

St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Buckfast

Address: Buckfast Road, Buckfast, Buckfastleigh, Devon, TQ11 0EA

Unique reference number (URN): 140774

Inspection report: 3 February 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.

Expected standard

Early years

Expected standard

Children in the early years make a positive start to their education. From the Nursery Year, children are happy, settled and confident in their routines. Staff have high expectations of what children can and should achieve, regardless of their starting points. Staff use every interaction with children as a learning opportunity. For example, when children struggle to fasten their coat zips, staff model the process before expecting children to try independently. Staff typically use high-quality language, modelling accurate sentence structures and introducing new vocabulary with care.

The curriculum is well planned and supported by a wide range of activities that help children practise and consolidate what they know. Staff consistently reinforce positive learning behaviours. Children understand classroom routines and listen attentively during 'carpet sessions'.

Children learn early reading and writing skills effectively. They develop the phonics knowledge they need to begin reading with fluency. Writing activities provide frequent opportunities for children to apply the sounds they know to spell words. Children are well prepared for the transition into key stage 1.

Staff know children well. They work closely with parents and carers and external professionals to identify children's additional needs and barriers to their learning quickly. For example, children who need support with speech, language and communication development receive timely help, enabling them to catch up with their peers.

Inclusion

Expected standard

The school's inclusive ethos is rooted firmly in its values. Leaders are ambitious for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Staff receive suitable training to identify the needs of pupils with SEND quickly. Leaders work closely with parents and carers to ensure that support is designed to meet pupils' individual needs. When required, the school uses external professionals, such as play therapists, to provide additional support for pupils' wellbeing. Leaders check and review pupils' individual learning targets thoroughly throughout the school year. They make sure teachers make changes to learning and provision for pupils when needed.

Staff make adaptations to the support that pupils receive. This generally helps to removed or reduce any barriers to learning. Where some pupils have more specific needs, leaders provide specialised support. For example, the recent establishment of the 'Butterbrook' class has enabled the school to offer more bespoke provision for identified pupils. Pupils with SEND achieve well from their individual starting points and make appropriate progress through the curriculum.

Leaders use additional funding effectively to meet the needs of disadvantaged pupils. This includes implementing high-quality support for pupils' speech, language and communication

needs. Leaders and governors monitor their strategy for supporting disadvantaged pupils and check that actions are having the intended impact.

Personal development and wellbeing

Expected standard 

School leaders provide a well-structured programme that promotes pupils' personal development and wellbeing effectively. The school's ethos and activities, such as meditation, support pupils' spiritual growth. Visitors from different faiths help pupils develop an informed understanding and appreciation of beliefs and cultures beyond their own.

Pupils learn how relationships change as they grow older, including important concepts, such as consent. This helps prepare them for life beyond school. Leaders work closely with parents and carers to explain how the personal, social and health education curriculum is taught. Pupils develop an appropriate understanding of how to stay safe online.

Pupils benefit from a wide range of opportunities to take responsibility. Elected school councillors work alongside leaders and contribute to decision-making, including introducing 'respect champions' who foster positive relationships and counter bullying. These roles help pupils build an age-appropriate understanding of fundamental British values, build their confidence and nurture responsibility. The school promotes tolerance and respect through external visitors, including, for example, charities that support refugees.

Recognising the school's rural setting, leaders ensure pupils access a rich programme of trips and visits that broadens their experiences beyond their own community. Pupils attend performances by a national orchestra and visit museums in Exeter to support what they learn in lessons. Visitors, such as marine biologists, help pupils to understand different careers. The local Abbey provides workshops that further enrich pupils' learning. School leaders work proactively to identify and remove any potential barriers that pupils might face in accessing these opportunities.

Pupils enjoy a wide range of after-school clubs, including art, drama and chess. These activities help pupils develop their interests, skills and talents.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention 

Inconsistencies in teaching mean that current pupils make uneven progress through the curriculum. In some instances, teachers do not ensure that pupils secure important knowledge. For example, where teachers do not support pupils well to develop the skills they need in handwriting, spelling and grammar, pupils lack important knowledge and their work is of varying quality.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) generally make appropriate progress from their starting points, particularly those with the highest levels of need. However, pupils with SEND experience the same inconsistencies in teaching as their peers, which impacts their progress through the curriculum.

Published outcomes in national assessments are largely positive. In the end of Year 6 tests in reading, writing and mathematics, typically, pupils' results are close to national averages over time. Similarly, in the Year 1 phonics screening check and Year 4 multiplication tables check, pupils' achievements are close to the national average.

