

Polam Hall Boarding School

Polam Hall School, Grange Road, Darlington, County Durham DL1 5PA

Inspection dates

20–22 September 2016

The overall experiences and progress of children and young people

Good **2**

The quality of care and support

Good 2

How well children and young people are protected

Good 2

The impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers

Requires improvement 3

Summary of key findings

The boarding provision is good because

- The great majority of boarders enjoy their time here. Boarding provides them with opportunities to make friends and enjoy free time as well as activities with boarding staff. Structured homework periods support good academic progress.
- Relationships between boarders and staff, and each other, are harmonious. The atmosphere within boarding is happy and relaxed. Boarders are helpful to each other and cooperate with the requests of staff. Boarders experience consistency and stability, and consequently develop maturity and resilience.
- Arrangements to safeguard boarders are generally very sound. Bullying is well controlled. Staff are good at managing behaviour. Sanctions are used sparingly and the need to use physical restraint is extremely rare. Boarders do not go missing.
- Staff take the views of boarders seriously and act on their suggestions for improvement wherever possible. The standard of accommodation is generally good and indicates to boarders that they are valued.
- Leadership and management require improvement. The school meets all but one national minimum standard, which is in relation to staff development. In addition, some points for improvement have been made. These are with regard to the security of the accommodation, medication recording and staffing levels.

Compliance with the national minimum standards for boarding schools

The school must meet the following national minimum standards for boarding schools:

- 15.1 Any staff member or volunteer employed or volunteering in a position working with boarders has a job description reflecting their duties, receives induction training in boarding when newly appointed, and receives regular reviews of their boarding practice, with opportunities for training and continual professional development in boarding.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Review staffing arrangements to provide greater range and choice of activities.
- Adopt pre-printed medication administration forms, incorporating regular stock checks, to make the recording of medication clearer and less prone to error.
- Review the physical security of the boarding accommodation to ensure that access to the building is controlled at all times.

Information about this inspection

The inspector gave two hours' notice of the inspection to the headteacher. Inspection activity comprised of: a tour of the boarding accommodation and the whole school; discussions with boarders individually and in groups; discussions with the headteacher, boarding and support staff, members of the senior management team and a governor; examination of policies, documents and records; evaluation of a hard-copy survey completed by boarders, feedback from parents (via Parent View) and discussion with other professionals; and observation of routines within boarding at various times of the day and evening.

Inspection team

Nick Murphy

Social care inspector

Full report

Information about this school

Polam Hall School is a free school for 690 pupils, irrespective of gender, aged four to 19 years, situated on the outskirts of Darlington. The school has boarding capacity for up to 60 pupils from year 7 upwards. Boarding accommodation is currently provided in two houses, located within the school grounds. This is the first inspection since the school acquired free school status in September 2015.

At the time of this inspection, there were 36 boarding pupils.

Inspection judgements

The overall experiences and progress of children and young people

Good

The large majority of boarding pupils enjoy their time here. The diversity of the boarders' backgrounds is a feature of the school, adding to the richness of their experience. One said, 'It's good how you get to know people from different cultures and make new friends.' Feedback from parents is also generally positive, one commenting, 'My son has been a boarder for a year and he enjoys it very much. He has made some good friends and is looked after very well by the boarding staff.'

Boarding pupils make good progress in all areas of their lives. For example, boarders at key stage 5 achieve 10–20% higher performance than day pupils. The boarding environment supports and promotes academic success. One boarding pupil said, 'It's better to do school work here rather than at home. There are not as many distractions, so we can really concentrate on our learning.' They also develop greater confidence and self-sufficiency. A professional who works with one boarding pupil said of them, 'They have become a much more confident young person, more resilient and in control of their emotions.'

A strength of the school is the regard given to the views of boarding pupils. As a result of their comments and suggestions, changes are considered and implemented by staff. For example, upgrading the Wi-Fi provision within the boarding houses has just been approved by the school's management team.

The school's strong focus on safeguarding ensures that boarding pupils feel safe. Bullying is well controlled, and boarding pupils develop consideration for others and a feeling of common purpose, one saying, 'It's just like a family really.'

