

Stowe School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Seka Graovac / Angela Hunt
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Date of last inspection	7 March 2005

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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

Stowe School is a co-educational independent boarding and day school for approximately 720 children and young people aged 13 to 18. The majority of pupils live in one of the boarding houses. There are eight houses for boys and four for girls. Day pupils are fully integrated into life at Stowe School by being attached to one of these houses. Pupils are admitted on the basis of Common Entrance or Scholarship Examination in line with the school's emphasis on the individual merit. The school's educational philosophy focuses on bringing out the unique talent in each pupil, promotion of diversity and commitment to the pursuit of intellectual, cultural and sporting excellence. It is a Christian school that welcomes people from all faiths. Traditional values and fostering of moral, social and spiritual responsibility underlines the school's ethos. The school is surrounded by 750 acres of historically significant landscape gardens. It works in partnership with the National Trust and Stowe House Preservation Trust to preserve the heritage while protecting the interests of the school. The school was founded in 1923. Its vision continues to embody the values of the English Enlightenment movement and as expressed in the school's brochure, 'to produce thinkers and leaders for the modern world.'

Summary

This was an announced full inspection. Its main aim was to assess the quality of the welfare provision at Stowe School in line with the National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools. Ofsted inspectors were accompanied by a Boarding Schools Additional Inspector. Views of boarders and their parents were gathered through written questionnaires. The inspectors also had opportunities to speak to many boarders individually and in small groups, during the inspection.

The main inspection finding is that Stowe School provides good quality boarding with some aspects of it being outstanding. Health promotion, safeguarding boarders' welfare and their economic wellbeing have been judged as good with some outstanding features, but also with some shortfalls that led to two recommendations being made in this report. The school's capacity to improve has been assessed as good. The opportunities for boarders' positive contribution, their enjoyment and achievements have been judged as outstanding.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection was conducted in March 2005 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection. That inspection identified many shortfalls that led to 26 recommended actions and nine advisory recommendations being included in the inspection report. The shortfalls related to a wide range of issues including health promotion, safeguarding, environment and management processes. The school has taken decisive steps to address the identified weaknesses in the provision. The actions taken have been effective and the school's welfare provision has significantly improved, since the previous inspection. The extent of the improvement achieved is variable. In some areas of work, the school is planning more changes to ensure that better practices are fully embedded. For example, a more comprehensive induction package for matrons will be rolled out from the Autumn 2009. Other areas, which had been previously identified as a weakness, have become a real strength. For example, the assessments of high risk activities

that were seen at this inspection are of excellent quality and surpass the specifications of the related National Minimum Standard. No previously recommended actions or advisory recommendations have been restated in this report.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Stowe School promotes and protects boarders' health well. Personal, social and health education provides age appropriate guidance on potential health hazards and health protection. This is complemented by the Teaching Life Choices programme with the regular tutorial input from nurses. Additional information on health promotion is available on the school's internet and also in the form of leaflets. There are clear policies on use of alcohol, smoking and illegal substances that are known to boarders and their parents and are rigorously implemented.

An excellent catering service contributes to boarders' health by providing information on healthy eating and offering a wide selection of delicious, nutritious, freshly prepared food. The school's grand dining hall is appropriately furnished and sufficient in size to enable all boarders to enjoy three meals a day in a convivial atmosphere and beautiful surroundings. Mealtimes are orderly occasions and there is a good queuing system guarded by prefects.

Boarders can also prepare additional snacks for themselves in boarding houses. Baskets with fresh fruit are delivered to those kitchens, daily. Adequate arrangements are in place to ensure that kitchens are hygienically maintained. The overall level of cleanliness at the school is good. Appropriate on-site laundry facilities contribute to ensuring that boarders' clothing and bedding are clean.

Healthy lifestyles are also promoted by an excellent provision of sporting facilities. The school encourages boarders to engage in regular cardiovascular activities and improve their fitness levels.

Boarders are well looked after when feeling unwell or ill. There is a medical centre on site with excellent accommodation facilities for isolation of sick boarders when necessary. On-site medical advice is available at all times through 24 hour nursing staff cover. A male and a female doctor visit the school every day, Monday to Friday to enable boarders to have a choice about who they see. There are good recording systems in place that include links with the strictly confidential National Health records accessible by medical staff only, as well as an internal electronic data tool that the school's staff can access. Each nurse is responsible for linking with two boarding houses to provide additional medical support and ensure good partnership working. However, the recent nursing staff turnover has impacted on the effectiveness of this arrangement. All nurses are appropriately qualified. In addition, the school is arranging specialist training for them in various nursing fields of expertise, such as travel immunisation and diabetes.

