

Cowley International College

Address: Hard Lane, St Helens, Merseyside, WA10 6PN

Unique reference number (URN): 104829

Inspection report: 10 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.

Expected standard

Leadership and governance

Expected standard 

Since the last inspection, there have been significant changes in leadership and staffing. Under new leaders, the school is undergoing rapid, purposeful and well-sequenced improvement.

Leaders, together with governors, are strategic in their actions and deeply committed to improving the school. They know exactly what to work on, why it matters and how each action contributes to better outcomes for pupils. Leaders and governors make changes in the best interests of pupils.

With support principally from a multi-academy trust, leaders have instigated accelerated but carefully structured change. This is rooted in a clear understanding of what pupils need. Leaders' actions are already having a tangible and positive impact on pupils' daily experiences. This can be seen in improvements in attendance, behaviour, classroom practice and pupils' learning.

Governors carry out their duties effectively. They support and challenge leaders well, with a focus on continuing to improve the education that the school provides for pupils.

A culture of professional growth is developing. Staff value regular training opportunities and increased time to develop the curriculum. Most staff appreciate the actions leaders have taken to support their workload and wellbeing during a period of rapid change. While some staff express concerns about the pace of change, they recognise the positive impact on pupils.

Leaders are taking sensible steps to improve their engagement and communications with staff and the community, including parents and carers. Despite this, some staff and parents have a less positive view of the changes leaders have made.

Personal development and wellbeing

Expected standard 

Leaders place a clear emphasis on pupils' personal development. They have recently introduced an ambitious new personal, social and health education curriculum that includes important topics, such as mental health, domestic abuse, positive relationships and the risks of exploitation.

Leaders know their pupils' needs well, and pastoral structures support pupils effectively. The inclusion space offers somewhere quiet for pupils to be at social times and promotes their sense of belonging. Pupils appreciate the work of the wellbeing team, which helps them to overcome any challenges they face. Pupils know who to turn to if they need support. They are confident they will receive the help they need.

Leaders' monitoring of pupils' participation in wider opportunities ensures that pupils engage in a range of activities that nurture their talents and develop their interests. These include the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, outdoor residential activities and a range of clubs, such as

dance, sports and Mandarin. Leaders are tenacious in helping pupils who face barriers to participate fully in educational trips, such as going to museums and a zoo.

Pupils typically treat others with respect. They learn about equality and its links to employment rights. In the main, pupils have a secure knowledge of diversity and a developing understanding that some differences are protected in law against discrimination. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe online, for example blocking unwanted contacts and not befriending a stranger. They learn about world religions and fundamental British values, such as democracy.

Well-designed careers advice and guidance includes links with a range of employers. This helps all pupils, including pupils with additional needs, to make well-informed decisions about their next steps. Pupils in Year 10 participate in work experience placements, where they learn employability skills in readiness for the world of work. An increasing number of pupils move on to appropriate education, employment and training, including apprenticeships.

Needs attention ●

Achievement

Needs attention ●

Pupils' achievement in national tests, including disadvantaged pupils, dipped to below the national average in 2025. Overall, attainment and progress have been inconsistent across a range of subjects over time. Historically, too many pupils did not learn well and were not well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Leaders have raised expectations of what pupils can achieve. Their recent initiatives have started to have a positive impact on pupils' learning. Pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, now achieve more highly in some subjects. However, pupils do not consistently make suitable progress through the curriculum in all subjects. This is because of variability in the teaching.

Leaders have implemented strategies to improve pupils' basic English and mathematics knowledge and skills, such as handwriting and number facts. These are beginning to bear fruit. However, typically, pupils' work shows that they have gaps in their knowledge, particularly in writing.

Attendance and behaviour

Needs attention ●

Pupils' attendance has been low in the past. Absence rates, including pupils with more frequent absences, have been higher than the national average for some time. Leaders have developed a range of successful strategies to support pupils to attend more regularly. They analyse attendance information closely and identify patterns and trends. They use these to support pupils to improve their attendance. There are early signs that this work is having a positive impact, including for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, improving the attendance of older pupils and disadvantaged pupils remains a priority.

