

# High Close School

Welfare inspection report for a residential special school

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**Inspector** Maire Atherton

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## Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for residential special schools, in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Information about the school

High Close School is a non-maintained school administered by Barnardos. It provides for both day and residential pupils of both genders aged from seven to 18 years, with most boarders being of senior school age. There are 70 pupils on roll, with provision for 36 boarding. At the time of the inspection there were 24 residential pupils.

The school is set in 7 acres of woodland, within easy walking distance of the town centre of Wokingham. There are four residential units on the school site. There is a pattern of fortnightly boarding and residential pupils usually return home on alternate weekends and during school holidays.

The school takes young people who have been unable to succeed in mainstream school and have statements of special educational need arising from social, 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.

The last inspection took place in June 2011.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents).

<sup>2</sup> [www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools).

## Inspection judgements

<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>outstanding</b>
Outcomes for residential pupils	outstanding
Quality of residential provision and care	outstanding
Residential pupils' safety	outstanding
Leadership and management of the residential provision	outstanding

## Overall effectiveness

The key findings of the residential inspection are as follows.

- The overall effectiveness of High Close School is outstanding.
- Residential pupils enjoy creative care and support provided by enthusiastic, skilled and committed staff.
- Excellent relationships between residential pupils and staff flourish in a warm, nurturing and relaxed environment where pupils learn to accept and respect difference. The diverse and complex needs of residential pupils are extremely well met.
- Staff focus effectively on the individual needs and wishes of each residential pupil and this is reflected in the individually tailored care plans and regular reviews to which the residential pupils actively contribute.
- The high quality and range of activities provides residential pupils with ample opportunities to develop new interests and discover talents as well as consolidating skills already obtained.
- Residential pupils feel safe and are safe as a result of the implementation of robust and effective safeguarding procedures.
- The behaviour management of the residential pupils is excellent and there is a clear culture of continuing improvement in this key area.
- The accommodation is of an extremely high standard and very well maintained to provide a homely environment for the residential pupils.
- Staff enable residential pupils to make a significant contribution to decision making, both in their day to day plans and in the way boarding is run. As a result

boarders feel their opinions are heard, valued and acted on.

- The leadership, management and organisation of the residential provision is highly effective with the individual needs of residential pupils the first consideration.
- Although internal monitoring and evaluation is robust and is used to inform and develop practice, to further improve the school is asked to review monitoring by independent visitors so that it too effectively drives improvement.
- Parents and placing authorities report high levels of satisfaction with the quality and frequency of communication by the school.
- All national minimum standards are met, there were no shortfalls in national minimum standards at the last inspection.

## **Outcomes for residential pupils**

Outcomes for residential pupils are outstanding. Residential pupils enjoy positive relationships with each other. Any volatility in relationships is exceptionally well managed by staff so that they learn to understand, accept and value difference over time. Residential pupils benefit from the constructive and warm relationships they develop with experienced and committed staff members. Key workers are valued by pupils and described 'as someone you can build trust in.' Staff are skilled at helping residential pupils to move on from their starting points and make significant progress during their time at school, emotionally, socially and academically. This is shown by improved self-esteem and confidence as they take on new situations and challenges, for example making their own way home at weekends and engaging in voluntary work.

Residential pupils have made considerable improvements in their behaviour and recognise this for themselves, reflecting on the changes they have made during their time at the school. They say that staff are fair and teach them to use strategies that help them manage their behaviour at school and come into the classroom to do this. They then learn how to use the strategies in other situations, at home for example.

Residential pupils enjoy their time in boarding and at the time of the inspection were involved in planning for activity week. Paintballing, paddle boarding and a day trip to the beach were among the wide range of activities that they were looking forward to. Residential pupils used this example to illustrate how they are consulted and their views taken into account, other examples given of how this is achieved is their role on the school council and in the regular unit meetings. Residential pupils value the opportunity to become prefects which gives them additional responsibilities and a chance to enhance their personal and social development.

Residential pupils develop independence through participation in age appropriate daily living tasks. For example a starting point is laying the table and clearing away

after meals building towards shopping for and cooking an evening meal, all of which contribute to preparation for adulthood. This is supported by the provision of visual cues to aid developing independence, a footprint trail from a bedroom door to the front door to reflect progress for example. Those moving into the 16 plus unit in September are excitedly considering what else they would like to do in this area. Residential pupils say, 'staff will help you with whatever you want, they won't do it for you but will point the way.'

## **Quality of residential provision and care**

The quality of the school's provision for residential pupils is outstanding. Staff individually and as a team are highly effective in providing excellent pastoral care and in the promotion of the health and well-being of each residential pupil throughout their time at the school. This is evident from the application of robust assessment and induction procedures that ensure that the school admits those who they can help achieve successful outcomes, through to support once a young person has left.

Prospective residential pupils visit and may have an overnight stay as part of the assessment process, followed by a probationary period. Residential pupils say that this is 'a good way to see if you think the school will be good for you.' Staff are committed to providing residential pupils with a positive experience of boarding and in the main succeed, with the majority stating that they enjoy boarding. Staff achieve this through the establishment of excellent relationships with residential pupils, based on open and warm interactions. Residential pupils say, 'Staff like their job, they do it because they really do care, they really throw themselves into it.'

