

Summerhill School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	David Welch
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Summerhill is an independent school with an alternative stance to children's education, described as 'democratic and self-governing'. It provides boarding and day facilities for pupils between the ages of about five and 17 years. The school is situated in the small market town of Leiston and is within walking distance of the town centre. The site extends to about 12 acres and consists of a main house and a number of permanent outbuildings, which include classrooms and workshops and most of the staff living quarters during term time. The school has a playing field, a camping area, a small wood, a garden area and there is an outdoor swimming pool. The boarding accommodation is in five areas, separated by age and/or gender, each with a designated houseparent. At the time of the inspection, there were four day pupils and 66 boarders on the school's roll. The school's policy is to resist admitting any child after 12 years old. Similarly, the school would rather not admit 'weekly boarders'. The school makes no guardian arrangements and no lodgings are arranged. Neither does the school take responsibility for organising holiday language courses or trips, for example outdoor pursuits or skiing abroad. The Head confirmed that every child goes home during the longer holidays. The school does not close during half term breaks. Founded by A.S.Neill, Summerhill strongly adheres to the principle that children should be given the opportunity to decide for themselves how to spend their time at the school. The school's general policy statement identifies five key principles underlying the philosophy of the school: * To provide choices and opportunities that allow children to develop at their own pace and to follow their own interests * To allow children to be free from compulsory or imposed assessment, allowing them to develop their own goals and sense of achievement * To allow children to be completely free to play as much as they like * To allow children to experience the full range of feelings free from the judgement and intervention of an adult * To allow children to live in a community that supports them and that they are responsible for; in which they have the freedom to be themselves, and have the power to change community life, through the democratic process. The daily life of the school is governed by the school meetings, held three times a week, in which everybody has an equal vote. The school meetings are used to create, confirm and amend all of the school 'laws', which form the structure of expectations the community has of itself, including all members of the school, regardless of age or position. Approximately two thirds of pupils, mainly from the Netherlands, Germany and South East Asia, speak English as an additional language. The Head and, from time to time other staff and children go out from the school to speak to and work with other children and adults and to promote democratic education.

Summary

This inspection took place within the prescribed 36-month timescale and, as such, all of the key National Minimum Standards were looked at, together with a number of others. The inspector considered the extent to which the school is promoting and safeguarding the welfare of the pupils attending. He used the five outcome areas of Every Child Matters, plus Organisation, as a template for doing so. The Head had prior notice that the inspection would take place, as there were numerous arrangements to make, including surveying all boarders, their parents and the staff for their feelings about the school. However, the Head was not aware until a couple of days beforehand of the actual date the inspection would start. Survey forms were completed and returned by 52 boarders, by 30 of their parents and by 10 staff working at the school. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The pupils like the school, and the parents and staff passionately support the principles on which the operation of the school

is based. During an interview with the Head, the 11 recommendations previously made by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), that followed the 2004 inspection, were discussed. Those relating to amendments to the complaints procedure, risk assessing access by pupils to the internet and for trips off site, training in food hygiene and Health and Safety and recruitment checks are generally now met. The school has still to fully meet the recommendations to obtain written permission from all parents for the administration of first-aid and other medical interventions or to complete installation of suitable locks on all outside doors, although a pilot scheme has identified the most successful one and these will be fitted shortly on all external doors. The inspector rated both Being Healthy and Staying Safe as at least satisfactory. The other four outcome areas are either 'outstanding' or 'good'. While Being Healthy and Staying Safe are both very important to the welfare of boarders, and each has attracted a number of recommendations, the outcomes for those children living at Summerhill are extremely good in all respects and it is for this reason that the overall rating across all six areas is felt to be good and not just satisfactory.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

A new fire escape has been fitted. The lounge has been painted with fire retardant paint. Push bars have been fitted on external doors and fire doors have been upgraded, both to improve safety and security. The school has purchased some new sports and gym equipment and built new climbing facilities. Staff first aid training has been updated. The school Meeting has restricted the amount of 'junk' food available in school tuck shops. There has been a pilot scheme to find suitable locks for external doors. The library has been improved for the older children and more books have been added to all library areas. The Carriage kids have reopened their own kitchen and equipped it from community funds. The school has improved its parent complaint procedure forms. Various risk assessments have been updated. The Staff Handbook has been updated.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

