

High Close School

Inspection report for Residential Special School

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Inspector	Merryl Wahogo
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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

High Close School is operated by Barnardos. It provides for day attendance and fortnightly boarding for pupils aged from eight to 17 years, with most boarders being of senior school age.

The school takes young people who have been unable to succeed in mainstream school and may have been excluded from previous schools, and have statements of special educational need arising from emotional and behavioural difficulties. The range of additional specific special needs with which the school is working is broad, and may include young people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, autistic spectrum disorders, speech and language difficulties and visual and auditory impairment.

Boarders are accommodated in four houses with up to nine places in single bedrooms, but can accommodate an additional boarder sharing, for short periods. Each house has a designated staff team and unit manager. There is a separate unit for day and extended day pupils. The day unit has a separate dedicated staff team.

The ethos of the school is to reward good behaviours, within the overall context of a behaviour management system, in which all care and teaching staff receive training.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was the key unannounced inspection covering all outcome areas. All outcome areas have been found to be outstanding. This is doubtless because the head of care and all senior managers are proactive in driving constant improvements. It is also because staff feel valued and work unusually well together, with very few moving on. As a result, young people love being at this school and a constant refrain is 'It's a lot better than my old school'.

The very minor recommendation made at the last inspection has been acted on.

Improvements since the last inspection

The external visitors are now dating their letters to the young people. This allows young people to know when to expect another visit.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

High Close works with young people with an extremely wide range of health needs. These are particularly well documented in health plans. Staff are especially good at using the expertise of external agencies to support these health needs. For example, they ensure that some young people access the NHS 'stop smoking' clinic and others have sessions with a substance misuse worker. All young people are registered with the local GP. Staff ensure that they have all the necessary details of young people's medication and coordinate well with the local GP and pharmacy. This means that they always have the right medication available, despite young people not being continuously in their care. Additionally, staff store medicines according to pharmacist requirements and record the administration of medication extremely thoroughly. Staff liaise closely with parents and external agencies to ensure that prescribed medication is entirely appropriate. All this means that young people and their parents can feel very secure about being kept in the best possible health.

The catering and domestic manager has oversight of the nutritional value of meals provided in the school dining hall. This ensures that meals meet the new standards for nutritional value. She ensures that menus in the dining hall include meals from a variety of cultural backgrounds, as well as popular English meals. The cooks now provide homemade soups as these are viewed as more nutritious than tinned soups. Additionally, vegetarian alternatives are available at all meals as are allergen-free meals for those who need them. Young people make choices within the units about the tea-time meals and send their requests to her for ordering. Staff negotiate with young people to ensure that evening meals are also healthy and varied. Within the units, staff and young people occasionally prepare food from one particular culture as part of a cultural evening. There have been Mexican and Chinese evenings, for example. The associated foods may then be introduced in the dining hall if they are enjoyed in the units. Where necessary, staff encourage young people to record their daily intake of fruit and vegetables to promote eating 'five a day'. This all means that young people are mostly entirely satisfied with the meals provided and are getting the best nutrition possible during their stays.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

High Close takes issues of privacy and confidentiality very seriously. For example, if a member of staff needs to remove a young person's file from the main office, they have to sign it out and back in. Management and staff use closed circuit TV appropriately and sensitively, such that young people appreciate it.

While there are detailed and thorough policies on handling complaints, these are exceptionally rare. When they are made, staff take them seriously and follow them up thoroughly. Management and all staff take safeguarding even more seriously, approaching young people with great humanity. It is constantly on the agenda, both

formally and informally, in relation to every aspect of the work with the young people. The head of care now sits on a borough-wide safeguarding board. Both care and teaching staff are alert to the issues, being proactive in guiding young people towards safer behaviour. Care staff also follow policies and procedures closely, being careful to record anything that is a source of concern. The school's field social workers are highly valued by staff and are central to safeguarding, especially in relation to home-school links. All this means that young people learn to feel safe enough to confide in staff. One young person acknowledges that staff cannot protect them 100% of the time. Another says, however, 'They'll follow you when you're angry, so you can't hurt yourself or someone else'.

Inevitably, bullying occurs in a school of this type. The young people, nevertheless, express great confidence that if they report it, or it is witnessed by staff, it will be dealt with helpfully. Staff ask young people to sign an anti-bullying charter and fill in an annual survey on bullying. This sends a strong message to the pupils, but also allows management to consider targeted ways of reducing it.

It is striking that young people never stray far from the boundaries of the school, even when very distressed. Supervision levels are also such that when they do, there is a member of staff close by who works with them to help them return. One young person agrees, saying appreciatively 'They stop me running away'.