Communication between the boarding houses and the medical centre is also facilitated by written welfare plans for boarders with special welfare needs, such as asthma or diabetes. However, on occasions some boarding staff felt that specific information about a boarder's welfare that would enable them to more fully support that person, has not been made available to them, for example, if a boarder had issues related to a potential eating disorder and the nursing staff were aware of that, but did not pass the information to staff with welfare responsibilities. An appropriate balance of protecting confidential information, stemming from a young person's right to privacy and the sharing of information between medical and boarding

staff to ensure that the young person receives the best support possible, has not always been achieved. The school is aware of the complexities involved in finding this balance and has taken appropriate steps to explore the issues involved and to review current practice.

The school's counsellor provides good support to boarders in relation to their personal problems. This work involves creating a safe confidential space for boarders to explore their emotions, while sensitively guiding them to understand and agree that on occasions, it is in their best interest if some information is shared with other people involved in supporting them.

The school has comprehensive protocols for dealing with boarders' medication and self-administration of medication, when appropriate. These protocols that include robust record keeping are rigorously and consistently implemented to safeguard boarders' health.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The school safeguards and promotes boarders' welfare well. There are a number of comprehensive safeguarding policies and procedures that are robustly implemented. They include child protection, anti-bullying and staff recruitment. This, together with regular staff training and information sharing ensures consistently safe boarding practices.

Boarders and their parents know what to expect from the school in terms of the service provided and its standard. They are aware of their rights including the right to complain. They know that if they raise any concerns, they will be listened to and appropriately responded to.

Equally, boarders are clear of the school's expectations from them. They are well supported to take responsibility for their behaviour. There is a transparent rewards and punishment system that includes excellent record keeping. Everybody is clear that no form of bullying, including cyber-bullying will be tolerated. The school conducts regular surveys on bullying to capture any trends. In response to the results, it takes proactive measures to promote boarders' welfare and secure an environment that is free from bullying, for example, an increased presence of staff in some areas of the school. Use of disciplinary measures is experienced as fair and proportionate both by boarders and their parents. There is an excellent prefect system, as well as a Peer Support Group (PSG). This group was initiated by boarders and it is run by them with the counsellor's support. All this adds to safeguarding and promotion of boarders' welfare.

Boarders feel safe at the school. There are excellent security arrangements in place that include two security staff on duty and a full time school beadle. Control measures are in place to protect boarders from unsupervised contact with adults who have not been subject to the school's stringent recruitment checking procedures. For example, the visitors to the Stowe House that is at times opened to public by Stowe House Preservation Trust are only through guided and supervised tours. Clear signage is in place to keep the National Trust volunteers and visitors to the extensive landscape gardens away from the areas used by boarders. This minimises potential risks of unsupervised contact. Boarding houses are accessible only by keypad locks, and these were found to be operational and effective at the inspection. Although safe practices have been implemented, the related written risk assessment could be more comprehensive.

The school's buildings and grounds are kept free from safety hazards. However, the school's system for monitoring of the written risk assessments is not fully effective. This has led to inconsistent quality of the written risk assessments. In addition to the example given in the

previous paragraph, the written fire risk assessments for some of the boarding houses have not been formally reviewed for more than a year. However, the school has excellent links with the Fire Authority to ensure a high standard of fire-safety.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The school enables boarders to enjoy life and excel in their achievements. A number of boarders told the inspectors that being at the Stowe School has been the best thing that has ever happened to them.

Boarders receive excellent personal support at Stowe School from a wide range of sources. This is irrespective of their gender, abilities or a specific individual need. Boarders benefit from having appropriately warm and trusting relationships with boarding staff. There is also a very effective personal tutor system that enables boarders to excel. The Peer Support Group, as well as the school's counsellor and the chaplain are also available to boarders for confidential discussion of any personal and welfare issues. Boarders with disabilities receive additional individually tailored support through the school's Skills Department.

The school realises its commitment to the pursuit of intellectual, cultural and sporting excellence through a wide range of excellent facilities and activities being made available to boarders. This includes excellent education provision, a library with fully integrated information and communication technology facilities, a wealth of concerts, recitals and theatrical performances, a broad range of creative visual disciplines and an extremely well organised sports programme that includes a huge range of sports. The key sports are rugby, hockey and cricket for boys and lacrosse, hockey and tennis for girls. Many other exiting activities for boarders are organised through Combined Cadet Force, a Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme and a Community Service Programme.

The school has an explicitly Christian ethos. Through it, boarders are encouraged to explore universal values in the modern world and develop moral, social and spiritual responsibility. There is a church and a large chapel on site where the whole school comes together three times a week. The school is actively seeking to diversify. It has arranged a number of trips abroad to give boarders the opportunities to experience other cultures and different ways of living. Destinations have included Borneo, Namibia, Peru, Bolivia and the Galapagos Islands. The school ensures that international pupils receive the support they need and feel welcomed. Boarders whose first language is not English are appropriately supported through an Additional Language Department. The school recently supported some Muslim boarders who wanted to observe the Ramadan fast. Through Branson scholarship, five boarders from South Africa have also brought more diversity to the school.

