

# Cobham Hall

Inspection report for boarding school

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<b>Inspection date</b>	19/05/2011
<b>Inspector</b>	Sophie Wood
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<b>Setting address</b>	Cobham Hall, Cobham, GRAVESEND, Kent, DA12 3BL
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<b>Head/ Principal</b>	Paul Mitchell
<b>Nominated person</b>	
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	21/02/2008

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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**

Cobham Hall School was founded in 1962 and is set within 150 acres of grade two listed parkland. Approximately 200 girls aged between 11 and 19 attend the school. Just over half are day pupils, the remainder board on either a weekly or full basis. As a long standing member of Round Square, an association of schools world wide which subscribe to the philosophy of the educationalist Kurt Hahn, the school shares the belief that: 'a child's learning should go beyond academic excellence. Above all, the idea of responsibility and service to others is fostered.' This statement is borne out through the wide variety of experiences this membership brings to pupils in terms of overseas travel to attend seminars and conferences, working to fund raise for charities and sponsoring children in third world countries. Approximately half of the pupils are British, the remainder represent over 30 different nationalities and this factor is quite deliberately celebrated by the school, which places the acceptance and understanding of a multi-cultural community at the heart of its ethos.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Boarders thoroughly enjoy their time at this school. A rich mixture of girls from countries around the world are provided with the individual support they need in order to achieve academically, whilst developing the skills they need to prepare them well for life beyond their school years.

Older pupils present as grounded young women who hold clear aspirations and are ready for impending adulthood, with the vast majority electing to pursue further educational routes.

The school is small enough to offer very personalised services and staff across all disciplines are passionate about providing a nurturing and stimulating environment.

A clear recently historic omission in the school's recruitment practices has an overriding negative effect upon the safeguarding and overall outcome judgements. This has resulted in the school being judged to be offering a satisfactory service, yet there are many factors which would ordinarily describe the provision as good, with outstanding features. The senior management team took immediate appropriate steps to address this shortfall before the inspection ended, in the best interests of safeguarding the pupils.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Ten recommendations were made from the previous inspection of 21 February 2008. The school was asked to improve upon the quality of health records, to consult with

boarders about their health care and to review the dual role in terms of nurses also having a housemistress role. Health records are now clearer and boarders confirm that good consultation mechanisms ensure they take an active role in terms of their own health care needs. Only one nurse is in post with a dual housemistress role and although her practice protects confidentiality, there is still a perception from a number of boarders that this could be compromised.

The school was asked to expand upon its personal, health and social education programme and the developments which have occurred provides boarders with a broader learning base, thus equipping them to make informed lifestyle choices. Written literature in terms of staff policies and pupil guidance has been reviewed and updated, as was recommended: this now provides greater clarity for its intended audience.

Written records pertaining to absence and late returns are being comprehensively completed to ensure the whereabouts of all pupils is strictly monitored, thus their safety is effectively protected.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

Boarders receive a good quality nursing service, whereby their health needs are being robustly assessed, provided for and monitored. Boarders are assured of receiving the support they need; staff are trained in first aid, the use of medication is robustly monitored and external services are accessed as appropriate. Satisfactory arrangements remain in place to ensure that boarders access doctors' visits at school or by visiting the local surgery. A number of boarders state they would prefer to see a female doctor and this request is currently being explored.

The school nurse is also employed as a housemistress. Although carefully managed, this dual role presents the potential risk of boarders being anxious about sharing their own confidential information. The nurse is available throughout the school day and robust systems ensure boarders' health concerns are readily identified, with prompt action taken. Boarders have asked to remain in their own boarding houses when they are unwell during the day and staff duty rosters are being revised to meet this request. Although in place, the procedures for dealing with health concerns during the night are not always being implemented and this presents potential risks to boarders' welfare.

Personal, social, and health educational (PHSE) guidance equips boarders with the information they need to widen their understanding of the world and to make informed lifestyle choices. Clear plans are in place to expand upon the current programme and boarders benefit by receiving guidance from within the school, as well as from external speakers.

The school is very good at recognising the individual and specific welfare needs of boarders. Written plans are detailed and clear. Boarders are assured the school

works very hard to meet their specific needs.

Boarders enjoy nutritious meals which include a good range of choice and variety. Comments frequently include, 'there is always plenty of choice' and 'I am never hungry'. Although there is no formal food committee, boarders confirm that whenever they make suggestions to the catering team, their requests are swiftly honoured. Snacks and drinks in between meals are readily available and older boarders are provided with the equipment and produce they need to exercise their growing independence to cook for themselves.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

Boarders say they feel very safe at school. Bullying incidents are rare and are managed effectively when they do occur. The school has successfully created an educative culture with regards to bullying, whereby boarders are enabled to easily report such incidents. They have confidence that swift action will be taken.

