

St Mary's School

Welfare inspection report for a residential special school

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Inspector Janet Hunnam

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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.^{1,2}

Information about the school

St Mary's School is a specialist residential special school that is part of a federation maintained by East Sussex County Council. St Mary's School offers a 24 hour curriculum for boys between the ages of nine and 16 who have an educational statement for behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

The school and residential accommodation are on one site situated in grounds between Heathfield and Horam in East Sussex. Residential accommodation is situated within the main school building. The residential provision in the main building was redesigned and refurbished in 2007. The school is a weekly boarding establishment, with flexible boarding provision for 12 places. At the time of the inspection there were 53 pupils on roll. The residential provision was last inspected on 17 October 2011.

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents.

² www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools.

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness	outstanding
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 the school's residential provision is outstanding. Happy residential pupils receive highly individualised support and guidance which result in pupils making considerable progress with their social skills, independence skills and self-esteem.
- Positive, sensitive, nurturing relationships with experienced and committed staff allow pupils to develop trust in the adults who care for them so that they feel safe and enjoy their residential experience.
- A wide range of enriching and stimulating activities enhance pupils' social engagement, personal development and fulfilment.
- Highly effective, cohesive links and partnerships across the school provide pupils with specific support tailored to their needs resulting in continuity of care and excellent progress.
- Superb accommodation is safe, secure and maintained to a high standard. Pupils benefit from excellent facilities and spacious grounds.
- Residential pupils are central to the care planning process. They design their own care plan and with sensitive support from care staff, set their own goals and review their progress. Each of the pupil's care plans reflect their individuality, personality and character and demonstrate how they are beginning to take responsibility for themselves.
- Safeguarding the welfare and well-being of pupils is embedded in all aspects of practice, policies and procedures. All health and safety matters are rigorously addressed to protect pupils.

- Effective behaviour management systems focus on clear expectations of pupils and positive encouragement. Staff are consistent and skilled at bringing the best out of pupils.
- Leadership and management of the residential provision is dynamic and effective. Skilled and experienced managers support and guide a motivated staff team to provide high quality care enabling pupils to make significant progress.
- Areas highlighted for improvement at the last inspection have been addressed. Outstanding practice is sustained. Managers demonstrate an on-going commitment to continuous improvement to provide opportunities for pupils to progress and fulfil their potential.
- All national minimum standards are met. No recommendations are made at this inspection.

Outcomes for residential pupils

Outcomes for residential pupils are outstanding. Pupils benefit greatly from their residential experience and highly individualised care. The supportive and nurturing environment allows them to make significant progress with their social skills, independence skills, confidence and self-esteem. The quality of social interactions is excellent with staff providing sensitive support enabling pupils to develop constructive, tolerant relationships with their peers and trust in the adults who care for them. Pupils report they can approach any member of staff with concerns and are confident staff will listen. A pupil commented that, 'We can tell the staff if we have a problem and they help us.' The calm and relaxing atmosphere within the residential provision contributes to pupils' improved behaviour. Positive relationships with staff, the focus on enjoyable, constructive activities and the perceptive support pupils receive in managing their behaviour contribute to considerable development in their social skills.

Pupils thoroughly enjoy their residential experience and choose to stay. They fully participate in a wide range of enriching, stimulating activities and opportunities both on and off site which are fun and which further their social engagement, personal development and fulfilment. There is a considerable level of choice enabling them to participate in group or individual activities and staff actively encourage them to try new experiences and develop new interests. Staff support the health and well-being of pupils through close monitoring, effective partnerships with other health care professionals and frequent communication with families. Pupils are encouraged to develop an understanding of their own health needs and staff provide specific support to meet these needs such as focusing on personal hygiene and healthy eating.

Pupils' views are valued. The school council has a real voice in influencing decisions such as broadening the choice of school uniform, redesigning the common room and making suggestions for anti-bullying initiatives. Pupils also have a forum of

residential meetings to discuss issues affecting their residential experience. Individually, pupils can put forward their thoughts and opinions informally to staff and they have ready access to key workers, tutors and senior members of staff. A pupil commented that they 'feel respected'.

Staff provide a wide range of opportunities for pupils to develop independence skills at a pace and level appropriate to their understanding and ability. Staff support prepares older pupils for a successful transition to adult life or the next stage of their education.

Quality of residential provision and care

The quality of the residential provision and care is outstanding. Highly effective, cohesive links and partnerships between care and education staff provide pupils with individual support tailored to their needs. Pastoral care is a real strength of the school and pupils benefit from a committed and caring staff team with a wide range of experience and interests.

