

St Christopher School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Martha Nethaway
Type of Inspection	Key

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Nominated person	Richard Palmer
Date of last inspection	17 January 2007

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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 Christopher School is a co-educational, day and boarding school situated in Letchworth Garden City. Since its foundation in 1915 by members of the Theosophical Education Trust, the school has retained its philosophy of informality, vegetarianism and mutual tolerance. There is a strong history of self-government and an emphasis on respecting the views of all members of the school community which operates in an ethos of trust and respect. Registered as an educational charitable company, the school is administered by a board of governors.

The school aims to be a developing community of boarders and adults working together in an informal atmosphere where all are valued as individuals and encouraged to develop in curiosity, competence, judgement, kindness and courage. Boarders are thus prepared for happy and fulfilled lives in the service of others.

At the time of inspection, 506 pupils were on roll. The total number of pupils includes 201 girls and 305 boys. A total of 30 pupils were boarders.

Summary

This was an announced inspection. The inspection looked at the key boarding school national minimum standards under the Every Child Matters outcome groups.

The overall outcome judgement is good with an outstanding feature. The outcome judgement in enjoying and achieving is outstanding. The outcome areas for being healthy, staying safe, positive contribution, economic wellbeing and organisation is judged as good. There are no recommendations set.

The school's social, moral, spiritual and cultural provision and its links with the community are outstanding.

Rules in the boarding houses are kept to a minimum and are based on the safety and welfare of the individual and the community. Boarders understand the expectations and routines of boarding life and establish good routines and positive relationships. There is an open, informal and deeply respectful culture reinforced with rigorous policies for expectations and appropriate conduct. Teaching and non-teaching staff relationships are friendly, respectful and supportive of the needs of the boarders.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, the school was recommended to improve the policy in relation to the safe management of medication and this has now been fully addressed. The school has improved the arrangements to ensure full compliance with fire safety measures and there is further improvement planned with the installation of new electronic fire safety door closures. The school has addressed the water temperature control in relation to baths.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Boarders' health is well promoted. Health education is covered by programmes within the school curriculum and from the surgery. Staff are well informed about issues being covered with boarders who are in their charge and use the opportunity to continue the discussions with boarders in their houses. The school also provides drop in sessions with the school counsellor and school nurse. The school doctor holds an in school surgery once a week and there is an independent listener.

Boarders show a real willingness to engage in healthy pursuits and dialogue and this is evident in the issues raised at the food committee and activities organised for outward bound weekends. One boarder commented, 'There are lots of activities to do.'

Boarders receive excellent health care. The school has comprehensive records which have been developed by the nurse. The health records are an integral part of the surgery procedure and ensure that there is a real understanding of the individual boarders' medical needs. Records are kept securely. Medical conditions are recorded on 'pupil profiles' so that all relevant staff are aware of health implications that might affect a boarder's welfare.

Boarders are further protected because the nurse arranges regular training for staff on medical issues such as allergies, anaphylaxis, asthma and epilepsy. Boarders' medicines are kept securely and issued at appropriate times and records reflect full compliance with the school's procedures. Boarders are able to access first aid. Staff attend accredited first aid training which means they are competent and skilled to deal with medical emergencies.

The school has a large in-house catering team. The school considers carefully the content and balance of the meals served to boarders. The food provided at the school is vegetarian. There is a choice of hot meals, salads, desserts and fruit every day. Food is bought locally and prepared in the school's kitchens.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The system in place to promote the safety and welfare of boarders is good. Boarders commented that they feel 'safe and secure'. Boarders' personal privacy is respected. Staff have access to clear information, support, guidance and advice about child protection and safeguarding requirements. Policies are updated to reflect wider guidance regarding safeguarding measures. The school's protective strategies are very strong. The school acts appropriately when welfare concerns are suspected. The school has forged an effective relationship with the Local Children Safeguarding Board. Boarders receive training on staying safe in a range of different environments. This includes work on worries and strategies to avoid bullying. This ensures that boarders are protected from abuse.

The school has a culture of not accepting any bullying and understanding how to counter it if it does occur. Boarders are provided with a clear anti-bullying policy. Staff take an active lead with raising anti-bullying as a topic. This is regularly discussed with the head and deputy at their weekly lunch with elected officials of the school population.

Boarders are able to raise concerns and complaints. Boarders say that the school listens to what they have to say and takes appropriate action. Concerns expressed by parents or boarders are all recorded in pastoral files. Staff are given guidance on communication between home and school and responded promptly to parental enquiries. Parental concerns are dealt with face to

face if possible and otherwise by phone or email. The school has a formal complaints procedure, available to parents, which has been reviewed and updated.

Staff act as excellent role models for the boarders. The school does not have a complex set of rules and associated reactive sanctions. Rather, staff follow the simple rule that boarders should treat others as they would wish to be treated. As a result, boarders' behaviour is outstanding. There is an informal atmosphere where all are valued as individuals and encouraged to develop curiosity, competence, judgment, kindness and courage.

Fire safety is given good importance by the school. Fire drills are carried out each term in boarding time. This means that boarders know what to do in the event of an emergency. Health and safety is given an excellent priority by the school. Risk assessments are thorough and regularly reviewed. All staff are trained in writing risk assessments for their area of responsibility and for trips and expeditions. Access to and security of accommodation is good because access is restricted by keypad. There is a comprehensive electronic access system for the older boarders' facilities.

