

Additional inspection report

9 to 10 June 2026

The Holden School

Firs Lane

Leigh

Greater Manchester

WN7 4SB

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'.

Inspection outcome

The school does not meet all the relevant Standards that were considered during this inspection. A schedule of unmet Standards is included at the end of the report.

Inspection findings

Part 1. Quality of education provided

ISSR paragraphs 2(1)(a), (b)(i), (b)(ii), 3(c), 3(d), 3(h)

1. The written policy on the curriculum gives pupils throughout the school experiences in all of the required areas of learning, including English, mathematics, science, technology, humanities and the arts. Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) is suitably integrated into the curriculum. This enables pupils to develop an understanding of inclusion and equality and an appreciation of differences between people, including culture, religion, beliefs, gender and disability.
2. In the senior school, pupils study a core range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science, PSHE and physical education, alongside foundation subjects including art, food technology, computing and humanities. Staff in the senior school draw up schemes of work and plans which take account of pupils' needs and starting points. This enables pupils to follow appropriate personalised pathways leading to accredited qualifications including functional skills. Pupils are successful in gaining vocational qualifications, including BTEC home cooking skills and entry level science and arts awards. Secondary pupils are suitably prepared for their examinations and their next steps in education, employment or training.
3. Leaders draw up schemes of work for primary pupils which are based on the national curriculum. However, these do not take sufficient account of pupils' age, context, special educational needs or use of English as an additional language. Teachers plan activities to help pupils acquire new knowledge and skills. However, lessons are not planned specifically and consistently to reflect pupils' individual needs, education and health care plan (EHC plan) targets or therapeutic provision. Teachers do not consistently take pupils' starting points or prior knowledge into account or make effective use of assessment data. As a result, pupils in the primary school do not consistently build secure knowledge, skills and understanding over time.
4. The school does not meet the Standards.

Part 3. Welfare, health and safety of pupils

ISSR paragraphs 7(a) and 7(b), 9(a), 9(b) and 9(c), 11, 14, 16(a) and 16(b)

5. Governors work closely with leaders to promote a well-established culture of safeguarding throughout the school. They are well informed about leaders' management of safeguarding through regular meetings with those who have designated safeguarding responsibilities, an annual review, discussions with staff and pupils, surveys and scrutiny of leaders' reports.
6. Staff understand their responsibilities well and are diligent in fulfilling them. The school's safeguarding policy and procedures are in line with statutory guidance, effectively taking into account contextual safeguarding risks and risks associated with alternative provision. Members of the safeguarding team are appropriately trained and have sufficient time to fulfil their duties. They work well together as a team, sharing information effectively in order to evaluate risk and take timely action. Leaders make timely referrals to children's services and liaise effectively with external

agencies including social services, family support teams, health professionals, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and the police.

