

Alfriston School

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number 110573

Local Authority Buckinghamshire

Inspection number 337523

Inspection dates 18–19 November 2009

Reporting inspector Steven Parker

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

The inspection of social care was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

Type of school Special
School category Community
Age range of pupils 11–18
Gender of pupils Girls
Gender of pupils in the sixth form Girls
Number of pupils on the school roll 101
Of which, number on roll in the sixth form 16

Appropriate authority The governing body

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Age group11–18Inspection dates18–19 November 2009Inspection number337523

Boarding provision

Social care Unique Reference Number SC023097 **Social care inspector** Merryl Wahogo

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Introduction

This integrated inspection of the school and boarding provision was carried out by two additional inspectors and an inspector of social care. The inspectors visited 13 lessons and activities in the residential setting, and held meetings with pupils, staff, governors and parents. They observed the school's work, scrutinised documentation and data provided by the school and examined questionnaires returned by 64 parents and carers, 94 pupils and 17 staff.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the effectiveness of support to develop pupils' independence and self-help skills, and how well the school works with parents, carers and other agencies to this end
- how well assessment procedures have been developed since the last inspection, and if staff are making effective use of this information to ensure that teaching properly meets pupils' individual needs and is appropriately challenging to promote their learning
- how well the curriculum is being adapted (particularly in the sixth form) to meet the increasingly wide range of pupils' needs
- the extent to which all staff and governors have clear roles and responsibilities, and their level of involvement in monitoring and evaluating the impact of provision on pupils' learning and progress.

Information about the school

Alfriston is a secondary-age day and boarding school for girls. It caters for pupils with a wide range of special educational needs and/or disabilities. Most have moderate learning difficulties, and a large majority have additional needs, such as speech, language and communication difficulties, sensory impairment, physical disability, and other learning difficulties and disabilities. It serves the whole community of Buckinghamshire and a number of neighbouring local authorities. Pupils come from very mixed backgrounds. A small minority have English as an additional language. The school has received a number of national awards in the recent past, including Healthy School, Sportsmark and Investor in Careers. Most notably, it achieved specialist Sports College status in July 2009, including science as a second speciality subject.

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

1

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

1

Main findings

This is an exceptional school. It has a tangible atmosphere of shared endeavour and everyone involved has a pride in what they achieve. One parent spoke for many in saying, 'It's a privilege to be part of the Alfriston experience.' All the girls are very straightforward in expressing their appreciation of what the school does for them, and older students, in particular, are very clear that attending has much improved their life chances. Parents and carers hold staff in very high esteem. One parent who wrote summed up the strong consensus that came through responses to questionnaires, and conversations with individuals: 'A great school and a shining example of what can be achieved by a dedicated team'. There have been considerable improvements since the last inspection.

All pupils are cared for, supported and guided exceptionally well. This nurturing atmosphere encourages pupils to strive to do their best and thoroughly enjoy doing so in a safe and happy environment. They clearly benefit from an outstanding curriculum that strongly promotes essential basic skills and provides an exciting range of valuable learning opportunities. Personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) underpins this framework so that, as they move through the school, pupils become increasingly independent and relish the additional responsibilities presented to them. The prefects, for example, meet their exacting brief with mature insight. As a result of this comprehensive provision, outcomes for pupils are outstanding.

Well-structured teaching by a very capable team of teachers and support assistants ensures that all pupils experience successful learning at a pace and level appropriate to their needs. This enables them to achieve good results in GCSE and entry level qualifications at the end of Year 11 and then go on to gain excellent results in the sixth form. Assessment and tracking of pupils' progress are well defined and effective. The school has successfully brought its practice up to a good level, and in some subjects it is excellent. Work is currently in progress to monitor even more closely the progress of different groups of pupils and better inform teachers' planning. Not all teachers are fully up to the necessary high standard at this stage.