National Minimum Standards 6, 15, 16, 17, 24, 25 and 48 were considered at this inspection. The school promotes boarders' health well. Summerhill has a pragmatic approach, shared with parents in a 'Parent's Handbook', to pupils smoking. This applies to older pupils and only when they are outside. The inspector saw no pupil smoking during the three-day inspection. There are school 'laws' about drinking alcohol and using drugs, which protect pupils. Staff ensure that pupils receive first-aid and health care as required. The pupils confirmed this during discussion groups and in the survey. A previous recommendation that written permission from parents is kept on file for the administration of first-aid and other medical interventions has not been met in every respect. While records are kept of the administration of regular, prescribed medicines, in one case this was not being recorded every day. Staff do keep an Accident Book, where details of any incidents are recorded. However, the system used is not in line with Date Protection principles and neither are staff aware of the requirement, in certain circumstances, to notify the Health and Safety Executive under RIDDOR. Boarders are adequately looked after in The Lodge when they are ill. Staff make regular supervision and 'comfort' visits, including at night, so that boarders who are unwell are cared for and not isolated. This is a very supportive environment and boarders are helped by the community's members when they have health or

personal problems that might include homesickness or, for the youngest pupils, bed-wetting. While the catering staff have not made conspicuous efforts to display encouraging posters about eating a healthy diet, and the 'New Kids Handbook' produced by the school, does indicate that pupils can eat what they like and nobody will mind, the choices on offer do include healthy options. The meal choice has fresh vegetables and fruit always available, which is important for the good health of children. The meals are nutritious and appetising and take account of special diets. In the survey, completed and returned by nearly 80% of boarders, pupils were extremely positive about the food provided and many confirmed that they 'always' or 'usually' had a balanced diet. The staff involved in the handling of food have suitable training. A number of the pupils also help, at times, to prepare and handle food, but are not food handling and food hygiene trained. The boarders have access to snack items in addition to main meals, which most older children can prepare themselves or which a house parent will prepare for the younger children so they do not go hungry. No child complained about not having enough to eat.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

National Minimum Standards 2, 3, 4, 5, 26, 37, 38, 39, 41 and 47 were considered at this inspection. Bullying is certainly not an issue at Summerhill, evidenced by what pupils say about this matter. The weekly Meetings play an important part in dealing openly and transparently with any incidents of harassment, which protects pupils well, in that potential bullies are not able to operate. Boarders are protected from abuse by the school's approach to safeguarding. Staff are trained in child protection and are aware of how to respond if a pupil makes a disclosure. In the same way that the weekly meetings serve to protect boarders from bullying, they provide a suitable forum in which any child can bring before the community any matter with which he or she is uncomfortable. During the inspection, the inspector was informed of a current child protection matter, but this did not involve a boarder. The school had informed all necessary parties so that the matter could be taken forward, but could have done so slightly earlier. As HMI were on site at the time they dealt with this issue. Summerhill describes itself as 'a democratic community' and as such deals in an open and considered way with any matter that individuals feel is an affront to them personally, to others or which breaks the community's 'laws'. It is a powerful and effective method of behaviour management, with members of the community, whether adult or child, subject to the scrutiny of the group. The community is fair when dealing with 'law' breakers, no grudges are born and group members, younger and older, demonstrate much understanding and real wisdom when considering what action to take over misdemeanours. The school has a complaints procedure, but community members do bring matters that are troubling them to the meetings where they receive a thoughtful and appropriate hearing. However, parents do have to buy into the school's approach, which means that staff might ask them to speak to their children, rather than themselves, about some matters that in other schools might be dealt with between parents and the teaching staff concerned. Boarders and staff are protected from the risk of fire through their awareness of evacuation procedures. They practice them at regular intervals. The in-depth fire risk assessment audit that took place earlier this year also gave the proprietors clear insight into what had to be done to achieve greater protection for the community's members. However, there are not sufficient fire practices at times when children are in bed, say later at night or early in the morning and neither do they practice often enough using the actual evacuation route they would use in a real emergency. The school's administrator makes good efforts to ensure that recruitment checks are robust enough to provide a vigorous selection process for new applicants. However, not in every case is there a full employment history and not every member of staff has a current CRB disclosure.

