

Sherborne Preparatory School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Heather Chaplin
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Nominated person	Peter Stuart Tait
Date of last inspection	6 November 2006

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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

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

Sherborne Preparatory School is an independent co-educational school with boarding for children aged seven to 13 years. Founded in 1885, the school has a broad Christian ethos, but welcomes pupils from all denominations and faiths.

The school is a mixture of Victorian and modern buildings set in 12 acres of grounds and gardens in the centre of the town. There are close links with other independent and maintained schools nearby.

At the time of the inspection there were 181 pupils in the school, 32 of whom board. Boy boarders stay in Acreman, located in the main school building. The girls stay in Netherton, which is sited close to the main building.

In addition to the numbers above, the school has 56 pre-preparatory pupils, aged from three to seven years.

Summary

This was an announced inspection, in which all key standards were assessed. The school excels in five out of the six outcome areas and achieves good outcomes for children in the remaining area, achieving economic well-being.

Children's questionnaires are very positive and include the following comments: 'The education is amazing, and the teachers are so kind....it's my favourite school out of all three I've been to'; 'The sport and education are good and the teachers will listen to you'; and 'I think that the school provides a wide variety of opportunities and activities. I also have noticed that my knowledge has grown since I've moved from the State system.'

By encouraging good nutrition and providing plenty of sporting activities, the school does particularly well in promoting good health. There is an excellent personal, social and health education programme supported by dedicated pastoral care.

There are outstanding outcomes for children in all areas of child protection and safeguarding, and the school has a particularly creative approach to the prevention of bullying. In discussion, the school presented plans to improve risk assessments for activities. These currently ensure children's safety, but lack consistency at times. Children are kept safe from public intrusion, but the school is working towards further improvements in overall site security.

The activities programme is exceptionally strong and the school achieves high standards in pupil consultation. Boarding accommodation is a little more variable. Some areas are outstanding, while others are good and improving. The school has an experienced and highly focused senior management team, effectively led by the headteacher and the governors. All children and staff understand the school's ethos and there is a strong vision for the future.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection on 6 November 2006, 12 recommendations were made. Two recommendations in the being healthy outcome area concerned procedures for the administration of medicines, with two additional recommendations about medical questionnaires and communication with parents.

Six recommendations concerned the staying safe section of the report. These related to certain policies and procedures, building security, staff recruitment and risk assessment.

One recommendation under enjoying and achieving concerned different levels of access to certain evening activities for boys and girls, and the final recommendation was about induction for gap year students. All but one of these areas has been fully addressed, and the remaining recommendation partially addressed. Medical information is now always included as a category on risk assessments, but this section of the form is not always completed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

An excellent programme of personal, social and health education is in place, which helps children to develop age-appropriate understanding of concepts such as bullying, sexual health and personal safety. Success in promoting the programme's values of kindness, fairness, empathy and equality is clearly evident. There are high quality displays of relevant work all around the school and in the boarding houses, for example, excellent posters relating to bullying. Even the youngest children are mindful of their role as good citizens.

Parents complete a detailed confidential questionnaire to provide their child's full medical history. These records are available only to the matron and assistant matrons, but any child with specific allergies or other serious medical condition is made known to any staff who may have to respond in an emergency. Parents are asked to sign all the necessary consents to ensure that emergency medical treatment, first aid and homely remedies may be provided without delay.

Routine medical, dental and optical appointments can be arranged. Children make appointments to see a visiting doctor, who attends once a week. Although the matron does not hold a nursing qualification, she is a highly experienced and competent person who conducts the sick bay and the medication systems with considerable professionalism. All three sick bay staff and the permanent boarding house staff hold appropriate first aid qualifications.

There are effective systems in place to ensure that medication is stored, handled and administered safely. Suitable records are kept of any medicines given to children. Only one controlled medicine is in use and this is stored and recorded in a suitable manner.

Pupils say: 'When we are ill, it is very easy to go to matron and tell her our problems.' A very large majority of children said in their questionnaires that they are very well looked after when ill: 'If you are unwell, Matron will take your temperature and give you some medicine. If you are really unwell, she will send you to bed or even ask your parents to pick you up.'

