

Downlands Community School

Address: Dale Avenue, Hassocks, West Sussex, BN6 8LP

Unique reference number (URN): 126087

Inspection report: 7 July 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 ●

Achievement

Strong standard ●

Pupils achieve well. At key stage 4, their performance in examinations is well above the national average. This includes pupils' achievement in English and mathematics. Pupils are ready for their next steps in education, employment or training.

Disadvantaged pupils achieve significantly better than their peers nationally. They progress well through the curriculum. As a result, they secure the qualifications that they need for their next steps.

Pupils produce high-quality work. This includes disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. They show secure knowledge across subjects, including mathematics. They develop the necessary understanding and skills to write at length using ambitious language. Leaders' relentless focus on reading has a clear impact. Pupils who need support improve swiftly and go on to achieve highly. Older pupils enjoy borrowing books from the library and consider themselves to be lifelong readers.

Curriculum and teaching

Strong standard ●

Leaders' clear oversight and expectations help to ensure consistently high-quality teaching across the school. The curriculum is precisely organised so that pupils' new learning builds securely on what has gone before. Teachers and staff receive regular, highly effective training. Across subjects, teachers have a shared understanding of the specific knowledge that pupils need to be taught and how best to deliver this.

Teachers check pupils' understanding carefully. They adjust lessons so that pupils learn what they need to. As a result, pupils are able to understand what they are learning and make progress through the curriculum. Teachers are skilled subject experts who bring learning to life.

Staff make consistently helpful adaptations to resources and teaching strategies. As a result, teaching is highly inclusive. Staff are alert to pupils who may need extra help with writing, reading or mathematics. Leaders' early intervention ensures that these pupils catch up quickly and go on to achieve very well.

Leaders are highly focused on developing language and communication skills. The school's focus on reading supports pupils to read complex texts in lessons. The positive impact of this work is increasingly evident as pupils progress through the school.

Leadership and governance

Strong standard ●

Leaders provide a clear direction for the school. They understand precisely the school's strengths and identify the areas that need further improvement. Leaders make decisions in the best interests of pupils. This includes those who are disadvantaged or who face additional barriers to learning. Leaders are highly reflective when they make future plans for

the school. They are ambitious for their pupils and always believe the school can be even better for them.

Leaders monitor the quality of education carefully. They use expertise from external networks very well to support school improvement. Leaders provide professional development that meets the needs of staff. As a result, staff strengthen their knowledge and practice. Early career teachers say that leaders provide helpful guidance and support.

Leaders consider staff workload and wellbeing when making decisions. Staff report that leaders listen to their views and respond appropriately when concerns arise. This creates a positive working environment where staff feel respected and supported.

Those responsible for governance understand the school well. They hold leaders to account through effective scrutiny and ask informed questions about the school's work. Governors monitor how leaders use resources and evaluate the impact of key decisions. Governors understand the school's equality and diversity work well. They provide appropriate support and challenge to help drive improvement across the school.

Leaders at all levels promote high expectations, inclusion and equal opportunities. Their work helps pupils achieve well, feel safe and access the support and opportunities they need to succeed.

Personal development and wellbeing

Strong standard ●

The personal development opportunities at the school prepare pupils for life beyond school extremely well. Pupils develop a broad understanding of important topics, including healthy relationships and consent. They understand online risks and know how to keep themselves safe. Leaders review and adapt this curriculum to reflect pupils' needs and experiences. Pupils understand fundamental British value, including having a detailed understanding of our political system. They know the difference between right and wrong and show respect for others.

Leaders place a clear focus on developing pupils' character. The school's values promote resilience, optimism, community, kindness and self-awareness. Pupils speak highly of opportunities such as residential trips and the forest school. These help pupils to develop confidence and independence.

Leaders have developed a wide range of sporting, cultural and artistic opportunities. These help pupils explore their interests and talents. Many pupils participate in enrichment activities and attend clubs such as competitive handball, and the school orchestra. Pupils in Year 7 have recently enjoyed theatre trips to see musicals. Pupils value the leadership roles available to them, including the prefect and ambassador schemes. Pupils are proud that these roles have helped to make the school even more inclusive, through diversity leadership, buddy reading and pupil-led coaching. Disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities also have high rates of engagement in these opportunities.