The school has in place a good vetting and selection policy and procedure. The senior management team ensure that staff employed at the school are deemed suitable to work with children. All the necessary checks are completed including an enhanced Criminal Record Bureau check. The headteacher and other key senior staff have attended advanced training on safer recruitment practices. As a result, the school has standardised the recruitment process further to comply with best practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders receive outstanding personal support from staff. This is underpinned by excellent pastoral care. Boarders and their individual needs are well known by staff. The relationship between home, school and the boarding houses is seen as crucial in ensuring that boarders' needs are properly considered at all times. Excellent communication between teachers, company advisers and house parents ensures that all resident staff are kept informed of boarders' progress. All boarding houses have a mix of teaching and non-teaching staff who meet with the headteacher weekly to discuss house issues and individual boarders. One parent commented, 'I am very impressed with pastoral care, the boarding staff are always available in the houses. They communicate with parents very well and the nurse is always very accommodating.'

The school values diversity in all areas. Boarders are proud that they have no uniform and all of the school community are called by their first names. The school is entirely vegetarian enabling people of all faiths and those of none to share meals. The school operates on a basis of trust where all are valued as individuals. The programme of educational visits in the United Kingdom and abroad is very wide-ranging. For example, these include culture and language exchange trips and end of year expeditions. This means that boarders are developing into well-rounded individuals.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Boarders are able to positively contribute to boarding life. The school has a strong convention of consulting with boarders over matters of policy, routine and their views of boarding and

school life. The boarding houses are small communities where all are valued as individuals. Staffing ratios are generous and enable all resident staff to have an excellent knowledge of boarders' individual needs and circumstances at all times.

There is a long tradition of self-government. The headteacher commented, 'School self-government is almost entirely what the children themselves make of it. Personal responsibility, freedom of speech and the impulse to reach a shared view remain at the heart of the self-government system here.' This produces very lively discussions, which are led by the views of the boarders. Among some of the issues that have been settled by council has been the establishment of the coffee shop, the setting up of a system to give grants to clubs and societies and the establishment of an annual summer fair. There is a boarders' committee, food committee and school council. The school also completes surveys and focus group discussion to gain views. Boarders are encouraged to voice their opinions and successfully do this and the headteacher is always available to see boarders individually or collectively.

Boarders are able to maintain contact with their family and significant others as they are allowed mobile phones and there are also pay phones available. Email communication and social networking with restricted times for connection, is also possible.

Prospective boarders coming to the school are managed in a planned and sensitive manner. Written guidance is provided for all boarders. Experienced boarders are asked to 'buddy' a new boarder and all staff are carefully briefed in advance of all new boarders and any specific needs that they may have. The school is very sensitive to the demands that parents and boarders face when they start boarding and have a range of staff and expertise to deal with separation anxiety, homesickness and for boarders adjusting to new routines and the school environment.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Boarders' possessions and money are protected. Boarding staff keep receipts for boarders' expenditure and keep money, tokens and rail warrant books in a secure place. Boarders' pocket money is received termly and banked through the school's finance office. There is a coffee shop in the senior school.

The boarding houses are named Arundale and Arunside. Arundale accommodates boarders between 14-16. This is located on the first and second floor above the main school. It is split into two zones called Old House and Cloisters. Old House is where the Year 8 and Year 9 boarders are accommodated. Cloisters accommodates Year 10 and Year 11.

Arunside accommodates boarders between 17-18. This is a separate self-contained boarding house just off campus. One wing contains the accommodation and staff for those that remain at the weekend.

In Arundale and Arunside, all boarders are provided with their own rooms and good access to showering and bathing facilities. There are ample toilets for the number of boarders using the range of different accommodation.

Boarders have good sleeping accommodation and it is secure from public intrusion and there are facilities for organised and private study. There is access to safe recreational indoor and outdoor areas. There is separate accommodation if a boarder is unwell. The effectiveness of

cleaning and maintenance of the boarding accommodation is judged as good. The housekeeping team take particular pride in meeting the needs of individual boarders.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The senior management and teaching staff contribute effectively to a well organised and well managed boarding school. The headteacher takes a deep personal interest in the boarding life of the school and its boarders. There is always a senior manager on duty on the weekdays and at weekends. The headteacher is always on call during out of office hours and can be contacted by any member of staff or parent in the event of a crisis. Everything that staff do is for the benefit of ensuring that boarders are happy, secure, safe and achieving. One parent commented, 'There is an excellent family atmosphere. I have complete confidence in the boarding and teaching staff.'

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The boarders are currently involved in running committees on the environment, charities and food. Much of the work the boarders do reflects the school’s aims and ethos of valuing diversity and encouraging the boarders to explore life and the world around them. There is an excellent after school debating club as well as a range of other opportunities to become involved in community work locally, nationally and overseas.

Staffing levels are extremely generous and arrangements for organised trips off site are well planned and coordinated. Boarders may leave the site unaccompanied at certain times. For example, trips into town. Staff ensure that all boarders fully comply with the thorough signing out and in procedures.

The school has a statement of boarding principles and practice. The handbooks are sent annually to all parents and boarders and these are available on the school website.

The school gives good priority to staff training. This ensures that staff are skilled and competent to carry out their responsibilities and duties effectively in relation to the promotion of the welfare of boarders. Boarding staff attend regular meetings. This includes weekly meetings with the headteacher. A written daily report is completed by all boarding staff at the end of each duty so that all boarding staff can keep up to date with boarders’ progress. This ensures that boarders' achievements are acknowledged and celebrated and concerns can be addressed without delay. As a result, boarders receive the best possible boarding experience.

The senior management team regularly monitor risk assessments, discipline records, complaints and accidents. Action is taken in relation to any trends or themes. This ensures that the school's record keeping contributes to boarders' welfare, effectively.

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

There are no recommendations.