

Ofsted registered early years setting inspection report

27 to 29 January 2026

Sancton Wood Nursery School

Sancton Wood School

17 Station Road

Cambridge

CB1 2JB

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is commissioned by Ofsted to inspect registered early years settings in independent schools in England which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council. Ofsted is the regulator for early years registered settings in England.

Inspection outcomes

Safeguarding	Met
Inclusion	Strong standard
Curriculum and teaching	Expected standard
Achievement	Expected standard
Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines	Strong standard
Children's welfare and wellbeing	Expected standard
Leadership and governance	Expected standard

The extent to which the school meets the requirements of the early years foundation stage

The school's registered provision for childcare meets the requirements of the Childcare Act 2006.

Summary of inspection findings

1. Children experience thoughtful and attentive care from familiar adults who know them well. They are supported through calm routines that help them feel secure and protect their privacy and safety. Babies and young children are comforted promptly, while older children are encouraged to become increasingly independent within safe boundaries. Children are helped to understand what will happen next and who they can go to for help. Children thrive in this welcoming environment where they enjoy play, learning and social interaction. Children have regular access to well-planned indoor and outdoor spaces which support their learning, exploration and physical development.
2. Staff build warm, responsive bonds through the effective use of the key person role, which helps children to feel secure and understood from the moment they join the setting. Settling-in arrangements are flexible and thoughtfully planned, supporting children to separate confidently from their parents and carers. Staff support children to manage their emotions, follow routines and interact respectfully with others, including by using calm language and visual support. Children show trust in familiar adults, seek support when needed, and play co-operatively with each other across the setting.
3. Children typically enjoy learning and show sustained interest across a broad range of activities. Indoors, they take pleasure in storytelling, mark making and creative play, confidently sharing ideas and recalling what they have learned and what they know. Outdoors, children readily access activities that help them build muscle strength and co-ordination. Babies explore through sensory play, supported by warm, responsive interactions that encourage curiosity and communication. Older children work together to make bird feeders. This supports fine motor control, concentration,

co-operation and understanding of the natural world. Children demonstrate enjoyment, perseverance and pride in their achievements.

4. Overall, children make progress well from their starting points across all areas of learning. Babies develop early communication, physical co-ordination and curiosity through sensory and small-world experiences. Two-year-olds build independence, language and motor skills through purposeful play and routines. Older children strengthen early literacy, physical skills and personal development through story-based activities, creative tasks and physical challenges. Children, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and those who may face other barriers to their learning, achieve well from their starting points. They are effectively supported and develop the knowledge, skills and confidence they need so that they are very well prepared for the next stage of their learning.

Safeguarding

5. Safeguarding is met.
6. 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.

Inclusion

7. The grading for inclusion is at the strong standard.
8. Leaders have established and maintain a consistently inclusive culture across the setting, where equality, respect and belonging are actively promoted and firmly embedded in daily practice. Inclusion is clearly understood as a shared responsibility. Leaders model this through clear expectations, targeted training and effective oversight of practice. Children experience a welcoming environment in which differences are recognised positively, individual needs are anticipated, and children are proactively supported to overcome barriers to their learning and development.
9. Leaders and staff use their deep knowledge and insight to identify barriers to learning and wellbeing promptly and accurately. Robust systems for gathering information from parents, and ongoing observation and assessment are used effectively to understand children's emerging special educational needs. Leaders and staff also work closely with parents and other agencies to ensure that the right strategies are in place to support vulnerable children, children who speak English as an additional language (EAL), and children who may face other barriers to their learning and development. Staff are skilful and confident in adapting the provision so that all children can participate meaningfully to develop their knowledge and skills. Children receive appropriate support from the earliest stage. This includes targeted physical activities to support physical development and structured emotional regulation strategies. Staff make very effective use of visual timetables and give clear instructions, checking children's understanding before moving on to the next activity.
10. Leaders and staff monitor children's progress carefully to ensure that the support and individual strategies that they put in place continue to meet each child's needs well. Children who have

previously found group activities, friendships or emotional regulation difficult quickly develop the confidence in their relationships with adults and with other children to engage positively in their play, follow routines and anticipate and manage transitions with increasing independence. Staff adapt physical activities very effectively to enable all children to join in and develop their skills. Staff adapt their interactions effectively to support children who speak EAL, checking their understanding and promoting children's English language fluency. Staff use carefully considered strategies, which are regularly reviewed and adjusted as needed, enabling children to make sustained and very positive progress from their starting points.

11. Leaders demonstrate careful oversight of children who are known to children's social care and those who face barriers to their learning and development. Leaders and staff show appropriate professional curiosity, monitor attendance and wellbeing closely and work in partnership with families and external agencies to promote children's wellbeing. Leaders act decisively to reduce risk, strengthen support and review practice diligently when incidents occur. This has a very positive impact on protecting and supporting children to thrive within a stable, nurturing and well-managed environment.

