

St Mary's School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Clare Davies
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Nominated person	Richard James
Date of last inspection	26 April 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

St Mary's School is located just outside Shaftesbury on the Wiltshire/Dorset border. This Roman Catholic day and boarding school for girls has approximately 320 pupils aged nine to nineteen years. There are approximately 230 pupils who are full and occasional boarders. The boarding accommodation is central to the school site allowing boarders easy access to the school resources, recreational facilities and the grounds.

Summary

This was an announced inspection to assess St Mary's School against the national minimum standards for boarding schools. All but two of the standards have been met with good outcomes for boarders across all areas. The school is dedicated to promoting its Catholic foundation and principles throughout the community of St Mary's. Safeguarding of boarders is given high importance supported by trained staff, good quality policies and procedures. Older girls have been made aware of their role in supporting younger girls and provided with training to do so effectively, all girls have been made aware of the dangers in using the internet. Pastoral care provided to boarders is an outstanding feature of the school, recognised by parents and boarders themselves. Boarders feel safe and have their medical needs met by qualified nursing staff. The dedication of staff across the school ensures the boarders are cared for in a safe and happy environment as summed up by the following quote from a boarder. 'I am more than satisfied with St Mary's School it has everything I could possibly want to make me happy'.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Since the last inspection the school has made improvements in relation to record keeping and the monitoring of such records. The information management system has been customised to meet the needs of the school and is regularly being developed to support record keeping. The junior boarding accommodation in cubicles has been decorated to provide the optimum space for each boarder. The school no longer has any communal showers. All the recommendations made at the last inspection have now been met.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The school gives great importance to health promotion and ensures that boarders have access to information from a variety of sources. A programme of personal, social and health education is delivered through the curriculum, from boarding house staff and through the infirmary. In addition to healthy eating and personal hygiene the comprehensive programme addresses topics such as smoking, sexual health, the dangers of using drugs and consuming alcohol. The information is delivered appropriately to different age groups and to keep parents fully informed of the programme it is published on the school website. The school is responsive to any current issues that may be presented by the boarders or in the media. There are sound policies to counter risks to health. Practice in the management of bodily fluids is good in the infirmary and the boarding houses though the school lacks a policy to support this practice.

Medical care and attention is primarily provided by qualified nurses in a designated facility known as the infirmary. Nursing cover is provided between 8am-8pm every day with visits from a local GP twice a week. The senior nurse has established a very good working relationship with the local surgery where the school can readily seek medical advice. Overnight the boarding house staff have access to a small amount of over the counter remedies and pain relief, nursing advice can be sought over the telephone. Any medication administered is suitably recorded by nurses and boarding staff; there are sound systems in place to monitor the amount of medication given to each boarder to ensure their safety and communication between the infirmary and the boarding houses is very good.

On arrival at St Mary's, medical information from parents identifies any health matters and staff are alerted on a 'need to know' basis confirming that confidentiality is given high regard. Parental consent is obtained to ensure that medical care is given according to their wishes. Any boarder considered suitable to manage their own medication is required to have written approval from their parents and subject to a risk assessment by a nurse. This ensures the safe management of medication for individual boarders and for any girls who may be sharing their room. Boarders report that they are able to approach the infirmary with any concern and feel confident that they will receive a positive response. Where appropriate the school liaises with community health professionals to ensure that boarders' individual needs are met. The school recognises the importance of training boarding house staff and other key personnel in first aid skills. Sixth form girls who take part in lifeguard training and pupils in Year 8 also receive training in first aid. The nurses regularly update their professional training to maintain their registration.

The catering is of a high standard, providing a range of nutritious meals and responding to any specific dietary needs. Boarders report that they like the food served and know that they can contribute suggestions to the menus through a comments book and the food committee. Here is one boarder's description of the food, 'There is always such a huge choice from an enormous salad bar to vegetarian and hot and cold meals. There is healthy fruit and a selection of yummy puddings.' Boarders acknowledge that the kitchen staff are there to look after them, ensuring that they have healthy and tasty meals. 'I think the kitchen staff here are wonderful, all very helpful and kind'. Once a week, a simple lunch of soup, cheese and bread is served as the school considers others less fortunate than themselves and donate the money saved from a full menu to a chosen charity. All the main meals are taken in the school dining room where the furniture and environment promotes a pleasant atmosphere for dining as a social experience. Celebration of cultural events such as Chinese New Year and Spanish National Day are incorporated into the dining room with themed meals. Snacks are available in the boarding houses during the evenings and the sixth form enjoy the privilege of having breakfast in their houses. The local authority environmental health department has awarded the school kitchen with a five star grading and no recommendations were necessary.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Boarders report that they feel very safe whilst at school and they are aware of the many safeguards the school has implemented to protect them. One boarder reported, 'I feel safe here, I know I am well looked after by years of experience and I know if I had any worries there is always someone to talk to.' A survey of boarders indicated that any incidents of bullying are very rare and appropriately dealt with by staff when reported. Staff across the school have an excellent understanding of the needs of boarders and how to safeguard them. This is supported

by training through national and local agencies. St Mary's School acknowledges the modern day pressures on children and young people and provides excellent pastoral care to support them. Boarders are permitted to use the internet and social network sites with some restrictions. The school has invested in training and ensured that this is cascaded to all pupils and their parents with the production of a newsletter on how to use the internet safely and increase awareness of potential risks.

