of self-discipline. Staff adapt their application of the behaviour policy to accommodate this. They set up targeted support, such as daily sensory activities which help pupils regulate their emotions, ready for the school day.

Early years

Strong standard ●

Early years provision builds firm foundations for children at the start of their educational journey. The curriculum is very carefully planned. It supports children to progress through each stage within early years, while preparing them extremely well for the learning they will encounter in Year 1. Language development is a clear priority. Staff model key vocabulary repeatedly and provide high-quality activities that allow children to rehearse and apply it. For example, Nursery children learn about the importance of keeping their teeth clean. Enticing activities involving water and mud enable them to practise 'brushing teeth'. In the role-play area, children act out visiting the dentist.

Staff's choice of strategies, such as questioning and modelling, are highly effective in engaging children and moving learning on. Staff know children well. They ensure all children benefit from the stimulating learning opportunities that are carefully set up, inside and outside. Phonics is taught skilfully so that children acquire the essential knowledge they need for fluent reading and writing.

Leaders maintain close oversight of the provision. They act effectively to deliver improvements, for example the development of the Reception outdoor area. Staff and leaders liaise with other settings and visit children at home before they join the school. This builds constructive relationships with families and helps children embrace school life fully.

Inclusion

Strong standard 

Leaders build relationships with pupils and their families as soon as they join the school. This helps them identify any additional needs pupils have, often before they start, or as quickly as possible afterwards. Leaders use different approaches to meet pupils' needs and ensure they benefit fully from the school's offer. Where appropriate, leaders liaise with external specialists, for example speech and language therapists, to strengthen pupils' provision.

There are robust systems in place to ensure the support which pupils receive is specifically tailored to help them overcome any barriers. Leaders and staff write effective individual pupil profiles and learning plans, which set out clear targets for each pupil to achieve. Staff receive high-quality training that increases their confidence and expertise, for instance, when working with pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Regular checks and precise record-keeping enable leaders and staff to track pupils' progress meticulously. This tracking leads to careful adjustments of provision to ensure it is consistently enhancing pupils' experiences.

Leaders plan their use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils strategically to maximise pupils' chances of success. Leaders carefully check the impact of their chosen strategies. This ensures that the funding benefits pupils academically and otherwise, for example giving them access to the full range of wider opportunities.

Leadership and governance

Strong standard 

Leaders maintain strong oversight of each area of the school's provision. They check rigorously how well things are working, identifying strengths and next steps. There are many examples of improvements which leaders have brought about, often at pace, as a result of their checks. For example, pupils' outcomes in mathematics increased following improvements to the curriculum. Rising numbers of Reception-aged children are fully prepared for Year 1 as a result of the development of the early years provision.

Governors fulfil their statutory duties effectively. They bring a range of expertise to their role. Governors are very well informed about the school's work. They provide support and guidance, working collaboratively with leaders on school improvement priorities. Governors are not afraid to hold leaders fully to account when evaluating progress towards their stated objectives.

The school's priorities sit behind a carefully planned programme of professional learning. Staff have input into their own training pathways. They appreciate how their views and aspirations are considered, and value the training they receive. This consistently enhances their expertise and ability to carry out their roles effectively. Leaders consider staff wellbeing and workload when making decisions. They remove unnecessary tasks and focus on things that make the greatest difference for pupils. Leaders at all levels, staff and governors share a common goal to 'always be better', building on their successes and keeping a sharp focus on pupils' best interests.

Pupils' personal development and wellbeing are highly valued. Leaders consider pupils' individual circumstances when planning the extensive array of enrichment opportunities. Through these, pupils build their readiness for the world beyond Clophill. For example, on a 'faith tour', pupils visit different places of worship to deepen their knowledge of religions other than Christianity. A Second World War themed trip provides an opportunity to experience life as an evacuee.

The personal, social and health education curriculum is deliberately adapted to match the school's context. It includes strands that teach about risk in the community and online. Pupils learn about healthy relationships, diverse family structures and maintaining good physical and mental health. They recall this learning with ease. Pupils have a sophisticated knowledge of difference, including the notion of equity versus equality. They show sensitivity and tolerance when considering differences between themselves and others.

Wellbeing leaders actively support pupils' mental health. 'Time to talk' sessions mean pupils feel heard and valued. Pupils' daily use of the 'feelings flowers' on arrival at school develops their emotional literacy and enables staff to anticipate which pupils may require additional pastoral care.

The range of extra-curricular activities on offer is impressive, especially in light of the school's small size. Leaders use termly pupil surveys to gauge pupils' enthusiasm and ensure the clubs offered cater for all interests. Leaders specifically track the participation of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, disadvantaged pupils and pupils from other vulnerable groups. They ensure the offer is fully inclusive and that all pupils benefit from it.

The impact of the personal development programme is visible in many pupils, particularly those in key stage 2, who are mature, reflective and resilient. They enjoy the leadership roles they carry out and see these as a way of giving back to the school that has prepared them so well for their next steps.

Expected standard

Achievement

Expected standard

Overall, pupils progress well through the curriculum in all subjects and are ready for their next stage of learning. In lessons, pupils apply their existing knowledge to new concepts successfully. They use subject-specific vocabulary appropriately. This includes pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils. This secure knowledge is generally reflected in the quality of work in pupils' books. However, some pupils have gaps in their basic knowledge of spelling, punctuation and grammar. The new curriculum in English prioritises this.