Leaders and managers strive to develop and maintain the highest possible standards in everything they do, succeeding in most instances. The work of the school senior leadership team is outstanding. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and all managers right across the school work together in a supportive and constructive manner. Their collective success demonstrates outstanding capacity for sustained long-term improvement. Governors make a strong contribution to the school's effectiveness. The whole school team creatively reviews, plans and develops provision very effectively to meet the changing needs of its pupils. Systems for monitoring the

quality of provision and evaluating outcomes are solid and effective, properly informing improvement planning. They are, however, not yet sufficiently comprehensive to measure and take full account of the impact of new initiatives.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Work to improve the quality of teaching and learning so that it all becomes consistently at least good and mostly outstanding across the curriculum, so that pupils' academic progress and achievement become outstanding by:
 - sharing the best assessment practice in the analysis and use of data to inform planning
 - completing current initiatives in curriculum development.
- Ensure that evaluation of all developments across the school is properly informed by appropriate collection and analysis of all available information.
- Ensure the school meets the indicated national minimum standards (NMS) for boarding.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils

1

The school is outstandingly successful in meeting its main aim to prepare its pupils for integration into the wider community, so that they are able to enjoy and participate in life as contributing adults. Consequently, the most striking outcome for the girls is their outstanding personal development, based on the maxim that success is a powerful motivator. There is no doubt that they really enjoy coming to school. For many, this is a significant change from their previous unhappy experiences elsewhere. As a result, attendance is good. Enthusiastic involvement in physical activity, sport, music and drama contributes enormously to pupils' confidence and self-esteem. All girls are enabled to participate successfully at their own level ' just one of the ways in which the school demonstrates its total commitment to the promotion of equal opportunities. There is no doubt that girls are fully aware of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle. They talk enthusiastically about sensible eating, aided significantly as they are by very involved catering staff, who readily take account of pupils' views when planning and producing attractive, balanced menus. There is a strong sense that everyone has mutual respect and understanding of each other's needs, so that girls feel very safe and virtually free from bullying or unkindness. Behaviour is exemplary and exclusion is almost unheard of. A very active school council sets the tone for a shared understanding of the importance of making an individual contribution to the life of the school and the wider community. Girls display a strong understanding of right and wrong, are capable and very ready to participate in discussions about all things cultural, and develop a spiritual sensitivity to the world around them. The most impressive outcome of the school's work, recognised by all parents and highly valued by the girls themselves, is their significantly increased independence, maturity and responsibility for their own success.

The great majority of the girls make good, and sometimes excellent, academic progress.

These results are clear in the carefully analysed assessment data and were apparent in all of the lessons observed during the inspection. Consequently, when taking account of the extent of their special educational needs, other difficulties and starting points (nearly always well below those expected for pupils of their age), they achieve well. Through skilled teaching and highly effective support and guidance, all pupils are enabled to gain a wide range of nationally recognised qualifications by the time they leave, ensuring that, without exception, every girl goes on to further education, training or employment. The number and level of GCSE passes in mathematics, science, and art and design are commendable and there are regularly excellent results in entry level certificates, with a very large majority gaining at least five, including English and mathematics. Achievements are particularly high in physical education (PE) and information and communication technology (ICT). There are no discernible differences in outcomes for particular groups of pupils.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2	
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	*	
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2	
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2	
The extent to which pupils feel safe	1	
Pupils' behaviour		
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles		
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community		
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being		
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	2	
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development		

The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low

^{*} In some special schools inspectors do not make a judgement about attainment in relation to expectations of the pupils' age.

How effective is the provision?

The essential strengths of the good teaching are effective personalised learning for individuals, very strong teamwork between teachers and their very able school support assistants, and respectful and highly productive relationships with pupils. This combination ensures that pupils develop extremely positive attitudes to school and learning and make good progress in their studies. Staff try always to provide opportunities for pupils to experience success, and celebrate their achievements through structured and focused praise and very attractive displays of their best work. Individual staff often have exceptional expertise in and knowledge of their specialist subjects, while being flexible and conscious of the importance of promoting and supporting functional skills, such as literacy, communication, numeracy and ICT in their own lessons. There has been a particularly important impact here from the very successful application of a highly structured approach to improving pupils reading capability through the Catch-Up reading programme. There is careful and continuous assessment of pupils' progress and their individual needs, and pupils are enabled and encouraged to evaluate their own and other's work and progress. In most instances, this approach informs appropriate and well-focused planning to meet individual pupil needs and ensures that all lessons are varied and engaging. This is, however, not consistent across all subjects.