All staff have a good understanding of safeguarding issues and this area is addressed with new staff during their induction followed with refresher training. The designated person for child protection has liaised with the local authority on safeguarding issues and has developed contacts for advice regarding any concern. The designated person and deputy have received the required level of training for their role. The child protection policy is a comprehensive document and staff are issued with their own copy that includes an excellent 'Code of Conduct' detailing safe working practices. Sixth form girls are briefed on safeguarding matters and how to identify and report any concerns.

Boarders are generally very well behaved and encouraged to represent themselves and the school with pride. Expectations of pupils and the school rules are published, tickets can be awarded as merits leading to house points. Any minor infringement of school rules may lead to a Lavender ticket where a house point is deducted, appropriate sanctions are applied for repeated misbehaviour or serious incidents. Incidents of poor behaviour are rare as boarders are supported to reflect and learn from their mistakes. A parent reported 'St Mary's offers very good pastoral care with the right amount of structure and firmness.' The staff have a good understanding of boarders' behaviour through the school database and very good communication across the school. Daily records are made of incidents and behaviour in each boarding house and these are monitored well by the senior management team. Boarders comment that generally the rules are fair and they know what is expected of them. The complaints procedure is posted on the school website for parents and pupils and details are available on notice boards in boarding houses. Boarders reported that they can readily approach staff with any problem and they know they have the anonymous option of using suggestion boxes.

Staff and boarders are aware of fire safety procedures and have experienced evacuating the boarding areas. Fire detection and prevention equipment is regularly checked and serviced. A fire risk assessment is in place and some staff are trained in fire safety. Large rooms divided into cubicles for junior boarders offer minimal privacy, however the majority of the boarders report how they like this arrangement. All upper sixth form girls, and some lower sixth form, have single rooms and this level of privacy is appreciated by senior boarders.

Robust recruitment procedures are in place for all staff working at the school and the senior management team have undertaken training in safer recruitment. A comprehensive document is provided to spouses of resident staff ensuring they are aware of their responsibilities towards safeguarding within the school and the need to adhere to the school policies and procedures. Maintenance issues are dealt with promptly by the school staff and recreational areas have appropriate safety measures in place. Risk assessments are produced for boarding accommodation, regular on site activities and more in-depth assessments for off site activities and trips away. There is good monitoring by the senior management team of all the risk assessments and once again, safety is given high regard through producing a written evaluation of every off site trip identifying what went well and any changes that would need to be considered if the trip were to be repeated.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Boarders have access to a good range and choice of activities out of school hours and at the weekends. The variety on offer is enjoyed by the boarders as one girl stated, 'I think St Mary's School is a great school because you can do lots of things like hockey and netball or if you are not into sports you can do drama, music etc.' On site sports facilities are very good with a sports hall, swimming pool, tennis/netball courts and sports fields. In addition to sport, music features strongly at St Mary's and girls have the opportunity to belong to a choir, an orchestra and learn to play a musical instrument. The school choir received the great honour of singing in St Peter's Square before Pope Benedict whilst in Rome this Autumn to mark the 400th Anniversary of the school's founder Mary Ward. Dance, drama, cooking, craft, Duke of Edinburgh award and horse riding are just some of the other activities available.

The school provides very high levels of pastoral support and guidance for boarders, this is a strength of the school. Many parents report that 'the pastoral care is excellent' and many support comments such as, 'the school provides an excellent environment for teenage girls to grow and flourish'. There is regular liaison and good information sharing between staff across the school over any pupil welfare concern; appropriate records are made. The school offers a very supportive approach to any pastoral issues and where they may be impacting on learning or behaviour, individual strategies are put in place to support boarders. The school is dedicated to promote its Catholic foundation and principles; the pastoral support can be summarised as reported in the mission statement, 'We are concerned with all that a girl is and could become.' There is a family community at St Mary's School, led by the head and supported through the number of resident families on the staff team and the high number of daughters of staff who are attending or have attended this school. The length of service attributed to many staff also contributes to the warmth of the St Mary's community. Senior pupils are given areas of responsibility and this promotes relationships across the year groups. Boarders indicated on a questionnaire that if they have a problem there are many people they can turn to in the school, this included sixth formers and prefects. 'Any teacher would be glad to help, also the girls will ask "are you ok?" which is great.' 'Everyone is really friendly and there is always someone you can turn to if you are upset or homesick.'