In the Year 1 phonics screening check, pupils' achievement over time is close to or above the national average. In the Year 4 multiplication tables check, historically, pupils'

achievement was below the national average. Last year, it rose to above average thanks to improvements to the curriculum and teaching in mathematics. Children in the early years achieve highly by the end of the Reception Year.

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard 

Leaders ensure the school's ambitious curriculum clearly defines what pupils will learn in each subject and the sequence of learning. It identifies the key language that pupils learn within each subject. This supports teachers to deliver the curriculum effectively. Leaders continually review and refine the curriculum to ensure it meets pupils' needs, for example strengthening the mathematics curriculum to improve pupils' fundamental skills, such as multiplication. Leaders recently introduced a new English curriculum to raise standards in pupils' writing.

Teachers have secure subject knowledge. They deliver the curriculum using an agreed structure for learning that helps pupils progress. For example, teachers revisit previous learning systematically before introducing new content. Occasionally, teachers do not use questioning as effectively as they might to check pupils' understanding, or to challenge pupils who are ready for more-complex ideas.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are supported to progress well. Teachers adapt the curriculum, if necessary, for pupils with SEND and other pupils who face barriers to learning. For example, they break tasks down and provide appropriate visual aids or practical resources. Pupils with gaps in their early reading, writing and mathematical knowledge receive effective targeted support to catch up.

What it's like to be a pupil at this school

This is a happy, caring school, where pupils' wellbeing is a top priority. Pupils know school is a safe place, where staff look after them, sort out their worries and make learning fun. As a result, attendance at the school is high.

Pupils are eager to learn. Those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and other additional needs receive highly effective support that helps them overcome barriers to learning. For example, additional, targeted sessions in mathematics, reading, speaking and listening happen first thing each day, preparing pupils for the lessons that will follow.

In the early years, children make a great start to their school journey. They learn and play in stimulating environments. Clear routines and warm relationships with staff enable them to settle quickly. Throughout the school, established habits and high expectations support pupils to behave beautifully. Staff and older pupils act as role models. Well-understood school values underpin a respectful, caring culture. Pupils are adamant there are no bullying behaviours. They are confident staff will help them resolve any friendship issues.

Wider opportunities, including leadership roles for pupils of all ages, develop pupils' readiness for life outside St Mary's. Values ambassadors spot and reward pupils who

demonstrate the values, and eco-warriors encourage the reduction of waste and care for the environment. Voting for the school council and regular 'pupil voice' surveys teach pupils about democracy and fairness. Pupils develop high levels of confidence, independence and resilience. This includes the youngest children in the Nursery and Reception Years.

Overall, pupils achieve very well. They progress suitably through the curriculum, matching or exceeding national average outcomes in tests such as the phonics screening check and the multiplication tables check. In the early years, children achieve highly. They are eminently well prepared for Year 1 by the end of the Reception Year.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure consistently high-quality teaching is embedded across all subjects and year groups, including effective use of questioning to check pupils' understanding and provide further challenge.
 - Leaders should continue to embed the new curriculum for English so that standards of attainment improve, particularly in pupils' foundational knowledge and skills for writing, for example spelling, punctuation and grammar.
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About this inspection

The chair of the board of governors at this school is Emma Thoullass.

Inspectors carried out this full inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Following our renewed inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMIs.

Inspection activities:

Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, office manager/early years leader, and assistant headteacher during the inspection. They met with governors, including the chair of governors. An inspector spoke with the local authority's school improvement adviser and with a representative from the Diocese of St Albans.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school is registered as having a Church of England religious character. The last inspection for schools with a religious character took place in November 2025.

The school does not make use of any alternative provision.

Headteacher: Karen Bingley

Lead inspector:

Caroline Crozier, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspector:

Simon Eardley, Ofsted Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.

 This data is from 3 March 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

143

Below average

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils currently at this school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

National average: 272

School capacity

150

Below average

What does this mean?

The total number of pupils who can attend the school and how this compares to other schools of this phase in England.

National average: 300

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

11.32%

Below average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

National average: 26.3%

Pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

3.50%

Close to average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan. This covers pupils with more support than is available through special educational needs support.

National average: 3.5%

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

7.69%

Well below average

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils with reported special educational support needs at the school.

National average: 15%

Location deprivation

Well below average

What does this mean?

Based on the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) and the school's location, we have calculated whether the school is located in a more or less deprived area.

Resourced Provision or SEND Unit (if applicable)

No resourced provision

What does this mean?

Whether school has Resourced Provision or SEND unit (if applicable).

Absence

Overall absence

The percentage of all possible mornings and afternoons missed due to absence from school (for whatever reason, whether authorised or unauthorised) across all pupils.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (2 term)	4.1%	5.2%	Below
2023/24 (3 term)	4.7%	5.5%	Below
2022/23 (3 term)	4.7%	5.9%	Below

Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (2 term)	6.0%	13.3%	Below
2023/24 (3 term)	10.5%	14.6%	Below
2022/23 (3 term)	11.0%	16.2%	Below

Our grades explained

Exceptional

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other schools can learn from it.

Strong standard

The school reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard

The school is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention ●

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement ●

The school needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for children and learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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