

Appleford School

Inspection report for Residential Special School

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Inspector	Jennifer Reed
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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Appleford School is a co-educational school for children aged seven to 14 years with dyslexia and associated learning difficulties, with options of full boarding, weekly boarding and day provision. The school has a Christian character and close links with its local church; the school is inclusive and welcomes children of other faiths.

There are two boarding houses; one for boys and one for girls. Boarding provides a structured environment which encourages and supports children in the development of personal organisation and life skills. The care support ratio available to children is usually at least one member of staff for every eight children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced, three day inspection of boarding provision and the school was inspected against the residential special school national minimum standards. The inspection process also included the monitoring of the school's progress in addressing the recommendations made at the previous inspection.

At the time of the inspection there were 51 children in boarding provision; 13 girls and 15 boys took an active part in the inspection process. Furthermore, prior to the inspection, 32 boarders and 11 parents completed survey questionnaires to contribute their views about the operation of the boarding provision.

The school provides a good standard of boarding provision, with some outstanding features. Children are looked after by competent boarding staff and parents appreciate the kindness and the good, individual support staff give to their children. The promotion of children's health and well-being is excellent. Children are encouraged to develop their interests, helped to make and sustain friendships and are supported to take part in community activities. The inspection identified shortfalls in some management processes and recording practices, the staff training programme and in relation to some facilities provided in boarding houses.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, the school was asked to make improvements in three areas and the school has addressed each matter satisfactorily. The school has reviewed and updated its complaints policy and children now sign a dated record whenever they receive their pocket money from their finances held by the school. The school has sought planning permission to build a new dining hall to improve eating facilities for children; the building work is expected to be completed in 2011.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The promotion of children's health and well-being is excellent. Children generally continue to be registered with their family doctor, dentist and optician, and parents make arrangements for them to receive routine medical checks during holiday periods. Nevertheless, the school has established links with a range of local medical practitioners to provide health services for those boarders from overseas, and for any boarder who may require medical attention during the term. Children have easy access to the specialist therapies provided within the school, for example, speech therapy, occupational therapy and counselling services. Cleaning and laundry routines within boarding provision are carried out rigorously and children benefit from living within a healthy environment. Staff sensitively manage children's personal hygiene issues and any soiled clothing or bedding is discretely dealt with.

The 28 children spoken with during the inspection and 94 per cent of the children surveyed, reported that they are well looked after when they are ill. Sick children can spend time in bed in each boarding house's surgery and their welfare is closely monitored by staff. One parent commented, 'boarding is an incredibly caring environment and the children know who to turn to at all times'.

Staff complete training in emergency first aid and all accidents are recorded and monitored to ensure children's welfare is promoted. The boarding houses have systems in place for the administration of medication and clear, written records are kept to eliminate the likelihood of error. All medication is securely stored to keep children safe. The school gains sufficient medical information about each child, prior to admission, including consent for giving of non-prescribed medicines for minor ailments. This good practice helps to make sure that boarders receive appropriate medical support and their individual medical needs are known and can be met by the school; for example, managing particular allergies.

Medical, cultural and religious needs relating to food are shared with the kitchen staff and the chef makes sure that each child is provided with meals that are suitable for them to eat. Additionally, all children have completed a list of food items they dislike and the chef provides a choice of meals ensuring that every child will enjoy eating something. Meals are well presented and well cooked and locally sourced fresh produce is used whenever possible. The varied menus offer children choice about what they eat and meals provide a balanced, nutritious and healthy diet. The kitchen organises regular themed days when children have the opportunity to try food from different cultures; recently a pirates day was arranged. The school has looked at how best to manage mealtimes within the limitations of the dining hall's structure. New systems have been implemented to address the level of noise and to decrease time spent in serving food to children while the school awaits the building of a new dining hall. Most boarders surveyed and all boarders spoken with agreed that the food is good. For example, one boarder wrote, 'the food is great!' and another said, 'It is five star!'

