

Wells Cathedral School

Inspection report for Boarding School

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Inspector	Kenneth Smith
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Wells Cathedral School is a co-educational day and boarding school. Boarders are accommodated in eight boarding houses, all of which are in close proximity to the main school buildings. Six of the houses accommodate students between 14 and 18 years of age with two houses providing separate male and female accommodation for younger students. All houses have at least two residential staff in addition to at least one matron.

The school provides education to a wide range of children and young people many of whom are specialist musicians and some who are choristers. For both of these groups there are arrangements in place to enable them to give significant time to this alongside a full education.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Wells Cathedral School gives boarders a unique and enjoyable experience and prepares them well for adulthood. The school community is one in which boarders learn to respect others regardless of background, make significant and valued development academically, musically (for many boarders) and personally. Boarders enjoy constructive, nurturing relationships with boarding house staff; other staff may be equally important to them and there is genuine sense of a whole school community of which boarding staff are a valued part. Needs of individual boarders are very well known to all key staff. Staff demonstrate a willingness to go out of their way to support them well.

The school premises are historic buildings which tend to be high maintenance and a small number of minor shortfalls were found in this area.

The school operates as a genuine community founded on excellent informal relationships with high levels of purposeful communication about boarders. The achievements have been considerable and the management of the school is wary that more formal monitoring and reviewing processes, not currently in place, might detract from this. Recommendations made in this report are to complement, not alter the current, effective boarding practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection seven recommendations were set, mostly of a technical nature. The school was asked to ensure all matrons receive first aid training; this has been done. It was asked to update the contact details in the complaints policy, ratify the

then draft guardianship policy, consider putting Ofsted contact details in the student calendar and ensure all staff were familiar with the missing child policy; these were all done. It was asked to ensure all fire escape routes were unimpeded, and this was observed to be complied with; and to improve privacy in toilet and washing facilities. Shrewsbury House, the area specified in that report, has been upgraded in line with this recommendation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Boarders' health is promoted well and specific healthcare needs are known to house-parents and met diligently. Health promotion is delivered formally through good quality personal, social and health education within the school day which is well planned, and informally through discussion, advice and guidance given by house-parents. Boarders value the support given to them.

The school applies judiciously the messages of health promotion in the management of any incidents of smoking, alcohol or drug misuse. Boarders know what is expected of them and are not surprised by the consequences if they break the rules. Staff apply these rules consistently.

Boarders' individual health needs are known to staff from the point of admission. The school liaises closely with a local medical practice, including weekly attendance on site by a General Practitioner. The school has its own medical centre, St Andrew's Lodge, which is staffed by trained nurses twenty four hours a day. Boarders may see a male or female doctor, if they have a preference, although it is a male doctor who provides personal continuity visiting weekly. The support at St Andrew's Lodge is appreciated by boarders. Two nurses work full time in this centre and bank staff provide other cover, although in practice the permanent staff are covering a very high proportion of the time.

House-parents and matrons are almost all first-aid trained with two exceptions who are scheduled to undertake this training during this school year. There is good capacity to respond to the immediate health needs of boarders in any situation likely to arise. Boarding houses all have locked medication cupboards within the offices. Arrangements are clearly tailored around the individual needs of boarders, for example, secure refrigerated storage for medication being made available where required.

Boarders with specific welfare needs are supported closely by house-parents and medical staff. The school has not used a formal system of care planning to underpin this. The communication between staff about the welfare of boarders is thorough, with key staff conferring daily, communicating through emails and collating these. This helps to ensure that the success or otherwise of support is reflected upon and further developed, although there is no single trail of the strategy followed or formal review points. The outcomes achieved for boarders, ensuring that they have personal and health needs met whilst advancing within their education, are very good.

Boarders enjoy good quality, nutritious food. The meals are prepared in a central kitchen and boarders take all their main meals in the dining hall. Within boarding houses drinks and snacks are available and boarders can store and consume food they choose to purchase for themselves. Comments from boarders both in conversation with inspectors and through questionnaires were predominantly positive about the quality of the food. Some boys were critical of the quantities given, but acknowledged that second helpings are available towards the end of mealtimes. Observation of meals showed young people enjoying meals in a relaxed and sociable dining hall.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Wells Cathedral School provides boarders with a safe environment in which to learn and grow, where the strong relationships with staff coupled with effective formal systems ensure they are protected from abuse and bullying is not tolerated.