The approach to behaviour management in this school is exceptionally thorough. Staff are happy about the new program in place which allows them to understand behaviours in great detail. This includes learning about cultural variations in what is deemed to be respectful or rude behaviour. It also allows them to restrain young people, when it is absolutely necessary, in safer and less stressful ways. Staff are meticulous about recording incidents, including all necessary detail. The senior management team have adapted an excellent computerised system for analysing incidents. This allows them to interrogate data to reveal patterns that they can then address. Much depends on highly detailed information on individual risk assessments, which staff are good at updating. The fact that young people sign their agreement to sanctions reflects both the fairness of sanctions and the level of trust in staff. Staff record, with equal dedication, every aspect of good behaviour and how it is rewarded. This means that young people have the best possible chance of being supported to improve their behaviour.

Management ensure that all the necessary risk assessments are completed for different areas of the site and all activities. Unit managers are completing a large piece of work reviewing and, where necessary, revising all risk assessments. Staff complete regular fire training and carry out unusually frequent fire drills, such that all young people are confident about how to evacuate units. Unit managers ensure that fire checks are conducted according to the required frequencies. The catering and domestic manager checks fridge and freezer temperatures in all units daily and is therefore able to fix any problems arising. This means that young people are continuously in a very safe environment.

The senior management team maintains a high standard of recruitment practice,

based on staying updated with safer recruitment developments. This, in part, contributes to the fact that there is a very stable staff team. In turn, this consistency results in young people being able to form excellent relationships with staff, which promote their progress.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people at this school have both a wide range of attainment levels and of educational needs. Residential staff support their educational progress in a variety of ways, based on clear and detailed documentation. Key workers collaborate well with class tutors, so there is a continuous reassessment of educational as well as behavioural targets supported by both staff groups. Residential staff escort young people to and from school, and also support teaching staff in relation to behaviour management when necessary. Unit managers and deputies attend handovers with school staff to enhance continuity for the young people. This maximises the chances that young people will make educational as well as behavioural progress.

Young people are very enthusiastic about the wide variety of regular and annual activities available to them. These range from making use of sports facilities in the units and the new sports hall to annual trips abroad. For several years now, young people have been able to participate in a trip to Goa to learn about life for children there. Some go instead, on a skiing trip and others go on the school's activities week. Photos in units and school buildings evidence the huge enjoyment young people derive from these trips. Indeed, young people are always eager to talk about them.

The school has introduced the services of an occupational therapist in addition to offering others such as speech and language therapy. This is relatively new and she is working hard to get to know young people and to ensure staff understand what she has to offer. Residential staff are already enthusiastic about the opportunity to enhance the support they give relevant young people, based on her advice. One young person says 'This school has done everything for me, they try their best for everyone. If I didn't come here, I would be someone different! I love this school and what they have done!'. At times staff go out of their way to support young people when they identify a need. Residential staff are so good at working with young people and their families that some parents and children say 'It's like another big FAMILY'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

One young person says 'I've only been here a week, but I feel I can have my say'. This reflects a combination of staff's listening skills and the opportunities provided by unit meetings and school council. Staff are proud of the fact that young people have driven the purchase of a commemorative bench for an ex-pupil who died tragically.

Also, young people make it very clear that they feel relaxed about telling staff their views. One example of the result is that management have agreed that year 11 pupils can have their mobile phones in school as a privilege.

There is a careful and thorough admissions process ensuring that new pupils and their parents are fully aware of what is involved in becoming a resident. This allows staff to gather all the information they may need, including cultural and religious backgrounds, to make the young person feel welcome. New residents have a probationary period so that everybody can assess whether the placement is entirely appropriate. Staff begin to prepare for transition as far ahead as may be necessary for each young person. The head of care ensures that the local authority are aware of the needs of young people leaving their care. This is especially true when long term planning is important. Care and teaching staff coordinate their efforts to prepare young people for moving on from the school. Occasionally they take exceptional steps to support young people in this process, backed by the field social worker attached to the school. This all means that young people can gain the maximum possible benefit from their time at High Close.

Staff have recently combined care plans with placement plans so that they contain all the information they might need on the units. As a result, these plans now give a clearer and fuller picture of the young person's needs and progress. This includes information care staff need to support the work of the teachers. Staff keep more sensitive and confidential information on the main files in the school office. It is notable that care staff are eager to learn everything possible that may support young people. Key workers ensure that they provide detailed and accurate information in time for reviews. This contributes to young people and their families feeling supported, as opposed to threatened, by the process.