The excellent curriculum is comprehensive, relevant and imaginatively organised to meet the increasingly diverse needs of pupils. For example, the recent adaptation of the art and design and design technology timetable for pupils in Years 10 and 11 was undertaken to ensure that individuals had the best chance of experiencing all elements in depth, and achieving the best possible outcomes. PSHCE is a thread that runs through all subjects and contributes significantly to pupils' wider understanding and increased confidence and independence. The impressive travel training programme is a clear example of this. ICT is exceptionally well used. Alfie's Zone, a virtual learning environment on the school's website, provides a hugely effective interface between pupils, parents and the school, both for information exchange (homework, for example) and regular surveys. The sprawling and often unsuitable buildings have been very imaginatively adapted to provide a wide range of specialist facilities. The award of Sports College status recognises the already excellent quality of PE provision in the school, as does the allocation of science as the secondary specialist subject by the same token. Pupils' opportunities are considerably enhanced by a considerable number of lunchtime and after-school clubs and activities, residential educational trips, imaginative use of community facilities and excellent, productive links with partner organisations. Pupils are exceptionally well cared for and every effort is made to ensure that all their medical, physical and emotional needs are met to a very high standard. Safeguarding procedures are very rigorous and have the highest priority. The school has very well-thought-out systems and structures to ensure pupils are safe and receive the best

support, while not constraining their ability to make their own decisions and experience structured risk taking. By the same token, there is rigorous documentation and guidance

to support vigilant monitoring of all aspects of health and safety. Thorough and

supportive follow-up of all pupil absences encourages improvement in pupils' attendance where necessary. Pastoral support is highly structured and individualised, but certainly not sentimental, and always focused on helping the girls to develop a mature approach to meeting any difficulties they experience. Parents and carers are especially appreciative of this aspect of the school's provision.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	2
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	2
The use of assessment to support learning	
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	1
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	1

How effective are leadership and management?

The school's outstanding leadership demonstrates a continuous drive for improvement and thorough development planning. The exceptional improvements effected since the last inspection are testament to this. An important element in this turnaround has been the headteacher's commitment to empowering and developing, first, her senior leadership colleagues and, latterly, the subject leaders. There is a very strong sense of everyone working together and supporting one another to secure outstanding outcomes for pupils and the trust and support of parents. Management responsibilities and duties are very well distributed and diligently met. Perhaps one of the headteacher's greatest strengths has been her encouragement of collective responsibility and a shared sense of success. The school's approach to supporting and developing its staff through rigorous monitoring, well-focused and encouraging feedback, and appropriate training is impressive and highly effective.

The school is in constant flux in order to meet its changing circumstances, most particularly in terms of pupils' needs. It can do this because self-evaluation is rigorous and generally effective. It is, however, not always best served by detailed collection, analysis and interpretation of all available data. Governors are very supportive, conscientious and increasingly involved in strategic planning. They are aware of their statutory responsibilities but are not always proactive in monitoring all elements. They are extremely conscientious in wanting to do their best for the school.

Engagement and collaboration with parents and carers, and a wide range of agencies and individual professionals, is outstanding, benefiting pupils enormously. The school makes a strong contribution to community cohesion locally through its many links, nationally through its sporting activities and internationally through charitable causes. Through these activities, pupils gain an extensive understanding of the experiences of different sectors of society and what can be done to help and support those less fortunate than themselves.

Prudent management of the school's finances and resources offers excellent value for money. The recent award of specialist Sports College status will bring significant additional resources to the school. The successful bid document, which has now become the development framework, details imaginative and carefully structured approaches to make best use of this unique opportunity.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	1
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	1
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	1
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	1
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	1
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	2
The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	

Sixth form

The school is justifiably proud of this outstanding provision, which is housed in separate accommodation on site to provide a sense of mature graduation. Very recent developments to extend its remit to cater for a much wider range of student needs have been very successfully planned and delivered. The highly imaginative curriculum is vibrant and extremely well focused on enabling students to develop further a wide range of skills that will enable them to lead a fulfilling life and be as independent as possible. All students make exceptionally good progress, leaving school with a comprehensive portfolio of qualifications appropriate to their needs and abilities. At the same time, they have developed and consolidated important capabilities through vocational education and work experience to enable them to move on successfully to college or appropriate work-based training.