Although boarders surveys reported a few instances of bullying, they are confident that staff deal with this effectively. Staff are knowledgeable about the relationships between young people and consider carefully how to intervene, whilst establishing a culture that does not tolerate bullying. Boarders also report that they are taught about e-safety and the dangers of misuse of technology. Policies are in place to ensure young people and staff understand and respond to any perceived cyber-bullying.

The school has a safeguarding lead person who delivers training across all staff groups and ensures that all staff know how to report suspicions and concerns. She has established an effective link with external safeguarding agencies which she can draw on for advice or action, if required. The constructive relationships between staff ensure that any concerns about boarders are voiced to senior staff at a very early stage. There are no ongoing safeguarding concerns.

The school ensures boarders and other interested parties have an accessible complaints procedure. When this has been used the school investigates thoroughly and seeks to learn any lessons applicable from the episode examined. Boarders have many other avenues through which to raise issues or concerns and the number of formal complaints is very low.

Discipline in the school is discreetly but decisively managed. Boarders are aware of the expectations upon them and the probable consequences of any transgressions. Boarders described sanctions as fair, and there was good evidence that these are comparable across boarding houses. There is not a formal process to monitor this, although the communication between staff, closely involving the deputy headteacher with responsibility for boarding, is effective.

Fire safety is well managed. Each boarding house has fire risk assessment,

completed and updated by the house-parent. Boarders report that they have experienced evacuation at differing times of day; the bursar monitors the frequency of drills. The school is a safe environment for young people. The buildings are all part of the small city of Wells and do not occupy a single, defined site. However, the school community is cohesive and staff and senior boarders take responsibility for enquiring the business of strangers on site, and visitors to the school are all issued with identifiable passes.

Recruitment practice is well managed; the school adopts safer working recruitment practices with suitable checks taken before any employment commences. Checks on staff living on site but not employed directly, for example, family members of house-parents, are also undertaken.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders are supported ably by staff who put a lot of time and thought into getting to know them. There is an emphasis on building a supportive school community and this has included effectively all boarders regardless of race, gender or ability.

Many boarders have demanding schedules, for example practising a musical instrument for many hours within a structured weekly programme or, for choristers, attending early morning and evening services. These demands have an impact on the lives of boarders which house-parents monitor carefully. Boarders spoken with took enormous pride in their extra-curricular achievements, and understood that these demands helped them to develop their talents further. In a school with an excellent proportion of high musical achievement young people were found to be relaxed and at ease with themselves. The interest that musicians took in each other was supportive and ensured that a sometimes solitary task has many social benefits. Young musicians are afforded opportunities to perform periodically and there is always consideration of how these demands balance with other aspects of their life and schooling. The school has an enduring track record of nurturing young people's talents in a rounded way which prepares them well for future life.

There are external activities undertaken on many weekends, supervised by house-parents and enjoyed by boarders. There are also frequent sporting events which boarders are able to participate in. Boarders with other commitments, for example, choristers, are given the opportunity to join sports teams whenever practical.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The boarding community centres on the wishes and needs of young people living here. There is a strong emphasis on consultation with boarders, both formally and informally. There are student-led committees which comment formally through minutes to the school on issues varying from food to green matters and charity

enterprises. Boarding houses also have less-formalised weekly meetings. Young people are able to talk to house-parents who take a genuine interest in their wishes and issues.

Boarders have contact with their families using all practical means. There are telephones in each boarding house and computers which boarders may use to contact family electronically. Most boarders also have their own mobile phones and many have laptops. In the junior houses (under 14s) there are restrictions on keeping their mobile phones overnight, access is unrestricted for older children. House-parents liaise regularly with parents and are always mindful of parental wishes.

Boarders may go into the town of Wells within clear school rules. Junior boarders go in groups of at least three, and they are permitted only to certain areas. Older boarders may go more independently and widely but still with some areas off-limits. This is managed by a combination of trust and the inhibiting likelihood of transgressions being discovered in due course. Boarders understood the reason for the restrictive elements in these rules and may freely access the shops which is their main use of town. With specific permission they may visit other areas, for example, the homes of non-boarding friends.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Wells Cathedral School is located in an array of historic buildings very close to Wells Cathedral. The premises are both interesting and challenging. There have been occasional problems requiring minor structural repair and these have been analysed carefully to manage safety issues, and promptly responded to. The close working between the school and the cathedral, the landlord for some of the buildings, provides effective maintenance. The premises have long been adapted as school buildings but require continual updating. Since the last inspection the showering facilities in Shrewsbury House have been upgraded. The only shower area which still does not provide lockable individual shower cubicles is within De Sallis, where opaque curtains give boarders some limited privacy. Bedrooms are all furnished to include study areas and young people use these daily. The environment in De Sallis is not well maintained, one bedroom being poorly decorated and marked across the walls and two toilets still having some graffiti showing. One toilet door by the games room has no lock on it. Within Shrewsbury House the lounge furnishings are of poor quality, mostly second hand sofas covered by a loose throw because the original covers are so faded.