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The boarding houses have clear policies regarding privacy and confidentiality and staff work in ways that promote children's dignity. The girls say they have sufficient privacy living in boarding; however, the majority of boys disagreed with this view in relation to dressing in their dormitories. Information is securely stored and staff understand the need for confidentiality.

The school has updated its child protection policy in line with current guidance and legislation. The head of care acts as the school's safeguarding co-ordinator and she has attended relevant training courses in child protection. Appropriate systems are in place to safeguard children and boarding staff know how to report any concern or suspicion they may have about the welfare of children. All staff complete regular foundation training in child protection matters and they know when to appropriately share information to safeguard children. A zero tolerance stance is taken by the school in regard to any episode of bullying and a pro-active approach to the issue is encouraged. For example, the school takes part in anti-bullying week events and operates a 'telling' school culture, where pupils are encouraged to speak with an adult about anything of concern. Nevertheless, boys in boarding provision say that some bullying does occur in the school; however, they feel able to discuss this with staff and feel confident that they will be supported and the matter swiftly dealt with. Children say they feel safe living in boarding houses.

Most boarders know what to do if they want to make a complaint; generally they chose to raise their issues directly with members of staff or alternatively, tell their parents about their concerns. The school's policy informs parents how to make a complaint. The school has recently updated its complaints policy and procedure, to make improvements to the process. Records are kept of any complaint made about the school; however, the school has not contacted Ofsted in accordance with the national minimum standards, in regard to a serious complaint made against the school.

The school has a number of policies regarding the protection of missing children which guide staff on how to keep children safe and respond to any unauthorised absence. The school devises strategies to reduce the likelihood of children going missing and since the previous inspection there have been no missing children from the school. The school does not have a system in place to notify the appropriate authorities, for example the Department for Education and Ofsted, of significant events relating to the protection of children; however, at the time of the inspection, this shortfall had not had an adverse impact on outcomes for children.

Children are assisted to develop appropriate behaviour through the school's behaviour management approach, modelling and supervision and pupils earning rewards for acceptable behaviour. Although some children report that this feels too onerous at times, the boarding houses do not implement the 'credits' system over

week-end periods, ensuring all boarders, whether at home or at school are treated fairly in their free time. Permissible sanctions are given for any misdemeanour occurring in teaching time or in boarding provision; they are recorded and regularly monitored, ensuring children are safeguarded. Similarly, measures of restraint are recorded in a dedicated book. However, one restraint undertaken, identified during the inspection, had not been recorded; this matter was rectified during the inspection. Furthermore, staff have not received regular and updated training in the use of control and restraint techniques; this shortfall could potentially place children at risk of harm.

Health and safety matters are robustly addressed and the school has rigorous systems in place to ensure that children live in a safe and secure environment. Detailed risk assessments are completed for the premises, activities, animals living on site and the operation of the school, including boarding provision. Regular utility, water temperature and fire safety checks are carried out. Children and staff take part in frequent fire drills, including during night-time hours, to make sure that everyone knows how to safely evacuate the boarding houses in an emergency situation.

Senior staff have completed training in safer recruitment practices and the school has set up a recruitment and selection system to reflect these principles. The system in place is sound and appropriate checks are made to ensure that only suitable persons are employed to work at the school. Nevertheless, one record looked at showed that the school had not recorded one aspect of the recruitment process for a particular member of staff.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Care staff actively support children's education, ensuring regular attendance and punctuality at lessons. The close working relationships and the good communication established between the teaching and care staff, contribute to promoting individual children's educational progress. Boarders have easy access to the school's educational and recreational facilities outside of teaching time and benefit from supervised periods for music practice. Teaching staff also help children to prepare for independence as they move towards adulthood; for example, the senior children were making and decorating Christmas cakes.