Outstanding leadership has underpinned the development and sustained delivery of very high-quality teaching and learning. There is a continuous drive for improvement and an exceptional commitment to care, nurture and support of students and their families. Staff at all levels are highly effective in evaluating their work, motivated by a clear drive to achieve and maintain excellence.

These are the grades for the sixth form

Overall effectiveness of the sixth form	1
Taking into account:	1
Outcomes for students in the sixth form	1
The quality of provision in the sixth form	1
Leadership and management of the sixth form	1

Boarding provision

Staff are thorough in every aspect of keeping girls in the best possible health. This is supported by good training, policies and procedures, which are carefully delivered and monitored. One parent stated that boarding staff have made a dramatic difference to her daughter's capacity for maintaining her own hygiene, saying, 'She has put herself into a routine now; I don't have to tell her.' The medical support officer has an in-depth understanding of her job, but currently lacks clinical supervision. The school chef, whom the girls find very accessible, plays an important role, providing healthy but popular menus. He introduces a dish from another country once a month to expand the girls' experience of food.

Excellent policies and procedures support staff in safeguarding and also in respecting the girls' privacy. The girls confirm that they feel safe. Staff rarely have to use sanctions or physical interventions and it is clear, from speaking to the girls, how much is achieved through discussion and explanation. This demonstrates that the school's behaviour management policies and procedures, which encompass the girls' diverse impairments, are thoroughly understood by boarding staff and work well in practice. In line with this, there have been no complaints nor incidents of girls going missing.

The medical support officer is also responsible for health and safety within the school and ensures that all necessary risk assessments are completed and reviewed regularly. The school also complies with any requirements of the fire officer. Regular fire drills ensure that the girls understand what is expected of them in the event of a fire.

Staff use an integrated way of working towards progress for each girl, such that they have a record of learning targets, alongside those of boarding. Thus, boarding staff actively support education targets. For example, they use outside activities, such as learning how to get the correct change when paying for shopping. Girls are confident about talking to staff and receiving support when they need it. They say, 'Staff are really easy to talk to', and one said, 'I look forward to going to school now, because of boarding.' They describe boarding as 'wicked', 'fantastic' and 'cool' and feel that friends who do not board are missing out.

The head of care produces a detailed boarding plan for each girl, partly on the basis of a home visit and an educational psychologist's assessment, before admission to residential provision. This plan, with the help of parents and the girls themselves, details all personal, cultural and religious needs, and staff handle the process of admission gently

and sensitively. The educational psychologist confirms that staff are frank and take on board her suggestions. The girls choose much of the decor in boarding and can bring items such as duvet covers from home if they wish.

Parents are enthusiastic about boarding and report how easy it is to exchange information with staff. They feel confident, both about staff acting on their information and about the extent to which staff know and understand their daughters. Equally, the girls are very clear about being able to ring parents in private, should they need to do so.

Staff produce focused plans that help girls increase their independence skills. Parents comment on how well their children's social and independence skills have developed, particularly in relation to coping in the wider community.

The accommodation is spacious and immaculately kept, meeting all the girls' needs. An independence flat provides older girls with a more suitable setting for learning life skills. Here, they prepare their own breakfasts and have a cleaning rota. One parent says of her daughter, 'She is more capable now than her older brother, with things like shopping and cooking.'

Parents understand the nature and purpose of boarding via a clear and detailed statement of purpose. There is also a children's guide, which the head of care asks parents to explain to their children prior to admission. She then ensures, during their first weeks, that new girls understand it thoroughly. This guide, however, is not properly accessible to young people with learning difficulties. This means that they may not enter boarding with a real sense of being welcomed there.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. As a result, girls interact positively with others who have a wide range of impairments and backgrounds, demonstrating real mutual support.

Staffing levels are always good, with any absences covered by teaching or other staff who are already known to the girls. The boarders also benefit from well-qualified staff, who receive good ongoing training. As a result, both girls and some staff have described the boarding experience as like being in a family. Senior managers provide excellent formal and informal supervision.