The quality of care and support

Good

The school has good policies and procedures in place, which are regularly reviewed and updated. They support boarding staff in providing consistent, safe care. Staff have a good knowledge of the needs of boarding pupils and take account of the differences between them to ensure that all are treated fairly. Staff promote and encourage boarders to develop their independence. As a result, boarders are largely self-motivated in keeping to the boarding house's routines. They get themselves up in the morning in good time and so are well prepared for a day's learning in school. They make responsible use of the considerable free time they are allowed to go out into the local community.

The boarding accommodation is clean and adequately furnished. There is ample space for boarding pupils to spend time together in activities, or, if they wish, to have time alone. Bedrooms and bathrooms provide adequate levels of privacy, and staff respect the rights of boarding pupils by, for example, always knocking before entering their rooms. Boarding pupils enjoy relaxing in the school's extensive grounds, which are safe and very well maintained. One boarding pupil said, 'We can go out on the bikes in the grounds, it's really good fun.'

Boarding pupils are able to access recreational facilities in the community. For example, some enjoy badminton and swimming in the local leisure centre. There are also organised activities. At weekends there is usually an outing, supervised by staff, which boarding pupils can elect to go on; – for example, trips to a beach or a theme park. In the past, the school has arranged for extra activities such as football coaching. Currently, however, there is insufficient variety of activities on offer to boarding pupils, restricting their opportunities for stimulation and new experiences.

The school promotes healthy lifestyles. Sport is an important part of the school day, which extends into boarding time. The school nurse provides close oversight of the physical and emotional well-being of boarding pupils. Boarding staff are sensitive to the needs of boarding pupils who have experienced upset, such as bad news from home, and provide appropriate support. The arrangements for medication are overseen by the school nurse, who trains boarding staff in its administration and recording. Records of medication are kept in an improvised, handwritten format. Although they meet basic standards, they would be more robust if a proper template was used.

Main meals for boarding pupils are provided in the main school dining room. In response to dissatisfaction expressed by pupils, the quality and variety of food has been substantially improved. There is always a vegetarian option, and innovations such as a pasta bar are proving very popular. The catering staff have been trained in allergen management, and are also able to accommodate the needs of pupils who are intolerant of dairy or gluten. In addition, the boarding houses have supplies of food for suppers and snacks.

Staff treat boarding pupils with respect, and build strong relationships with them. As a result, boarding pupils feel confident in expressing their views, or gripes, to staff. Staff do their best to accommodate the suggestions or preferences of boarding pupils – for example, which bedroom they would like to have. More formal boarding meetings enable the group as a whole to make their opinions known. In addition, the head boarder (who undergoes a competitive appointment process) acts as a conduit for taking any concerns within the boarding group to staff. This range of consultation methods ensure that boarding pupils have a real voice in what goes on within the school, giving them a genuine sense of ownership.

How well children and young people are protected

Good

Organisation and governance of the school's safeguarding arrangements are strong. One of the governing body has responsibility for safeguarding, and has advanced training and knowledge in this area. She meets regularly with the school's designated safeguarding lead as well as the head of boarding. The school's policies are regularly reviewed and updated. This ensures that changes to statutory guidance are promptly incorporated. All staff, including those in ancillary and support posts, receive safeguarding training. This gives them the knowledge they need to respond appropriately should any boarding pupil come to them with a concern.

An independent listener visits the school weekly, and makes herself available to pupils. Boarding pupils can also contact her by phone if necessary. This is an important

additional safeguard if a boarding pupil ever felt reluctant to talk to staff. The school has a good relationship with the local safeguarding children board. Managers report any issues of concern to the local authority designated officer for safeguarding, or, when necessary, seek their advice.

Staff are aware of the whereabouts of boarding pupils at all times, while giving them a degree of freedom appropriate to their age, and this encourages their independence. There have been no incidents of a boarding pupil going missing.

Boarding pupils have the occasional falling out with each other, akin to the kind of disputes which occur between siblings or friends. This kind of disagreement rarely leads to bullying. Staff strongly promote a culture where bullying is not accepted, either within boarding or the wider school.

