Inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School

High Road, Kells, Whitehaven, Cumbria CA28 9PG

Inspection dates:	7 and 8 May 2025
The quality of education	**Good**
Behaviour and attitudes	**Outstanding**
Personal development	**Outstanding**
Leadership and management	**Good**
Early years provision	**Outstanding**
Previous inspection grade	Outstanding

Until November 2020, the school was exempt from routine inspection because it was judged as outstanding for overall effectiveness at its previous inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. The school has not been inspected under section 5 of the Act since March 2014. Since September 2024, schools have not been awarded an overall effectiveness grade.

What is it like to attend this school?

Pupils love attending this school. They beam with happiness as they arrive. Many pupils run to their classrooms, excited to start the day. The school instils in pupils that everyone is unique and equal. Its values are central to the life of the school and are lived out in practice by pupils. Pupils demonstrate consistently high levels of respect towards others. Their behaviour is excellent.

The school has high expectations for pupils' achievement. It ensures that they learn a rich curriculum. Pupils achieve well across a range of subjects. Children in the early years get off to a flying start, making rapid gains in their learning.

The school exposes pupils to an impressive range of experiences that they may not otherwise encounter. Pupils participate in many trips to contrasting geographical locations. They visit different places of worship and numerous cities, including Glasgow, Newcastle and London. They enjoy annual residential trips from Year 2 onwards. This develops pupils' confidence and broadens their knowledge. Pupils contribute to designing the school's extensive extra-curricular offer. This includes the addition of activities that pupils are interested in but cannot access outside school. Clubs include sports, art, music, drama and dance. Take up of these is consistently high.

What does the school do well and what does it need to do better?

The school has developed an ambitious and engaging curriculum. The knowledgeable staff deliver this curriculum consistently. In most subjects, including English and mathematics, the school is clear about the important knowledge that pupils should know. However, in a small number of recently revised subjects, the key learning is still being refined. This makes it difficult for staff to design activities in these subjects that focus sharply on securing and deepening pupils' knowledge.

The provision for children in the early years is exceptional. The early years curriculum has been meticulously designed to build on children's learning over time. For example, children in the Nursery class learn to confidently identify rhymes and sounds in words, which prepares them well for learning phonics in the Reception class. Staff know children's precise next steps and focus on these through consistently high-quality interactions with them. Children make strong progress through the curriculum from the start.

Reading lies at the heart of this school. Staff inspire pupils of all ages to love books. They are skilled at delivering the school's early reading programme. Pupils develop their fluency by reading books matched to their phonics knowledge. The school supports pupils to overcome barriers to reading. Pupils who struggle are supported effectively to catch up rapidly.

The school prioritises developing pupils' language and communication skills. It has identified the key vocabulary that pupils should learn. Staff model high-level words to

pupils and provide clear explanations of their meaning. Pupils use these words accurately when speaking. Pupils become confident communicators.

The school checks how well pupils are learning the curriculum. It identifies and addresses aspects of their learning that are less secure. The school works in partnership with specialist professionals and with parents and carers to identify the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. It ensures that staff understand these needs and that support is in place to enable these pupils to achieve well.

The school has high expectations of attendance. It acts quickly and effectively when pupils do not attend as regularly as they should. Rates of attendance are high, and persistent absence is low. This has been maintained over time.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Pupils have learned how to independently support each other to maintain the school's calm and cohesive atmosphere. From the early years to Year 6, pupils consistently follow the expected routines and are deeply engaged in their learning. Pupils have a mature understanding of the unique and varied ways individuals manage their emotions. They use this knowledge to consider how best to support their friends when they struggle with their feelings. Pupils are proud of their role as 'happiness ninjas'. They delight in finding ways to spread joy to others.

The school's work to enhance pupils' broader development is praiseworthy. Pupils engage in a range of enterprise projects with businesses, where they develop skills in design, project management and budgeting. Pupils become active citizens. They speak passionately about sharing their ideas for improvements with the local MP. Pupils raise awareness of environmental issues, support charities and enjoy socialising with older people in the community. Pupils are exceptionally well prepared for life beyond school.

Governors have a clear vision for the school and carry out their roles well. Leaders support staff's well-being and consider any impact on staff's workload when making strategic decisions.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the school need to do to improve?

(Information for the school and appropriate authority)

- In a small number of subjects, the key knowledge that pupils should learn at each stage is not clearly defined. This means that the work pupils complete in these subjects does not consistently support them in deepening their understanding over time. The school should further refine these subjects to ensure that pupils are enabled to develop the depth of knowledge they need for the next stage in their education.

How can I feed back my views?

You can use Ofsted Parent View to give Ofsted your opinion on your child's school, or to find out what other parents and carers think. We use information from Ofsted Parent View when deciding which schools to inspect, when to inspect them and as part of their inspection.

The Department for Education has further guidance on how to complain about a school.

Further information

You can search for published performance information about the school.

In the report, 'disadvantaged pupils' is used to mean pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND); pupils who meet the definition of children in need of help and protection; pupils receiving statutory local authority support from a social worker; and pupils who otherwise meet the criteria used for deciding the school's pupil premium funding (this includes pupils claiming free school meals at any point in the last six years, looked after children (children in local authority care) and/or children who left care through adoption or another formal route).

School details

Unique reference number	112353
Local authority	Cumberland
Inspection number	10348112
Type of school	Primary
School category	Voluntary aided
Age range of pupils	3 to 11
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	189
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair of governing body	Nicola Pettitt
Headteacher	Susan Starkie
Website	www.kells-stmarys.cumbria.sch.uk
Dates of previous inspection	4 and 5 March 2014, under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Information about this school

- The school is a voluntary-aided Catholic primary school and is part of the Diocese of Lancaster. Its last inspection under section 48 of the Education Act 2005 was in November 2021. The school's next section 48 inspection will take place by November 2026.
- The school does not use any alternative provision.
- The school operates before- and after-school clubs.

Information about this inspection

The inspectors carried out this graded inspection under section 5 of the Education Act 2005. During a graded inspection, we grade the school for each of our key judgements (quality of education; behaviour and attitudes; personal development; and leadership and management) and for any relevant provision judgement (early years and/or sixth form provision). Schools receiving a graded inspection from September 2024 will not be given an overall effectiveness grade.

- Inspections are a point-in-time evaluation about the quality of a school's education

provision.

- This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Inspectors discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school and have taken that into account in their evaluation of the school.
- Inspectors met with the headteacher, other leaders, governors and staff at the school. The lead inspector spoke with representatives from the local authority and the diocese.
- Inspectors carried out deep dives in these subjects: early reading, mathematics and history. For each deep dive, inspectors held discussions about the curriculum, visited a sample of lessons, spoke to teachers, spoke to some pupils about their learning and looked at samples of pupils' work. Inspectors also discussed the curriculum in some other subjects.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of safeguarding, inspectors reviewed the single central record; took account of the views of leaders, staff and pupils; and considered the extent to which the school has created an open and positive culture around safeguarding that puts pupils' interests first.
- The lead inspector listened to some pupils read to a familiar adult.
- Inspectors observed pupils at playtime, at lunchtime and when moving around the school.
- Inspectors spoke to parents and considered the responses to the online survey, Ofsted Parent View, including the free-text comments. Inspectors spoke to pupils and to staff to gather their views.
- Inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including those related to the governance of the school.

Inspection team

Liz Dayton, lead inspector	His Majesty's Inspector
Sue Bowman	Ofsted Inspector

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