

Wycombe Abbey School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Sharon Lewis
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Date of last inspection	24 February 2003

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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

Wycombe Abbey School is a full boarding school which was founded by Dame Frances Dove in 1896. This independent school caters for girls between the ages of 11 and 18. The school aims to fulfil 'the pursuit of academic excellence, the development of each individual's talents in creative, physical and social skills and the encouragement of service to God and to other people.' The school believes the boarding experience assists girls to 'maximise their potential in a myriad of ways'. The school is located within the heart of High Wycombe, the shopping centre, bus and the railway station are within walking distance. The school is easily accessible from the M40 motorway.

This was a joint inspection undertaken with the Independent Schools Inspectorate. A Boarding School Additional Inspector, Carol Evans, assisted with this inspection. At the time of this inspection there were 527 full boarders. Over two hundred girls participated in this inspection.

Summary

At this announced full inspection, all key standards were inspected. The school provides a satisfactory service with both outstanding and good features. Girls benefit from exemplary opportunities to enjoy boarding life and to achieve. The school has a robust nurturing support system and a great strength is the caring relationships between the girls. The school provides excellent catering arrangements and homely, distinct accommodation within beautiful surroundings. Equality and diversity is well managed and there is a strong ethos of enriching the lives of themselves and others. Further improvements are needed in relation to staff recruitment records, health matters, food hygiene training, consultation, responses to complaints and an awareness of the child protection reporting procedures. A recommendation has also been identified relating to reviewing some aspects of boarding.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous full boarding welfare inspection was undertaken in February 2003. A follow up visit was made in February 2006. The school had appropriately addressed all areas of recommendation and there were no outstanding actions.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The school adequately addresses health promotion through a range of systems throughout school life. The school aims to meet the holistic health needs of each girl, recognising the pressures of adolescence. Highlighting the importance of each girl's physical and emotional wellbeing. It is encouraging to see the school directly exploring issues relating to eating disorders, self harm, mental health, grief and family breakdown. The school has an evolving personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) programme. Policies, guidance and training complement this. Sex education is not taught after Year nine until Year 13. Girls feel this is a gap and would appreciate further teaching in this area. The school does not have a problem with alcohol, smoking or drug misuse. Girls and staff are aware of the school rules and subsequent disciplinary measures. The school has good arrangements to support girls with

learning needs. The Bursar closely monitors special needs provision, where necessary making physical adjustments to the building.

Girls benefit from 24 hour medical cover. The medical centre has designated sick bays, four qualified nurses and two doctors. Doctors run general practices four mornings a week. The medical centre facilitates additional health services, which include psychiatric, orthodontic and physiotherapy services. The school is in an ideal location, close to the local general hospital. This enables efficient access to x-ray and other medical treatment. The medical centre nurses are able to manage epidemics, give travel immunisations, test urine and administer insulin and other medication. Doctors maintain an integrated computerised record keeping system. Nurses additionally keep appropriate health records for each girl and securely store medication. This practice, however, was not fully evident in one of the boarding houses. For example medication needing refrigeration was being stored in the kitchen fridge and there no auditing system.

The school recognises the need to address girls' emotional health. Girls have access to a counsellor, who visits every week. The school is able to fund counselling for girls in exceptional circumstances, otherwise costs are passed on to parents. Housemistresses and Matrons are generally the first to notice issues in their pastoral roles and endeavour to manage these. The school acknowledges the importance of promptly sharing concerns within a multi-disciplinary setting.

Girls enjoy excellent catering facilities, describing the food as, 'very impressive', 'delicious' and 'amazing'. The professionally run kitchen provides a wide choice of healthy, high quality, culturally diverse cuisine. Girls have a wide degree of choice of main meals and desserts. Vegetarian options are available and there is an extensive salad bar. The cafeteria style dining arrangements enable girls to help themselves. Girls have access to an abundant amount of food and are able to have 'seconds'. Girls contribute to menu planning through the Food Council and regular consultation. Fruit and water is widely available in the boarding houses and at meal times. Year 13 girls have the opportunity to cook for themselves, receiving weekly grocery supplies. There is also the option for them to have their meals in the main dining hall. The majority of catering staff have a current food hygiene certificate and relevant training is in progress.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Girls receive adequate protection via the school's safeguarding arrangements. The school has satisfactory policies to address bullying, child protection, complaints and health and safety. Girls have assisted in developing the anti-bullying policy which is widely available in documentation and on the school intranet. Girls and staff benefit from guidance which raises their awareness. Training recognises the varying forms of this behaviour, which includes cyber bullying. Girls can express their concerns through a range of avenues. For example, through a confidential email system, post boxes, and via pastoral, teaching staff, an Independent Listener and national help lines. The school operates a 'no blame' policy and seeks to support all involved. Girls in general feel that issues are promptly dealt with. The school acknowledges the need to continually promote its duty of care, when addressing bullying. Where complex incidents arise the school seeks specialist advice.

