

St Mary's School Ascot

Inspection report for boarding school

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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

St Mary's School Ascot is a leading Roman Catholic girls boarding school set in 55 acres of grounds in the heart of Berkshire. The school can accommodate up to 380 girls from the ages of 11 to 18 years, and almost all of the girls do board. The School is a stable and caring community, proud of its academic, sporting and musical achievements and dedicated to bringing out the full potential of each of the girls.

Every girl and member of staff at St Mary's belongs to one of the six houses. The house is not a building but a community of pupils who, under the care of the head of house, work together to promote the development of each other.

The school's mission statement states that 'St Mary's Ascot remains faithful to the mission of its founder, Mary Ward: It 'guides the girls to become "capable and fit to do God's service" in whatever walk of life they follow as women of the 21st Century'.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This announced inspection was aligned with the Independent School Inspectorate. The Ofsted lead inspector was supported by a Social Care Regulatory Inspector and a Boarding School Additional Inspector. All key standards were inspected.

St Mary's School was very well organised in preparing for the inspection. The level of attention and care afforded to girls is excellent and the girls value this. There is a wide range of people whom pupils can talk to and a wide range of activities and events for pupils to get involved in.

Excellent systems are in place to promote the health and safety of pupils and positive relationships between pupils and staff and between girls and their peers exist and this was one of the most important elements of the school. Regular pastoral care meetings between the Heads of Houses and the Headmistress and regular meetings amongst other departments take place to promote the health, safety and well-being of pupils at the school. Communication between the management team and rest of the staff is excellent and this is because of the dynamic and proactive approach of the Headmistress. The school has a strong Roman Catholic ethos.

The school has established exceptionally effective systems for monitoring boarding records as a part of the whole school quality assurance process. The school works hard to meet the full range of boarders' needs. There are excellent policies and procedures in place which are reviewed and updated regularly, especially safeguarding, risk assessment and child protection. The school has maintained good links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The school ensures that the safety

of all girls is paramount and this is evident throughout the school.

Ofsted received an overwhelming number of surveys back from parents and boarders and the majority of the comments received were very positive about the school, the teachers and the Headmistress and about what support they received.

Following this inspection no recommendations were made.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is St Mary's school first boarding school inspection under Ofsted.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The quality of pastoral care and the provision for the welfare, health and safety of the boarders are exceptionally managed. There is a robust and comprehensive personal social health and economic education programme called 'skills for life'. This is run as part of the school curriculum, delivering age appropriate topics to the girls. The programme has recently been updated to include cyber-bullying. All girls spoke highly of the classes and also understood the importance of each session taught. Girls overwhelmingly said that 'these sessions are a good foundation for life.' The school also offers related training and advice to parents and the majority of this information can be accessed via the school's up-to-date website.

The infirmary is overseen by a team of three nurses and a local doctor, who runs a twice weekly surgery. Outside of these hours boarders can access the same doctor locally by appointment. The boarding staff team and the nurses further promote high-quality health by supporting boarders with appropriate healthcare treatments, appointments, healthy eating and keeping safe. The waiting area within the infirmary has a variety of leaflets and posters for the girls to read whilst waiting to be seen. There is an excellent system in place to ensure medication is stored securely and administered appropriately. Medical records are well maintained. Medical information and consent is gathered from parents at the start of school, this ensures medical attention is given according to parents' wishes. The nurses receive good support from the school doctor and local surgery in the care of girls who are ill. The doctor has approved the homely remedies list, medical policies and procedures, and is available to give advice when necessary. For specific medical conditions there are written protocols ensuring that the pupils receive consistent care. The medical and health care of boarders is primarily delivered by the nurses supported by boarding staff. Any pastoral concern is handled sensitively and carefully, supported by a robust and comprehensive individual plan: this ensures that the safety and well-being of the pupil is paramount. The majority of staff are trained in first aid and the nurses are also trained to write prescriptions with the advice and support of the local doctor. A reporting system of accidents/incidents allows the nurses to monitor these and identify any changes that the school may need to take to reduce them. The computer data-base ensures that key staff know where girls are when they are ill.