Leaders have designed a well-considered and effective careers programme. Pupils value their careers education. They find it helpful when considering their future pathways. The careers programme helps to raise pupils' aspirations and explore different career

opportunities. For example, pupils have benefited from talks delivered by professionals from a range of industries.

Leaders prepare pupils well for life beyond education. They encourage pupils to value their individuality and pupils feel comfortable being themselves. Tutors, heads of year and pastoral support officers work together to support pupils' wellbeing and provide caring and effective pastoral support.

Expected standard

Attendance and behaviour

Expected standard 

Leaders have a clear focus on improving attendance and ensure that everyone has a role to play. Staff use established systems to monitor attendance and follow up absences promptly. Leaders analyse attendance information regularly. They take timely action to support pupils who do not attend consistently. For example, leaders provide pupils who are persistently absent with emotional support and help them catch up on missed learning. As a result, attendance is improving across the school. Leaders engage effectively with external agencies to get additional support for pupils and their families. Staff build positive relationships with parents and carers to identify and overcome barriers to attendance. However, these systems are not yet fully embedded and this means that a small number of pupils, including some who are disadvantaged do not yet attend on a regular enough basis.

Pupils' positive behaviour and attitudes to learning are a strength of the school. The school's values of community and kindness are central to its ethos. The school is a calm place that many pupils describe as a community. As a result, pupils and staff build respectful relationships. Pupils know that rare incidents of bullying are dealt with quickly and effectively. Pupils show consideration for each other in lessons and during social times. Pupils have positive attitudes to their learning. They are highly motivated and keen to achieve. Should pupils need extra help to manage their behaviour, carefully developed systems help them to improve.

Inclusion

Expected standard 

Leaders identify pupils' needs accurately at this inclusive school. They use a range of assessments to ensure that support matches pupils' individual needs. Leaders have identified the need to further strengthen these systems to support the most vulnerable pupils.

Leaders provide effective training that gives staff the knowledge and skills they need to support pupils. Teachers adapt learning so that all pupils can access the curriculum. The number of pupils with specific needs has increased recently. In response, leaders have developed a range of supportive provisions. These help pupils to feel a sense of belonging at school. Leaders ensure that support includes both emotional help as well as help for pupils to access their learning. As a result, pupils show improvements in attendance and behaviour.

Leaders have developed a well-considered pupil premium strategy. This focuses on addressing disadvantaged pupils' main barriers to learning. Leaders review the impact of this support regularly. They make appropriate changes when needed.

Leaders and staff develop positive relationships with parents and carers. Leaders seek support from external agencies and specialists when appropriate. Pupils known, or previously known, to social care receive highly effective support from the school.

Leaders make use of a range of alternative provision. They select placements carefully according to pupils' individual needs and future aspirations. They make decisions which are in pupils' best interests.

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

Pupils are very happy and love attending Downlands Community School. They value the inclusive culture and feel a strong sense of belonging within the community. Pupils benefit from leaders' passion to support every pupil to become successful academically and personally. This approach supports positive attendance and encourages pupils to engage fully in school life. Pupils enjoy learning and strive to achieve their best.

Pupils are proud of their caring school and take part in activities that help them get to know one another. For example, all pupils in Year 7 take part in forest school and a residential to support moving up from primary school. Pupils participate in a wide range of clubs, trips and enrichment opportunities such as rugby and handball clubs, theatre trips and a cultural exchange with a school in Indonesia. These experiences help pupils develop new skills, broaden their interests and build confidence. The school prepares pupils well for their future education, employment and training. This means they can make informed decisions about their next steps.

Pupils respond positively to the high expectations that leaders and staff set. They engage well in lessons and treat their peers and adults with respect. Pupils receive support to improve their attendance or attitudes to learning through thoughtful interventions. They understand the importance of diversity, equality and inclusion. Pupils demonstrate these values in their daily interactions. They support one another, and older pupils take on mentoring roles to help younger pupils with activities such as reading and sport.

Pupils feel safe, supported and valued. The school's strong focus on safeguarding ensures that pupils know how to seek help and understand risks they may encounter. Pupils report that bullying is uncommon and say that staff address concerns consistently well.