The Senior Housemistress takes the lead on child protection issues. All teaching, pastoral and ancillary staff receive annual training and child protection forms part of their employment

induction. The promotion of personal safety is an integral part of the schools teaching. The recent electronic safety week highlights the importance of being safe whilst online. The majority of staff demonstrate a good awareness of their safeguarding responsibilities. However, Prefects and some staff members were not fully aware of the child protection reporting procedures.

The school's core values of trust, encouragement and mutual respect sets the tone for the expected standards of behaviour. Girls, parents and staff are aware of the school's fair and appropriate disciplinary measures. While rules are generally accepted girls comment that some rules are petty. Individual housemistresses take responsibility for managing unacceptable behaviour within their respective boarding houses. There is great emphasis on reasoning with girls and a limited use of sanctions. Each boarding house has a record of all sanctions, which have an ethos of reparation and promoting positive conduct. Where suspension is being considered, the school aims for a consistent, balanced and proportionate approach.

The complaints procedure is widely available and includes Ofsted's contact details. The school maintains a record of all serious complaints. Girls are able to voice their concerns in various forums. However, they feel that the most effective way for complaints to be addressed, is to refer them to their parents. The school seeks to nurture a sense of responsibility and leadership in each girl. Every girl has a role within their respective house. The school also has a popular, well-established prefect and head of house system. Girls receive an induction and ongoing training for their prefect role.

Health and safety practices promote protection of girls, staff and visitors. A specific Health and Safety Committee meets to discuss issues and an external company undertakes audits. Risk assessments form part of the school's culture and the safety of the girls is paramount. There are excellent security arrangements. A security firm monitors the entrance area and codes are needed for access throughout the school buildings. The school completes weekly fire alarm tests and regular drills. Staff training also incorporates fire safety and girls have an awareness of the procedure.

The school seeks to ensure that girls receive the necessary protection through their staff selection and vetting procedures. It is the expectation that all staff, adults living on the premises or in close proximity to the girls undertake the necessary Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks. In such cases staff have started work prior to the receipt of the CRB check. The school has taken the necessary steps to ensure they do not work unsupervised. Necessary risk assessments are in place. Examination of personnel files demonstrates that the school strives to comply with the necessary checks. The only other issue was that explanation of gaps in employment, though known were not documented.

The nature of the shared dormitories means that girls may experience a lack of privacy. No girls however expressed any concerns relating to this. Staff will knock on bedroom doors before entering. Staff sensitively manage their supervisory duties, having respect for the girls' privacy.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Girls benefit from an excellent system of personal support. The school provides extensive opportunities for girls to express any concerns. Helpline numbers and contact details are widely available in documentation and on display. Housemistresses have a clear understanding of their pastoral role. The personal tutor system functions effectively and all teachers are assigned to

a boarding house. Weekly visits to the boarding house assist with strengthening this link. Girls greatly appreciate living within boarding houses where there is a mixed age range. Older girls mentor younger girls undertaking a caring, sisterly role. There is a commendable housemother/house daughter relationship. As previously mentioned the school has an experienced, well qualified counsellor, who also operates as the Independent Listener. Girls are able to text, email or phone her at anytime. Girls' comment that 'Everyone is friendly, caring and happy to help' and 'All the pastoral staff are very kind, loving and considerate.' Girls find the Senior Housemistress extremely approachable. They can also approach their matrons, the Chaplain, other staff members, prefects and the Head of House. Regular meetings within the school structure, additionally offer key areas of support. The school acknowledges the individual challenges girls face and aims to work closely with parents.

Girls express a great appreciation of the school and the boarding experience. The school offers outstanding sporting facilities and opportunities. Girls pursue and achieve national success in a variety of areas. Facilities include a large purpose built sports centre, a floodlit astro turf pitch, five lacrosse pitches which convert into a 400 metre athletics track, 20 tennis courts, netball and rounders pitches. Girls are able to enjoy badminton, polo, judo, karate, kick boxing, trampolining, swimming, Pilates, fencing, ballet, tap and street dancing. Houses have music rooms and girls are able to learn a wide variety of instruments. There are also opportunities to join orchestras, choirs and bands, which reflect a wide selection of musical tastes. Girls can also pursue their skills in debating, drama, young enterprise, politics, cookery, textiles, art, film making and photography. Girls can additionally undertake the Duke of Edinburgh Award in child care, sign language and first aid. The vast range of activities aims to stimulate varying interests, foster confidence and promote a sense of community and achievement.

