

The Astley Cooper School

Address: St Agnell's Lane, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, HP2 7HL

Unique reference number (URN): 117552

Inspection report: 28 April 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

Inclusion

Expected standard

Provision for vulnerable pupils is thoughtfully planned and well led. Leaders demonstrate a clear understanding of the school's context. There are secure systems in place to identify pupils quickly, track their progress and respond to emerging concerns. Relationships are positive, and pupils speak highly about the support they receive.

Leaders use funding for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds effectively. This helps tackle any financial and academic barriers. By focusing on attendance, wellbeing and academic progress, leaders have strengthened support systems and improved some pupils' attendance.

Regular staff training ensures that more pupils can access their learning. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities benefit from a range of effective support. This includes access to laptops, one-to-one help and pastoral provision. The school works successfully with other professionals. This shows effective partnerships and a commitment to pupils in care. Leaders demonstrate a clear moral purpose. They focus on fairness and support this group well. Alternative provision is arranged to meet pupils' needs and support their engagement in learning.

The Pathway Centre and other programmes provide effective assistance for pupils needing extra help with behaviour and engagement. Staff successfully support pupils who face daily challenges. Leaders have invested in further training for staff so that pupils get the best possible guidance.

Post 16 provision

Expected standard

Leaders have deliberately designed a small and highly inclusive post-16 provision that reflects the needs of the local community. They ensure that students with special educational needs and/or disabilities can continue their education in a familiar, supportive environment. This clear strategic intent enables strong relationships, high levels of pastoral care and high retention rates.

Outcomes reflect students' starting points and needs. Consequently, results in some areas are in line with national expectations. Many progress well from low starting points. While some results are more varied, this reflects the broad range of starting points. While strengths are evident, a lack of consistency in teaching quality and curriculum implementation means some students do not achieve all that they could.

Preparation for next steps is a clear focus of the provision. There is a structured personal development offer and careers programmes. As a result, students feel confident, are generally on track to meet their targets and are well prepared for their next steps. Successful destinations are sustained, demonstrating the effectiveness of the provision.

Students benefit from opportunities for leadership and wider contribution within the school. Some examples include supporting as reading leads and officiating matches for younger

pupils. The small size of the provision supports participation and ensures that students can access a range of enrichment opportunities suited to their needs.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention 

Outcomes for pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, remain below the national averages across key measures. While targeted interventions, especially in literacy, are carefully designed, these improvements are not yet consistently embedded. High mobility and disrupted learning due to absence and suspensions continue to hinder some pupils' mastery of the basic foundational knowledge in reading, writing and mathematics.

Achievement across different subjects reflects the complex context of the school. Leaders place an emphasis on inclusion, ensuring that all pupils regardless of starting point or background can access the curriculum.

Many pupils make progress from low starting points. Leaders use assessment information effectively to identify needs and implement targeted support. However, progress is uneven and still below national figures. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils are particularly impacted. Persistent absence reduces their access to the curriculum and slows their progress over time.

Despite these challenges, almost all pupils move on to appropriate destinations. This reflects the school's focus on supporting pupils to access suitable pathways that match their needs and aspirations.

Attendance and behaviour

Needs attention 

Attendance remains a key focus for development. Leaders demonstrate an increasing focus on the strategic approach to managing attendance and behaviour. There are clear systems for monitoring and targeted pastoral support. These processes have improved overall attendance and reduced persistent absence from historically high levels. However, attendance rates for disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities are still significantly below national averages. This low attendance limits their access to learning and shows that barriers for vulnerable groups still exist. Leaders are beginning to address underlying causes, including truancy and repeat absence. These early efforts are beginning to show a positive impact.

Behaviour across the school is calm and generally positive. Staff have established purposeful classrooms with clear routines. These help pupils to engage in learning with minimal disruption. Leaders have strengthened behaviour systems. They have introduced a taught behaviour curriculum and focused on restorative approaches. Pupils report that bullying occurs, but this is usually handled well. However, some note that follow-up can be inconsistent. Staff are generally effective in addressing any incidents of discrimination,

harassment or poor conduct. Pupils generally behave well during unstructured time, although some low level incidents do still occur.