Boarders can take part in activities outside class time, both within the school and in the community. For example, children attend the local scouts, guides, brownies and youth clubs and each Saturday, the boarding houses organise a trip out for the children. A range of activities are arranged within the boarding houses and children are encouraged to take part in at least two of these sessions each week. Activities take into account the safety of children at all times and recorded risk assessments are made to minimise unnecessary risks. Staff acknowledge that children need personal time and space and boarding routines ensure that children receive an appropriate balance between free time and organised activities during the evenings and week-ends.

Children benefit from the excellent individual support they receive. The boarders have a range of needs and difficulties and they are helped by the school's specialist teaching staff and therapists, as well as by the structured boarding processes. Within the curriculum, children attend personal, social, health, economic education and citizenship lessons and meet regularly with their group tutors, providing them with support and guidance in their personal development. In boarding provision, detailed care plans provide staff with clear guidance about how best to meet the individual needs of each child and identify areas where they may need additional support. Children's presenting difficulties are sensitively managed; staff liaise with parents to make sure that children are looked after in ways that are acceptable and suitable to the child and their family. One parent commented, 'my child gets very homesick and the staff deal with this really well'. Staff also find ways to make sure children feel comfortable and enjoy their stay in boarding houses, for example, the use of a star projector or bedtime stories to soothe children and help them settle at night.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The school provides a range of opportunities for children to influence the way the school is run and to make decisions about their lives. For example, children can make comments about the meals provided within the suggestion book kept in the dining hall or alternatively, make their views known at the regular boarding house meetings or through their school council representatives. Children spoken with demonstrate their ease in talking with adults and expressing their opinions about matters. Most boarders say they can identify an adult they can speak to about any concerns they may have and they are listened to and taken seriously. The school has made some changes to practice as a result of listening to children.

Admission and leaving process are well planned and are agreed with each child. Prospective children wishing to attend the school spend at least two nights in boarding prior to admission, to find out if this is a suitable option for them. Boarding staff assess the needs of each child and consider the likely effects of their admission on the rest of the children living in the boarding house. Routines within boarding are varied when children are approaching their leaving date, to provide new opportunities which will help them prepare for their next school. For example, they may take more responsibility for organising their personal items and clothing. Each child in boarding provision has an excellent, detailed care plan which provides clear guidance to staff on how best to look after them. Plans are reviewed at least twice each term to make sure they reflect children's current support needs.

Most children surveyed said that they could easily contact their families and friends. Boarders are allowed their mobile phones at set times and can freely make calls during these periods. Children can also use the boarding house phones or the pay phone to make calls in private. Additionally, children can use electronic mail to make contact with others; however, access to social networking sites is not permitted, protecting children from the risk of possible harm.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The boarding houses provide a tuck shop and boarders are able to purchase any toiletries or personal items they may need. A pocket money system has been devised which requires boarders to sign for any money they take from their finances held by the school.

Daily routines within the boarding houses provide some opportunities for children to develop independence skills, for example, making their beds, tidying their dormitories and sorting their laundry. Most boarders require some support in organising their clothing and personal belongings and the structured routines in boarding help to minimise difficult tasks. Children are given more responsibility for managing their clothing during their final term, to help prepare them for their next school. Staff have recently been made aware that some children may need more help over a longer period to manage such tasks successfully and timeframes for this work are under review. This is good reflective practice for improvement in outcomes for children.

Girls board in Elston House and boys board in Shrewton House. Some parents comment that the girl's house provides a better standard of accommodation and this view is reflected in the children's survey responses. For example, all seven girls surveyed reported that their boarding house provides good accommodation whereas only half of the boys surveyed shared this view. The visible differences are the size of the houses and boys' dormitories accommodate higher numbers of children than the girls' dormitories. Both houses are well maintained and repairs are promptly carried out; the houses have sufficient light and ventilation. Cleaning standards are very high throughout the houses and all accommodation is carpeted and decorated to a satisfactory standard. Boarders sleep in dormitories where many children sleep in bunk beds; two sets of bunk beds, one set in each house, are not of the same standard as others provided. Four boys said they were dissatisfied with the quality or comfort of their beds. The common rooms are well used and some furnishings are looking tired. The school's development plan shows that some refurbishment of the boarding houses is planned this year.