Residential pupils benefit from care tailored to meet individual needs. There is a robust care planning process in place with regular reviews that the residential pupils actively contribute to with encouragement and support from key workers. The care plans are detailed and include a positive handling plan designed to help staff support residential pupils to manage their own behaviour. Residential pupils make significant progress due to the successful implementation of these plans. This is underpinned by the close working relationships between the academic and residential staff to ensure the effective delivery of the 24 hour curriculum, with valuable input from the field social work team and specialist staff. These include an occupational therapist, an educational psychologist, a counsellor/psychotherapist and a dyslexia specialist. A member of the academic staff commented, 'The unit staff are really good at working with specialist consultants and delivering the programmes devised for young people.' For example the occupational therapist is leading the development of a sensory circuit to assist those on the autistic spectrum.

Residential pupils enjoy a wide range of activities, on campus and in the wider community, on an individual and a group basis. On site opportunities are provided by the well-equipped sports hall, a multi-gym, an outdoor hard court area and a football pitch in addition to access to computers, a games console and a pool table in each unit. Examples of some of the off-site opportunities accessed by residential pupils

include going to local clubs, cadets for example, golf lessons, cinema, swimming and the dry ski slope, in preparation for the annual skiing trip abroad. These achievements are celebrated and recorded in photos on display and to share with friends and family. Staff are committed to supporting residential pupils in their interests and talents and exploring and developing new ones.

Staff effectively implement the excellent systems that promote the health and well-being of residential pupils. The staff have established excellent links with mental health professionals that provide residential pupils with diagnosed conditions the support they need when they need it. Staff are very proactive in linking with both universal and specialist healthcare providers to explore any concerns arising from their observations, for example to determine if there may be a physiological reason for behaviour. Whilst parents retain primary responsibility for meeting their child's routine health needs, parents and residential staff work effectively in partnership to promote the health of the residential pupils. For example staff assist parents in getting young people's immunisations up to date. Residential pupils benefit from easy access to information on healthy lifestyles, drug awareness for example. The school nurse visits regularly and has an open door policy so that anyone can drop in to seek advice or information. Staff are trained in and know how to implement the policies and health care plans so that pupils' individual health needs are identified and met creatively and effectively.

The school actively promotes healthy eating and the majority of residential pupils say that they enjoy the food. They benefit from a varied and balanced diet with individual and specialist diets well catered for. The central kitchen provides a main meal at lunch time, other meals are prepared in each unit. Residential pupils are involved in menu planning and have lots of opportunities to shop and cook for themselves, with staff assistance, some are very keen and adventurous in their food choices, others more selective.

The accommodation in each unit is of an excellent standard. Each residential pupil has a well-furnished and decorated single room, which they can arrange to their own taste. Some rooms have en-suite facilities. There is ample communal space for residential pupils to be engaged, either alone or as part of a group, in a variety of activities without impinging on each other.

Residential pupils contact with their families is positively promoted and supported where necessary. Most have mobile phones but there are also landlines that they can use in private. In the survey all but one agreed that they could easily contact their family and friends. There are some restrictions on access to social media in accordance with individual care plans.

## **Residential pupils' safety**

The school makes excellent provision to safeguard the welfare of residential pupils. The recruitment of staff is exceptionally robust so that only those deemed suitable

are appointed, thus ensuring that residential pupils are properly safeguarded. For example a minimum of three references are taken up.

The school's approach to child protection is equally robust. The safeguarding policies and procedures are effectively implemented by knowledgeable staff trained to a level commensurate with their role. Policies and procedures are reviewed leading to improvements, such as the increase in number of nominated persons and the introduction of prompt cards. Staff are vigilant in ensuring that any observation of minor concerns is recorded and monitored at a senior level so that appropriate action is taken where necessary. The school works in partnership with the Local Safeguarding Children Board, and those in the residential pupils' home areas, and ensures that any safeguarding concerns are referred promptly to them.

The vast majority of pupils believe that any instances of bullying is taken seriously. Staff are proactive in identifying any behaviour that could be interpreted as bullying and dealing with it in accordance with policies and procedures in place. The systems for recording and monitoring are rigorous as are any interventions necessary. The required 'missing from school' protocols are appropriate and staff know what to do in the event of any such instances. There have been no residential pupils reported as missing since the last inspection.

Staff are highly skilled and creative in their approach to the promotion of positive behaviour in accordance with the individual behaviour management plans. This is achieved through very good relationships, encouragement, reward and praise. Residential pupils are clear about how they are expected to behave and generally are polite, well-mannered and quick to apologise when their behaviour slips. Residential pupils and staff demonstrate a keen understanding of the points system, how it relates to their individual targets and the rewards to be earned from achievement. The training in, implementation of and continual review of the approved behaviour management technique and strategy is a real strength of the residential provision. There is an overarching emphasis on not using physical intervention unless absolutely necessary, with distraction and diversion used to good effect. Residential pupils say that staff only use a physical intervention to 'stop someone getting hurt' and 'it doesn't happen very often.' There is excellent monitoring and evaluation of the behaviour management strategies employed, including a learning and listening interview which actively seeks the views of residential pupils involved. Residential pupils learn how to make positive choices about how they behave and so improve their life chances.

