

James Marks Academy

Address: The Commons, Welwyn Garden City, AL7 4RZ

Unique reference number (URN): 149736

Inspection report: 9 June 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 academically, socially and emotionally from their different starting points. Their achievement extends far beyond their academic studies. Many join the school with significant gaps in their learning due to previous disruption to their education. Pupils build confidence in their ability to succeed. Thoughtfully tailored support networks mean that they join in lessons. They connect with learning and interact positively with others. Younger pupils progress well through the curriculum, including in English, mathematics and science. Achievements are celebrated through weekly awards recognising pupils' successes. In key stage 4, the school's first cohort of Year 10 pupils produce high-quality work towards GCSE qualifications. Post-16 students achieve well in their A-level studies. They overcome barriers to learning. Consequently, they gain a range of qualifications and life skills before they leave. Leaders and staff ensure that pupils are prepared carefully for the next stage in education and adulthood.

Attendance and behaviour

Strong standard ●

Most pupils enjoy school, so they want to attend. Many improve their attendance significantly during their time at the school. Those who join with a history of persistently low attendance are supported successfully to improve. Leaders track attendance information closely. Working closely with families, their carefully targeted interventions remove individual barriers to attendance.

Pupils settle into the school's nurturing culture quickly. They gain confidence and build self-esteem. Pupils know how they are expected to behave and respond very well. Their attitudes to learning improve substantially as a result. The school environment is calm and caring. Clear and well-established routines underpin the successful promotion of pupils' highly positive behaviour. Pupils feel safe and trust staff to look out for them. They know that support is prompt if they are worried.

Highly positive, respectful relationships are at the heart of the considerable improvements in many pupils' behaviour. The school's values of aspiration, respect, community and integrity are modelled consistently in daily school life. Staff offer well-focused, highly successful and precisely targeted behavioural support when pupils need it. Pupils learn to manage their feelings and make positive choices. They interact socially with others and participate well in lessons. Unkindness and bullying are not tolerated.

Curriculum and teaching

Strong standard ●

Many pupils join the school with poor mental health and low self-esteem. All have diagnosed special educational needs and/or disabilities, including autism. They thrive because of the ambitious curriculum, high expectations and well-crafted support. At key stage 4, pupils work towards at least 6 GCSE subjects, including English, mathematics and science. They progress well across year groups. Those who join the school with significant gaps in their learning are supported to catch up. In the sixth form, students settle quickly and successfully into A-level studies.

Most pupils arrive with age-appropriate reading skills. Help is on hand if they need to improve. They experience an increasingly diverse range of literature in English. The focus on pupils reading a greater range of texts is developing in other subjects. Teachers are experts in their subjects. Carefully targeted training keeps them up to date. They know their pupils extremely well. Skilful teaching and thoughtful adaptations address pupils' individual needs successfully. This includes, for example, through the use of technology or graphic novels when needed. Whole-school approaches ensure that pupils' changing needs are shared and acted on quickly. Teachers check pupils' understanding regularly. They correct misconceptions quickly. Inclusive practice means that barriers continue to reduce. Pupils are very well prepared for their next steps in education.

Inclusion

Strong standard ●

The school's highly inclusive culture is deeply embedded. Pupils thrive despite many having negative experiences of education previously. They settle into school quickly. This means they enjoy the broad range of academic and wider school experiences on offer. Pupils' individual needs are well known. These needs are identified promptly when pupils join the school. Skilful staff address the complex and often multiple needs sensitively and successfully. Support includes comprehensive arrangements to manage pupils' anxieties. The well-trained team gives careful attention to individual pupils' mental health and wellbeing needs. The school counsellor provides access to daily support for pupils on site. Staff thoughtfully adapt their provision to best fit the changing needs of individual pupils. End-of-day debriefing sessions make sure their information is up to date.

The school works closely with pupils and parents and carers to plan the interventions needed. External professional support enhances these arrangements when required. As a result, barriers to learning reduce. Pupils, including those in the sixth form, build trusting relationships with school staff and their peers. They achieve highly from their different starting points, personally, socially and academically. Pupils are well prepared for their next steps in education.

The school uses additional funding effectively. Staff identify any barriers to participation and remove them quickly. Well-implemented support means that disadvantaged pupils achieve well alongside their peers, including pupils known or previously known to children's social care.

Leadership and governance

Strong standard ●

Leaders and trustees are highly ambitious for all pupils to succeed. This ambition is reflected in the well-designed and very well-implemented curriculum. Leaders act promptly when improvements are needed. They continue to extend the range of opportunities offered. Staff are proud to work at the school. Their absolute commitment to pupils' achievement underpins pupils' success in all aspects of learning. Close working relationships are integral to the open, transparent school culture. Consequently, leaders and staff know pupils well. The school's community spirit is valued and respected.

Leaders give thoughtful attention to staff's workload and wellbeing. Staff appreciate leaders' visibility in daily school life and their 'open door' policy. Early career teachers are very well supported. Alongside other staff, they benefit from relevant and regular specialist training.

This enhances the skilful support for pupils' autism and mental health needs. Leaders ensure that subject teachers keep up to date, including through examination board training.

Trust board members share a wide range of skills and experience. They offer appropriate challenge and support to leaders. This means that leaders are clear about what they need to do next, so the school continues to improve. The school's culture of safeguarding is well embedded. Trustees, leaders and staff are well trained to keep pupils safe. Parents are highly positive about the school's work. Many speak warmly about the considerable difference the school makes to their children's and family's lives. They appreciate the positive learning environment in which pupils thrive and achieve their potential.