Pupils commence their residential experience by staying for an extended day to participate in activities. They choose when they would like to reside and benefit from a seamless 24-hour curriculum with the emphasis on each individual feeling comfortable and happy in the residential environment. Care staff support pupils during the school day and are fully aware of any difficulties pupils have experienced. This enables them to plan effectively for the transition to evening activities and staying the night with effective individual support strategies in place. Consequently, pupils thrive and progress socially and academically. Parents, carers and professionals are extremely positive about the care provided reporting they are, 'Very happy with the school overall,' their child 'loves staying,' 'pupils have huge benefits from being residential resulting in them developing their self-confidence, feeling safe and being able to relax.'

Close liaison with parents and carers prior to admission to the school enables staff to identify each pupil's individual needs. Residential pupils have their own care plan individually compiled with their key worker. The pupil is central to the care planning process, setting their own targets and reflecting on their progress in their own words. The pupils design their own plan, giving it their own title. Each care plan is highly individualised and reflects the personality and character of the pupil. This innovative practice is hugely beneficial to pupils, providing them with opportunities to take ownership and responsibility for identifying their needs and goals and reviewing their progress.

The programme of activities is a key strength. Pupils have access to a wide variety of activities both off-site and within the school ranging from sporting activities such as skiing, kick boxing, fishing, golf to cooking, music, art and the Duke of Edinburgh award. Pupils comment extremely positively on their involvement in activities. Staff are keen to encourage pupils to try new activities and arrange 'Care Days' where

pupils can experience tasters of new leisure pursuits. These days are popular with pupils and are successful in introducing them to new pastimes, which support their development and social interaction. Pupils are involved in fundraising for charities and activities raising their awareness of other cultures such as a Diwali and Thai evenings.

Residential pupils are registered with their own doctor, dentist and optician and staff work closely with families to ensure they can meet all pupils' health needs. A school nurse attends the school one day a week and with care staff monitors pupils' health needs and has an input into the curriculum relating to health matters. Health care is excellent and provides pupils with a caring and sensitive service in line with their health plans. The school nurse liaises with external agencies such as the child and adolescent mental health service, ensuring that pupils' emotional and mental health needs are addressed. The procedures for administering medication are robust ensuring pupils receive their prescribed medication safely. There are clear arrangements in place if a pupil is unwell to monitor them closely until they return home.

Pupils have nutritious and balanced meals. They report they enjoy the food on offer. Care staff cook evening meals and this is a social occasion designed to encourage the development of social skills and positive interaction between pupils and with staff. Pupils respond with appropriate manners and behaviour and appear to enjoy this time together with other pupils and staff.

Residential accommodation is spacious, well maintained and pleasantly decorated and furnished providing a welcoming environment. Pupils are able to personalise their bedrooms. The environment is calm and relaxing and pupils respond to their surroundings appearing comfortable, settled and at ease. Late evening activities focus on calming down with card games and DVDs in preparation for settling peacefully for the night. This nurturing environment allows pupils to thrive.

Staff communicate with parents and carers at least weekly. Parents and carers report a real sense of working together with staff to support pupils to make progress. Close liaison and home visits if necessary, ensure staff have relevant information to support pupils with their specific needs. Pupils are able to contact their families and have access to a private telephone.

Residential pupils' safety

The arrangements for ensuring pupils' welfare and safety are outstanding and are embedded in practice. Pupils receive care from staff who are subject to rigorous recruitment checks reducing the risk of unsuitable people having contact with pupils. Effective policies, procedures and risk assessments promote and safeguard the welfare of pupils.

Clear safeguarding procedures, understood by staff, with designated staff having key

roles of accountability protect pupils. Staff receive regular child protection training appropriate to their role and understand their responsibility in implementing safeguarding procedures. Staff work closely and proactively with a range of external agencies to safeguard pupils' welfare. The safeguarding officer reports weekly to the senior management team on detailed concerns regarding individual pupils and action taken to protect them. Early interventions and identification of concerns result in joint working to safeguard pupils and well-planned care to meet their individual needs. Social workers and families report they are confident that pupils are safe. One carer commented that they are 'absolutely safe at the school' and pupils also reported feeling safe. Pupils report they can approach any member of staff if they have concerns and identified staff they are comfortable talking to other than teaching or care staff. There is a strong commitment by staff to tackle all types of bullying through initiatives and strategies that improve behaviour and pupils' awareness. The school council discusses issues around bullying and puts forward suggestions for ways of dealing with it. They have suggested an ant-bullying assembly and nominated a staff member to lead the assembly. A mentoring and buddy system is in place for older pupils to support younger pupils. Pupils and staff have a high degree of awareness of the potential for bullying and are vigilant in identifying it and proactive in dealing with it.