Leaders have worked with staff, pupils, parents and carers to introduce a new behaviour approach. This is beginning to make a difference. Pupils and staff report that school is calmer and more conducive to learning. Suspensions are much reduced. The majority of pupils behave appropriately in lessons and at social times. However, leaders recognise that inconsistencies in the application of the new approach sometimes lead to a small number of instances of poor behaviour. Leaders use improved pastoral and wellbeing initiatives to provide tailored support for pupils who need help managing their behaviour. Bullying is rare, and pupils are confident that it will be dealt with swiftly if it happens.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention 

Teachers do not check pupils' understanding consistently well to identify gaps in their learning and address misconceptions and errors. Sometimes, staff do not adapt their teaching effectively to provide support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). These inconsistencies limit pupils' ability to build on their prior knowledge and lead to uneven progress through the curriculum, including for pupils with SEND.

Leaders have an accurate and well-informed understanding of the quality of curriculum and teaching. They have improved their processes to check how well things are working. This helps leaders to provide staff with more tailored professional learning opportunities to improve their practice. Consequently, teaching is improving across a range of subjects.

Leaders have developed a range of strategies to improve pupils' basic knowledge in English and mathematics, for example handwriting and arithmetic. However, these are relatively new and it is too soon to see their full impact. Provision for pupils at an early stage of reading has improved, including phonics support from trained teachers. This helps pupils to develop their reading fluency and comprehension skills.

The curriculum is broad and ambitious. It includes academic and vocational subjects. Leaders have improved curriculum design so that pupils learn new content in a logical order. Leaders have designed 3 flexible curriculum pathways to better support the range of pupils' needs.

Inclusion

Needs attention 

Leaders are committed to providing an inclusive environment for all pupils. However, provision for pupils with additional needs is inconsistent across the school. Staff do not consistently apply strategies to reduce pupils' barriers to learning effectively. Teaching is not always adapted well to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Consequently, some barriers remain, and this hampers pupils' ability to achieve, belong and thrive.

Leaders have a secure knowledge of the range of pupils' needs. They have recently developed systems to strengthen the ways in which they identify and track the progress of pupils with additional needs. Leaders work effectively with parents and carers and a range of different agencies. This means leaders are able to provide more timely support for pupils. Leaders have strengthened the information they provide to staff so that staff know precisely what pupils need. They have also improved staff training.

Leaders have set up teams to support their focus on disadvantaged pupils. They take timely and effective action to support these pupils using additional funding. As a result, disadvantaged pupils' attendance is improving and behaviour consequences are reducing.

Leaders use alternative provision appropriately and in pupils' best interests.

Post 16 provision

Needs attention 

Sixth-form students did not generally achieve well in the past, particularly on A level courses. This is due to a weaker curriculum and less strong teaching. There remain some inconsistencies in teaching. For example, occasionally, teachers do not check students' prior knowledge well enough to identify gaps and make appropriate adaptations to address them. Leaders are acutely aware of this. Plans are in place to improve teaching, but they have not been implemented consistently well.

Following leaders' actions, most subject curriculums are thoughtfully designed. Leaders are working with staff to further improve teaching and students' achievement. Where teaching is effective, students, including those who are disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, progress well. In vocational subjects, outcomes are typically close to the national average.

Non-qualification opportunities are plentiful. Students learn about the safe use of social media and healthy relationships, including consent. They have opportunities to participate in a variety of enrichment activities, including sports, performing arts and driving taster lessons. Students enjoy taking on leadership roles, including mentoring younger pupils.

Students appreciate meaningful work experience placements with local employers. Students with particular barriers receive additional support in finding appropriate placements. Guidance on next steps includes practice interviews with former students. This helps students move on to appropriate education, employment or training, including apprenticeships. Students with additional needs are well prepared for life after school.

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

Pupils feel safe and are typically happy at this rapidly improving school. They value the time they get to spend with their friends and enjoy their learning. Pupils are confident that staff will resolve any concerns they have. Leaders deal with bullying effectively.

There is a newly created positive culture for learning. Pupils are rising to leaders' increased expectations of their achievement and behaviour. Pupils report that hearing derogatory language is rare. Staff and pupils describe a school that is more purposeful than before. Pupils move calmly and respectfully around the school. They follow clear routines. Lessons begin promptly. Pupils have positive relationships with each other and their teachers. Typically, pupils are engaged in lessons, and most pupils want to learn. Leaders have taken positive action to improve pupils' rates of attendance. However, some pupils do not attend regularly enough.

