

Ashford School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Address	Ashford School East Hill ASHFORD Kent TN24 8PB
Telephone number	01233 625171
Email	registrar@ashfordschool.co.uk
Registered person	Ashford School
Head / Principal	
Nominated person	Yvonne Howard
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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

Ashford School is situated in the town of Ashford in Kent. It is near to the Euro Star terminal and is also within easy reach of the ferry port at Dover, as well as the airports in and around London. The school is governed by a charitable trust, The United Church Schools Trust and administered by a local board of governors.

The school offers a day and boarding provision. Currently, over 115 boarders are accommodated, many of whom are from overseas. There are two boarding houses for boys and one for girls. All of the houses provide clean, suitably furnished living accommodation and a senior master leads a team of enthusiastic and well trained staff in caring for the boarders.

Though Christian in its approach, the school welcomes pupils from all religious and cultural denominations and this is reflected within the boarding community. Great emphasis is placed on providing the individual with the specific support required for each young person to realise their full potential. The school boasts an excellent academic record as most pupils secure a place at a university or other institute of higher education.

Summary

This announced full welfare inspection was undertaken to fulfil the three year inspection requirement for boarding schools. All of the key national minimum standards were inspected. The visit provided the opportunity to meet with the head teacher and key staff as well as many of the young people who board. Feedback from surveys completed by young people and parents was also considered as part of the inspection process.

The school provides suitable boarding accommodation and a team of staff ensure the young people's good health is promoted and that they are kept safe while they stay. The staff believe the young people's views are important and ensure there are different avenues available for them to voice any concerns. They provide excellent support whereby the young people can develop as individuals. Where areas of shortfall in practice have been identified, the senior management team are responsive and keen to explore changes to improve the provision.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full welfare inspection of the school was undertaken in January 2005. A follow up visit to ascertain progress was made in January 2006; considerable improvements had been made by that visit. Since then the school has continued to develop, introducing many changes and meeting many of the recommendations previously made. As a result, much of the school's information has now been translated, making it more accessible for those parents and boarders for whom English is not their first language. In addition, safeguarding policies and procedures have been updated and a key member of staff is designated to co-ordinate any safeguarding issues across the school. Similarly, minutes are now taken for some meetings, such as the school council, enabling the young people to know the decisions that have been made. Details of who the young people can talk to if they have concerns are well publicised. Medications and health information are now generally well managed and the school's robust recruitment procedures

ensure individuals involved with the boarders are appropriately checked by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). The appointment of a Business Manager to lead health and safety underpins the school's commitment to a cohesive approach towards risk assessments and the monitoring of accidents.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

A fundamental ethos across Ashford School is that each young person's well-being is paramount and that healthy living should be promoted. Personal, social and health education is included in the school curriculum and the boarding staff are aware of the programme content; this enables them to appropriately discuss with the young people the risks associated with smoking, alcohol, drugs and sexual activity. The nursing team and the medical officer are also readily available as a resource, for the young people to raise any concerns they may have. In addition, the young people are able to participate in a wide range of both physical and health promoting activities.

Good arrangements are in place to ensure the boarders can access first aid and medical care when needed. Those young people who board are registered with a local general practitioner (GP), optician and dentist; they can see a male or female doctor and choose whether or not to be accompanied for appointments. Health information is gathered from parents; effective arrangements ensure that first aid is appropriately provided and minor illnesses are treated. Protocols and health plans are well circulated for those children with particular medical needs. The nursing team are all registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council and they liaise with the medical officer for professional guidance and consultation. In general, medications are well managed although some shortfalls were noted in one area, which the school was responsive in addressing immediately. Good communication between the nurses and the house staff ensures that prescription and non-prescription 'household' medications are appropriately administered. Risk assessments underpin practice for those young people who self-medicate. The sick bay facilities are limited and pose a risk of cross infection; however, the school are developing plans for improved facilities later this year.

There is good catering provision whereby the young people are provided with a choice of meals which are varied and nutritious. Salad and fruit are readily available and specific dietary needs are catered for. The catering staff are all well trained and listen to views expressed by the young people through the comments book in the refectory, as well as at school council. Some young people believe portion sizes are not enough; the school are aware of this and recognise they need to communicate more effectively that all young people may have the quantity of food they require and ask for. The school explores multi-cultural foods and has a theme day each term when food from different countries is provided. Meal times are happy, sociable occasions, held in the school's spacious refectory. The inspectors sampled several meals while at the school and found them to be of a good standard.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The school's anti-bullying policy is well publicised and readily available for staff to reference. It clearly defines bullying and the procedure for staff to follow to counter any incidents. They are vigilant and recognise those young people who have the potential to bully as well as those who are vulnerable. The young people confirm that bullying is not a feature in the school, that

any incident is well managed and that its incidence is low. They all identify staff they can talk to if they have concerns and the contact details of relevant support agencies such as Child Line, are well publicised.