The school aims to meet the girls social and spiritual needs. The full time chaplaincy enables the provision of a short chapel service every weekday and some Sunday mornings, alternating with Evensong. Once a term each boarding house undertake a weekday service. The social calendar combines organised trips to London, Oxford and surrounding areas. Girls go bowling, cinema, into the town centre and benefit from extended exeat when they can visit their families. Girls enjoy fun relaxing activities in their respective houses, have interhouse socials and competitions and mix socially with other schools. The school has a strong charitable ethos. Girls undertake a variety of events to raise money for numerous charities and also participate in community service.

The international student base contributes to the school's effective management of equality issues. There is a celebration of diversity and staff competently demonstrate an understanding of cultural issues. Girls are able to observe their respective religions and festivals. Catholic girls receive confirmation instruction and are able to attend their own Mass. Jewish girls can also opt out of Sunday chapel and attend their own class within the school. During Ramadan the school provides prayer facilities and the opportunity to eat meals at specific times. There are no issues of discrimination based on gender, disability, race, religion, cultural or linguistic background, sexuality, academic or sporting ability. Although some girls find the academic pressures demanding, the school sensitively manages these matters.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The school has considerable consultation systems for listening to and obtaining the views of girls. Girls can contribute through the school council, prefects' meetings, head of house meetings, frequent surveys and year representative meetings. The school also provides informal opportunities through discussions at house meetings, individual discussions with staff or by email. Girls appreciate that they are able to voice their opinions. They feel, however, that their recommendations are not acted upon. Staff acknowledge the need to routinely feedback decisions, especially if unable to implement suggestions.

Girls can maintain private contact with their parents and families. Each house has landlines and payphones available. Girls have their own mobile phones, which have to be handed in overnight. Numerous internet points enable girls to email and update their blogs. Currently the school is also experimenting with the use of a web camera. The additional provision of newspapers, television and radio enables girls to keep in touch with the outside world.

New boarders benefit from a comprehensive induction process, which is attentive to their needs. Girls describe the process as 'excellent'. Girls have the opportunity to visit the school before they arrive and can express a preference about which house they wish to join. A visit to the school is a condition of entry. The whole pastoral team and other girls in the Houses are involved in the welcoming process. The school sees the first three weeks as especially important and provide ongoing care through the housemother role, where an older girl is assigned to provide individual support. The school produces introductory booklets solely designed for new girls and their parents. An added bonus is the House specific booklets, which describes their uniqueness and paints a picture of what life is like there.

The ethos of the school encourages girls to make a positive contribution to the school and society. The school has a commitment to charitable and community work. There is also a strong emphasis on energy saving, conservation and the environment. Houses routinely recycle, competitions and committees additionally promote Green issues.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The school endeavours to protect girls' possessions and monies. Each boarder has a suitably secure, accessible place to keep their possessions and valuables. Matrons assist with the safekeeping of their money and the school discourages girls from bringing in items of value. The school has its own shop, where girls can buy personal requisites. Living within High Wycombe, there is also a range of shops in close proximity.

Girls reside in 11 separate boarding houses set within very beautiful and spacious grounds. The landscape comprises of woodland, gardens, a lake and a wide variety of wild-life, including deer, badgers and many species of birds. Each boarding house celebrates its unique strengths and character. House colours assist with the distinctions. Within the historic Abbey building are two boarding houses Pitt and Rubens. Leading up from the main school building, along Marlow Hill are four purpose-built houses, Barry, Butler, Airlie and Campbell. These resemble a terrace of very large houses with separate entrances. At the top of the grounds within Daws Hill House are Shelburne, Cloister and Wendover. Junior house and Clarence cater for the youngest and oldest girls respectively. Junior House is a modernised building halfway up Marlow Hill. Clarence House within the main school grounds, provides single study bedrooms and encourages semi-independent living.

Girls enjoy living in comfortable accommodation which has a very high standard of cleanliness. The majority of boarding houses, with the exception of Clarence have shared dormitories and separate study areas. Year 12 girls have study bedrooms, many of which are single, others paired. Girls rotate rooms on a termly basis and can choose who they wish to share with. Girls are able to personalise their sleeping space with posters, photographs and other items. All dormitories provides a bed, wardrobe, storage space and a bedside light. Girls like their accommodation. However, they highlight that not everyone has an easily accessible, separate plug socket point.

Boarding houses have a range of communal areas. Drawing rooms provide a place to relax with comfortable sofas, large plasma televisions with Freesat and blue ray, DVD players and pianos. Girls have their own desk and shelf space to store their books in their study rooms. Music practice rooms and kitchens are available in the majority of the houses. All houses have kitchens or facilities to make hot drinks and snacks. Junior House benefits from its own cafeteria style kitchen, with a library area and computer stations. In addition to a sitting room, there are a television lounge and a large recreational room with a craft activities area.