Curriculum and teaching

12. The grading for curriculum and teaching is at the expected standard.
13. The curriculum is broad, balanced and informed by children's interests, what children know and can do and children's individual needs. Staff successfully build children's skills and knowledge throughout their time at the nursery. Teaching is typically well-matched to children's age and stage of development. For example, babies engage in small-world play where staff model animal sounds and repeat key words. Toddlers explore animals through sensory activities such as sand play, with staff exploring with them the language to describe textures and actions. Older children are supported well to develop early literacy and to build their vocabulary and conversational skills. During creative activities, such as painting planets, staff introduce relevant vocabulary and support safe use of tools.
14. Teaching supports children to make effective progress from their starting points. However, the curriculum for mathematics is less well-embedded than other areas of learning. Staff do not consistently find ways to extend children's early mathematical learning through everyday language linked to number, volume or weight. In addition, for older children, learning is engaging but opportunities to extend problem-solving and critical thinking are not always fully developed. For example, during story-based activities linked to the book *Stick Man*, children create their own books and confidently talk about their pictures. However, staff do not consistently use probing questions to deepen children's thinking or give them time to explore their ideas.
15. The curriculum supports children's physical development well. Children have daily access to outdoor learning, including physical play that develops strength, balance and co-ordination. Babies learn to move in different ways through well-planned activities such as see-saws, block play and sensory exploration. Toddlers develop their gross motor skills by riding wheeled toys and engaging in active play. Older children access rich outdoor provision, including obstacle courses, balancing on beams, painting on large surfaces and taking part in treasure hunts. These experiences support strength, co-ordination, confidence and positive attitudes to physical activity.

Achievement

16. The grading for achievement is at the expected standard.
17. Children make sustained progress from their starting points across all seven areas of learning. Children benefit from a curriculum that is responsive to their interests and developmental stages. The curriculum and teaching support children to develop secure foundations in communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development, which underpin later learning and school readiness.
18. Babies strengthen their balance and co-ordination as they crawl, pull themselves up using low-level equipment and explore blocks through stacking and knocking them down. Toddlers build confidence and independence. They listen to familiar stories and songs, showing growing attention and enjoyment, and begin to respond to questions and join in with repeated phrases. Physical skills develop well as toddlers confidently ride wheeled bikes, demonstrating spatial awareness and care for others. They practise fine motor skills appropriately through mark making, cutting and handling tools. Older children use language increasingly confidently to explain ideas, recall learning and engage in purposeful play.
19. Children who face barriers to learning, including disadvantaged children, those who have SEND, those known (or previously known) to children's social care and those with additional needs, are supported effectively and make particularly positive progress from their starting points. Children who have previously found it difficult to join in play with others become increasingly confident in group activities, listen carefully, follow instructions and build positive relationships.

Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines

20. The grading for behaviour, is at the strong standard.
21. Leaders have established a harmonious, respectful and inclusive culture in which children manage their own feelings and behaviour with increasing confidence and independence. Staff consistently enable children's best possible behaviour through clear and consistently high expectations and calm routines. Staff enable children to develop their social skills in a highly effective way. Staff explicitly teach children to identify their own feelings and to consider the needs of others. This results in a calm, purposeful environment, where children show consideration towards each other and respond promptly to requests from staff.
22. Staff explicitly teach children the skills they need to focus on and engage well in their learning. For example, during story sessions, young children listen attentively, remain settled and respond positively to questions and discussion. They co-operate well during group activities, take turns and show pride in their participation and collaboration.
23. Staff explicitly teach children how to understand, express and regulate emotions. Core texts are used effectively to develop children's emotional literacy. Children confidently name their feelings and are supported very well to talk about emotions in age-appropriate ways. Each room provides dedicated, cosy self-regulation spaces where children can withdraw, reflect and regain calm whenever this may be needed. When children experience emotional upset, staff respond calmly and

consistently, sitting alongside them, modelling breathing techniques and offering reassurance through comfort, familiar toys or quiet spaces.

24. Routines are very well established and consistently reinforced across the setting. Visual timetables help children understand what will happen next and reduce uncertainty during transitions. Children move calmly between activities, tidy away resources independently and with care, and follow daily expectations with confidence. Babies and toddlers benefit from predictable routines that promote their emotional security, while older children demonstrate increasing independence and self-control throughout the day.
25. Leaders take decisive, evidence-led action to identify and address barriers to attendance. Settling-in arrangements are flexible and responsive, supporting children and families to establish positive routines from the outset. Leaders work closely with families, including those of children who have SEND, those who speak EAL or children who face barriers to their learning, to promote regular attendance and ensure routines are embedded in preparation for the next stage of learning, including school. This consistent approach helps children feel safe, valued and respected. Children show confidence, resilience and consistently positive attitudes to their learning, and build positive relationships with adults and with children.