The school has a two-bedded sick bay in Acreman House, with a third bed available in an adjacent room. Netherton House has a one-bedded sick bay situated next door to the

housemistress's flat. The three matrons provide substantial first aid cover from early morning to late evening every day, with the houseparents covering overnight.

The school has excellent provision for pastoral care. Any member of staff can raise a concern at the weekly pastoral care meeting. These issues are very well documented and any ongoing concerns are raised with parents. Children with special educational needs are carefully assessed and fully supported, with ready access to outside agencies, for example the educational psychological service.

The school's policies show an inclusive approach to children with special needs. Children with chronic health conditions such as diabetes are able to administer their own medication in private, provided that they are assessed as sufficiently safe to do so.

The school provides boarders with a nutritious and plentiful diet, and access to fresh drinking water at all times. Boarders say: 'They always offer salad, carbohydrates and meats...also, they offer yoghurt and fruit if you don't want pudding'; and 'We have a salad bar, we have a choice, which gives us variety...the main meals are good.'

Generally, the menu choice is varied, with clear evidence of healthy eating considerations. All the meals sampled and observed were freshly prepared and wholesome. There is plenty of yoghurt and fresh fruit on offer. Salads are of good quality and feature a different dish every day. Because of the family-style serving procedure, hot meals can sometimes cool rapidly by the time they reach the last child on the table. The school is currently reviewing its catering procedures and is considering whether to provide a cafeteria-style service.

Standards of cleanliness in the service area are high, as indeed they are throughout the school. Legal requirements from the last Environment Health Department report have all been met. The school undertook to address some minor repair work.

Boarders have a tradition of having hot chocolate and toast in the boarding houses before bedtime. Gap year students help to prepare the snacks in the main kitchen for Acreman, and a small kitchen area in Netherton. All main meals and breakfast are taken in the main dining area.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The school has a comprehensive policy on bullying, which is well known to staff and pupils. The personal, health and social education programme addresses the subject in depth. Pupils interviewed said that there are no significant bullying issues in the school and that staff would rapidly intervene if there was a problem. The school is well aware of the potential for cyber-bullying and has blocked social networking sites to help prevent this.

Safeguarding and child protection policies provide all the guidance necessary to ensure that staff follow the correct procedures. All staff interviewed, including ancillary staff, are clear about how to respond in the event of a disclosure. Any potential child protection issues are dealt with appropriately.

The senior master is the designated member of the management team responsible for leading in child protection matters. He has received multi-agency training on several occasions. Other

key staff, for example the matrons and the head of boarding, have also received external child protection training. The remaining staff are trained through regular in-service training days.

Pupils and staff are well aware of the policies on behaviour, discipline and sanctions. The recording of rewards and significant sanctions is good, although minor issues are not recorded unless they are repeated or become more serious in nature.

Standards of pupil behaviour are excellent. Generally, children regard the use of sanctions as appropriate and fair. The school also has a policy on restraint of pupils, but has not had to implement this.

The headteacher maintains a record of any complaints and concerns raised. There is a clear complaints procedure for boarders. Children have a number of ways in which they may raise informal concerns, and all thought that these would be dealt with.

The school has a prefect system in place. Generally, prefects are seen by boarders as a support and are named in questionnaires as a source of help. Prefects receive general child protection advice, but the planned continued training for prefects is 'work in progress'.

All staff and boarders interviewed are aware of fire procedures and the evacuation routine. Fire practices and fire safety equipment checks take place at intervals recommended by the Dorset Fire and Rescue Service. There are regular fire drills in boarding houses and across the school site.

Risk assessments are all in place for all activities. The senior management team recognise the need for improvement and so these are currently under review. The forms completed for high-risk activities were of a good standard. However, there is inconsistency in judgements made and in some cases, assessment of likelihood and severity of risks is insufficiently robust. For example, certain outdoor activities are rated low risk, when they are clearly at least medium risk.

Staffing levels are always appropriate for the activity and the number of pupils. Although individual medical needs are not always identified on risk assessments, the matron confirmed that first aid kits are always carried, complete with any items required by specific children.

Boarders receive appropriate supervision and there are no identified issues about privacy. Staff ensure that furniture is placed so that boarders have screens in each dormitory for dressing and changing. There is also a screen in the sick bay that may be used if there are children of different genders using the facility at the same time.

