

Prior's Field School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Kerry Fell
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Date of last inspection	21 November 2006

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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

The school is a day and boarding school for girls. The main school building is a listed Arts and Crafts style building. Buildings added to the school have been designed in the likeness of the main building. Junior boarding houses are based within the main school building on the first three floors and are separate from any teaching areas of the school. Senior boarding is accommodated in a separate building a short distance from the main school building.

There is easy access to the A3 and routes to London, Portsmouth and the M25. A mainline train station for access to London and Portsmouth is also within a short drive. The school makes arrangements for minibuses to collect and return pupils to the local area and a minibus is also available to collect and return pupils to London and the main London airports. Some parking is available on the school site.

Summary

All key national minimum standards for boarding schools were assessed at this full announced inspection. Other national minimum standards are reported on because sufficient evidence was obtained to evidence that these are met, or that areas of concern were identified during the inspection. Recommendations made at the last inspection were also reviewed.

This is a satisfactory school with a number of elements that are good.

Students feel supported by staff and report that they have good relationships with staff and feel that they are listened to. The school provides some good support systems, for example the new boarder induction process offers a great deal of support and promotes bonding. The school offers students a wide range of activities and opportunities that are actively taken up by the students.

Good pastoral systems are in place and there are a range of people that students can approach if they are worried. However, welfare systems need to be formalised to demonstrate how students with emotional and health needs need to be, and are supported by staff.

Although the school has taken action to improve its recruitment procedures, the recruitment of contract staff is not robust.

Students are able to influence the running of the school through a number of councils and student representatives. The school can demonstrate how student requests have been listened to.

Students are provided with a balanced and wide ranging menu and the boarding houses provide well maintained and comfortable accommodation. Of note is the sixth form boarding house in which students have the opportunity to stay in en suite rooms. The school has a strong focus on health and safety; however records of risk assessments and pool management do not reflect the school's policy.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The school has grown and developed since the last inspection, and action has been taken to improve pastoral support and boarding provision. A range of monitoring and auditing systems have been introduced by the pastoral deputy head teacher. School records and logs are now regularly monitored to ensure that the detail within them is accurate and well maintained. Sanction logs are fully completed.

Form tutors are now attending special afternoon teas with boarding students, and specialist training programmes have been introduced to support students with managing stress, and building relationships.

The new bursar has overhauled the procedures for recruiting staff and has a detailed central school register in place to support this.

The school has made changes to the junior boarding house which has created common rooms for each of the year groups and a larger boarding office that has an informal seating area for use by staff and students.

The school demonstrates that it listens to the students through a number of improvements that have been made since the last inspection. These improvements include the refurbishment of the school's swimming pool, which is now in regular use, the introduction of vegetable patches and chickens, and the improvement of recycling facilities at the school.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The school states that they have listened to boarding students and have implemented changes that benefit their health. This has included the renovation of the swimming pool, which is now in regular use, the use of less oil in food preparation, and the establishment of a gym for use by fifth and sixth form students.

The school arranges some training to support students to manage stress and anxiety prior to exams, and they plan to introduce training for 3rd form students in wellbeing and emotional intelligence.

The school has a Personal Health, Social Education and Citizenship programme which is varied and interesting. The policy in place focuses on life skills and the topics covered. It does not address the countering of major risks to health. There is, however, a substance abuse policy, which very clearly details the issues, the support available and possible sanctions. There is also a sex and relationships policy, with a strong emphasis on family life.

There is a strong focus on bullying and moral codes, both of which are addressed every term, and gender stereotyping. The school also has outside speakers attend. Prefects attend a weekend training course on talking to boarding students about drugs, called HYPE.

Whilst there are some strong elements to the promotion of health; the programmes provided do not demonstrate that all key issues relating to this standard, (sex education, smoking, alcohol and drugs), are covered effectively. The programmes provided do not contain details of the sessions, and there is no evidence to demonstrate that all key issues are being covered with each year group.

The school supports boarding students to meet health needs. Boarding students are registered with a local NHS practice, and a doctor attends the school twice a week. There are no problems accessing dental or optical services. Staff are first aid trained, and out of hours GP cover is provided by an external service.

The school has a good medication policy, but not a written protocol on the provision of non-prescription 'household' remedies to boarders. There are also policies for a range of specific medical and health support needs. It was not clear that these were always followed. The inspectors could not confirm that health needs were being met fully because the nursing staff restrict access to medical records on the grounds of confidentiality.