The school has not in all cases made contact with previous employers where the work has involved children or vulnerable adults to verify the reason for leaving. The arrangements are generally good to protect pupils from any adult coming on to the site with the expectation that visitors will report to the school office and wear a badge. The Head was not aware if the drivers employed by the local taxi firm used by the school have been CRB checked. Boarders do have their own accommodation that is protected against intrusion, with the community having 'laws' relating to members being in each other's space. The pilot scheme to identify suitable locks for external doors, which is a previous recommendation, has been successful. This means that, with their installation planned to take place shortly, pupils' safety will be further enhanced. Pupils are protected from safety hazards by the provision of risk assessments, including for trips and outings off site.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

National Minimum Standards 11, 14, 18, 27 and 46 were considered at this inspection. Boarders do have a range and choice of activities, which enable them to enjoy different experiences. They have sufficient free time during the day in which to pursue their own inclinations, hobbies and pastimes. Staff encourage and assist pupils to follow their own choices. Boarders receive lots of personal support from the whole community. The pupils consistently identify a wide range of people, both adults and peers, who they could turn to or speak with if they have a problem or feel unhappy. The school has identified an Independent Listener, but the person concerned has no regular contact with the school and certainly is not a familiar face to pupils such that they would be likely to contact them for advice and guidance. This is not a community that discriminates against any of its members. Pupils can be confident that everybody will be accepted and supported. The principles on which this school operate are that everybody, young or old, of whatever race or culture, male or female, are of equivalent worth, which encourages pupils to be tolerant and accepting in their attitudes. Pupils who wish to dress differently or who behave unusually are accepted and supported in a sensitive way by the community. Boarders' welfare is not compromised or adversely affected in any way by onerous demands made upon them in terms of academic, sporting, linguistic or other expectations. Pupils confirmed that they make their own choices about how they spend their time. This allows them to develop at their own pace and come to academic, and other pursuits when they feel ready to do so and therefore with a maturity that encourages them to make good use of their opportunities. Pupils have a range of recreational spaces around the campus that present their own challenges in terms of risk. The community has over the years developed 'laws' that have been introduced to protect members from serious injury or hurt and they are therefore in a position to learn from their experiences. Boarders have numerous places where they can be alone if they wish and they have unlimited access to dormitory areas so they can play or study, listen to music or read.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

National Minimum Standards 12, 19, 21, 30 and 36 were considered at this inspection. This community is run by its members, with each individual having a say, if they wish, in day to day decisions about what happens. 'Laws' are then made democratically with everybody's opinions given equal weight. The school has a pupil's telephone so they can keep in contact with their families. They also have access to e-mail, which is sometimes the preferred option for pupils.

In a good number of the surveys returned, the message is that pupils are often reluctant to go home at the end of term and cannot wait to get back, which says much about the positive way they feel about the school. New boarders are helped to settle in, learn the school's 'laws' and who is who and where things are. The 'buddy system' ensures that new boarders are not left to their own devices before they are happy to do so. At appropriate times during the day, boarders are allowed to go down into the town, where there is suitable and sufficient exposure to the 'outside world' and where they have access to facilities not available at school. The school 'laws' are specific about who can go into town with whom, which protects and safeguards all pupils, especially the youngest, while allowing them freedom to roam and to learn by their experiences. The school's peg system ensures that responsible people within the community know who is in school and who is out. There are sound relationships between boarders and between pupils and adults, who are also members of this community. Children learn to relate on equal terms to those older and younger than themselves. For instance, there is no stigma attached to playing with friends who may be older or younger, which again encourages the development among children of very accepting and broadly-based attitudes. The community has a very effective system for dealing with disagreements that includes, in the first instance, personal responsibility for working things out or, in some circumstances enlists the help of others identified by the community for their diplomatic qualities. Surveys returned confirm that the approach encourages the development of independence and self-reliance, tolerance of others' different outlooks and mature acceptance that the other person's views may have validity beyond one's own.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