Similarly, there are good policies and procedures to protect the young people from abuse. A well trained, senior staff member is designated to take responsibility for safeguarding and she facilitates staff training; this ensures all staff involved with boarding are trained in child protection, either during in-service training or individually. The school's safeguarding procedures mirror those of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and are readily available for staff to reference. The school uses a robust filter for computers and internet use is well monitored, greatly reducing the opportunity for the young people to access inappropriate sites.

Behaviour is well managed at the school. Guidance and information is well publicised for parents, staff and the boarders; it has been translated and is therefore accessible for those people for whom English is not their first language. The school places an emphasis on responding positively to good behaviour and a reward system supports this. However, a stripe system clearly determines the different levels of punishment for breaking the school rules; these are well publicised and are known by the young people. In general they believe the staff are fair and that stripes are used consistently across the school day as well as boarding. Records of such incidents are centrally held and are well monitored for trends and themes by a named senior member of staff. Minor incidents of behaviour that occur in boarding are managed by the house staff and recorded in house logs. The school recognises that there are some inconsistencies in how sanctions are used for minor offences within boarding; plans are underway to oversee the house logs as part of the central monitoring currently undertaken. The school operates a prefect system; prefects are used appropriately and are not able to use sanctioning or any form of discipline. Restraint and physical interventions are very rare, but guidance is available for staff should the need arise.

There is a detailed complaints policy which is well publicised. The school's ethos is that the young people should raise any concerns they may have and that they should be listened to. They are encouraged to discuss issues with individual staff of their choice but they can also raise concerns in the weekly house meetings, boarders' council or school council. Major complaints are recorded and investigated within appropriate timescales. However, as the house meetings are not minuted and there are inconsistencies of recording when concerns are raised informally with individuals, it cannot be determined how well issues raised informally are followed through. Similarly, when changes are introduced in response to the young people, the processes for communicating them are not yet formalised and robust. However, the young people report that they believe they are listened to although feel some of the forums are less effective than others.

Some procedures are undertaken to protect the young people from the risk of fire; checks of emergency lighting, fire fighting equipment and fire alarms are carried out and fire drills are arranged during boarding time each term. However, these procedures are not consistent or well recorded across all of the boarding areas. The school recognises that its approach to fire safety is not formalised and robust although it has been very responsive in immediately addressing the shortfalls identified. All the staff and young people spoken to have been involved in fire drills and know the action to take in the event of a fire alarm.

The staff recognise that the young people must have personal privacy. They are readily available to monitor and care for the boarders but aim not to be intrusive. In general the young people confirm that they believe the staff respect their privacy; however, there are times when they are in their en-suite that they are not aware someone has knocked their bedroom door and entered the room.

There are good processes for the selection and vetting of all staff who care for the young people who board. Enhanced CRB disclosures are sought and references are required prior to employment. The school employs Gap students from overseas; the required checks are made and once through they join the school. However, they do not have unsupervised access to the young people whilst a CRB disclosure is applied for. Contractors are also well screened and the site managers are well known to the school.

Good arrangements are made to protect the boarders from unsupervised contact with adults who have not been appropriately checked. The controlled entry systems for the boarding houses make them secure from public intrusion and none of the boarding houses are a thoroughfare for young people, staff or visitors. Once boarding starts, the young people are well supervised and in general there are good security arrangements for the school buildings. As stated previously, all staff are checked through the CRB when recruited to work at the school and similarly, CRB checks are required for any adults who live on the premises. The school uses taxi firms who employ robust checking procedures.

The school now employs a full-time Business Manager whose role is the coordination of health and safety across the site. There are many effective health and safety policies as well as risk assessments, to identify and reduce risk for boarders. However, the school acknowledges that the systems for implementing these are not yet fully effective. Maintenance systems are developing although there is still outstanding work required. Nevertheless, although some shortfalls were observed during the inspection, the school was very responsive in rectifying them immediately.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The young people have access to a wide range of activities when they board. Well supervised active sports as well as sedentary activities are arranged. Equally the young people have free time when they can be quiet or enjoy a pastime of their choice. Newspapers and journals are evident and there are a variety of videos and DVDs available. The young people can also use the school's computers or have their own laptops at school; internet sites are filtered and internet access is well monitored. There are excellent arrangements to ensure the young people have opportunities to study; sufficient study space is provided and 'prep' time is very well supervised.

The school encourages the young people to share any anxieties or concerns with staff. Each young person has a tutor they can turn to for personal guidance or support, but they are encouraged to speak with whoever they feel most comfortable with. Details of the school's independent listener are also well publicised and the appointment of a counsellor is a welcome development; she attends each week to see any young person who asks for particular personal guidance or support. Feedback from the young people is positive; they confirm they have excellent personal support and guidance, clearly identifying different people they can share any concerns with.