As a Roman Catholic Foundation, St Mary's School embraces spirituality. Worship is central to school life through the chapel, the full time resident Chaplain and part time resident priest. Girls from other Christian denominations are welcome and an Anglican Minister regularly visits the school. To promote inclusion, the school has made adaptations to some areas of the school to welcome pupils with physical disabilities. The learning support department provides additional support where identified and a designated teacher supports the boarders for whom English is a second language. Fund raising for local, national and international charities is supported well by the school as pupils elect which charities to support. The allocation of boarders to each house is given careful consideration ensuring that there is an equitable balance of skills across the houses in sport, music and drama. There are structures in place to integrate boarders from overseas. A small minority of girls reported instances where integration could be further improved.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

St Mary's School has embraced the national policy for developing the 'pupil voice' and has recently invested in staff training in this area. The school has traditionally gathered views from the pupils through the school council and other forums and is committed to developing consultation in a wider remit. There are regular house meetings where boarders can have their say in addition to the food committee, suggestion boxes, surveys and through approaching the prefects. Boarders reported 'at house meetings we have a chance to say what we think should change or ask for a change to be made' and 'we are always reminded of the various people willing to listen and make things happen'. There is good access to the head and members of the senior management team. The prefects meet weekly with the head and act as an effective link between pupils and staff. In response to listening to boarders, changes have been made to the summer uniform, the activities on offer and more flexibility when going out of school.

Contact with family and friends is readily available as mobile telephones are permitted. Pay phones and email provide other options and the sixth form are able to access a social network site. Arrangements can be made for boarders whose family is not in the UK to access social networks with parental permission. Parents report that communication from the school is prompt and informative with comments such as, 'communication is excellent, we are kept fully informed'. Parents are given contact details for key staff involved with boarding so they can communicate with them directly.

New boarders are assigned a guide known as their 'guardian angel'. After a visit during the preceding term the new girls are sent welcome cards and given a leaflet with some information about boarding life and school routines. The parent information booklet is comprehensive in addition to information on the website. Boarders reported that they are made to feel welcome and like the idea of their guardian angel. A special arrangement particular to St Mary's is the marking of the end of an induction period with a service held in the school chapel called the Rite of Welcome. New pupils are welcomed as full members of the St Mary's community and presented with the gift of a personalised prayer book. A boarder summarised her experience of being a new boarder as follows, 'I was sad the first day and everybody helped me to be happy. Now I think that St Mary's is part of me'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Boarders have lockable storage for personal and valuable belongings. Boarders report that respect is shown for each others possessions and they do not always feel the need to lock their personal things away. The accommodation is made up of six boarding houses. One for junior boarders, one for the upper sixth and four houses providing for a mixture of four year groups. The junior boarding is in the style of cubicle bedrooms within a large dormitory. This arrangement does not allow for much privacy however the junior girls and older ones who have experienced this accommodation talk fondly of the cubicles and the school have enhanced the environment with brightly coloured decoration. The four mixed age houses have a variety of different sized dormitories and generally the boarders share with less as they get older, most lower sixth have their own rooms. The upper sixth form house named after the founder of the school, Mary Ward, is purpose built providing single accommodation and an opportunity to live semi-independently in preparation for university life. The senior girls really appreciate this opportunity and younger girls report how they look forward to the privilege of staying in Mary Ward House.

The common rooms are well furnished and the general decoration of the boarding houses is good. Great efforts have been made to make the areas homely with soft furnishings, pictures, soft lighting, ornaments and flower arrangements. There is sufficient bathroom and toilet provision and no reports of having to queue to use these facilities.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The head provides good leadership supported by an effective senior management team. All staff demonstrate a commitment to the welfare of boarders, working well across departments. There are clear lines of communication within the management of boarding provision, the size of the school allows for face to face communication to be effective yet this is underpinned by sound systems of recording and monitoring.

The school provides a clear statement of boarding principles and practice that stems from the vision of the school founder. Central to the school community is the Roman Catholic faith and the promotion of Christian values. Boarding is structured well with designated junior and senior boarding houses and mixed year groups in between. The house structure is strong and promoted through a house points system and inter-house competitions. Many boarders are following their mothers and sisters through the same boarding house.

The supervision of boarders is primarily with housemistresses supported by house assistants. Gap students from overseas support the junior boarding house and weekend activities. Boarders know who is on duty and where to get adult support if required. One particular evening has minimal staff supervision and the potential for thin staffing levels. This is not identified as a problem for boarders however the school should review the rota for staff time off. Clear policies and practice guidance documents are available through the school information management system to support staff in their roles and responsibilities. Staff are trained in safeguarding, first aid, fire safety, electrical safety, food hygiene and other areas relating to pastoral care. Some staff have undertaken training with the Boarding Schools Association, all staff have their performance reviewed.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The pastoral care ensures that personal support systems are equally available to all boarders, there is a policy in relation to equal opportunities and systems in place to promote diversity and inclusion. The consultation opportunities ensure that boarders are fairly and equally represented by age and ability. The school is involved with community projects and fund raising at a local, national and international level. Additional information is reported under Enjoying and Achieving.

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):

- to produce a policy for the safe disposal of bodily fluids (NMS 6)
- review staff availability relating to occasional times when staffing is minimal (NMS 31).