There is now a remote link between the school and the surgery. Boarding staff and the medical centre have daily email contact about medication given to boarding students and housemistresses keep logs of medication given, which are monitored.

Boarding students with allergies are known to staff and there are photographs of those with serious allergies, including those who need epipens. Other medical information may be shared verbally with staff.

There is a very effective system for laundry, with a 24 hour turn around. Sixth former boarding students do all their own laundry.

Staff and gap students said homesickness is picked up quickly and dealt with effectively. The school's pastoral system led by the heads of year and form tutors, also identifies and monitors concerns or specific support needs. However, written information about boarders with significant health and personal problems is limited. Where inspectors found such problems identified or referred to in files or by staff, no written evidence was available to support the staffs view that these are managed effectively, with the lack of well prepared, detailed welfare plans potentially putting boarding students health and welfare at risk. There is a sheet called a welfare plan; which the school is renaming. Those seen are not detailed and are incomplete.

Educational psychology reports are held where appropriate, however, in one case there was no evidence to demonstrate that the detailed information and advice had been disseminated to staff with a need to know. As a result the medical centre is not notified about some significant medical or personal problems.

Outside contractors provide the school's meals, with all aspects of the catering being of a good standard. All staff are trained, and have annual refresher courses in food hygiene and health and safety. Special provision is made for dietary, medical and religious needs and girls with such needs are known to the catering staff.

Boarding students have a very wide choice of nutritious, well-balanced food.

The school has a food committee and changes have been made at the students' request. The dining facilities are sufficient and clean, although the number of students being served at the moment is felt to be at a maximum level in the dining hall. The catering manager states that there are no outstanding recommendations from the Environmental Health Service.

Students' views on the meals provided are equally split, with half stating that the quality and range could be improved, and half stating that the meals provided were healthy, well balanced and varied.

Boarding students are provided with a variety of snacks and drinks for evenings and weekends. There is a water purifier in the dining room, which boarders can access throughout the day, and drinking water in both boarding houses. Students state that they are never hungry.

The school is about to re-launch their tuck shop.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The school takes a strong focus on countering bullying via its PSHE programme. The school has a no tolerance attitude towards bullying which generally protects students well. This is supported by a clear policy that includes guidance on the misuse of text messaging and social networking websites. The school has also held sessions on these topics for parents. Staff are vigilant when students appear to be having difficulties with relationships with friends and peers, and will take action to resolve issues in a range of ways including circle time sessions. However there is evidence to suggest that not all incidents are immediately identified as being bullying.

Staff report no incidents of bullying, and boarding students do not feel that they are bullied; although some comment that they are aware of some bullying occurring. The school may also offer mentoring to students, the provision of counselling and the use of mediation in order to resolve incidents of bullying.

The school has an identified Child Protection Liaison Officer who has completed the two day training course provided by the Local Children's Safeguarding Board. The head teacher has also completed this training. All other staff receive internal training in child protection. Non teaching staff confirmed that attending a separate session to the teaching staff has been very helpful. This ensures that staff are aware of how to respond to an allegation of abuse.

This is supported by a very good child protection policy has been completed by the school in September 2009. This policy is highly detailed and provides clarity on the school's expectations of staff, both in relation to their behaviour towards students and how they are to respond to a disclosure of abuse.

Sound records are held for all referrals made to the local safeguarding board, and demonstrates that the school follows up any referrals made in order to ensure that the students and others are safeguarded. The school holds separate child protection files for specific and ongoing cases.

The school updated its behaviour policy in August 2009. Good behaviour is promoted through a system of rewards and sanctions. Rewards in boarding time include awards for 'room of the week', special trips and treats and parties with staff, for example chocolate fountain parties. Students understand the school's expectations of their behaviour through the guide issued at the start of term each year.

Sanctions given during boarding time are recorded in a log, and this is monitored by the pastoral deputy head. The logs are well maintained, and students are not given arduous or inappropriate sanctions. These logs support the boarding student's view that the use of sanctions is fair.

Prefect's roles in awarding merits and cautions are clearly defined.

The pastoral deputy head teacher monitors the general standards of behaviour within the whole school, and states that these are of a high standard. The pastoral deputy head also stated that they felt that the pastoral team takes a proactive approach to the support of the students, and can therefore identify and tackle problems early.

The school is clear about the use of physical intervention, and the inspectors were advised that there have been no incidents of restraint. There is a physical restraint policy called positive handling and records of any physical intervention would be held.

The school has a complaints policy that is available to parents. Major complaints go to the head or head of boarding, with the final recourse is the governing body.