Pupils benefit from an ambitious and well-taught curriculum. They read confidently and enthusiastically. Pupils achieve well and make very secure progress from their starting points.

Next steps

- Leaders should make sure that they continue to embed their successful strategies to improve pupils' attendance, particularly disadvantaged pupils and those who are persistently absent.
 - Leaders should further strengthen the systems used to identify the needs of vulnerable pupils and appropriately respond to these needs, so that all these pupils achieve consistently well.
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About this inspection

The chair of the board of governors in this school is Diana Hunt.

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 HMI.

Inspectors spoke with the headteacher and other school leaders, governors, members of teaching and non-teaching staff, a representative from the local authority and several groups of pupils during the inspection.

The school meets the requirements of the provider access legislation, which requires schools to provide pupils in Years 8 to 13 with information and engagement about approved technical education qualifications and apprenticeships.

Inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school currently makes use of 11 alternative provisions, including 8 that are unregistered.

Headteacher: Matt Ashdown

Headteacher: Mr Matt Ashdown

Lead inspector:

Rachel Russell, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

Sue Keeling, His Majesty's Inspector

Paul Grundy, His Majesty's Inspector

Duncan Kamya, His Majesty's 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 7 July 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

1,250

Close to 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: 1,067

School capacity

1,200

Close to 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: 1,154

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

8.32%

Well 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: 28.9%

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

2.00%

Below 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: 3.09%

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

20.64%

Well above average

What does this mean?

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

National average: 13.4%

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).

All pupils' performance

English and maths GCSE

Percentage of pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	66.2%	45.4%	Above
2023/24 (final)	58.0%	45.9%	Above
2022/23 (final)	61.5%	45.3%	Above

Attainment 8

A measure of pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	57.3	46.1	Above
2023/24 (final)	54.9	45.9	Above
2022/23 (final)	56.0	46.3	Above

Progress 8

How much progress pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	0.53	-0.03	Above
2022/23 (final)	0.51	-0.03	Above

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' English and maths GCSE grade 5 or above

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieving grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	47.1%	25.8%	Above
2023/24 (final)	35.0%	25.8%	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	20.0%	25.2%	Close to average

Disadvantaged pupils' Attainment 8

A measure of disadvantaged pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (final)	45.8	34.9	Above
2023/24 (final)	39.9	34.6	Above
2022/23 (final)	36.3	35.0	Close to average

Disadvantaged pupils' Progress 8

How much progress disadvantaged pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	-0.22	-0.57	Above
2022/23 (final)	-0.42	-0.57	Close to average

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' English and maths GCSE grade 5 or above

Percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2024/25 (final)	47.1%	53.1%	-6.1 pp
2023/24 (final)	35.0%	53.1%	-18.1 pp
2022/23 (final)	20.0%	52.4%	-32.4 pp

Disadvantaged pupils' Attainment 8

A measure of disadvantaged pupils' point scores across 8 subjects including maths (double weighted), English (double weighted if both language and literature are taken), 3 EBacc measures and 3 GCSE or technical measures.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2024/25 (final)	45.8	50.4	-4.6
2023/24 (final)	39.9	50.0	-10.2
2022/23 (final)	36.3	50.3	-14.0

Disadvantaged pupils' Progress 8

How much progress disadvantaged pupils made between the end of primary school (key stage 2) and the end of secondary school (key stage 4), compared to pupils across England who got similar results at the end of key stage 2.

Year	This school	National non-disadvantaged score	School disadvantage gap
2023/24 (final)	-0.22	0.16	-0.38
2022/23 (final)	-0.42	0.17	-0.58

Destinations after 16

Destinations after 16

Percentage of pupils staying in education or employment for at least 2 terms after the end of secondary school (key stage 4).

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023 leavers (revised)	97%	92%	Above
2022 leavers (revised)	97%	93%	Above
2021 leavers (revised)	95%	94%	Average

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 (3 term)	7.6%	8.4%	Close to average
2023/24 (3 term)	7.7%	8.9%	Close to average
2022/23 (3 term)	7.2%	9.0%	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 (3 term)	19.1%	23.4%	Below
2023/24 (3 term)	19.9%	25.6%	Below
2022/23 (3 term)	18.8%	26.5%	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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