Children's welfare and wellbeing

26. The grading for children's welfare and wellbeing is at the expected standard.
27. Care practices meet children's individual needs well, and daily routines support children's health, comfort and wellbeing. Sleeping, weaning and feeding routines are planned carefully and tailored to children's ages, stages and individual requirements. Arrangements for health, hygiene, food and allergies are well-organised and implemented effectively. Potty training and nappy-changing are carried out sensitively, with staff respecting children's privacy. Visual prompts, such as pictorial guides in toilets, support children to wash and dry their hands independently. Staff teach children the skills they need to be able to carry out age-appropriate tasks for themselves. Children learn to tidy away resources and put on their own aprons before they take part in messy play or activities.
28. Children's physical health is promoted well. Children take part in a range of physical activities, including climbing, balancing, obstacle courses and wheeled play. These experiences support the development of strength, co-ordination and confidence. Staff supervise children and support them to manage risk in age-appropriate ways. Staff use mealtimes effectively to teach manners and explore with children the benefits of following a healthy diet.
29. Babies are cared for safely and form trusting bonds with their key person, who provides consistent, attentive care and responds sensitively to babies' cues and routines. The key person system is used effectively across the setting. Staff know children well and respond appropriately to their emotional needs. Children are supported to recognise and manage emotions. Staff help children to talk about feelings through discussion, modelling and the use of stories. Simple breathing strategies are used to help children calm themselves and reflect, helping children to feel reassured and return to their learning and play.
30. Children develop secure attachments and a sense of belonging. Their key person supports each child during settling-in, transitions and daily routines, and maintains regular communication with families,

which supports children's emotional security well. Staff focus consistently on building trusting bonds with babies. Staff successfully help children feel confident about future changes, including preparing children to move on to school, which further supports their emotional wellbeing.

31. Staff support children to understand boundaries and personal safety during play and daily routines. Children are helped to manage risk in age-appropriate ways. For example, during activities in the woodland area, staff carefully teach and support children to use real tools. Staff provide clear instructions, model safe handling, supervise closely and ensure children understand how to position their hands and bodies safely. Staff also help children develop their awareness of online safety in age-appropriate ways.

Leadership and governance

32. The grading for leadership and governance is at the expected standard.
33. Leaders, including those with responsibility for governance, demonstrate a secure understanding of the setting's context, strengths and areas for development. Leaders are ambitious for children's learning and development and are committed to providing education and care that supports all children to thrive. Where aspects of practice require strengthening, leaders identify these accurately and take suitable action to maintain the expected high standards of education, care and safeguarding.
34. Leaders ensure that safeguarding arrangements are effective and embedded in daily practice. Systems for staff induction, supervision and oversight support consistent expectations and accountability. Policies and procedures are well understood by staff and implemented appropriately. This contributes to a safe and inclusive environment. Leaders promote a positive culture in which staff feel valued and supported and are clear about their responsibilities.
35. Staff are suitably equipped to carry out their roles confidently to care for and safeguard babies and children through an effective programme of training and support. Recent training has been less focused on developing practice in teaching and the curriculum.
36. Leaders take appropriate steps to ensure that staff workload is manageable and that the wellbeing of staff is considered in leaders' decision-making. Staff feel supported and are able to raise concerns or seek guidance from leaders when needed.
37. Leaders and staff engage positively with parents and external professionals. Communication with families is effective, particularly during transitions into the setting. Partnership working contributes positively to children's wellbeing and development.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- strengthen the quality of the teaching of mathematics, particularly for babies and younger children
- enable older children to practise their critical thinking by ensuring that staff consistently give children time to think and respond
- ensure that staff receive the training and guidance they need to strengthen teaching quality and improve consistency in high-quality practice.

Registered setting details

Registered setting name	Sancton Wood Nursery School
Unique reference number	110921
Address	Sancton Wood Nursery School 17 Station Road Cambridge Cambridgeshire CB1 2JB
Phone number	01223 471703
Email address	richard.settle@sanctonwood.co.uk
Website	www.sanctonwood.co.uk
Proprietor	Dukes Education
Nominated individual	Catherine Robertson
Age range of children at the time of the inspection	1 to 4
Total number of places	52
Number of children on roll	51
Date of previous inspection of the registered setting	15 October 2024

Information about the setting

38. Sancton Wood Nursery School registered in 2016. The registered setting operates from Sancton Wood Nursery which is located on a site near to Sancton Wood School in Cambridge. The nursery opens all year round. Sessions are from 8am until 6pm. The nursery offers government funded places.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

27 to 29 January 2026

39. One inspector visited the registered setting for two half days.

40. Inspection activities included:

- shared observation of learning in collaboration with setting leaders
- discussions with the school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with parents
- discussions with children
- observations of children's routines, including eating, sleeping and transition times
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the setting.

41. The inspection team considered the views of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are Ofsted registered early years settings in association independent schools in England inspected?

- Ofsted is the regulator for early years registered settings England.
- ISI is commissioned by the Ofsted to inspect Ofsted registered early years settings in independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
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Independent Schools Inspectorate

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