

Our Lady's Abingdon

URN: 123298

Catholic Schools Inspectorate report on behalf of the Bishop of Portsmouth

28–29 February 2024

Summary of key findings

Overall effectiveness

The overall quality of Catholic education provided by the school

2

Catholic life and mission (p.3)

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission

2

Religious education (p.5)

The quality of curriculum religious education

2

Collective worship (p.7)

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

2

The school is fully compliant with the curriculum requirements laid down by the Bishops' Conference

No

The school is fully compliant with all requirements of the diocesan bishop

Yes

The school has responded to the areas for improvement from the last inspection

N/A

What the school does well

- The headteacher is passionate in his vision for improving the school and enriching its Catholic identity.
- Students make good progress in religious education, demonstrating an accurate understanding of core concepts and the ability to discuss, apply and evaluate their learning.
- Students feel safe and happy at the school, with the vast majority of parents showing a high degree of confidence in the school's leadership.
- Students respond well to prayer and liturgy, recognising it as a signature feature of their school.

- Catholic social teaching is beginning to permeate the school, and allowing staff of all faiths and none to align their practice with the deeply humane principles that Catholic social teaching conveys.

What the school needs to improve

- In religious studies, the school must ensure compliance with the requirement of the Bishops' Council to teach religious education for a minimum of five per cent of the taught curriculum to all students in the Sixth Form. Further, students will benefit from greater pace and challenge in religious studies to move the faculty towards outstanding.
- The school needs to review its provision for chaplaincy in order to allow the school's sacramental life, retreats and professional development of staff as members of a Catholic community to be supported.
- Students must be enabled to develop, lead and evaluate prayer and liturgy, commensurate with their age.

Catholic life and mission

How faithfully the school responds to the call to live as a Catholic community at the service of the Church's educational mission.

Catholic life and mission key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

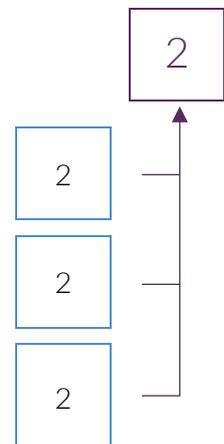
The extent to which pupils contribute to and benefit from the Catholic life and mission of the school

Provision

The quality of provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for the Catholic life and mission of the school



Students are proud of their school, deeply value the support of the staff and can articulate what makes the school special. Some can see, and articulate, how this derives specifically from the Catholic identity of the school; all speak of kindness and of a genuine family atmosphere. Leaders are working to ensure an understanding of Christ at the centre. The school is truly welcoming, with a developing confidence around its Catholic identity driven by the headteacher. One parent said the school 'transmits a strong Catholic approach.' For another 'staff know the children so well'. Observed students' behaviour was excellent, showing the respect they have for themselves and others. Students are proud of their charitable work, with one sixth form student describing it as 'just simply doing the right thing'. Students speak confidently about how their school welcomes those of all faiths and none, provides a safe and empowering space for all and therefore aids their moral development. Their commitment to looking outwards to those in need is significant and genuine. Students' understanding of Catholic social teaching is gradually embedding, reflecting a recent push by school leaders to ensure this is a firm feature of the school's character. The deep embedding of all of the above will be secured with ever-greater student involvement, a review of the school's chaplaincy provision, including giving consideration to the appointment of a dedicated chaplain, the keen scrutiny of governors and the further upskilling of staff to support the Catholic identity of the school.

The mission statement of the school is generally understood, with most students able to explain its significance. The importance and the charism of the Sisters of Mercy is articulated by a few and the headteacher is working to place this charism at the centre of what makes the school special, including highlighting artefacts and devotional features across the historic estate. Staff commitment and collegiality at all levels is strong; they readily serve the community and

participate in activities and routines which promote the school's standards. Staff survey responses are positive, with most believing students are respectful. Approximately half of the respondents felt the Catholic identity of the school had an impact on the curriculum. Mercy Studies develop students' understanding of faith and provides a link with the founding religious congregation. The provision for relationships, sex, and health education (RSHE) meets all statutory requirements and is firmly rooted in Church teaching. These lessons are much valued by the students, and parents expressed confidence in their content and delivery. The pastoral care of students is excellent, with one parent saying, 'once you raise an issue the school will sort it out swiftly'. Most parents were positive about the school as safe, caring and respectful to all. One committed Anglican parent said 'We had no hesitation sending our child to this school, and we fully respect the Catholic principles'. More time, a review of the provision for chaplaincy and ongoing staff formation will help to ensure any weaknesses are resolved.