No key standards are identified by Ofsted in this area. National Minimum Standards 20, 40, 42, 44 and 50 were considered at this inspection. National Minimum Standard 51, relating to boarders placed in lodgings, is not applicable. Boarders have cupboards where they can lock away anything that they do not want taken or broken, so their possessions can be kept safely. Everybody gets pocket money according to age and pupils learn to manage this themselves. Feedback from parents is very positive about the learning experience of managing money that their children get at Summerhill. Many small entrepreneurial projects have developed among the boarders, which teaches them the rudiments of running a business. The school provides written guidance for parents about sending in extra pocket money that ensures that boarders learn to rely on themselves rather than on parents bailing them out of financial difficulties. Boarding areas are satisfactorily lit, heated and provided for although boarders with disabilities that involve a degree of immobility would not be able to access all areas within the school. The school employs a team of domestic assistants, so living areas are cleaned regularly. Many furniture items are constructed by the pupils themselves, which endows a sense of ownership and teaches them some DIY skills. When boarding areas become so noisy that pupils themselves perceive a problem, they deal with it in the meetings and offenders are instructed to be quiet. Her Majesty's Inspectors, who were on site at the same time that this inspection took place, identified a couple of accommodation issues, namely loose carpet tiles in the entrance to the main school and cracked flooring in the corridor. Some dormitories do accommodate four or more children, but are of sufficient floor area for this not to be a problem. The Parent Handbook makes it clear that younger children do not have power points in their bedrooms so cannot bring electrical items to school. They do have computer points available elsewhere where they can run laptops and play games. Boarders do have sufficiently private washing and toilet facilities, although the degree of separation is not to the extent that other schools would

perhaps impose. Within the context of Summerhill, the children confirmed that this does not present any problem. Children have access to the nearby town at all reasonable times so can purchase personal items for themselves, if they are not available at one of the many small 'shops' run by pupils on site.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

National Minimum Standards 1, 23, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 35 were considered at this inspection. National Minimum Standard 52, relating to accommodation away from the school site used for short-term visits, is not applicable. Summerhill has a suitable statement of purpose, available to parents and others, that contains all the required information. There are also useful written notes for parents and for pupils. Up to date contact details for Ofsted were not available at the beginning of the inspection. The school took steps to remedy this situation before the visit finished so interested parties will have the necessary telephone number if they wish to contact Ofsted. Risk assessments are in place, which contribute to boarders' welfare. The Head is present at most of the community's meetings and as such can maintain a watching brief on how complaints and sanctions imposed by the gathering are managed. She has no immediate power within this forum to impose her wishes, but can contribute to the debate and offer advice and guidance to the community based on her experience. The Head is confident that if a pupil is off site, his or her absence would be noted should they fail to return. Having observed the 'peg system' in use, the inspector felt that this was a valid assumption to have. Each boarding house has a designated member of staff responsible for the children accommodated there during the day and at night. There is a formal induction programme for staff and on-going training is available. The school decided that the Boarding Schools Association training for house staff is not really appropriate for Summerhill. Child protection training is provided to ensure that all staff are aware of this important issue. Despite considering the matter, the school continues to have some difficulty in writing guidance for staff who have been suspended following an allegation. This relates to the support they can expect from the school.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that Medication Administration Records (MAR sheets) are filled in and signed on a daily basis (NMS 15)
- ensure that the Accident Book is used in line with Data Protection principles and appropriate referrals are made to the Health and Safety Executive under RIDDOR when necessary (NMS 15)

- provide food handling and food hygiene training for everybody involved in the preparation and/or handling of food for other people in the school (NMS 24)
- ensure that in every case written permission has been obtained from parents for the administration of first-aid and other medical interventions (NMS 15)
- check with the proprietor of the taxi company used by the school that an enhanced CRB disclosure has been obtained on all drivers transporting Summerhill children (NMS 38)
- ensure that on occasions boarders have a fire drill when they are in bed or early in the morning and that sometimes they leave by the actual evacuation route they might be required to use in an emergency, namely the fire escape (NMS 26)
- ensure that recruitment checks are as robust as possible by obtaining for every employee an enhanced CRB disclosure, asking them to provide a full employment history and by checking with all previous employers where the work has involved children or vulnerable adults the reason for leaving (NMS 38)
- install as quickly as possible on external doors the locks identified as most suitable for the purpose (NMS 41)
- ensure that suitable written guidance is provided in relation to the support available to any member of staff suspended pending investigation or final decisions following allegations (NMS 35)