There is a system for reporting areas requiring attention and prioritising of tasks. It was unclear to inspectors whether the specific tasks above were reported or not, but this system is not delivering to the satisfaction of all boarders. It is notable that many boarding houses were in good condition throughout and many boarders gave favourable comments about the accommodation.

The premises afford a good standard of privacy throughout, except the one showering area identified above. The boarders' questionnaires evidenced some concern for greater privacy but these were, through discussion, found to be commentary on the use of shared bedrooms (only a small number of year 13 boarders have single accommodation); all boarders spoken with were content with the other boarders with whom they shared.

Boarders have access to personal requisites within a school shop or may visit the high street of Wells to purchase personal effects. Boarders have lockable spaces in their rooms to keep small sums of money and valuables or they may have it securely stored by house-parents; upper school boarders are encouraged to use high street savings accounts to manage their own money, and juniors may do this after consultation with house-parents.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Wells Cathedral School has a clear sense of purpose which is written and known to staff, and evident in the strong leadership which puts this into practice. Information of high quality is made available to boarders and their families both before and during their stay at the school.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The school has a strong Christian ethos with very close links to the cathedral and boarders regularly attend services. School age cathedral choristers all attend this school, either as boarders or day pupils. The school does have some boarders of other faiths and no faith and there is no discrimination between these. The chaplain ensures internal services are inclusive. The school has a growing international feel as numbers of overseas boarders has grown. There is excellent integration of young people from different countries and backgrounds. Additionally the school has made international links which have grown in importance and have gained learning from this. The school has a partnership with an education project in Sri Lanka and with a music academy and a primary school in Sierra Leone. This has created meaningful staff and student development opportunities.

The community of boarders (and day pupils) has a genuine culture of respect. The relationships between girls and boys are consistently good and young people demonstrate positive attitudes to each other, regardless of race or gender.

Boarding houses are staffed with a house-parent and an assistant house-parent living on site, plus a resident matron in the junior boys' house. Other staff contribute on a regular basis to the supervision of boarding at particular times. Boarders know how to contact house-parents at all times; all house-parents have just been issued with mobile phones and the numbers are to be highlighted in the phone booths within each house. This ensures that boarders may contact them if they are elsewhere on the site. House-parents are available throughout the day and night; examples were given by boarders of staff responding helpfully to calls for attention in

the early hours of the morning. The level of supervision of boarders available is good, coupled with the promotion of responsible behaviour which successfully occurs. Good and proportionate supervision is maintained for boarders when they are on trips away from school, whether visiting other schools or on external activities.

The oversight of boarding practice is thorough but not entirely systematic. It relies very heavily on the good dialogue between all house-parents and the senior team, but is not underpinned by review of records, for example, of risk assessments, accidents or sanctions. These issues were well known to the deputy headteacher and no flaws in the actual practices were identified during this inspection.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Compliance with national minimum standards

The school meets all the national minimum standards, with the exception of any listed below. To ensure that the school meets the national minimum standards the school needs to...

- improve the décor and furnishings in boarding houses ensuring all graffiti is removed and room 6 in De Sallis is redecorated and good quality sofas are provided in Shrewsbury House (NMS 40.4 and 40.5)
- ensure adequate private washing facilities, in particular, make a time specific plan to provide privacy for showers in De Sallis (NMS 44.1)
- oversee systematic reporting of maintenance and furnishing concerns of boarders, matrons and house parents to facilities and that this is monitored by the head of boarding, to achieve more timely rectification of shortfalls (40.4, 40.5 and 40.6)
- prepare and work to an individual 'welfare plan', which can be periodically reviewed, for boarders with special welfare needs (NMS 17.2)
- ensure that a designated senior member of staff monitors house records including sanctions, risk assessments, accidents, complaints and any other pertinent records at least twice per term. (NMS 23.2)