Robust safeguarding systems ensure that boarders are being suitably protected from possible sources of harm and abuse. Appropriate levels of external and internal safeguarding training are being delivered and refreshed to all levels of school personnel. The designated school child protection officer maintains good quality records and enjoys a very positive relationship with the local authority. Concerns and issues are treated with urgency and boarders and parents are assured that the welfare needs of boarders are of paramount importance.

The majority of boarders and their parents understand the school's rules with regards to behavioural expectations because these are made explicitly clear within the prospectus and student handbook. The school remains keen to positively reward good conduct and boarders are appreciative of this. The use of sanctions and behavioural intervention is strictly monitored in an attempt to ensure fairness and equity; however, a small number of boarders and parents say they are unclear with regards to the application of sanctions. Robust recording and monitoring systems demonstrate the commitment of the senior management team and governing body to ensure that the sanctions and rewards systems in place remain appropriate and meaningful.

Boarders demonstrate a good understanding of the complaints mechanisms which are available to them. They are particularly positive with regards to informal resolution processes and say, 'you just tell any of the staff and your problems gets sorted' and 'if you have a concern there is always someone you can tell'. Records pertaining to formal complaints are being monitored by the governing body; these are rare. A small number of parents say they are unsure of the processes and the written procedures do not explicitly mention the external authorities who may be contacted in the event of dissatisfaction.

Boarders enjoy very positive relationships with their peers. Older girls are elected for

prefect and guardian roles, which they take very seriously. Younger girls commend this provision and refer to these individuals as 'big sisters'. Quotes include, 'they always help you' and 'they really help you to settle in when you are new'.

Boarders live in a safe, secure environment. Fire prevention is taken very seriously and boarders routinely practise evacuation procedures. The premises are well maintained and boarders say they feel completely safe at school. Clear health and safety procedures, including detailed risk assessments, premises checks and the tight supervision of all visitors, serve to safeguard the boarders.

Recent historic omissions with regards to staff recruitment practices present potential risks. Safer recruitment procedures were not being implemented and these shortfalls had not been identified through internal monitoring systems. This compromises the safety and welfare of boarders. The school has immediately responded and the newly appointed bursar is currently implementing appropriate remedial action.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Boarders thoroughly enjoy and benefit from a wide range of activities. Additional ideas and opportunities continue to be created and encouraged; boarders say there is something for everyone. Recent developments include greater access to local facilities, such as youth clubs. Day pupils are now encouraged to join weekend activities in an attempt to fully integrate the school's dual provision.

Boarders speak warmly about their housemistresses and teachers. They say there is always someone available to talk to in the event of having a problem or difficulty. The school demonstrates a real desire to effectively listen to its pupils; in response to their suggestions, a peer mentoring programme has been established and this is very popular. An independent listener is available, but arrangements for counselling provision are unclear.

Integration is a particular strength of the school. Boarders thrive in an open, inclusive and welcoming environment. The school actively seeks to welcome boarding applicants from all over the world; its boarding community is rich in diversity as a result. Excellent support systems provide boarders with the assistance they require in terms of language difficulties and educational support needs.

Boarding houses offer comfort and privacy. Boarders feel a sense of ownership because they have had a real say in terms of recent refurbishment and decoration. Common rooms are spacious and boarders may readily access their houses during break times. Internal and external recreational areas are safe and secure; boarders enjoy spending time with their friends and can also find safe, quiet places when they want to be alone.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The school actively encourages boarders to contribute to the operation of boarding. Various forums ensure their views and opinions are sought; boarders demonstrate maturity in terms of their suggestions because they are used to being treated with respect. They do not have to wait until a formal meeting is convened; they are encouraged to think for themselves and to direct their queries in an appropriate manner. Boarders speak very positively about the bursar; 'we can talk to him about things we need for the house.' The catering manager receives similar positive comments such as, 'if you ask for something specific, it usually appears on the menu within a couple of days'. Recent consultation forums include house decoration, activities and staff appointments.

Clear arrangements ensure that boarders are able to maintain regular, private contact with their families and friends during their time at school. Private telephones are sometimes used, with the majority of boarders preferring to use their own mobiles. Contact helpline numbers are widely advertised; boarders are encouraged to seek support from the most appropriate sources, in their best interests. Plans to improve internet access are being eagerly received. Parents and guardians enjoy regular liaison with the boarding team and this factor strengthens positive working relationships.