The Stowe School pupils are known as Stoics and there is a strong alumni branch. The Old Stoics and the governors contribute to the safeguarding of the school's caring ethics, liberal educational vision and the passion for bringing out the unique talent in each child.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There is an appropriate formal process of induction and guidance for new boarders to ensure that they settle with ease into their new school. The school maintains close partnership working

with parents through meetings and good communication that includes frequent reports. This relationship adds to protecting children's rights and strengthening their voice through their parents, if it is needed.

The school deploys many ways to facilitate boarders' confidence, empowerment, development of leadership skills and styles of influence. There are numerous formal opportunities for boarders to express their views. There is a highly developed prefect system that includes weekly meetings with the Headmaster. Formal meetings of Senior and Junior Councils are regularly held to represent and discuss views of boarders from different houses. Daily house meetings offer further opportunities for talking and information sharing. Trusting relationships between boarders and staff, the availability of the Peer Support Group, the counsellor, the clergy and gap students, various debating and other types of societies and written surveys provide additional routes for boarders to express themselves and influence the development of boarding practices at the school. Boarders feel listened to and enabled to effectively contribute to the school life.

Through internet access, newspapers, external speakers, community service activities and local and international trips boarders keep well informed about the world around them. This, together with the school's effective fostering of personal and social responsibility helps boarders to find their own ways and confidence to contribute to the society.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Through living in an architecturally and historically rich environment, boarders develop admiration for the tradition and culture, as well as the appreciation of the contemporary and modern. The main school building is a magnificent neo-classical ducal palace built by some of the greatest names in the 18th century architecture. The landscaped gardens that surround the school are amongst the best known around the world. They contain over 40 monuments and temples and many lakes. In the continuing tradition of care for great buildings, one of the newly built houses has received a prestigious award by the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Boarders are attached to boarding houses that are run as relatively independent living units with common values and procedures shared by the school as the whole. Accommodation, washing and additional communal facilities in boarding houses significantly vary in age, design and sometimes in actual quality. For example, some boarders are accommodated in small dormitories, while the others might live in shared study bedsits or individual rooms. However, despite the physical differences, the environment is well maintained. A clear maintenance plan that includes planned improvement is implemented to ensure that lighting, ventilation, hot water supply and pressure, fittings and furnishings are fully functional and contribute to boarders' wellbeing. For example, shower rooms in some of the boys' houses are included in the summer's refurbishment programme.

Boarders can purchase small personal requisites from the school shops or in nearby places. Each boarder has an appropriate lockable provision that includes a laptop safe. This allows them to secure their possessions. It is possible also to fit locks to other storage facilities they use, if needed. Boarders feel comfortable about leaving their possessions unattended.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Information about the school that is made available to parents, boarders, staff and other stakeholders is clear and comprehensive. It is available through a dedicated website, as well as various publications, handbooks and other marketing materials.

The liberal vision of education based on the values of the English Enlightenment continues to shape the school's current aims and objectives. The school's staff, management and the governing body remain committed to organising the school activities around the sensitive nurturing of the best and the unique in each child. Through good management, the school is able to effectively translate its vision into positive outcomes for children. Strong leadership, open communication, professional attitudes, commitment and capacity to improve, also provide role models for boarders to learn from and follow. Boarders' formal forums, such as the prefect system and the councils contribute to the dynamics and strength of the school's complex management structure and decision making process. They also give opportunities to boarders to practise their leadership skills, grow in confidence in expressing themselves freely and develop as questioning, reasonable and responsible individuals.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Boarders and staff are treated with fairness and respect. They are well supported to grow in their own way and celebrate differences between them.

Staff roles in maintaining a safe and nurturing environment for boarders are clearly specified in their job descriptions. Good practice is reinforced by the comprehensive policies and procedures. Good provision of pastoral care is further facilitated by staff induction, training and reviewing processes. Good organisation of boarding houses that includes appropriate supervision of boarders also complements this process of promoting boarders' welfare. Good recording systems and an excellent meetings framework facilitate good communication and the horizontal and vertical flow of significant information within the organisation. This enables monitoring to take place with a view of identifying any issues requiring action. This process has been very effective with the exception of monitoring of the written risk assessments. Annual welfare reports that include summary information on complaints are presented to the governing body. The governing body is well established and organised. It adds to the safeguarding and promotion of boarders' welfare in line with the school ethos.

The school has a proven ability to successfully and smoothly manage crisis situations as well as usual ones. It even managed to turn the most recent emergency closure for one week into an opportunity to spearhead the implementation of a distant online education.

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):

- review the arrangements for information sharing between the medical and boarding staff so that an appropriate balance is found in relation to protecting confidentiality and providing appropriate support to boarders with any health or personal problems (NMS 7)
- review the arrangements for monitoring of risk assessment records to ensure that they are fully completed and regularly reviewed (NMS 23)