The Catholic life of the school is clearly visible and the headteacher is committed to building on it. To move forward, governors will need to ensure that they both establish a framework for recognising the strengths and weaknesses of the school's Catholic identity, as well as give due consideration for the reintroduction of a dedicated chaplain. Governors met with during the inspection recognised that the Catholic identity had not always been the top priority but they have the capacity and drive to support the headteacher in taking this element of the school from good to outstanding. The headteacher has a deep sense of personal investment in the school community and enjoys a high degree of confidence from parents and staff alike. For some, the notion of the whole taught curriculum being an expression of a Catholic understanding of reality is understood well, though for many this is new and emerging. New staff feel supported and well inducted into the school and for those starting in September they benefit from in-service training on working in a Catholic school. Further in-service training, planned by the headteacher, an active chaplaincy and the support and challenge of the governing body will help move this element towards outstanding.

Religious education

The quality of curriculum religious education

Religious education key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

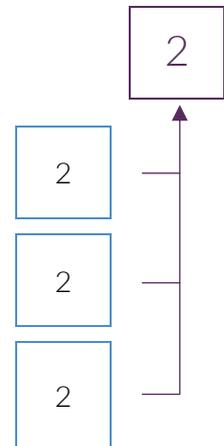
How well pupils achieve and enjoy their learning in religious education

Provision

The quality of teaching, learning, and assessment in religious education

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for religious education



Students enjoy their religious studies lessons, supported by very well qualified teachers, who are committed to ensuring the subject is one of the best performing in the school. Students, including disadvantaged students and the substantial number of students with special educational needs and disabilities, make progress demonstrating religious literacy and an interest in deeper thinking. For one student, 'I really like the philosophy part of this – being able to think about things'. In an A level lesson, students were examining theodicies showing an understanding of the vocabulary as well as the ability to apply it. In a Year 10 lesson students showed the confidence they have in the teachers and the subject to take risks in their answers, engaging in mature debate. In a Year 6 lesson, pupils' ideas were given real consideration, built on and developed so that many children felt part of the process. The children also saw how art can express ideas, including those of Catholic social teaching. Over the 13 lessons visited, some outstanding practice was seen, some weaker practice but predominantly practice deemed to be good. The less experienced members of the department are making good progress and demonstrated some excellent practice. Where practice was less than outstanding, this was typically where there seemed to be a lack of pace or a lack of questioning and challenge to *all* the class. In these instances, a significant number of children were spending a substantial amount of time without being questioned or challenged, while at the same time being very ready to engage if so asked. Generally, work produced was of a good standard, though marking and feedback, which appears to differ depending on the teacher, require greater consistency, not least to provide the students with a consistent level of feedback.

Teachers in this committed, knowledgeable department support each other and are focused on ensuring religious studies is one of the best performing subjects in the school. There is evidence of excellent planning, especially by the head of faculty in ensuring that the curriculum is fit for

purpose, progressive, deepens understanding, and offers challenge. In a very good Year 7 RSE lesson, the highly experienced teacher created the ideal climate for a discussion on relationships which was sensitive, appropriate, and engaging. Where students are questioned the questions are often skilful and probing though this needs to cover more of the class to ensure a wider degree of challenge. When asked, students could explain the significance of the education to the world and to the decision-making that they would be engaged in as they grew older. Most exercise books were well looked after, containing relevant notes, vocabulary, and model answers. The school is not currently compliant with regard to the requirement of the Bishops' Council to teach religious education for a minimum of five per cent of the taught curriculum to all students in the Sixth Form. The headteacher and his team have plans in place to ensure the school will be fully compliant from September with regard to religious studies teaching time in the sixth form, including providing the timetabling and ensuring the correct staffing.