7. The induction programme for new staff includes a suitable introduction to the school's safeguarding, behaviour and whistleblowing policies, the staff code of conduct and procedures for contacting the safeguarding team. Leaders, governors and staff receive comprehensive safeguarding training, including with regard to the 'Prevent' duty relating to the risks of radicalisation and extremism. The safeguarding team provides safeguarding updates as part of daily staff briefings. These support staff in their understanding and consistent implementation of the school's safeguarding policy and procedures.
8. Staff throughout the school are clear about the actions they must take when disclosures are made or when other safeguarding concerns arise. They record any concerns about pupils in detail on the school's electronic system. Incidents involving physical intervention or the use of any restrictive practice are recorded, and parents are informed as required. Safeguarding records are comprehensive, clearly outlining the rationale for decisions made and the actions taken in response to concerns raised.
9. Staff understand how to recognise and report allegations or low-level concerns relating to the conduct of adults, including making self-referrals where appropriate. Leaders keep suitable records of any such concerns raised. Timely and appropriate action is taken should any concerns or allegations about adults working with pupils arise.
10. Leaders provide pupils with appropriate guidance about keeping safe, including online, particularly through PSHE and relationships and sex education (RSE). Pupils are not permitted to use mobile phones on site. This reduces risks linked to online activity and peer conflict. Effective systems for filtering and monitoring internet use have been installed. The safeguarding team receives alerts if there is any potentially unsuitable use and responds to these appropriately without delay.
11. The school has a detailed positive behaviour policy that emphasises the need to understand pupils' needs and how they respond to adults and to each other. Governors and leaders have overseen the introduction of comprehensive staff training in behaviour management and trauma-informed practice. This has resulted in the consistent use of agreed, effective approaches to managing behaviour. Staff take action at an early stage to de-escalate situations when conflict arises. They help pupils to understand and acknowledge their behaviour and take steps to put things right. Staff record all incidents and positive behaviour diligently on the school's electronic system. Radios are available to all staff so that they can call on additional support when needed. Leaders responsible for behaviour management and pastoral care provide clear guidance and support for staff and pupils. Trends and patterns are analysed regularly by designated team members, with effective oversight from senior leaders and governors. Consequently, there has been a significant reduction in the number of incidents and in the use of physical intervention in recent months, leading to a much calmer, more focused ethos across the whole school.
12. Leaders do not ensure that the health and safety policy is implemented constantly. During the inspection, a metal cabinet used to store substances covered by COSHH (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health), including flammable products, was found to be unlocked within a locked cleaners' storage room despite repeated instructions from leaders that the cabinet must always remain secured. A cleaning agent was left out in a toilet used by pupils and was removed during the inspection. The primary premises are not sufficiently clean to ensure an appropriately hygienic environment for pupils.

13. Pupils are supervised and supported by staff throughout the school day, including during movement breaks, recreation times and structured activities. Leaders implement a supervision rota which takes pupils' needs into account in allocating high levels of appropriate staffing at all times.
14. Leaders and governors ensure that a range of comprehensive risk assessments including those related to safeguarding, trips, behaviour and attendance are implemented consistently. They have identified and assessed the potential risks associated with the storage of hazardous substances and cleanliness of the school. However, leaders have not ensured the consistent and effective implementation of the measures identified to mitigate these risks in the primary school building.
15. The school does not meet the Standards.

Part 5. Premises of and accommodation at schools

ISSR paragraph 25

16. The primary school premises are not sufficiently clean, including toilets, floors, rugs, soft furnishings, indoor and outdoor toys and resources. Leaders have not ensured that staff maintain cleaning equipment appropriately. Consequently, the mops, cloths, sink and equipment used for cleaning purposes are dirty and not fit for purpose.
17. The school does not meet the Standard.

Part 6. Provision of information

ISSR paragraph 32(1)(c)

18. The school meets the requirements for providing information relating to safeguarding to parents. Particulars of the arrangements for safeguarding are published on the school website.
19. The school meets the Standard.

Part 7. Manner in which complaints are handled

20. ISSR paragraph 33(c)

21. The school has a suitable complaints policy with clear and appropriate timescales which leaders implement consistently. The number of formal complaints received for the previous year is made available as required. Leaders keep appropriate records of complaints including details of any action taken and the outcomes of the complaint.
22. The school meets the Standard.

Part 8. Quality of leadership and management of schools

ISSR paragraph 34(1)(a), 34(1)(b) and 34(1)(c)

23. The school has undergone a considerable period of change in leadership and staffing in recent years including the appointment of a new headteacher and senior leadership team operational from November 2025. Governors have provided effective support for the headteacher in overseeing the introduction of comprehensive training in behaviour management and trauma-informed practice. This has resulted in the consistent use of agreed, effective approaches to managing the behaviour of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Consequently, there has been a significant reduction in the number of incidents and the use of physical intervention, which is in

line with statutory requirements. This has contributed greatly to the calmer and more positive ethos that is evident across the whole school.