Students know how to raise concerns and are happy that their concerns are heard and responded to. The school keeps a record of all formal written complaints, and this record includes details of how the complaint are responded to and the subsequent outcome. A separate log is also held by the head teacher of informal or verbal complaints raised with them. Minor complaints or day-to-day concerns and queries are managed by the school's heads of year or by boarding staff.

The school has improved the procedures for the recruitment of staff. Records demonstrate that all staff recruited directly by the school are subject to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, that two written references are sought, and that these are verified by staff. The reference request forms used by the school specifically requests the referees to state whether the applicant is suitable to work with children, however neither the form nor the covering letter states that the referee should not make material misstatements or omission relevant to the suitability of the applicant.

However, the catering contractors are not taking written references on their staff. Although the Bursar stated that they had confirmed that the contractors are recruiting staff in line with safeguarding children procedures, what this entailed had not been verified. The school has since taken direct action to rectify this in order to safeguard their students.

The school has a robust policy with regard to CRB checks on visitors, long term contractors and the school ensures that taxi drivers used by students have been CRB checked. The bursar also confirms that appropriate checks have been taken on staff and adults working at stables and centres used by the students.

Evidence demonstrates that the school has a good focus on promoting the health and safety of students.

The main boarding areas are for the exclusive use of boarding students, with keypad access through external doors and doorways that allow access onto the boarding houses. The school has attempted to better secure the one remaining area of the boarding house, however this is proving difficult because of fire safety and listed building regulations. However, the school has taken steps to make this area as secure as possible. The school has fitted CCTV cameras to secure the external areas.

The dedicated grounds and maintenance team ensure that the school is in good repair and that boarding students are protected from hazards. The school has a rolling programme of maintenance and maintenance staff confirm that they respond promptly to notifications of damage or breakages in the boarding houses.

The school makes students aware of the out of bounds areas, or areas where they are only able to access in groups or with permission. Extensive risk assessment is taken for trips and high risk activities as well as for the school, the grounds and day-to-day activities. Some risk assessment formats have not been completed fully to demonstrate how these are kept under review and risks minimised. Windows above the first floor level are secured with bars or fixtures.

The school has a swimming pool that is extensively used by the students. There is a policy for routine maintenance, and pool water testing, however the records of pool testing do not reflect the policy available.

Maintenance staff are involved in fire marshalling. Fire drills are carried out regularly, but not planned when boarders are asleep. However, it was noted that because of false alarms, boarding students have been evacuated over night. Sometimes areas are blocked off to simulate a real fire. Where necessary specialist fire safety equipment is sought for students and is tested regularly.

Prefects are chosen by staff and students, and are given clear information about their roles and responsibility through an induction process and the prefects' file. Prefects are trained in child protection and take roles in mentoring students. There are a variety of ways in which other students can take on leadership roles and responsibility.

The school does not appoint guardians but is working hard to ensure that guardians want to act in the role. A member of staff will attend parents' evenings on the behalf of guardians if they are not able to attend. They will then share any information about the student's progress with them.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The school offers a wide range of activities, clubs and trips both in the UK and overseas to all students at the school. At the time of the inspection the activities programme had not commenced. An activities fair is held at the end of September to introduce the students to all of the activities available.

A timetable of planned activities for weekends is displayed around the boarding houses. The school offers a good range of trips to theme parks and places of interest, leisure and craft sessions and trips to local towns for shopping. Senior school boarding students are able to visit the local town in their free time after school, and the school supports them by making the minibus available to take them to and from town. Boarding students have access to the gym, though there were complaints that this is often locked. Appropriate safeguards are in place for use of the internet.

Boarding housemistresses and gap year students plan activities in the evenings for the boarding students; these include pampering and social evenings and group activities. At the time of the inspection boarding students were making piñatas for their Mexican evening.

The school's approach to pastoral support is led from the school's tutor system, with the heads of year and the pastoral deputy head playing a key part. Older students can request a personal tutor as well as being in a tutor group. The sixth form students see their tutor individually as well as in groups. Peer mentoring also takes place.

Boarding students can identify a range of people that they would approach if they needed support or had a concern. Many of the boarding students spoke specifically about talking to the gap year students and housemistresses. All students are provided with a copy of the school's listening tree which clearly details a number of staff, organisations and independent people that the students can access.

An independent listener is available to the students, however their services have not been used. A counsellor is also available, and students can refer themselves if they so wish. Counselling sessions do take place in the school, however as the school does not have a dedicated room for counselling sessions, they are occasionally disturbed. Boarding students stated that they know about the independent listener and the school counsellor.