The head of faculty, who is well regarded across the school and by parents, is ensuring that the school's curriculum for religious studies is beginning to be an expression of the *Religious Education Directory*, consistent with his following of the Bishop's Vision in support of the headteacher. The department is resourced and treated with broad parity to core subjects and the school is investing in the professional development of the religious studies team, including attending diocesan events. The head of faculty has planned the curriculum methodically to ensure depth and breadth, and he is able to articulate clear vision and rationale which is impressive and ambitious. A focus on greater consistency in marking style and regularity, together with an increase in pace and challenge in some lessons will help ensure outstanding practice. Recruitment to post 16 is beginning to take shape, though still with relatively low numbers.

Collective worship

The quality and range of liturgy and prayer provided by the school

Collective worship key judgement grade

Pupil outcomes

How well pupils participate in and respond to the school's collective worship

2

Provision

The quality of collective worship provided by the school

2

Leadership

How well leaders and governors promote, monitor and evaluate the provision for collective worship

2

2

Students engage cooperatively and reverently in the prayer and liturgy of the school, making the judgement of this aspect as good. A number speak persuasively of the importance this has in their life, as well as how it is an intrinsic part of what makes their school different. All are simply happy to take part and recognise this as a core element of a Catholic school. In one Year 9 assembly seen, scripture, reflection and student involvement were employed in the beautiful chapel. In another, students led scripture reading and, in another, the sixth form led worship, acting as a powerful witness to the importance of faith in their minds and, thus, engaging the younger students. An increase in chaplaincy provision and the opening up of the chapel to worship throughout the week, will provide a rich experience for ever more students. The headteacher is working to ensure ever greater consistency of prayer and liturgy at tutor time, linking with the formation of staff in this regard.

The headteacher and colleagues are committed to ensuring prayer is at the heart of the school, though recognising that this is currently not entirely consistent in its application and quality. The school includes in its communications regular references to the Church's year and to activities associated with the parish. Daily prayer takes place, in some settings better than others, and is overseen by heads of section. Some staff surveyed currently feel confident to deliver on the religious commitment of the school though all staff are enthusiastic to develop in this area. The school's commitment to and expertise in the arts is a real strength which students appreciate. The headteacher recognises how this can be integrated, together with the artefacts from the original convent school, to make the school building visually rich, drawing on its Catholic identity and the Sisters of Mercy's provenance. He has begun this with, for example, recovering some of the original features of the buildings, including stained glass. Parents appreciate being invited to events such as the Christmas carol service, as well as the school choir, and would welcome

further opportunities to share in the faith of the school. The parish priest, who also serves as a governor, is firmly committed to supporting the school's move towards outstanding. The review of the school's chaplaincy provision, together with the governors' adoption of a prayer and liturgy policy will help ensure progress from good to outstanding.

The headteacher, has done much to drive forward the character of prayer and liturgy in a relatively short time and it is now seen as a priority. This is reflected by parents and staff. The school is palpably a community of prayer, responding to the rhythms of the liturgical year, embedded in communications with parents and valued by students. The headteacher has undertaken the necessary research, engaged with the diocese, to develop a clear understanding as to how he wants prayer and liturgy to develop so as to become outstanding. This he has shared with his newly reconfigured senior leaders who support him in this. To move towards outstanding, more systematic whole-school professional development in this area is needed, as is a governors' prayer and liturgy policy.

Information about the school

Full name of school	Our Lady's Abingdon School
School unique reference number (URN)	123298
School DfE Number (LAESTAB)	9316076
Full postal address of the school	Our Lady's School, Radley Road, Abingdon, OX14 3PS
School phone number	01235524658
Headteacher	Daniel Gibbons
Chair of Governors/Trustees	Freddy El Turk
School Website	www.ola.org.uk
Trusteeship	Our Lady's Abingdon Trustees
Multi-academy trust or company (if applicable)	N/A
Phase	All Through
Type of school	Catholic Independent School
Admissions policy	Selective
Age-range of pupils	7-19
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Date of last denominational inspection	N/A
Previous denominational inspection grade	N/A

The inspection team

Simon Uttley	Lead
Jo Smith	Team
John Wright	Team

Key to grade judgements

Grade	England	Wales
1	Outstanding	Excellent
2	Good	Good
3	Requires improvement	Adequate and requires improvement
4	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory and in need of urgent improvement