Health and safety is very well promoted and residential pupils benefit from a safe and secure environment. The school site has appropriate security, for example access to the residential accommodation is restricted by the use of effective security measures. The school takes appropriate steps to ensure that residential pupils and staff are kept safe from the risk of fire with routine tests, servicing and drills taking place as required. Other routine servicing and maintenance tasks are also undertaken as required. The extensive written risk assessments for the whole school site and all



activities, on and off site, are thorough, detailed and regularly reviewed. These enable residential pupils to enjoy a wide range of activities both on and off site. Residential pupils say that they feel safe.

## **Leadership and management of the residential provision**

The management and organisation of the residential provision is outstanding. The clear aims of the school outlined in written information for residential pupils, their parents and others are implemented in practice. The senior management team are responsive to emerging needs. For example since the last inspection the age range of school has changed to enable the school to provide for residential pupils aged 16 to 18. From September 2012 one of the four units will be for that age range. Those who have chosen to stay on and attend local colleges are working with the designated staff team to develop house rules and share views about how they see the unit working in practice. The school are also making provision to accommodate the increasing number of referrals for primary aged children. The school has stayed open on some closed weekends to provide continuity of care for residential pupils whose home circumstances have changed.

Boarding is an integral part of the school. The routines are well established and well known by residential pupils and staff. Each unit has an established staff team with a named manager and deputy providing stability and a consistency in approach that significantly benefits pupils. The units are staffed in accordance with the needs of the residential pupils, with one-to-one where this is an identified need. There is a generic risk assessment in place for lone working but this is not formally reviewed on a case by case basis. Staff demonstrate a flexible approach, providing support to residential pupils across units to achieve this if necessary.

Residential pupils are well cared for by a staff team who themselves are well supported. New staff describe the induction programme as 'very thorough and has given me the skills to do my role with confidence and well informed.' Residential staff benefit from ongoing training, both mandatory and more specialist, and appreciate how this serves to update their knowledge, skill and expertise. The plan for the next two years, developed in response to the changing needs of residential pupils, includes training on attachment, autism and adoption for example. Most staff hold a relevant qualification and others are working towards this. In each unit the management team provide staff with support through regular formal and informal supervision and annual appraisals. Regular staff meetings are used to good effect to discuss individual residential pupils, with input from staff from other disciplines on occasions.

The strong leadership team are committed to ensuring equality of opportunity for all. The needs of all residential pupils, including those relating to disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, religious belief, and sexual orientation are identified and addressed through the care planning process.

Records are very well maintained and up to date. The head of care and unit managers robustly monitor records to identify and take action in response to any emerging trends and themes. There is additional monitoring by independent visitors and these include opportunities for pupils and staff to speak in private with the visitor. However they use differing formats and it is difficult to evidence how these reports can be used to drive improvement. For example it is unclear how issues raised on one visit are followed up at the next.

The staff team are skilled at dealing with day-to-day low level grumbles so that residential pupils do not have to use the formal complaints process. Residential pupils say they can talk to lots of people and are confident that any complaints would be addressed properly. Parents enjoy the positive relationships they have with the school. They feel that residential staff are accessible and share information to the benefit of their children. One parent said 'I think the school and the care exceptionally good, most impressive is the level of real care which is very reassuring. Also they are responsive and consider each child a unique potential.'

## **National minimum standards**

The school meets the national minimum standards for residential special schools.

## **What should the school do to improve further?**

- improve the reporting by independent visitors so as to drive improved outcomes for residential pupils
- ensure that risk assessments for lone working are carried out on a case by case basis.

**This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.**



10/07/2012

Dear Pupil

### **Inspection of High Close School**

As you know I recently visited you in your residential units to do an inspection of the care you receive when staying at High Close. Thank you to those of you who spent time talking to me, with a special thanks to those who invited me to share their home cooking which I really enjoyed.

I think that the school gives you outstanding care and support in all the residential units. I think that there is a lively and fun atmosphere in the units and that staff look after you very well. They know each of your likes (Tabasco sauce for example) and dislikes and what upsets you and work hard to help you manage how you react to things that do upset you.

There are lots of things for you to do, at school, in Wokingham and further away, including abroad, and staff are really good at encouraging you to try things that are new to you.

They are also very good at helping you to make progress in school and get ready for independence. I know that you are pleased that the school has sorted things so that you can stay on until you are 18 in a unit for you as a group. Staff help you to keep healthy and make sure you have the right balance of food and exercise as well as going to health care appointments when you need to.

Thanks again for your time, I enjoyed my visit to your outstanding units.

Maire Atherton

Yours sincerely,

Maire Atherton