The Wi-Fi facility is well used by boarding pupils. The use of video chat and voice call applications is particularly important to those from overseas in communicating with friends and family. In response to requests from boarding pupils, the Wi-Fi is to be upgraded to provide faster and more reliable connections. Some boarding pupils are frustrated that the school's internet filtering blocks the use of certain applications. However, this is done for good safeguarding reasons and protects boarding pupils from the potential for online exploitation or grooming.

The behaviour of boarding pupils is excellent. They act with consideration for the needs of others and respect the differences between themselves. Staff rarely need to raise their voices to maintain an orderly and productive atmosphere within boarding. A few words of firm encouragement are usually sufficient to gain cooperation, for example in directing boarding pupils to start their allotted homework period. Major sanctions are rare, with the occasional early bedtime or grounding being all that is necessary in response to misbehaviour.

The management of the premises and site is largely effective in maintaining a safe environment. Arrangements for fire safety are robust. Any risks associated with activities, both on-site and off-site, are assessed and appropriate safeguards put in place to reduce the potential for harm. However, staff do not always take care to keep the external doors to the boarding accommodation secure, and the system for locking the front door means that it is possible for it to be left unlocked inadvertently.

The impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers

Requires improvement

The headteacher's reports to the governing body include an evaluation of the boarding provision's performance. This enables governors to maintain an oversight and provide constructive challenge. Staff at all levels demonstrate their readiness to listen to the views of boarding pupils. By acting on these views, the school makes changes which improve the experience of boarding pupils.

In general, the boarding provision is well organised. There has been a recent change in the leadership within boarding, with the new head of boarding being mentored by the previous head, who has moved into a different role. Daily routines are well established, boarding pupils understand their responsibilities and they are largely self-reliant in

organising themselves.

Boarding staff have a great deal of experience. Most have been with the school for some time and so provide consistency and stability for boarding pupils. Staff receive training in mandatory areas such as safeguarding, fire safety and the administration of medication. There is, however, little opportunity or encouragement for staff to undertake more child-centred training. For example, in this kind of setting, some boarding pupils may experience anxiety through separation from their parents. It would be helpful for staff to have some awareness of the impact of this and how to mitigate it. Additionally, most staff have not had regular appraisals of their performance. For example, the appraisals of two staff last took place in 2012 and 2013 respectively. This limits the ability of the staff to develop and improve their practice and so provide a better quality of support to boarding pupils.

What inspection judgements mean

The experiences and progress of children and young people are at the centre of the inspection. Inspectors will use their professional judgement to determine the weight and significance of their findings in this respect. The judgements included in the report are made against 'Inspections of boarding and residential provision in schools: the inspection framework'.

| Judgement | Description |
|----------------------|---|
| Outstanding | A school where the experiences and progress of children and young people consistently exceed the standard of good and result in sustained progress and achievement. The outcomes achieved by children and young people are outstanding and the impact the boarding/residential provision has had in supporting this progress and achieving these outcomes is clearly evidenced. |
| Good | A school providing effective services which exceed minimum requirements. Children and young people are protected and cared for and have their welfare safeguarded and promoted. |
| Requires improvement | A school where there are no serious or widespread failures that result in children and young people's welfare not being safeguarded or promoted. However, the overall outcomes, experiences and progress of children and young people are not yet good. |
| Inadequate | A school where there are serious and/or widespread failures that mean that children and young people are not protected or that their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded or that their care and experiences are poor and they are not making progress. |

School details

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| Unique reference number | 142174 |
| Social care unique reference number | SC000830 |
| DfE registration number | 841/6000 |

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 boarding schools.

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| Type of school | Free boarding school |
| Number of boarders on roll | 36 |
| Gender of boarders | Mixed |
| Age range of boarders | 12–18 |
| Headteacher | Mr John Moreland |
| Date of previous boarding inspection | First inspection |
| Telephone number | 01325 463383 |
| Email address | information@polamhall.com |

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