The bursar has attended a course on safe recruitment, and all 10 staff files sampled within the past three years shows that the school recruits staff safely. All staff are subject to enhanced level Criminal Records Bureau checks. All have the required checks on identity and past employment in place, and telephone checks verify written references.

In some instances, there is insufficient evidence recorded on the staff file to confirm the content of interviews. For example, any gaps in employment history are checked with the candidate, but the reasons for the gaps are not recorded. In discussion, the bursar said that the interview recording process would be reviewed.

Boarding accommodation is used for educational purposes outside boarding hours, and this does not impinge on boarders' welfare. The school site is partially secured, with future plans to install additional gates to all the driveways. Entry to the boarding houses is controlled through keypad access. There is a careful lock-up procedure at night to help ensure that the houses are safe from intrusion.

The school provides a very safe and comfortable environment for children. Premises and fire risk assessments are thorough, and there are no significant hazards evident. Boarders are aware of school boundaries and out-of-bounds areas.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

One boarder said: 'I really like the school, the education is great and so is the sport.'

Another said: 'I like it...because it always has lots of things that you can do apart from work.'

There is a wide-ranging choice of activities. Boarders use the facilities sensibly and with consideration for others. Staff supervision levels are excellent; gap year students help and support the staff, but their role is carefully managed. Activities are a key reason for some pupils to become flexi-boarders, who stay on occasional nights to experience boarding life. Sunday activity trips are much appreciated and are of good quality. For example, there have been outings to Crealy Adventure Park, a falconry centre and Mill on the Brue.

Children confirm that they may talk to anyone on the staff team if they have a problem. Older pupils prefer to speak with friends. Teachers, prefects, matron, gap year students and the headteacher were all identified as people that would listen and understand. The school also has three independent listeners who provide additional support when needed, and children are aware of how to contact them. One parent said: 'The school excels at looking after the needs of each pupil. They make it a fun yet caring environment.'

The school has a strong anti-discriminatory ethos, and does not discriminate against pupils or parents on the basis of any perceived or actual difference. Diversity is celebrated in every aspect of school life.

Although it might be difficult to accommodate a boarder who is a wheelchair user, this is entirely due to the difficulty in adapting Victorian buildings. As new building takes place, special needs are being accommodated. The bursar asked a parent who uses a wheelchair to advise on how to create dignified and effective wheelchair access to the main building, which is good practice.

The headteacher believes firmly that children must have some time to relax. Hence the school keeps children busy, but does not expect high levels of extra-curricular activities outside the academic day. For example, Saturday school has been replaced with activities, and these are well supported.

The school is situated in 12 acres of attractive grounds in the centre of a historic town. It provides very safe and interesting recreational areas for children, including netball and tennis courts, and well-maintained pitches for team sports. There is a five-acre paddock which is used for a variety of activities. The school does not have its own swimming pool, and swimming is

undertaken at an independent senior school nearby. All sports activities are supervised by suitably qualified staff.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The school offers a number of ways in which pupils can put forward their views, and significant changes have been made as a result. Dormitory heads, the head boarder and the houseparents meet every two weeks to talk about any possible changes.

There is a school council, which focuses on specific concerns raised through pupil representatives. The housemistress circulates a survey each term to ask which activities boarders would like to do, and there are suggestions boxes. Changes made as a result of consultation include additional activities such as Laser Quest and Splashdown. Children have negotiated for a budget to purchase equipment, craft materials, DVDs and new curtains for the girls' boarding house. Further improvements are planned.

Children can keep in touch with their families through email, telephone and writing. Some parents are able to visit at weekends and take children out, but parents living overseas say they sometimes find it harder to keep in touch. The school has a very informative website which carries news items. Staff communicate with parents via email or telephone to discuss any concerns.

The school website and well-written boarder handbooks for pupils and parents explain the system of introducing new pupils to the school. New pupils are assigned a 'buddy' who guides and supports them until they have settled in.

The school has strong links with maintained and other independent schools locally and has extensive contacts overseas, in particular with a school in Qatar. Pupils welcome residents from a home for older people to school plays, and participate in the town's Abbey Choir. The school has embraced the international Eco-Schools project and has been awarded a Green Flag for pupils' contribution to environmental responsibility.