There are sufficient bathrooms, showers and toilets with suitable locks fitted, providing children with privacy and safety. However, one shower in the boys' house has faulty doors which can compromise boys' privacy and in one shower in the girls' house, the lever is too stiff for most girls to turn on the water. Water discharge temperatures are regularly monitored to ensure children are protected.

Over some week-ends, when many boarders have gone home and numbers are particularly low in boarding provision, the school makes alternative accommodation arrangements. The girls move over to join the boys in Shrewton House and separate arrangements are made within the building; the boys are accommodated on one floor and the girls on another.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff help children to understand and appreciate each others differences on a daily basis and the school celebrates diversity through themed days and discussion. Staff ensure children's dignity is preserved by staff supporting children to complete tasks that they find difficultly in doing, helping them to benefit from the same opportunities that other children enjoy. Staff make sure that children do not suffer any stigmatisation and the school encourages boarders to take part in community activities. Boarders attend a local church service each Sunday, dressed in their school uniform; only children of other faiths are permitted not to attend the service. Some boarders thought this practice was unfair, as their peers who were spending the week-end at home, did not have to either go to church or to wear school uniform. The boarders' views were shared with the senior management of the school during the inspection and the school has agreed to consider this issue.

The school has a Statement of Purpose which describes how the school and the boarding provision operate. It is reviewed annually to ensure that it reflects current practice and it is available to parents and children. The school has a clear admissions policy and a development plan which outlines how boarding provision will be supported in future years.

Boarding staff are well trained and knowledgeable about their work and this underpins the sound standard of care given to boarders. Furthermore, staff are guided in their work by the school's policies and clear boarding principles and they are robustly supported in their work by the competent leadership and supervision provided by the experienced and qualified head of care. Boarders benefit from being cared for by a consistent boarding team, supported by the school's management structure. Regular care meetings ensure continuity in caring for children and contribute to ensuring boarders are well looked after. Additionally, boarding matters are discussed at weekly senior management meetings, ensuring boarders benefit from coherent support provided across the school. Records kept within the boarding provision are well organised and give a good account of the operation of the boarding houses, contributing to safeguarding boarders and promoting their welfare.

The proprietor of the school carries out an unannounced inspection of the boarding houses each month, to monitor the quality of the boarding provision and the care given to boarders. A written report of this visit is given to the headteacher, enabling any recommendations made to be promptly acted upon.

All parents surveyed made positive comments about the care given to their children in boarding, particularly praising the good leadership and the kindness shown to children. Parental survey comments included, 'care from boarding staff is excellent', and 'we would like to acknowledge the kindness shown by care staff to our children'. Similarly, 30 of the 32 children surveyed reported that boarding staff knew them well

and 25 children surveyed believed that boarding staff cared about how they were doing.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Compliance with national minimum standards

The school meets all the national minimum standards, with the exception of any listed below. To ensure that the school meets the national minimum standards the school needs to...

- ensure that serious complaints against the school or the staff of the school are notified to Ofsted (national minimum standard 4.7)
- put in place a system to promptly notify Ofsted, the local social services authority, the Department for Education and the placing authority of any of the events listed within standard 7.2 (national minimum standard 7.2)
- provide or secure the provision of training for staff in safe and appropriate physical intervention techniques with children, and the circumstances in which they may be used, which includes training in reducing or avoiding the need to use physical intervention (national minimum standard 10.12)
- ensure that any record of a measure of physical restraint is completed at the earliest opportunity within the dedicated book kept and that this is no later than 24 hours after the incident (national minimum standard 10.14)
- ensure that direct contact by the school with each referee to verify the reference is evidenced in recruitment records held at the school (national minimum standard 27.2)
- ensure that all children are provided with suitable beds (national minimum standard 24.5)
- ensure that all showers are of a good standard and suitable to meet the needs of the children. (national minimum standard 25.1)