Personal development and wellbeing

Strong standard ●

Pupils feel safe, valued and very well supported in the school's highly positive and inclusive culture. They speak effusively about the difference the school makes to their lives personally, socially and academically. The thoughtfully planned personal development programme ensures that pupils learn how to keep safe in different situations. They develop positive social interactions and respectful relationships. Their self-esteem and confidence increase significantly because of the carefully crafted support for their wellbeing. A deep and shared sense of belonging underpins the school's community spirit. Pupils benefit from activities tailored to their needs and interests, such as in the 'pilot school' experiencing flight simulation, on circuit training or enjoying nature walks in mixed-age groups with their peers. The lunchtime clubs, such as 'dungeons and dragons', chess and crochet clubs, are well attended. These opportunities help to reduce anxiety, build positive social skills, encourage cooperation and develop conflict-resolution practices.

The personal, social and health education curriculum is comprehensive and well-sequenced. Individually focused refinements are well matched to pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. Over their time in the school, pupils build essential life skills through activities, such as growing vegetables in horticulture and preparing them in practical cookery. They develop their understanding of healthy eating and seasonality as a result. The curriculum builds pupils' age-appropriate awareness of important issues, such as consent and respectful relationships. They learn about respectful use of mobile phones and social media. British values, including respect for individual differences, are well taught and modelled routinely.

Pupils learn about career choices, training and education options open to them when they leave school. They are ambitious about their futures. Post-16 students are equally highly ambitious. They build their understanding with work-related learning and visits that support them to be ready for their next steps. Overall, pupils are very well prepared to move on to further studies and adulthood.

Post 16 provision

Strong standard ●

The carefully considered post-16 curriculum is consistently well taught. It is tailored skilfully to student's individual personal, social and emotional wellbeing, as well as to their academic needs. Teachers' high aspirations inspire students to learn. As a result, students thrive. They build independence, confidence and self-esteem very successfully over their time in the school.

Students' sense of belonging is highly visible in their attitudes to learning and interactions with others. They recognise and value the significant difference the school's work makes to their personal, social and academic development. Students access thoughtfully tailored support that extends way beyond their academic studies. They speak confidently about how the school has supported them to overcome anxieties and to reconnect with learning. As a result, they achieve well across the range of A-level subjects on offer. Effective careers education includes university visits, engagement with employers and support with applications for future studies.

Students benefit from wider opportunities. They support younger peers, for example, in leading clubs, such as chess club and 'dungeons and dragons'. They enjoy educational visits, including theatre performances and visits linked to their A-level studies. The school is highly successful in supporting students to move confidently to the next stage of their education and adulthood, including progression to university.

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

Pupils, who all have special educational needs and/or disabilities, flourish in the school's nurturing and highly ambitious community. Pupils trust staff because they take the time to understand each pupil's needs. Pupils know they are valued as individuals. Staff thoughtfully tailor the support they provide to pupils to make a marked difference to their confidence and resilience. As a result, pupils' anxieties reduce, so they become ready to learn. For many pupils, this is their first positive experience in a school environment.

The ambitious curriculum aligns closely with pupils' needs and interests. Pupils enjoy school. They benefit from expert teachers and respond well to teachers' consistently high expectations. From their different starting points, pupils produce high-quality work. They achieve successfully across year groups, including in Year 10 GCSE studies and at A level in the sixth form. Alongside their academic learning, pupils enjoy activities such as horticulture and nature walks. They can explain how lunchtime clubs help to build their social skills. Pupils appreciate the extensively positive interactions with staff and their peers. They speak highly of the support and the range of opportunities on offer. Classrooms are well ordered and purposeful. Pupils feel safe and well supported by the caring staff team. Bullying is not tolerated. Pupils are proud of their school, so they want to attend. Pupils who find it harder to come to school get the help they need to continue to improve their attendance.

Pupils learn key skills about future employment through work experience and well-planned interactions with employers. They build their understanding of the range of opportunities open to them, including apprenticeships. Visits to careers fairs and other education providers enhance their learning. Pupils become increasingly confident, independent and responsive to opportunities to learn in different situations. They are very well prepared to take the next steps in education, including to progress to university.

Next steps

- Leaders and those responsible for governance should sustain the effectiveness of their work as they continue to refine and address their identified priorities for improvement, including to promote reading more widely across subjects beyond English, in order to secure a consistently transformational impact for all pupils.
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About this inspection

The headteacher is Scott Martin. The school is part of the James Marks Academy Trust, which means other people in the trust also have responsibility for running the school. The trust is run by the chief executive officer (CEO), Trevor Orchard, who is also the executive headteacher of this school and another school in the trust. It is overseen by a board of trustees, chaired by Eugene Billeter.

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 pupils, leaders and staff, the CEO, the chair of the board of trustees and other trust leaders 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.

The school does not use any alternative providers.

The school opened in temporary accommodation in September 2023, moving to its permanent site in 2024.

There are no pupils currently in Year 11 and Year 12.

The school's post-16 provision will be paused at the end of the current academic year and restart in September 2027.

Headteacher: Scott Martin

Lead inspector:

Christine Dick, Ofsted Inspector

Team inspector:

Susan Pryor, 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 9 June 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

51

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.

School capacity

60

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.

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

24.39%

What does this mean?

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years.

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

98.04%

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.

Pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support

1.96%

What does this mean?

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

Location deprivation

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).

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
2024/25 (3 term)	24.3%
2023/24 (3 term)	32.0%

Persistent absence

The percentage of pupils missing 10% or more of their possible mornings and afternoons.

Year	This school
2024/25 (3 term)	65.1%
2023/24 (3 term)	68.4%

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.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for children and learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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