Clear expectations of pupils is the foundation of behaviour management and pupils understand there may be consequences if they fail to meet these expectations. Staff are consistent in their approach and behaviour within the residential setting is generally appropriate and of a high standard. The focus is on rewarding positive behaviour and sensitive coaching in relation to appropriate conduct. Physical intervention is rare, sanctions are not used excessively and staff maintain comprehensive records for all incidents. Within the calm, sociable atmosphere, pupils get on well together. With a strong emphasis on positive encouragement, staff are skilled in bringing out the best in pupils. Consequently, pupils strive to do well and enjoy their residential experience. Staff supervise pupils closely and residential pupils choose not to leave without permission. Procedures are in place for dealing with such incidents if they occur.

Robust arrangements are in place for monitoring all health and safety issues. All required safety checks occur without delay, including fire safety and hazards are minimised. Residential pupils participate in regular fire drills. Health and safety has a high priority and all maintenance is prioritised to ensure the safety of pupils.

Leadership and management of the residential provision

The leadership and management of the residential provision are outstanding. Pupils benefit from dynamic, enthusiastic leadership and a strongly committed staff team. The head of care and acting head of school work closely together ensuring the effective and efficient management of the residential provision and that it is an integral part of the school. The residential staff work extremely well together to run an exceptional service that is highly responsive to the diverse needs of the pupils.

Staff commented that the team, 'Work well together and provide consistency for pupils.' The team has a wide range of skills and interests, which they use to good effect to support pupils in activities and enhance their residential experience. Consequently, pupils thoroughly enjoy their residential time and develop personal and social skills to assist their progress. The care staff's expertise and experience is recognised throughout the school and they are part of the whole school staff team providing valuable support throughout the school day and excellent continuity of care.

Staff receive excellent support from the head of care including regular supervision and have access to training to support them in their role. Systems are in place to review individual performance and promote personal development. Care staff are responsible for development projects linked directly to national minimum standards and continuous improvement within the wider school development plan. The residential provision has an important role in the academic, personal, social and emotional development of pupils.

The head of care and a governor effectively monitor residential provision. The governor undertakes unannounced visits, produces a report and confirms that managers are very receptive to feedback and respond positively to the benefit of pupils. This contributes to the development of the school and the residential provision. The comprehensive school development plan ensures the residential provision is continuously moving forward and improving. The involvement of residential pupils in their care plans has significantly improved demonstrating innovative practice to engage pupils in strategies to assist their development.

Pupils receive a leaflet prior to admission giving them information about the residential provision. Vibrant newsletters keep families up to date and give a real sense of what is happening at the school. Parents, carers and placing authorities have excellent communication with the school and have a high regard for the service provided and its proactive partnership working.

All national minimum standards are met and the residential provision is sustaining outstanding practice and evidencing many areas of improvement impacting positively on outcomes for pupils.

National minimum standards

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

What should the school do to improve further?

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.



14/11/2012

Dear pupils

Inspection of St Mary's School

I enjoyed my recent visit to your school. Thank you for being so friendly and talking to me.

It is good to see that you enjoy your time in n.e.s.t. and you are happy staying there. The staff provide you with outstanding care. They treat each of you as an individual and know you very well. I can see you get on well with staff and you can talk to staff about anything that bothers you.

You have many different activities in the evenings and I am very impressed with how many exciting things are on offer. It's great that you have opportunities to try new activities and have fun.

Staff make sure you are healthy. I know you have amazing food because I really enjoyed joining you for meals during my visit. It was good to see that you enjoy the meals and also like chatting to your friends and staff at meal times. It was great to see how calm and relaxed it was after dinner. You all seemed very happy.

Your living areas are great and you have a lot of space in the grounds to do activities. Staff make sure the school is safe for you and protect you from harm. Staff are very good at helping you through difficult times. You are doing very well in getting your rewards and I can see you are pleased when you meet your targets.

All the staff want what's best for you. They are excellent at listening to you and value what you are saying. I can see you are making excellent progress and learning a great deal from staying in n.e.s.t.

I am very impressed with your care plans which you have designed yourselves. It is great to see that each one is different and you have thought about your targets and how you can progress. I'd love to come back and see how each of your plans has developed and how your targets change over time.

I judged the residential part of your school as outstanding.

Thank you again for making my visit so enjoyable.

Yours sincerely,

Janet Hunnam