Curriculum and teaching

Needs attention 

While the curriculum intent is appropriate, its implementation, and therefore its impact, are not yet consistently high enough. Consequently, pupils are not securing improved academic outcomes by the end of key stage 4.

Leaders show a clear and growing understanding of the challenges facing the school. Leaders are focusing on removing pupils' barriers to learning, especially in literacy. Targeted interventions, especially in reading, are beginning to have a positive impact.

Teachers frequently check pupils' work and, as a result, provide extra help for those that need it. However, sometimes, teachers do not use this information well enough to spot pupils' gaps or misunderstandings. Consequently, sometimes, teachers miss opportunities to support pupils and adapt learning during lessons. In addition, disruptions caused by staffing instability, pupil mobility and inconsistent attendance have affected continuity in learning. As a result, teaching has not always secured the necessary progress across different cohorts. Leaders are working to improve consistency and effectiveness. However, these improvements are still at an early stage and not yet embedded across the school.

High proportions of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are prioritised in day-to-day provision. Targeted support, including the use of additional funding, ensures that pupils access suitable pathways.

Leadership and governance

Needs attention 

Leaders demonstrate a clear moral purpose, placing pupils' best interests at the centre of decision-making. They have high aspirations for all. Leaders have an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and priorities and have taken appropriate action to address key areas such as attendance and behaviour.

However, while leadership is moving in a positive direction, the impact of improvement work is not yet consistently embedded across the school. Variability in practice remains too high, reflecting inconsistencies in the implementation and sustainability of strategies. Several initiatives, including sharing effective classroom practice, are at an early stage and have not yet secured consistent impact. Although systems for curriculum, assessment and intervention are in place, their effectiveness is uneven.

Governance has recently strengthened, with greater strategic focus. Governors are increasingly well placed to support and challenge school leaders. While improvements are evident, continued development is required to ensure that governance consistently contributes to raising standards.

Staff benefit from a supportive and collaborative working environment, underpinned by a clear focus on wellbeing. Systems for induction and ongoing support help staff to manage workload effectively and feel valued within the school community. The majority of staff report feeling well supported.

Staff are provided with ongoing professional development opportunities. Leaders are creating a culture of continuous improvement, where staff are encouraged to develop their practice. Despite these efforts, variability in classroom practice suggests that professional learning is not yet consistently embedded or translated into sustained improvement. Leaders are proactive in fostering relationships with families and the wider community, supporting improved engagement.

Personal development and wellbeing

Needs attention 

Work to understand the impact of the curriculum is at an early stage. It is not sufficiently embedded to secure consistent outcomes. This is particularly evident in areas such as fundamental British values and protected characteristics. In these areas, pupils' recall is weaker than in other topics, such as healthy relationships.

Leaders have established a coherent and well-sequenced strategy for personal development and wellbeing. This is underpinned by a clearly designed personal, social and health education curriculum. Provision is inclusive, with leaders ensuring that pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) access the full offer.

Pupils learn about relationships, safeguarding and health in an age-appropriate way. They are taught about online and offline risks to their wellbeing. Although most pupils demonstrate respectful attitudes, some derogatory language remains. This indicates that the impact of the programme in promoting equality and respect is not yet fully realised. Leaders are taking steps to address this.

Enrichment opportunities are broad and increasingly inclusive. Staff provide targeted support for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. This includes adapted work placements and experiences in sporting and enrichment activities. These approaches help remove barriers and promote equality of access. As a result, participation rates have risen.

The school prioritises pastoral care. Pupils describe the school as a safe and supportive environment. They feel well cared for and able to access trusted adults. Leaders have developed systems to support pupils' wellbeing and respond to their needs. These include targeted interventions and external agency support where appropriate. The school's 'pathway' provision also provides effective support for pupils who may need to reset or reflect.

The school provides a comprehensive careers programme. It prepares pupils for their next steps effectively. All pupils undertake work experience in Year 10 and Year 12. The programme includes events such as Futures Week and engagement with employers, colleges and universities.

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

Pupils feel they belong to a caring and inclusive school community. Relationships with staff are a strength. Pupils appreciate having adults who listen and support them. Inclusion is at the centre of the school's ethos. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities,

disadvantaged pupils and those with other vulnerabilities take part fully in school life and the various enrichment opportunities. These opportunities help develop pupils' confidence and self-esteem.