Relationships between staff and pupils are founded on mutual respect and openness. Together, they have created a very happy, successful school. Children participated fully in the inspection. They greeted and showed the inspectors around with considerable confidence and maturity and are clearly very proud of their school.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Boarders have access to lockable storage space for their personal possessions, and accurate records are kept to monitor pocket money. Children said that there is no problem in the school with personal items going missing.

The standard of boarding accommodation in Netherton is exceptionally high, but despite a major programme of redecoration in the boys' accommodation, there remains some discrepancy between the standards in the two houses and in the showering facilities. This has led to a rating of good rather than outstanding.

The school has clear plans for continuing improvements to boarding accommodation. The girls' boarding house is already spacious, homely and very attractively decorated, in particular the common rooms and individual bedrooms. The common rooms are also of very high quality in the boys' house, which has been decorated using a very effective sea-faring theme. The standards of maintenance and cleaning through the boarding accommodation and the school in general are excellent.

One of the boys' dormitories has insufficient space between the beds. This may require some creative thinking to resolve. However, there is plenty of space within Acreman as a whole, and the housemaster is keen to look at how to use the space to achieve improvements.

There are plenty of showers and toilets throughout the boarding accommodation, but there are discrepancies between the girls' showers and the boys' showers in terms of privacy. The girls' showers are of high quality with solid lockable doors, but at the start of the inspection, the senior boys' showers lacked full shower curtains. This was remedied by hanging shower curtains during the inspection, but the discrepancy remains.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There are a number of effective policies in place to help ensure that everyone in the school is treated as an individual. The multicultural staff group includes staff from Europe, Australia, New Zealand and Africa, and the school promotes strong links with other schools overseas.

The school addresses diversity issues with creativity and enthusiasm. Children are encouraged to join in boarders' cultural traditions, for example by African poetry readings in assembly, celebrating Chinese New Year and enjoying meals from around the world. The school has appointed a Year 8 pupil as a diversity officer. The personal, health and social education programme runs 'walk tall' workshops for children and encourages awareness of their potential, irrespective of gender, ethnicity and physical abilities.

A statement of the school's boarding principles and practice is available in the staff and parent boarding manuals. The school also has an informative website where many policies and procedures are located. This means that prospective parents can readily access the school's aims, ethos, philosophy and organisation, together with admission criteria, facilities, pastoral and cultural care.

The headteacher demonstrates strong, consultative and inspirational leadership to ensure that the school is effectively managed. Governors are very actively involved and committed to the school. One governor is responsible for boarding, and is also a parent with children in the school. The headteacher has encouraged committees to deal with specific areas of school life, for example fundraising and education. He has a strong management team and has made some excellent recent appointments to ensure that the school continues to develop and progress in all areas, including boarding.

Boarding is effectively organised to promote excellent outcomes for children of all ages and both genders. Although there are some minor discrepancies between the two boarding houses, the school is committed to addressing these.

Systems are in place to ensure the monitoring of school records, for example complaints, sanctions and discipline. Recording shows that there have been no serious sanctions over the recent years. Risk assessments are in place for all parts of the premises, for fire risks, and for activities. Accident reporting is effective and the bursar regularly reviews these records.

There are sufficient staff on duty at all times, including during school trips off-site and at night, to ensure that boarders are safe and looked after well. For example, Netherton House has at least one permanent member of staff and at least one gap year student on duty for nine girls.

All boarding staff have clear job descriptions, and there are good staff training records in place. All new staff receive a thorough induction, and the gap year students have a comprehensive handbook to guide them. Gap year students have also received child protection training. The head of boarding has not yet attended specialist training in management of boarding, but is planning to do so.

All other staff have received training appropriate to their role. The staff handbook is clear, detailed and constantly updated in response to changing circumstances or specific need. Staff communicate very effectively and meet regularly together to update each other on current issues.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- continue to review the format and criteria for assigning levels of risk to specific activities and include details of any children with specific medical issues (NMS 29.2)
- ensure that the showering facilities in the boys' changing rooms protect children's privacy at all times and are of the same standard as those in the girls' changing rooms. (NMS 45.3)