The senior management team, representatives of the local authority and the governing body ensure an exceptionally high level of both internal and external monitoring.

National Minimum Standards (NMS) to be met to improve social care

- Ensure that the medical support officer receives clinical supervision (NMS 14).
- Ensure that the children's guide is in a more accessible format (NMS 1).

This is the grade for the boarding provision

The effectiveness of the boarding provision	1
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Views of parents and carers

The inspection findings confirm parents' overwhelmingly positive views of the school. A higher proportion than usual returned questionnaires, and many took the time to add detailed, helpful commentaries. Almost all feel valued as partners in promoting their children's learning and development. The overwhelming majority were keen to express approval of the school and its positive impact on their daughters' lives. It was fortuitous that there was a parents' evening at the end of the first day of the inspection and it was possible to talk with five families. In all instances, it was clear that, by association, they had also experienced enhancement of the quality of their own lives. A very small minority of parents expressed concern about the limited information they receive about their child's progress, the actual progress they were making, the help received to support their child's learning and that leaders do not always listen to or take account of suggestions and concerns. None of these concerns were supported by parents spoken to during the inspection and inspectors could not find any evidence to support them.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Alfriston School to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school.

The inspection team received 64 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 101 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		ents I adree I D		Disa	Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	
My child enjoys school	32	50	31	48	1	2	0	0	
The school keeps my child safe	45	70	18	28	0	0	0	0	
The school informs me about my child's progress	37	58	23	36	3	5	0	0	
My child is making enough progress at this school	29	45	30	47	3	5	0	0	
The teaching is good at this school	34	53	26	41	1	2	0	0	
The school helps me to support my child's learning	32	50	27	42	4	6	0	0	
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	35	55	27	42	2	3	0	0	
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	37	58	24	38	1	2	0	0	
The school meets my child's particular needs	37	58	24	38	2	3	0	0	
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	37	56	23	36	1	2	1	2	
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	36	50	25	39	4	6	0	0	
The school is led and managed effectively	39	61	23	36	1	2	0	0	
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	43	67	19	30	1	2	0	0	

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description	
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An oustanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.	
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.	
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.	
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.	

Overall effectiveness of schools inspected between September 2007 and July 2008

	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
Type of school	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	39	58	3	0
Primary schools	13	50	33	4
Secondary schools	17	40	34	9
Sixth forms	18	43	37	2
Special schools	26	54	18	2
Pupil referral units	7	55	30	7
All schools	15	49	32	5

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above were reported in The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2007/08.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.
	 The school's capacity for sustained improvement. Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils. The quality of teaching. The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships. The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

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.



20 November 2009

Dear Girls

Inspection of Alfriston School, Buckinghamshire HP9 2TS

My colleagues and I really enjoyed our time visiting your school and sharing two very interesting days with you. Thank you for making us feel so welcome and for talking to us so openly. It was particularly special when some of you shared your feelings about the very real difference being at Alfriston has made to your lives, after some unhappy times elsewhere.

We were very impressed by what we saw and judged that your school is outstanding. It was significant that, while none of you used that term in describing your school when you filled in your questionnaires, others, such as 'fab', 'great' and 'it rocks' suggest that you agree with us.

We felt that the staff do a very good job of helping you to make good progress in everything you do. This is because they teach you well and give you exceptionally high-quality guidance and support. You thoroughly enjoy school because you are provided with an exceptional range of learning experiences and feel part of a huge caring family. We were very pleased to see how well you respect and get on with each other ' and how remarkably well you behave. We also noticed how committed and hard-working all the people who lead and manage the school are.

An important part of our work as inspectors is to suggest to the school how it can become even more successful. Your headteacher and all the other adults involved agree with us that, by making better use of all the information they have about your progress and the effectiveness of everything they do, they can be absolutely sure that they can help every single one of you to achieve the very best that you can.

Please always remember, however, that your own cooperation and hard work are equally important in securing a successful future for yourselves. We wish you a happy and fulfilling life while at school and beyond.

Yours sincerely

Steve Parker

Lead Inspector

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