Pupils' experience of learning is mixed. Sometimes, teachers do not use their checks on pupils' learning well enough to adapt their future lessons appropriately. Many pupils face barriers such as irregular attendance and additional needs. These pupils are supported through targeted interventions. Pupils speak positively about the support they receive from the 'pathway' provision in school. They benefit from a range of pastoral systems and know there is somewhere to go if they need help. Leadership responsibilities are available to all year groups. Pupils are proud of the contributions they make to their school.

Many pupils enjoy school and engage well in calm classrooms where routines are clear and support meets their needs. Targeted interventions in reading and mathematics help build confidence. Most pupils value the support they receive from trusted staff. They feel prepared for their next steps, reflected in positive destinations.

Pupils feel safe and understand how to keep themselves safe, including online. Behaviour is typically settled. Most pupils respond well to clear expectations and routines. Improvements in behaviour systems have reduced low-level disruption. A small minority of pupils report variability in how issues such as bullying or derogatory language are addressed. Leaders are aware and taking appropriate action. Attendance, while improving, is still a significant barrier for some. As a result, not all pupils are able to benefit fully or consistently from the school's provision.

Next steps

- Leaders should ensure that all pupils secure the foundational knowledge needed to access the curriculum confidently.
- Leaders should ensure that teachers use assessment effectively to identify gaps in pupils' knowledge or understanding so they can apply the most appropriate adaptations in their lessons.
- Leaders should continue to improve standards in behaviour and rates of attendance across all groups of pupils.
- Leaders should ensure that all pupils have a secure understanding of fundamental British values and protected characteristics.
- Leaders and governors should ensure that their monitoring and quality assurance are rigorous and precise across all areas of the school's work.

About this inspection

The co-chairs of the board of governors are Jason Lee and Anne James.

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 members of the school's leadership, the governors including the co-chair, and the local authority 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 inspectors confirmed the following information about the school:

The school makes use of one registered alternative provision and 13 that are unregistered.

Headteacher: Sam Orsborne

Lead inspector:

Louise Cooper, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

Caren Earp, Ofsted Inspector

Steve Woodley, His Majesty's Inspector

Wayne Jarvis, Ofsted Inspector

Jane Bennett, His Majesty's 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 28 April 2026

School and pupil context

Total pupils

947

Close to 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

1,055

Close to 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: 1,154

Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)

36.77%

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

3.80%

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

25.03%

Well 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

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 (final)	26.7%	45.4%	Below
2023/24 (final)	33.3%	45.9%	Below
2022/23 (final)	25.2%	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 (final)	34.7	46.1	Below

Year	This school	National average	Compared with national average
2023/24 (final)	37.2	45.9	Below
2022/23 (final)	35.7	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)	-0.60	-0.03	Below
2022/23 (final)	-0.82	-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 (final)	15.1%	25.8%	Below
2023/24 (final)	18.5%	25.8%	Close to average
2022/23 (final)	23.4%	25.2%	Close to average

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 (final)	25.2	34.9	Below
2023/24 (final)	26.8	34.6	Below
2022/23 (final)	28.2	35.0	Below

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)	-1.05	-0.57	Below
2022/23 (final)	-1.09	-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 (final)	15.1%	53.1%	-38.0 pp
2023/24 (final)	18.5%	53.1%	-34.6 pp
2022/23 (final)	23.4%	52.4%	-29.0 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 (final)	25.2	50.4	-25.2
2023/24 (final)	26.8	50.0	-23.3
2022/23 (final)	28.2	50.3	-22.1

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)	-1.05	0.16	-1.21
2022/23 (final)	-1.09	0.17	-1.25

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 (revised)	87%	92%	Average
2022 leavers (revised)	94%	93%	Average
2021 leavers (revised)	94%	94%	Average

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 (final)	24.66	35.00	Below
2023/24 (final)	23.56	34.38	Below
2022/23 (final)	17.31	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 (final)	-0.2	0.0	Below
2023/24 (revised)	-0.2	0.0	Close to average

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 (3 term)	13.7%	8.4%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	12.7%	8.9%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	12.7%	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 (3 term)	39.2%	23.4%	Above
2023/24 (3 term)	37.9%	25.6%	Above
2022/23 (3 term)	38.2%	26.5%	Above

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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