The school promotes its policy of equal opportunities, thereby facilitating a theme of respect among the young people and the staff; there is a strong ethos that all the young people are valued as individuals. Although historically Christian, the school embraces pupils from differing ethnic backgrounds and religious faiths. The staff are alert to those young people who struggle to integrate and ensure support is in place to prevent them being isolated. Many of the young people are from overseas and there is excellent support for those for whom English is not their first language.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Boarders have many opportunities to express their views and the school is committed to ensuring their views contribute to the operation of boarding. A boarders' council has recently been introduced and although it has only had three meetings, it already appears to be an effective vehicle for the transmission of views. Similarly, there is also boarding representation at school council. In addition, the governor who takes a lead in boarding issues ensures that she visits the boarding houses regularly to spend time talking with the young people. In general the feedback from the young people is positive about boarding at the school although they also suggest areas for development, as outlined in this report.

The young people are enabled to maintain contact with their families; pay phones are readily available for them to use and e-mail contact is also facilitated. Some concerns about the slowness of internet connection and its availability are currently being addressed by the school. In addition, there are no restrictions on mobile phones other than that they cannot be used during lessons, at formal occasions or late at night. Similarly, the school communicates promptly with parents about any significant welfare concerns relating to their child, either by telephone or through e-mail. The numbers of help lines and outside contact numbers that the young people may call if they are distressed are well publicised.

Comprehensive information is available for a young person who wishes to board at the school, as well as for their parents. Older pupils who are familiar with boarding support new boarders, which helps them to feel less isolated. The young people who board confirm that they feel looked after. Good communication amongst the staff ensures any young person who is initially anxious about being away from home is well supported.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The young people are encouraged to have bank accounts when they join the school and to then manage their own money. They are allowed to bring laptops and other valuable items into school and good provision is made for them to be kept in a lockable space. The school culture is one of trust and mutual respect but the young people confirm that if there ever is any petty theft, it is promptly and effectively managed by the staff.

The young people stay in light, heated and well ventilated accommodation which is comfortable. There are three separate houses, each protected by controlled entry systems. Most of the sixth form pupils benefit from a single room with their own en-suite facilities. Other boarders sleep in two or three bedded rooms which have a small washbasin, but they share communal toilets and showers. All the rooms seen are of an adequate size and are personalised to individual taste. They are clean and although showing some signs of wear and tear are generally

well-maintained. Each house has one or two small kitchens where the young people can prepare food; some equipment was found to be of an unacceptable standard although the school was responsive in ensuring it was immediately replaced. However, the kitchen areas were not included in the last environmental health inspection. Some of the houses report that there is insufficient hot water at times; the school have identified that significant structural work is required to rectify this and are making arrangements for it to be done at a time which will cause minimal disruption for the young people. The house staff have their own separate sleeping accommodation within or adjacent to the boarding areas.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Comprehensive up-to-date information that clearly outlines the school's boarding principles and practice, is made available for parents, boarders and staff.

Boarding has a high priority within the school. Recent changes in staffing and reorganisation of the boarding houses, has resulted in an enthusiastic staff team within boarding. As most of the boarding staff have a teaching role during the day, there is now increased continuity between boarding and the school day. The three boarding houses ensure the young people are appropriately separated by age and gender; there are no major discrepancies in the quality of each provision.

The school recognises that formalised evidenced monitoring of health & safety (including fire prevention) is inconsistent across the school and is not structured; however, there is good monitoring of the school's records of punishments, complaints and accidents. The local governing body and the governors of the United Church Schools Trust, which is ultimately responsible for the school, regularly visit the school and are well informed about its provision.

All staff involved with boarding are trained in child protection. When they initially take up their role they are mentored and guided through an informal induction. Each has a job description that confirms their responsibilities and they are appraised. All the staff have access to information to guide them in the school's approach to boarding, as well as how to safeguard the young people and promote their welfare. A boarding rota ensures that there are always sufficient staff on duty as well as a mix of males and females. Activities are well planned whereby the young people are appropriately supervised; each young person knows who is responsible for them and how they can contact staff.

The promotion of equality and diversity at the school is outstanding. The staff promote a theme of respect amongst all the young people; those from differing backgrounds and other religious faiths are welcomed and special diets are catered for. The staff are alert to those young people who struggle to integrate and ensure support is in place to prevent them from being isolated.

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 a record is maintained of all medication which is signed by the responsible member of staff and is regularly monitored by an appropriately designated member of staff (breach of NMS 15)
- enable improved communication between the catering staff and the boarders to ensure the boarders receive meals which are adequate in quantity (breach of NMS 24)
- review the sick bay arrangements to reduce the risk of cross infection by ensuring there are dedicated toilet and wash facilities for sick boarders, which are not shared by staff (breach of NMS 48)
- ensure there are detailed records to confirm that emergency lighting, fire alarms and fire fighting equipment are regularly checked in each of the houses and that the required fire drills are undertaken (breach of NMS 26)
- ensure the boarding house kitchens are inspected and monitored to confirm they meet the required food hygiene standards (breach of NMS 25)
- formalise the monitoring of the school's welfare provision, which is undertaken on behalf of the school's governing body or proprietor (breach of NMS 8).