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for boarding school

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- boarders' health is promoted (NMS 6)
- safeguarding and promoting boarders' health and welfare are supported by appropriate records (NMS 7)
- boarders' receive first aid and health care as necessary (NMS 15)
- boarders are adequately supervised and looked after when ill (NMS 16)
- boarders are supported in relation to any health or personal problems (NMS 17)
- boarders receive good quality catering provision (NMS 24)
- boarders have access to food and drinking water in addition to main meals (NMS 25)
- boarders are suitably accommodated when ill (NMS 48)
- boarders' clothing and bedding are adequately laundered (NMS 49).

Ofsted considers 6 and 15 the key standards to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- boarders are protected from bullying (NMS 2)
- boarders are protected from abuse (NMS 3)
- use of discipline with boarders is fair and appropriate (NMS 4)
- boarders' complaints are responded to appropriately (NMS 5)
- the operation of any prefect system safeguards and promotes boarders' welfare (NMS 13)
- boarders' welfare is protected in any appointment of educational guardians by the school (NMS 22)
- boarders are protected from the risk of fire (NMS 26)
- the welfare of any children other than the school's pupils is safeguarded and promoted while accommodated by the school (NMS 28)
- boarders' safety and welfare are protected during high risk activities (NMS 29)
- boarders' personal privacy is respected (NMS 37)
- there is vigorous selection and vetting of all staff and volunteers working with boarders (NMS 38)
- boarders are protected from unsupervised contact at school with adults who have not been subject to the school's complete recruitment checking procedures; all unchecked visitors to the boarding premises are supervised (NMS 39)
- boarders have their own accommodation, which is secure from public intrusion (NMS 41)
- boarders are protected from safety hazards (NMS 47)

Ofsted considers 2, 3, 4, 5, 26, 37, 38, 39, 41 and 47 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- boarders have access to a range and choice of activities (NMS 11)
- boarders do not experience inappropriate discrimination (NMS 18)
- boarders' welfare is not compromised by unusual or onerous demands (NMS 27)
- boarders have satisfactory provision to study (NMS 43)
- boarders have access to a range of safe recreational areas (NMS 46)

Ofsted considers 14 and 18 the key standards to be inspected.

Annex A

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- boarders are enabled to contribute to the operation of boarding in the school (NMS 12)
- boarders receive personal support from staff (NMS 14)
- boarders can maintain private contact with their parents and families (NMS 19)
- new boarders are introduced to the school's procedures and operation, and are enabled to settle in (NMS 21)
- boarders have appropriate access to information and facilities outside the school (NMS 30)
- there are sound relationships between staff and boarders (NMS 36)

Ofsted considers 12 and 19 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- boarders' possessions and money are protected (NMS 20)
- boarders are provided with satisfactory accommodation (NMS 40)
- boarders have satisfactory sleeping accommodation (NMS 42)
- boarders have adequate private toilet and washing facilities (NMS 44)
- boarders have satisfactory provision for changing by day (NMS 45)
- boarders can obtain personal requisites while accommodated at school (NMS 50)

Ofsted considers 51 the key standard to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- a suitable statement of the school's principles and practice should be available to parents, boarders and staff (NMS 1)
- there is clear leadership of boarding in the school (NMS 8)
- crises affecting boarders' welfare are managed effectively (NMS 9)
- the school's organisation of boarding contributes to boarders' welfare (NMS 10)
- risk assessment and school record-keeping contribute to boarders' welfare (NMS 23)
- boarders are supervised adequately by staff (NMS 31)
- staff exercise appropriate supervision of boarders leaving the school site (NMS 32)
- boarders are adequately supervised at night (NMS 33)
- boarders are looked after by staff which have specific boarding duties, and have received adequate induction and continued training (NMS 34)
- boarders are looked after by staff which follow clear boarding policies and practice (NMS 35)
- the welfare of boarders placed in lodgings is safeguarded and promoted (NMS 51)
- the welfare of boarders is safeguarded and promoted while accommodated away from the school site on short-term visits (NMS 52)

Ofsted considers 1, 23, 31 and 34 the key standards to be inspected.