

## **Wishmore Cross Academy**

Wishmore Cross Academy, Alpha Road, Chobham, Surrey GU24 8NE  
Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

### **Information about this residential special school**

Wishmore Cross Academy is a publicly funded independent state academy and is part of the Academies Enterprise Trust. The academy is situated in Chobham, Surrey. The academy is a special school for young people, all of whom have behavioural, emotional and/or social difficulties as their primary need. The academy can admit up to 60 boys between the ages of 9 and 16 and can offer up to 22 residential places for four nights per week. Within the building, there are three separate residential units. The residential provision was last inspected in March 2017.

**Inspection dates:** 22 to 24 January 2018

**Overall experiences and progress of children and young people,** taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The residential special school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

**Date of previous inspection:** 13 March 2017

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** Outstanding

## Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- The boarding experience is integral to the fabric of the school. Boarders exhibit improved attendance, behaviour and academic attainment.
- Boarders are very settled and form close and trusting relationships with boarding staff.
- Boarders benefit from an extremely committed staff team. Staff work together consistently and with a strong desire to educate and inspire.
- Behavioural management is extremely successful. There has been no use of restraint in the boarding house for three years.
- Boarding staff offer a holistic package of support, including engaging with parents and carers and supporting boarders during the school holidays.
- Staff mediate expertly. They make excellent use of 'restorative' interventions, through which boarders are encouraged to discuss their differences among themselves with staff support.
- Managers continue to monitor practice rigorously and use the latest research to inform behavioural management techniques.

The residential special school's areas for development are:

- three minor shortfalls noted in this inspection in relation to: the provision of key information on the school's website; the structure of the independent person's reports; and greater representation of the wishes and feelings of boarders in care plans and risk assessments. These shortfalls do not affect the quality of care offered to boarders.

## **What does the residential special school need to do to improve?**

### **Recommendations**

- To assist the parents of prospective boarders, the boarders' handbook should be available on the school's website.
- To support the scrutiny of the independent visitor, reports should differentiate more clearly between residential and day school provision.
- When possible, care plans and risk assessments should incorporate the wishes and feelings of young people, allowing for greater transparency.

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

Boarding is extremely important to the ethos of the school. Despite considerable challenges, boarders make very good progress compared to their fellow pupils who use the day provision. Their average attendance is 88% compared to 72% for day pupils. In addition, on average boarders experience 1 fixed-term exclusion per year as opposed to an average of 2.5 exclusions for day pupils. Boarders make excellent progress in education; one boarder recently passed three GCSE examinations one year early with increased staff support and access to online learning resources.

Boarders benefit from a new purpose-built facility within the school grounds. This allows for easy access to support from the boarding provision, for instance should boarders encounter difficulties during the school day. In addition to overnight care, boarding offers an extended evening provision. This includes staff transporting pupils home at the conclusion of the evening activity. Evening provision allows for effective introductions to the boarding experience and enables an increased number of pupils to enjoy activities such as trampolining and going to the cinema. Staff from the day school offer their expertise in activities such as judo, and this enriches the boarding experience. It also supports the development of closer relationships and communication between the boarding and day elements of the school.

Feedback from placing professionals and parents is positive. A social worker said, 'Staff are great and always hang in there, thinking of new strategies to help young people.' A parent said of their son, 'I see improvement every day; it helps his behaviour at home.'

Boarders benefit from high levels of individualised care and from an aspirational staff team. Occupancy levels are low and this allows for close levels of staff supervision. Boarders are free to personalise their own rooms and to bring their own duvets and posters; this helps boarders to feel at home. High staffing levels enable boarders to access off-site activities that they were previously not able to attend, such as army cadets. Staff seek alternative strategies and educational resources when young people find certain activities difficult, for example by proposing a chess club for a boarder to help to develop concentration levels and self-esteem.

Spending time in the boarding provision is considered the highlight of the week for boarders. Boarders speak of staff with great fondness and affection. They view boarding as a place of safety and a real badge of honour. A boarder said, 'I want to come here more. There is lots to do.' A parent said, 'He is always bragging to his friends about the boarding house.' Despite being educated away from the main school, boarders are still able to access the boarding provision, allowing them to access a large number of bespoke educational opportunities while maintaining their relationships with boarding staff.

Boarders learn a range of new skills. These include establishing a positive routine

and independence skills, learning to manage their emotions, developing peer relationships and understanding the importance of team work. These skills support positive outcomes, enabling a large number of boarders to transition to apprenticeships and colleges.

Behaviour management is highly successful, consistent and understood well by boarders. There has been no use of restraint for three years in the boarding house. Boarders respond very well to a points-based behaviour system which allows them to earn money towards sought after items such as new trainers or a repair to a mobile phone handset. Simple principles of respect and positivity guide the interventions of staff. Staff use behavioural incidents as tools for learning and development and as an opportunity to consider alternative coping strategies.

Staff model positive behaviours and use their close relationships and knowledge of young people to intervene quickly. Key phrases such as 'praise in public, challenge in private' support consistent, excellent care. Staff have a deep-rooted understanding of the complex and specific needs of each boarder and respond accordingly. Staff consider the behaviour of boarders to be an important means of communicating emotions and a link with early childhood trauma. One staff member said, 'We provide the scaffolding for our young people to make progress.'

Restorative conferencing is a key element of behaviour management. This allows boarders to settle differences positively with each other with staff guidance. Recently two boarders agreed to conclude their meeting by offering a judo-style bow to each other.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding**

Safeguarding is very strong and is supported by strong multi-agency working. The head of boarding is one of three designated safeguarding officers who support the designated safeguarding lead officer. Pictures of these staff are placed all around the school. Staff and boarders understand the procedures for reporting any concerns. Staff seek advice and guidance from the host local authority when appropriate.