In the past, pupils did not learn consistently well across the curriculum, including in the sixth form. This includes disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This meant that many pupils left school without being well prepared for their next steps. However, there have been significant improvements to the curriculum and teaching. Pupils learn better than in the past. However, improvements are at an early stage in some subjects and have not had the full impact intended.

Rich and varied enrichment activities are available to develop pupils' confidence and interests. Pupils speak enthusiastically about the dance and rock school performances they can take part in. They benefit from trips, including to museums, universities and a wide range of different countries. Pupils relish taking on leadership roles and raising money for charity. They participate in a range of clubs, including chess, debating, music, rugby and football. All pupils are included in these activities.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure that consistently effective teaching throughout the school, including in the sixth form, leads to improved achievement for all pupils.
 - Leaders should ensure that teachers' checks on pupils' knowledge and understanding identify gaps and address misconceptions consistently well in all subjects and year groups.
 - Leaders should ensure that staff are fully equipped and supported to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of all pupils as well as possible, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
 - Leaders should continue to work on improving pupils' attendance, including disadvantaged pupils.
 - Leaders should continue to build on their ongoing work to improve communication with staff and the wider school community.
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About this inspection

The chair of the board of governors in this school is Gary Anders.

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.

Inspectors spoke with the headteacher, other senior leaders and members of teaching and non-teaching staff. Inspectors also spoke with a representative of the multi-academy trust that is supporting the school, with a virtual school headteacher and with leaders of the alternative providers that the school uses. The lead inspector spoke with a group of governors, including the chair, and with a representative from the local authority.

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.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school makes use of 2 registered and 3 unregistered alternative provisions.

The school has undergone significant changes since the last inspection. The principal, members of the senior leadership team and many staff were appointed in recent years. A new chair of governors has been appointed since the previous inspection.

Principal : Russell Cormack

Lead inspector:

Ahmed Marikar, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

Rochelle Conefrey, Ofsted Inspector

Dawn Platt, Ofsted Inspector

Neil Johnson, His Majesty's Inspector

Tom Theobald, His Majesty's Inspector

Gerard Preston, 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 10 March 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

1,498

Well above 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

1,620

Well above 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: 1,153

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

41.91%

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: 28.9%

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

3.47%

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: 3.09%

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

17.02%

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 above 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 (revised)	30.4%	45.4%	Below
2023/24 (final)	29.1%	45.9%	Below
2022/23 (final)	27.3%	45.3%	Below

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 (revised)	39.3	46.0	Below

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	41.7	45.9	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	39.9	46.3	Below

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)	-0.69	-0.03	Below
2022/23 (final)	-0.77	-0.03	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' 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 (revised)	16.7%	25.8%	Close to average
2023/24 (final)	23.2%	25.8%	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	12.4%	25.2%	Below

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 (revised)	28.7	34.9	Below
2023/24 (final)	34.4	34.6	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	30.2	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)	-1.22	-0.57	Below
2022/23 (final)	-1.38	-0.57	Below

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 (revised)	16.7%	53.1%	-36.5 pp
2023/24 (final)	23.2%	53.1%	-30.0 pp
2022/23 (final)	12.4%	52.4%	-40.1 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 (revised)	28.7	50.4	-21.7
2023/24 (final)	34.4	50.0	-15.6
2022/23 (final)	30.2	50.3	-20.1

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)	-1.22	0.16	-1.38
2022/23 (final)	-1.38	0.17	-1.55

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 (provisional)	84%	91%	Below
2022 leavers (revised)	90%	93%	Average
2021 leavers (revised)	87%	94%	Below

16 to 18 performance

A-level average point score

The average points that students achieved per A-level entry.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (revised)	25.31	34.99	Below
2023/24 (final)	28.94	34.38	Below
2022/23 (final)	26.54	34.16	Below

A-level value added

A score showing students' progress between the end of key stage 4 and the end of their academic qualification studies.

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25 (revised)	-0.4	0.0	Below
2023/24 (revised)	-0.2	0.0	Below

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)	12.2%	8.1%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	12.5%	8.9%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	11.0%	9.0%	Above

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)	28.1%	21.9%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	32.1%	25.6%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	28.0%	26.5%	Close to average

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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