Attendance and behaviour

Needs attention 

Expectations for pupils' behaviour are not consistently high across the school. Staff do not apply the school's agreed behaviour approach of 'ready, respectful, safe', reliably. As a result, low-level disruption occurs too often and staff do not routinely address poor behaviour effectively. Some pupils do not respond promptly to staff instructions. Consequently, pupils do not develop secure learning behaviours and lose focus during lessons. In contrast, pupils behave well and show kindness towards one another at breaktimes. Pupils know that bullying or discrimination is not tolerated.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and others who need support for their behaviour, receive the help they need. Staff design precise support to help pupils to engage positively in school life. These tailored approaches have reduced the need for suspensions. When suspensions do occur, leaders ensure they are used appropriately.

Systems to support pupils' attendance are rigorous. Leaders have a detailed understanding of the individual pupils who struggle to attend regularly. When pupils need help, the school, alongside the family support worker, puts appropriate measures in place to improve attendance. Leaders recognise that further work is required to ensure all groups of pupils attend as well as they should and are taking appropriate actions.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention 

Inconsistencies in the implementation of the curriculum limit how well some pupils learn. Occasionally, staff expectations of what pupils can and should achieve are not ambitious enough. Teaching is effective in some classes, while in others, teachers do not use their checks on learning well to address misconceptions and gaps in pupils' knowledge. Teachers' feedback to pupils for how to improve their work sometimes lacks precision. As a result, some pupils are unclear when they have made mistakes and gaps in their knowledge persist. This hinders their progress through the curriculum and leads to varying quality written work.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) generally receive effective support through targeted teaching. Staff make effective adaptations so that all pupils can access the curriculum. In some instances, support from staff limits pupils' opportunities to practise and apply their learning independently.

The curriculum is broad and reflects the ambition of the national curriculum. Leaders have identified the important knowledge they want pupils to learn in different subjects, with clear end points for pupils to reach at the end of each stage. Early reading is largely taught well, through daily phonics sessions. However, variable teaching means that some pupils do not develop important knowledge in reading, writing and mathematics.

Leaders, including from the trust, have not identified with sufficient precision the current inconsistencies in curriculum and teaching. They have not ensured that the school's work to secure consistently high expectations for pupils' behaviour is effective. Leaders are broadly aware of the aspects of the school that need improving but their checks on school improvement work have lacked the rigour required to improve these aspects quickly.

Governors, leaders and staff understand the school's context and the needs of its community well. They ensure that all pupils are included in the life of the school. They make decisions in pupils' best interests. Governors meet their statutory duties, supported by the trust, and provide regular support and challenge to the school. All are ambitious for pupils. Governors are reflective. They recognise that further work is needed to ensure that leaders' actions to improve the school are appropriately focused and have a positive impact on pupils.

Leaders have strengthened the school's offer for continued professional development for staff. Staff value opportunities to develop their expertise and further their careers. They welcome the distribution of responsibilities, which reduces reliance on the senior leadership team. Leaders are considerate of staff workload and wellbeing, when making decisions.

Parents and carers are highly supportive of the school. They consider staff to be approachable and appreciate that they listen carefully to any concerns parents raise.

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

Pupils feel safe and happy in school. They behave kindly towards one another. Pupils, parents and carers value the warm welcome staff provide each morning. During social times, pupils play cooperatively and older pupils model the school's values of 'build, nurture, respect and love unconditionally'. They also serve as 'play leaders', helping younger pupils take part in a range of games. Bullying is rare and leaders act swiftly if it occurs. Pupils enjoy coming to school. This is reflected in generally positive attendance rates over time. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities have their needs identified quickly and leaders put personalised support in place.

The quality of curriculum and teaching across the school varies too much. Some pupils do not achieve as well as they should because staff do not hold high enough expectations of pupils' work or behaviour in lessons. Teachers' checks on pupils' learning and their feedback to pupils about what to do to improve, do not reliably help pupils to address gaps in their knowledge and correct misconceptions. Although leaders are beginning to make notable improvements, pupils in key stages 1 and 2 are not as well prepared for the next stage of their education as they need to be.

Children in the early years make a secure start to school life. They are nurtured by staff and their individual needs are met well. Children settle quickly into the school's Nursery and Reception provisions. They are enthusiastic learners who establish the knowledge and skills they need for later learning.