The school actively encourages boarders to be curious about the world outside of school. Access to newspapers, magazines and the media is readily provided. Boarders are encouraged to develop a social conscience and many participate in community service projects. The school is good at recognising the importance of protecting boarders alongside taking appropriate risks. Clear rules about lone and supervised outings enable personal growth and development, whilst ensuring appropriate safeguards.

Boarders are extremely positive about their relationships with the staff team across all departments, including boarding, teaching and ancillary services. They say they are treated with respect and they really appreciate being treated as young adults. Individual support packages are very detailed; boarders receive the help they need. One long standing staff member said; 'pastorally, we are the best we've ever been and this is largely due to the boarding team'.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

A number of boarders report concerns with regards to the safety of their personal possessions; examples of theft have been investigated by the school. Pro active measures are in place and the school continues to remind boarders to fully utilise the equipment provided for them, which includes lockable storage and the facility to deposit money and valuables into the office for safe keeping.



Boarders enjoy the comforts of living in pleasantly furnished and spacious accommodation which also ensures good privacy. Older boarders take full advantage of their own kitchens and utility equipment; this provision develops their independence skills in preparation for leaving school. A rolling maintenance programme ensures all facilities are of a good, safe standard and boarders appreciate how quickly any maintenance issues are dealt with.

Sleeping arrangements provide suitable separation in terms of age. Younger boarders enjoy sharing rooms, with a maximum of four occupants and they may change rooms subject to a reasonable request. Resident staff are close by; thus appropriate supervision is guaranteed at night. Boarders are happy with bathroom provision, which is close to bedrooms and affords good levels of privacy. A separate sixth form house offers single and double en suite bedrooms. Boarders are appreciative of the space and equipment provided. All boarders are equally appreciative of the excellent standard of cleaning throughout all of the boarding provision.

A well-stocked school shop enables boarders to purchase the items they need during their time at school. Many say they also use local facilities and are happy to be so close to a major shopping centre.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

Boarders, parents and staff receive good quality, up-to-date information about the school; they know what they can expect and are invited to ask questions and undertake introductory visits. Current boarders say they were very well prepared in terms of joining the school and describe it as 'like a family'.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Policies and procedures pertaining to equal opportunities are being implemented in practice, for the benefit of boarders and the staff team. Differences are actively celebrated through assemblies, the PHSE programme and naturally occurring activities, such as food, religious ceremonies and individual customs. Boarders are actively encouraged to have enquiring minds with regards to cultures and faiths which are different from their own. Hence, regardless of their own origins, boarders feel valued and respected as unique and respected individuals.

Lines of accountability and management are explicitly clear. Senior managers respect each other, communicate often and enjoy the security established by a strong and active governing body. The boarding team is cohesive and shares the vision of the whole school in terms of providing a nurturing environment which encourages the growth and development of all of its pupils.

The head of boarding is dynamic and very supportive of the team. Clear targets, objectives and training opportunities promote the continued development of this

motivated team which impacts very positively upon the provision and experiences for the boarders. They are effectively looked after by staff who possess the skills, experience and expertise necessary for such responsibilities.

Recent appointments, including the head teacher and bursar are very warmly received by longer standing staff and pupils. A clear vision is being implemented, with all departments in full support. The governing body possesses a broad range of experiences and expertise; the head teacher receives good support.

Monitoring systems are generally robust in terms of risk assessments, complaints, sanctions and accidents; this factor enhances the overall safety and well-being of everyone involved with the school. A significant shortfall in terms of recruitment monitoring has failed to identify serious omissions in documentation which presented potential risks to boarders' welfare. The school has immediately implemented appropriate remedial action and is also reviewing its monitoring systems.

## **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...

- make clearer the opportunity boarders have to request to be seen by a female doctor (NMS 15)
- ensure robust procedures are consistently implemented when dealing with boarders who are ill during the night (NMS 16)
- ensure all parents and boarders are fully aware of the school's behaviour management systems (NMS 4)
- ensure complaint's literature for parents and boarders includes the details of external agencies, for example, Ofsted (NMS 5)
- ensure that all staffing appointments are subject to robust safer recruitment criteria and that boarding positions do not commence until the results of CRB's are received (NMS 38)
- make clear the arrangements that are in place with regards to the school's arrangements for independent listener and counselling services (NMS 14)
- review current monitoring systems to ensure that all areas are robustly covered. (NMS 23)