Safeguarding officers understand the specific needs of each boarder and attend all relevant professional reviews and meetings. This helps them to provide very strong, persistent and effective challenge to ensure that boarders receive the support and services they require.

Boarders say they feel safe, heard and listened to. Boarders are open and honest with staff and let them know when things are going wrong or they feel worried. An independent advocate, a qualified social worker, visits the boarding house each half term and relays any concerns or questions back to the professional network. Staff have simplified key documents such as the complaints policy to make them usable and accessible for boarders. Daily meetings support the planning of activities and evening meals. However, the quality of care plans and risk assessments is limited because these documents do not include sufficient insight into the wishes and

feelings of boarders.

Risk assessments are extremely comprehensive and are regularly reviewed. Assessments incorporate all of the recommendations from statutory education assessments and protection plans. Assessments offer simple and highly effective solutions, for instance encouraging one boarder to focus on saying something positive each day. This promoted increased positivity, improved peer relations and raised self-esteem.

Boarding staff work very closely with day staff. The 'behaviour watch' communication system allows for immediate sharing of concerns and observations from all staff including therapists. Protective action is taken when needed, such as providing extra support for boarders who have struggled during the school day.

Partnership working with parents is a major strength. Boarding staff strive to engage parents by inviting them to the accommodation. Staff skilfully use the transportation of boarders to their homes as a means of assessing home conditions and parental interactions and to build relationships with family members. Boarding staff share behavioural management techniques and encourage parents to replicate these to ensure that there is a degree of consistency between boarding and home life. For many parents, this is their first experience of successful engagement with support services.

The head of care works during the school holidays and offers direct support for families at key times of vulnerability, such as the long summer holiday. He offers phone contact, home visits and advice on accessing support services such as youth clubs. Prior to his arrival, family difficulties during the long summer holiday contributed to six boarders entering the care system; none entered the care system following the last summer holiday.

Boarders do not go missing from the boarding house. Staff understand the procedures they should follow in the event of such an incident occurring.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

The head of care was absent during this inspection. The school's principal supported the inspection in his absence. The head of care has commenced a course in senior boarding management and expects to conclude this in May 2018. An experienced deputy and a small, dedicated staff team support him. The head of care completes one sleep-in shift per week, informing his close knowledge and understanding of the service.

Managers handle admissions very well. Managers have responded to financial restrictions by prioritising the boarding provision and ensuring that it continues to offer a high level of care. Managers are clear about which young people would benefit from boarding and they filter referrals accordingly. Managers use their broad knowledge of the young people to consider carefully peer relationships and dynamics. This reduces the risk of bullying and allows young people to build on

existing school relationships within the boarding setting.

The school's website lacks information for the parents of prospective boarders about the rules and behavioural expectations of the boarding house. A more informative website would ensure that parents are fully aware of the support and assistance available.

Helpful induction packages allow boarders to enjoy overnight experiences at their own pace and under regular review. For many boarders, this represents a first experience of staying away from the family home. When allocating bedrooms to boarders, staff carefully consider established friendships. A home visit precedes each admission; this promotes effective working relationships with parents and allows for a full assessment of need to be undertaken in partnership with parents and carers. These visits also help staff to assess early childhood experiences, such as loss or trauma, and inform risk assessments.

Case recordings and risk assessments demonstrate the excellent oversight of managers. When outcomes have not been positive, managers reflect on their actions and devise a plan for an alternative solution.

Staff morale is extremely strong and is supported by the small size of the team and excellent levels of staff support and supervision. Staff practise with knowledge and confidence. Excellent levels of training allow staff to understand the therapeutic ethos of the school and to work together consistently and highly effectively. Boarders value this input and develop warm and trusting relationships with staff.

Managers focus on maintaining a consistent staff team. Staff feel that managers prioritise their professional development. Staff pursue their own learning interests, such as attending a recent course on loss and bereavement, in order to inform further their care practice.

One staff member said, 'I do this job so I can see the transformation in the young people. That is my motivation.' Former boarders maintain contact with the staff team and their progress continues to be a source of pride and inspiration to the staff team. The school facilitates a social media group which celebrates the achievements and progress of former students. Managers appropriately oversee access to the group.

Managers continue to drive service improvements. A comprehensive self-evaluation accurately reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the service. One recommendation for improvement was already actioned during this inspection. An ambitious service development plan is in place and demonstrates a consistent desire for improvement.

Managers have introduced a more structured key-work programme that was devised by a national association for boarding schools. This offers boarders the opportunity to attain a formal certification and to increase their independence skills such as budgeting. The principal of the school is a member of a professional group which

seeks to reduce the use of restraint for young people. The group supports other schools to reassess their behavioural management techniques. She continues to drive improvements and to access current research; this helps her continually to refine and review the school's behavioural management strategies.

Service development continues to be supported well by the scrutiny of the independent visitor. Reports need to differentiate between school and boarding provision more clearly to offer a separate assessment.

The boarding provision is well maintained and provides a safe environment for boarders. All necessary risk assessments are undertaken.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the school knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.



## **Residential special school details**

**Social care unique reference number:** SC013899

**Headteacher/teacher in charge:** **Jeremy Donnelly/Maria Taylor**

**Type of school:** Residential special school

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## **Inspector**

Barnaby Dowell, social care inspector (lead)



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