Pupils' personal development and wellbeing is central to the school's work. Trips, such as to local farms, help pupils appreciate their local community and strengthen their geographical understanding. Pupils enjoy performing in the school choir and singing at events, such as the Christmas fayre. These opportunities enable pupils to develop new skills and build their confidence.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure that assessment and feedback are used consistently well to support teachers to design learning activities that build on what pupils know and can do.
 - Leaders should ensure that pupils develop the knowledge and skills they need, particularly in relation to their handwriting, spelling and grammar, so that they are able to produce work of a consistently high quality.
 - Leaders, including governors and trust leaders, should ensure that there is robust oversight of the actions they take to improve the school so that areas that need attention are promptly identified and addressed.
 - Leaders should ensure they support staff to consistently implement the behaviour policy, so that pupils develop appropriate learning behaviours.
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About this inspection

This school is part of the Plymouth Cast multi-academy trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer, Zoe Batten, and overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Elizabeth Ruth O'Donovan.

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, school improvement officer, members of the senior leadership team, subject leaders, governors and the special educational needs and/or disabilities coordinator team during the inspection.

Inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school does not use any alternative provision.

This school is registered as having a Roman Catholic religious character and is part of the diocese of Plymouth. The last section 48 inspection took place in March 2024.

Lead inspector:

James Gentile, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

Phil Minns, Ofsted Inspector

Tracy Hannon, 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 February 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

163

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

110

Well 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)

42.45%

Above 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

7.98%

Well above 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

9.82%

Below average

What does this mean?

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

National average: 15%

Location deprivation

Close to 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).

All pupils' performance

Pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics

The percentage of pupils meeting the expected standards in a combined reading, writing and mathematics measure.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	63%	61%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	61%	62%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	67%	61%	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	63%	60%	Close to average

Pupils reaching the expected standard in reading

The percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	78%	74%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	72%	75%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	87%	74%	Above
2022/23 (final)	75%	73%	Close to average

Pupils reaching the expected standard in teacher-assessed writing

The percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in teacher-assessed writing.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	69%	72%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	67%	72%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	67%	72%	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	75%	71%	Close to average

Pupils reaching the expected standard in mathematics

The percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in mathematics.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	71%	73%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	67%	74%	Below
2023/24 (final)	87%	73%	Above
2022/23 (final)	63%	73%	Below

Disadvantaged pupils' performance

Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years and children looked after.

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	52%	46%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	54%	47%	Close to average

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	S	46%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	44%	S

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in reading

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in reading.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	65%	62%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	62%	63%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	S	62%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	60%	S

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in teacher-assessed writing

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in teacher-assessed writing.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	57%	59%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	54%	59%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	S	58%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	58%	S

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in mathematics

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in mathematics.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
Latest 3 year average	61%	60%	Close to average
2024/25 (revised)	62%	61%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	S	59%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	59%	S

‘S’ in the table above indicates the data has been suppressed, which is usually due to small cohorts. The suppression rules applied by the DfE when publishing the data have been mirrored and applied in the report card.

Disadvantaged pupils' performance gap

Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years and children looked after. The school disadvantage gap is the difference between the performance of the school's disadvantaged pupils compared to the performance of all non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics, including the disadvantaged gap.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
Latest 3 year average	52%	68%	-15 pp
2024/25 (revised)	54%	69%	-15 pp
2023/24 (final)	S	67%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	66%	S

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in reading

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in reading and the disadvantaged gap.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
Latest 3 year average	65%	80%	-14 pp
2024/25 (revised)	62%	81%	-19 pp
2023/24 (final)	S	80%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	78%	S

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in teacher-assessed writing

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in teacher-assessed writing and the disadvantaged gap.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
Latest 3 year average	57%	78%	-21 pp
2024/25 (revised)	54%	78%	-24 pp
2023/24 (final)	S	78%	S
2022/23 (final)	S	77%	S

Disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected standard in mathematics

The percentage of disadvantaged pupils meeting the expected standard in mathematics and the disadvantaged gap.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
Latest 3 year average	61%	80%	-19 pp
2024/25 (revised)	62%	81%	-19 pp
2023/24 (final)	S	79%	S

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2022/23 (final)	S	79%	S

‘S’ in the table above indicates the data has been suppressed, which is usually due to small cohorts. The suppression rules applied by the DfE when publishing the data have been mirrored and applied in the report card.

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)	5.6%	5.2%	Close to average
2023/24 (3 term)	5.8%	5.5%	Close to average
2022/23 (3 term)	5.0%	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)	14.2%	13.3%	Close to average
2023/24 (3 term)	12.6%	14.6%	Close to average
2022/23 (3 term)	12.0%	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.

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