Great effort is made to promote a homely atmosphere, pictures, photographs, art work and flowers contribute to a welcoming environment. Entrance areas and walls throughout the houses have notice boards displaying activities, promoting various events, school news, current affairs and general information. Girls have satisfactory toilet and washing facilities, which meet the National Minimum Standards. Redecoration and refurbishment of accommodation is ongoing. A more efficient maintenance system is also in progress. An outstanding issue is the need for the maintenance team to have upgraded two-way radios. For example communication is not confidential as it can heard across all the maintenance team.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Parents, girls and staff benefit from a comprehensive collection of documentation which highlights the boarding principles and practice. This information is widely available through booklets, handbooks, on the intranet and the school website. The school aims to provide girls with 'exceptional opportunities: to grow, explore, fail and succeed in a safe, caring yet highly stimulating environment'. Feedback from girls confirm their love for the boarding experience. All mention the good house spirit and atmosphere and of the mutual support between girls of all ages. They comment that 'the girls are the best thing about the school.'

The school has clear leadership, the new Headmistress started at the beginning of the Autumn term. The Headmistress has fifteen years headship experience and an esteemed background within the independent sector. The new Headmistress demonstrates a genuine commitment to improving boarding life for girls and staff. The Headmistress receives support in her role from the Senior Housemistress. The Senior Housemistress reports directly to the Headmistress and is an integral part of the senior management team. The Senior Housemistress has a wealth of experience, having been a previous boarder at the school. Girls find the new Headmistress and the Senior Housemistress extremely approachable, which assists in promoting an amiable management structure.

Housemistresses are part of the senior pastoral team. Each house has a housemistress who is supported by a matron and at least one resident tutor. The exceptions are Clarence and Junior House where staffing reflects the specific needs of that age group. Within Junior House, girls

benefit from two additional assistant housemistresses. In Clarence roles are more in preparation for university life, with an emphasis on resident academic tutors. Resident tutors assist with covering the house and also undertake duties within main school life. A series of meetings and processes within the school specifically focus on the welfare of boarders. The school timetable enables both formal and informal opportunities for pastoral staff to meet on a regular basis. There is a range of communication systems in place within the school. However, the link between houses and health care professional is not always effectively utilised. This results in health and welfare issues not being shared in a timely manner. Girls receive continuous updates on developments within the school through the house order meetings. Although the Senior Housemistress meets regularly with all housemistresses, girls still report inconsistent practices within houses. This mostly relates to the interpretation of community rules.

Pastoral staff receive appropriate support to fulfil their roles. Staff handbooks provide written guidance on boarding policies and practice and staff receive practical support from a mentor. The school provides an induction and a broad range of ongoing training. Of particular benefit is the Boarding Schools Association training which focuses on a host of relevant topics. Job descriptions are available and there is a staff supervision, appraisal and disciplinary system. The Bursar, Deputy Head and Head monitor records to observe trends and ensure proportionality. Each boarding house receives at least two visits from the Head and Senior Housemistress every year.

The number of staff available for the supervision of boarders is reasonably sufficient for the number of boarders. Though staff highlight that there are rare occasions when the only adult in the boarding house is a member of the domestic staff and the implications this may have in managing an emergency. The Head is currently evaluating the Housemistresses' duties and staff accommodation, to support them in their role.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. As previously mentioned in the Enjoying and Achieving section the school aims to welcome and integrate all girls. The school's core value of encouragement incorporates the value of equality of opportunity. This outlines the need for 'respect for all members of the school community regardless of ethnicity, culture, gender or disability.'

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):

- review the delivering of the PHSCE syllabus throughout the year groups [NMS 6]
- improve the recording, storage and receipt of medication and introduce a medication audit system within houses [NMS 15]

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- ensure all staff handling foods have current food hygiene certificates [NMS 24]
 - ensure all prefects and staff are fully aware of the child protection procedure [NMS 3]
 - explore with the girls the effectiveness of the complaints procedure [NMS 5]
 - ensure staff recruitment files contain written confirmation that gaps in employment have been satisfactorily explored [NMS 38]
 - give greater consideration to girls' views in the development and practice of boarding [NMS 12]
 - consider upgrading maintenance two-way radios [NMS 40]
 - review accessibility of plug sockets for each boarder [NMS 42]
 - undertake a review of boarding to include staffing and staff accommodation [NMS 10]
 - develop strategies to enhance communication between pastoral care and health care professionals [NMS 10]