24. In the primary school, leaders and governors have not ensured that the curriculum and teachers' planning are appropriate for all pupils, taking into account their additional needs, starting points and potential. Although leaders and governors have identified the storage of hazardous substances and the cleanliness of the primary school premises as key issues and had commenced appropriate action, timely and effective action to address these has not been taken.

25. The school does not meet the Standards.

Schedule of unmet Standards

Paragraph number	Standard
ISSR Part 1, paragraph 2(1)	The standard in this paragraph is met if –
2(1)(a)	the proprietor ensures that a written policy on the curriculum, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, which provides for the matters specified in sub-paragraph (2) is drawn up and implemented effectively; and
2(1)(b)	the written policy, plans and schemes of work –
2(1)(b)(i)	take into account the ages, aptitudes and needs of all pupils, including those pupils with an EHC plan.
3	The standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the teaching at the school –
3(c)	involves well-planned lessons and effective teaching methods, activities and management of class time; and
3(d)	shows a good understanding of the aptitudes, needs and prior attainments of the pupils, and ensures that these are taken into account in the planning of lessons.
ISSR Part 3, paragraph 11	The Standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that relevant health and safety laws are complied with by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written health and safety policy.
16	The Standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that –
16(a)	the welfare of pupils at the school is safeguarded and promoted by the drawing up and effective implementation of a written risk assessment policy; and
16(b)	appropriate action is taken to reduce risks that are identified.
ISSR Part 5, paragraph 25	The Standard in this paragraph is met if the proprietor ensures that the school premises and the accommodation and facilities provided therein are maintained to a standard such that, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of pupils are ensured.
ISSR Part 8, paragraph 34(1)	The standard about the quality of leadership and management is met if the proprietor ensures that persons with leadership and management responsibilities at the school –
34(1)(a)	demonstrate good skills and knowledge appropriate to their role so that the independent school standards are met consistently
34(1)(b)	fulfil their responsibilities effectively so that the independent school standards

	are met consistently; and
34(1)(c)	actively promote the wellbeing of pupils.

School details

School	The Holden School
Department for Education number	359/6004
Address	The Holden School Firs Lane Leigh Greater Manchester WN7 4SB
Phone number	01942 932540
Email address	info@theholdenschool.co.uk
Website	theholdenschool.co.uk
Proprietor	Acorn Care and Education Limited
Chair	Mr Richard Power
Headteacher	Mr Alan Harrison
Age range	4 to 18
Number of pupils	62
Date of previous inspection	30 April to 2 May 2024

Information about the school

26. The Holden School is a co-educational special school catering for pupils who have a range of special educational needs. The school, which is a day school, is divided into a primary section for pupils aged from five to eleven and a secondary section for pupils aged from eleven to nineteen. The two sites are approximately a mile apart and function as a single school in the town of Leigh. The headteacher was appointed in October 2025 and assumed operational leadership in early November 2025. Governance and oversight are provided by the regional director for Acorn Care and Education.
27. There are currently no pupils in the early years.
28. All pupils who attend the school have an education, health and care plan.
29. The school has identified three pupils for whom English is an additional language.
30. The school states that its aims are to provide a safe, emotionally secure and relationship-centred environment in which neurodivergent pupils can re-engage with learning, rebuild confidence and make meaningful academic and personal progress. It seeks to provide personalised pathways that address individual barriers, promote positive behaviour through respect and responsibility, and develop essential life skills for adulthood. Through the development of self-reflection and strong, trusting relationships, the school strives to understand, support and challenge pupils so that they achieve their potential.

Purpose of the additional inspection

Inspectors carried out this inspection under section 109(1) and (2) of the Education and Skills Act 2008. This inspection was an unannounced additional monitoring inspection which was carried out at the request of the Department for Education.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

9 to 10 June 2026

31. Two reporting inspectors visited the school for two days.

32. Inspection activities included:

- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school and information available on the school's website
- a tour of the school sites
- discussions with the regional director responsible for governance at the school
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- learning walks with staff including discussions with pupils and scrutiny of pupils' work.

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.
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