Some parents praised the support provided by the school; others stated that they felt that the school provided good, homely support, allowing the boarding students to be independent. Some parents also stated that the school planned well, in conjunction with parents, how to meet any specific support need. Some parents were concerned about the support provided to boarding students if they were unwell.

The school has a spiritual, moral, social and cultural statement, which makes it clear that the school welcomes diversity. There is no discrimination and the school welcomes and supports pupils with disabilities.

Provision is made for religious and dietary requirements. The school is non denominational but has twice weekly assemblies which focuses on all faiths and religions. All major religious festivals are marked. Boarding students are supported to practice their faith if they so wish. Overseas students and staff talk about their countries and national days are celebrated, including a trip on Chinese New Year. Boarding staff have completed a course on supporting international students to integrate, and support is given to students for whom English is a second language.

Sixth form students are involved in a mentoring programme called 'Schools Without Walls' where the students mentor younger pupils in maintained schools and local primary schools. There is also an in-school mentoring system in place, which also includes a buddy scheme for new students.

Boarding students all have suitable facilities in which to study effectively. Each year group has its own common room and kitchenette, allowing for separation of ages and appropriate activities and entertainment. Younger boarding students have access to the boarding houses at all times outside school hours and the sixth form has access throughout the day. As all boarders above year nine have their own rooms, the ability to be alone is not an issue.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Students state that they feel that their views are heard and acted upon. It is clear that the school responds to requests, either with agreement or explanation. The school has made a

range of changes following listening to the views of the students for example; a vegetable patch has been put near the sixth form boarding house, and the improvement to the swimming pool.

Boarding students are able to raise their views via a number of school councils, including the full school council, a food committee, and via the head girl. The prefects meet with their form tutors and the deputy head teacher every week.

The school has a Green Charter, with a strong focus in school on environmental issues, and the students are looking at a variety of ways to promote recycling and conservation of energy and food.

Parents speak positively about being able to maintain contact with their children, and the contact maintained with the staff. Payphones are available and can be used in privacy, however most students have their own mobile telephones. The boarding houses also have direct lines and a house mobile that parents can call. There are notices for Child Line in the boarding houses and the Listening Tree has telephone numbers for all the organisations listed as offering support.

Students have access to the internet and email, and senior students are able to access social networking sites. Students are able to collect their post from the boarding office or on the board outside.

The school supports the students to meet with their parents; however in most cases students will go out with their parents rather than meet with them in the school.

The school has a supportive induction programme in place. The programme includes an introductory visit, the opportunity to attend a taster weekend, and new boarding students start a day before the rest of the school, in order to give them the opportunity to settle in before the school gets too busy. The school arranges trips to support the new boarding students to bond as a group. Year seven students have an induction trip to Shropshire and year 12 students go to the Isle of Wight. Year 13 students attend an introduction to the upper sixth evening.

New boarding students supported to integrate into the school by being assigned older students as 'shadows' who support them through their induction process. Parents are also invited to attend on the first day and they are given an introduction to the school and boarding processes.

Boarding students are well informed about the school via a range of guides and handbooks. Lower school boarding students are given an A to Z of boarding, and upper school boarding students receive two brochures.

All staff and boarding students spoken to said that the relationship between staff and students is very good. Staff state that the students are happy and the boarding students state that the staff are very supportive. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

The school is clear within boarding handbooks that personal items, cash, passports and travel documents should be handed into boarding staff. The handbooks also provide guidance to boarders about limiting the expensive personal items that they bring into school. The school

provides boarders with lockable storage. The bursary keeps pocket money for the full boarders and distributes it weekly. Signed records of this are kept.

Parents raise concerns in questionnaires about the loss of personal items. Boarding logs also evidence that there was a sequence of thefts of money in the senior house. The school recognises that it needs to improve the safeguarding of personal items; however there are no formal records of the thefts being investigated. Copies of the logs and telephone correspondence provided following the inspection demonstrated how the school followed up one complaint of theft, and that they had taken steps to investigate the theft internally. However, it was not clear from these logs that the theft has been formally reported to the police as originally noted. The community police liaison officer was asked to visit the school following this incident to talk to the boarding students about looking after their property.

The school buildings are listed and therefore the arrangement of boarding accommodation and any changes that the school can make to this are constrained by the listed buildings regulations. Junior boarding accommodation forms part of the upper floors of the main school building, and the senior boarding house is within a separate building that also houses the medical centre.

