

St George's School

Harpenden Academy Trust

Sun Lane, Harpenden, Hertfordshire AL5 4TD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this boarding school

This is a co-educational boarding school for children aged from 11 to 18 years. It is located in Harpenden. There are 1,391 children on roll, 111 of whom board.

Boarding accommodation is provided in three boarding houses adjoining the school.

The director of boarding has been in post since 2021. She has an extensive history of working in boarding education provisions and is suitably qualified.

Inspectors only inspected the boarding provision.

Inspection dates: 26 to 28 September 2023

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 boarding 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.

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Date of last inspection: 9 July 2019

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children make remarkable progress due to the high levels of nurturing care that they receive. They have built trusting, dependable relationships with the highly dedicated and motivated staff team. The relationships that children and staff have are full of fondness and mutual respect. The children are happy, relaxed and polite. They are confident, welcoming and engaging with visitors.

Staff are champions for equality and diversity. They challenge every event of perceived discrimination, including when children are in their local community. Children are given the confidence to challenge discriminatory practice and raise this themselves, safe in the knowledge that it will be responded to. Children are supported and encouraged to proudly celebrate their identity and share it with others. There is a consistent and embedded mindset in the children of equality and treating others with kindness and respect.

Children's behaviour is exemplary. There is a genuine warmth that runs throughout the boarding houses and school. The staff are quick to recognise and respond to potential difficulties in peer relationships, preventing any escalation. Bullying is not an identified issue.

Children recognise the positive impact that boarding has on them. Boarding helps children to aspire to succeed and thrive in their community. Feedback from children includes:

'With new students joining, I try as much as possible to integrate with them because I know how it feels to be new and how I was warmly welcomed. I've developed a broader social range and have enjoyed getting to meet and talk with different people.'

'It's so much more than just academics. It's about developing as a person and being open to new opportunities. It's about putting in the effort in all that you do. If you're not ready to aim higher, then this isn't the right school for you.'

Boarding children who move to the school from other countries and cultures in later school life are achieving at the same levels as their settled peers due to the efforts of staff. One family member said:

'This (St George's) has been a superb experience for her, both from personal and educational points of view. I had never imagined that when we decided to send her abroad that she would take such positive insights. She matured as a person and discovered a whole new spectrum of disciplines and learning.'

The staff are exceptional role models. They actively encourage children to develop their individual life experiences and independence. Older children can walk into town with friends, arrange meals out and use public transport. Staff work with them to give them the tools to manage independent time safely. Children keep very busy with sports and arts clubs, a school choir and trips to special places, such as theme parks and theatres. Children play sports to very high standard and have strong links with local elite sporting clubs.

Children are making excellent progress with their education and attaining qualifications. Prep times are well organised with clear expectations on behaviour and engagement. When children need additional support with their learning, this is quickly identified and put in place.

Staff help children to be healthy. This includes physical health, such as diet and exercise, and mental health. Mealtimes are an important part of children's routine. Mealtimes are enjoyable, sociable and busy. The boarding staff support children in prep after school when they do their homework. This is embedded into the children's routine and supports their learning.

The boarding accommodation is well maintained and continually improved, and children are proud of it. Children are grateful for improved privacy and dignity since the last inspection with a large investment in new bathroom areas in each house.

Staff talk about the children with love and pride, and they understand their individual personalities. This school has a family feel; all staff clearly want children to succeed in all aspects of their lives. One child wrote to staff thanking them. They said, 'You have always been so patient, understanding and fair. I always appreciate when you tell me the truth, even when it's not the best thing to hear.'

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

Boys are educated to counter misogynistic tropes and harmful behaviours, including control and coercion, and to treat women with respect. Women and girls are empowered to advocate for themselves and project this to men and boys. They are constantly educated in protective behaviours with this work led by specifically trained staff. Girls have real aspiration that is achievable about their rightful places in society and believe in this. They are confident in their expectations as they go into adulthood.

Anti-racism work is led by specially trained staff to deliver a strategy that promotes equality and challenges discrimination and risky behaviours. Children who have used discriminatory language are educated and supported, through restorative practice, to understand why this is wrong. There is an active trans alliance group which fosters acceptance and understanding of the needs of trans children.

Comprehensive safeguarding systems are in place. Staff know their responsibilities and report concerns effectively. These are followed up with the appropriate agencies and ensure that children are protected from harm. Staff undertake a range of safeguarding training, including child exploitation, radicalisation and e-safety. Children learn how to keep safe on social media. Consequently, children's awareness of risks and how to manage them increases.

Staff know children very well and can spot the early signs of children struggling. Staff see behaviour changes as indicators of underlying causes and are inquisitive and professionally curious to understand why. The multidisciplinary leadership team has detailed oversight of this. Children who have had adverse family experiences or are neurodiverse receive exceptional support to protect them and keep their boarding placement stable.

Very strong professional practice results in sustained improvement to the lives of children. Highly effective planning by the director of boarding manages and minimises risks inside and outside of the school. When children are new to the school, any risks are well understood and are being significantly reduced.

Children have placement plans that identify needs for early intervention and the support needed from partner agencies. The attention to detail in the improved planning process ensures that undiagnosed needs are not masked. It is made clear to parents of prospective boarders that staff want to know, so that they can be prepared for and meet those needs from the start.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The director of boarding is a strong, driven and committed leader who is caring and dedicated. She has completely embraced the school's mission to provide a pastoral model of care to boarding children. This is to help children stay safe and be model citizens who are empowered to protect themselves and make a stand for others. The director of boarding skilfully leads a multidisciplinary team across the well-being agenda, including safeguarding, anti-racism and equality. The team is dedicated and its sole focus is the high-quality boarding experience and well-being of children.

The strong senior team is inspirational and ambitious in promoting positive experiences for all children at the school and in boarding. This accomplished and confident leadership ensures that there is a thoroughly cohesive whole-school approach to give boarding children the best level of care.

Staff consistently speak of a family feel or ethos in the boarding provision with a sense of belonging for children and staff alike. Staff also speak of the genuine desire of leaders to enhance everyone's well-being, including staff. One staff member said, 'At the heart of St George's School is the house system. It bonds our school community in so many ways and allows pupils, who may not shine in the classroom, to excel in many other areas.'

The boarding provision and education departments are seen as equal partners. Exceptional academic achievement is not just the priority. Leaders are confident in the belief that this will come after children's well-being has been cared for and met. This culture is embodied with the governing body and senior leadership team.

A board of governors is in place which greatly values the positive experiences and safety of all children, particularly when boarding. The chair of governors has exceptionally high expectations of the governors to spend time with children, meet with them, listen to them and understand their lived experiences. He is driven and focused on leading a school that can meet children's well-being needs with care delivered by staff who are equally cared for. The aim of this is for staff to be inspired to give the best care for children who are away from home and to be citizens for the future with strong values of equality and kindness.

Parents consistently say that the leadership team gives them reassurance that their children are safe and make progress. One family member said:

'We cannot overstate our appreciation of the St George's team, particularly the boarding staff. We have had some challenging times in the past three years and [name of child] seems to be emerging with a confidence and happiness that we haven't seen for a while. I know that the school has provided him and us with the support through these challenges.'

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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.

Boarding school details

Social care unique reference number: SC061220

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Helen Barton

Type of school: Boarding school

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Inspectors

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