Care staff support the relationship between young people and their families in a number of ways. Perhaps the most important is that they create the best possible understanding between themselves and the families. One parent says they have a lot of contact and 'speak the same language'. She expressed her feeling that the unit was like a home-from-home and her gratitude to the staff for 'working in [her child's] best interests'. Young people explain that they are able to use their mobile phones to ring home, but that parents can ring them on the landline pay-phones. These are in booths providing privacy, as well as lots of useful information on posters. One girl appreciates the fact that there is a comfortable stool to sit on in the booth during calls.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The school has altered some bedrooms so that they have become particularly spacious. These are then used as an incentive for the older pupils in residence to maintain good behaviour. They are also a way of encouraging young people to take care of their environment and make it homely. One unit is also trialling an en-suite room in a further development to this process. In combination with work experience

placements and school courses, this provides encouragement towards independent living. Bedrooms are all of a good size and young people personalise them with pictures, photos and posters. Staff also help them choose and shop for items like lamps.

All the units are beautifully furnished and refurbished whenever necessary. Each unit has essentially the same facilities, but different décor. In combination with the excellent relationships with staff, this results in each group of young people declaring that their unit is best! They express pride in their surroundings and this is confirmed by the absence of damage. Staff choose some pictures and posters, such as one that declares 'diversity is about embracing others'. Whenever possible though, staff and young people go shopping together to choose new ornaments and furnishings.

There are one or two showers that switch off too rapidly or are poorly angled. This is the only thing with which young people are not satisfied. Even then, they say they can use another shower or the bath.

Despite lunchtimes being staggered to allow all the young people time to sit in the school dining hall at lunchtime, it is rather crowded. This set up does not lend itself well to managing young people behaviours, which can be triggered under such circumstances.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Management are committed to the idea that staff cannot do their best in this area without first examining their attitudes and values. As a result, all staff are now completing an e-learning course which requires them to develop this insight. They are also now taking a 'learning journal' to supervision. In addition, as a result of some new admissions, management have made sensory impairment training available. This work is supported in school via the Personal, Social, Health and Moral Education curriculum content. Staff signpost young people to supportive organisations in relation to some diversity issues such as sexual identity. The staff group, including senior managers, are themselves diverse and very cohesive, presenting an excellent role model for the young people. Photographs, displayed in the units, suggest that all young people are well integrated. Some of these show them enjoying the cultural evenings, wearing appropriate costumes, for example. These evenings showcase many aspects of the particular culture as possible, not just the food. This means that young people are increasingly able to explore their feelings about people from diverse backgrounds, whilst learning about them in relaxed ways.

There is a new Principal, who is already establishing a very good relationship with staff and young people. As a result, the atmosphere around the school and in the units remains warm and calm.

The head of care reviewed and revised the Statement of Purpose in July 2010 to

reflect the wider range of needs of the young people. This document is exceptionally detailed and indicates the school's commitment to delivering the outcomes required by government. Each unit also develops a young person's guide, which again follows certain patterns, but reflects the individuality within the unit. These guides are particularly homely and welcoming.

Budget economies imposed by government are impacting on all areas of the school's work. The senior management team, however, has not reduced staffing, leaving staff and young people feeling secure. Staffing remains at a level appropriate to providing all necessary supervision. This very stable group support each other across the units when necessary. Barnardos provide a wide range of training and development opportunities, contributing to the stability of the staff group. Staff find the e-learning courses, with hyperlinks to further information, stimulating and interesting. The stability and high morale of the staff group means that young people benefit from real continuity. This contributes to the 'family atmosphere' within the units.

Senior staff provide regular and thorough supervision, backed by the provision of supervision skills training. They also ensure every member of staff has an annual appraisal. Supervisors are meticulous in their recording of all aspects of supervision and staff find it useful and supportive.

This is a highly qualified staff group, with several already having, or are completing, a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at level 4 in care, and all others having or completing a NVQ at level 3. There are three qualified members of staff in the field social work department and both the head of care and his deputy have social work qualifications.

Seniors are excellent at ensuring that they monitor all necessary documents and clearly evidence this. Equally, independent visitors provide the school with reports from their visits to the units. The visitors also write letters to the young people in each unit, detailing what they found. This means that young people feel secure that there are outsiders that know about and understand their lives in the units.

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...

- consider ways to make lunchtime in the dining hall a calmer experience for the young people (NMS 15)
- consider ways of improving the quality of the showers in some units (NMS 25).