Boarding houses provide comfortable accommodation. Junior boarding provides shared bedrooms of between two and four students for year seven and eight. In year nine, students either have single bedrooms or share a bedroom with one other student. The sixth form boarding house is very attractive both inside and out. All the upper sixth form boarding students have their own ensuite study/bedrooms. They appreciate the rooms but complained that the heating does not go on until everyone else's does, even though they spend more time in their rooms in private study. Boarding students state that maintenance issues are dealt with quickly.

All students have access to their own common room area, with additional areas being available for prep.

Parents and students generally feel that the school provides good boarding accommodation. A small number of parents comment on the school's décor needing improvement, and some students and parents raise concerns about the bathrooms, and specifically the showers. The school has a rolling programme of maintenance and redecoration, and responds to maintenance issues well.

The school provides sufficient bathrooms and toilets in the lower school boarding house, and lower sixth form students. The additional provision of ensuite facilities to the upper sixth form students exceeds this standard. The school is in the process of providing locks for shower screens, in order to provide better privacy for the students.

Most students do not share facilities with staff; however one toilet in a block of toilets is made available for the sole use of staff. Staff stated that they do not usually use the bathroom at the same time as the boarding students.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The school provides a wide range of brochures, guides, diaries and leaflets about life at the school. The school's website has been redeveloped since the last inspection, and includes some of this information, as well as a separate parents' area.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good, gap year students have received training in integrating overseas students, and staff and students comment positively about how, where specific requests are made, they support students to meet any cultural or religious needs. Students and staff are encouraged to celebrate any cultural days, and are in the process of preparing for a Mexican evening.

Boarding staff confirm that the school provides them with clear roles and responsibilities and policies and procedures that support them to undertake their roles. The school is supporting staff to undertake the Boarding School Association training for housemistresses, and other staff have already completed this course.

All staff have in school training each term; which includes child protection training. Sometimes training is cascaded down. Recent training includes first aid, life guarding, a swimming operator's course and minibus training.

Maintenance staff receive ongoing training in health and safety, including a week long medical course, fire fighting procedure training and COSHH training. The maintenance staff have requested first aid and resuscitation training. All staff feel confident that training requests will be supported.

The school describes its staffing ratio as high, and levels of staffing within boarding provide good support and supervision to the boarding students. Staff are employed specifically to work within boarding houses; with only a small number of staff undertaking other roles within the school, including teaching classes. Staff receive ongoing support and supervision.

The pastoral deputy head teacher is responsible for monitoring and auditing school records and logs. They have a number of auditing systems in place that monitor trends and concerns, including a clear system for recording and monitoring behaviour within the school. This information is used to respond to any trends identified.

Accident books are held in the bursary, medical centre, sports hall office, sixth form office, matron station and the front office. They are reviewed each term by the health and safety committee. They were not seen on this occasion.

Boarding has been monitored in the past by the education committee but a new committee to monitor welfare on a more formal basis is planned. The governors visit the school fairly regularly, and they receive regular reports from the head teacher. The governor stated that they can see that the students are happy.

The relationship between governors and staff is good and the governors are kept fully informed.

Housemistresses and boarding tutors are experienced in boarding. Boarding staff are caring and competent, and take pride in ensuring that the boarding students are happy and well looked after. Boarding students are seen to be relaxed and comfortable in their presence, dropping into boarding offices to chat.

The school thoroughly plans trips and activities away from the school including overseas trips. These are supported by extensive risk assessments. All lodgings used during this trips are assessed before being used by the students. In some cases the school has been using the same lodgings and activity centres for a number of years.

The school has a detailed crisis management plan for a Swine Flu epidemic. The Crisis Management Plan is to be updated this term to provide a generic model to test against a variety of scenarios.

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 the Personal Social Health and Citizenship Education programme fully meets national minimum standard 6 (NMS 6)
- ensure that formal welfare plans are in place for students with identified medical or personal needs (NMS 17)
- ensure that the school's system for recruiting staff including ancillary staff, contract/sessional staff and volunteers who will work with boarders include all checks as detailed under national minimum standard 38.2 (NMS 38)
- ensure that the reference request letter specifically asks all referees not to make material mis-statement or omission relevant to the suitability of the applicant (NMS 38.2)
- ensure that all risk assessments held demonstrate that the formats are being completed fully, and kept under review (NMS 47)
- ensure that records of swimming pool water testing reflects the school's policy (NMS 47)
- ensure that formal records are maintained of any allegation of theft, the school's response, investigation and the outcome, including reporting to the police where appropriate. (NMS 20)