The menus provide a varied diet and daily choices for boarders. Throughout the day snacks and beverages are provided including a number of healthy options such as fruit, homemade biscuits and cakes. Any pupil who has a special diet or religious needs is catered for. The girls said that different cultures are celebrated such as Chinese New Year. The comments from the girls about the meals provided were mixed, but, generally good. There is a food council where comments are addressed and the catering department have introduced a comments book. Many of the girls said that the meals have improved with a lot more choice and variety.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The welfare of pupils is secured through excellent procedures for dealing with allegations or suspicions of abuse. The overall monitoring of any allegation or suspicion of abuse is managed by the Headmistress; this is completed sensitively and thoroughly. In addition, the school has worked hard to protect the pupils through promoting the power to keep themselves safe within the school and on-line. The designated person for child protection is known to all throughout the school and has attended a number of training courses with the local authority. The designated child protection officer has also co-ordinated the audit of the school's procedures to ensure they meet current legislation and guidance. The school provides a safe and protective environment for all pupils. Additional staff whose responsibility includes child protection is also evident within the school. One member of the governing body is the link safeguarding officer and works closely with the Headmistress and the designated child protection officer to ensure that safeguarding is at the forefront of what the school does. There is also additional support via the Local Safeguarding Children Board. All staff and prefects spoken to understand their role and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding.

There is a policy, known to staff and used in practice, for searching for and, if necessary reporting, any pupil missing from school. There are clear guide lines with regards to the use of the school's internet with clear safeguarding measures on keeping pupils safe whilst on-line.

The school's policy on bullying is clear and accessible to pupils and their parents/guardians. Pupils are well protected from bullying. The school policy and procedures on bullying speaks about 'unkindness' and ensures any issues relating to this are quickly spotted, monitored and appropriately dealt with. Pupils and staff gave examples of how such situations are managed if an issue arises. There was a clear message that any form of 'unkindness' rarely occurs and if it does it is quickly resolved through a series of meetings and discussions. The girls also said that if they feel unsafe or threatened in any way there are a number of people they could talk or go to such as their friends, the heads of house or their tutors. The school encourages the highest standards of behaviour and there are robust and clear systems in place to ensure any unacceptable behaviour is managed fairly. Where there is any inconsistency to sanctions or punishments imposed it is reviewed by the senior

management team.

Pupils are assured that sufficient measures are taken to minimise the risk of fire. Fire drills are carried out termly with additional fire drills to ensure all boarders know what to do in an emergency. This was confirmed by the boarders when interviewed. Boarders also gave examples of procedures they undertook when there was an emergency evacuation such as when burnt toast set off the fire alarms. Each floor within boarding has fire safety equipment and fire retardant furnishings. Any fire alarms and smoke detectors set off are monitored through the central security system. The fire and environmental risk assessments undertaken for each building or areas of risk were found to be robust, comprehensive and thoroughly completed, monitored and reviewed; they covered crisis management and risk assessed the various stairs within the school that could be deemed hazardous.

Identifiably high risk activities provided for boarders are also competently supervised and accompanied by appropriate safety measures.

The overall security within the school is good. Boarders feel safe and protected. Boarders confirmed that they felt completely safe and there are clear measures in place to ensure they are safe at all times.

The school has a comprehensive and robust health and safety policy, which is available to all staff and regularly monitored and reviewed by the health and safety officer. The school ensures that the supervision of boarders is risk assessed daily; there are CCTV cameras within the grounds and around the perimeter of the school. Security staff are employed by the school during the evening. Pupils are clear when they are permitted to go off site. While there is the potential for public access to some of the grounds staff are vigilant to ensure that the safety of the girls is paramount.

There is vigorous selection and vetting of all staff and volunteers working with pupils. The process is clear and robust. The school's central register is thoroughly maintained and all checks when completed are countersigned by the Headmistress. Recruitment of all staff is additionally subject to the safe recruitment practices as detailed in Safeguarding Children and Safer Recruitment in Education guidance. Visitors of boarding staff who live on site have appropriate checks undertaken. All spouses have a Criminal Records Bureau check.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The girls all reported that they have a range of people whom they can speak to if they need support. The independent listener is available twice a week in the evenings. Boarders know how to contact the independent listener outside of these times.

The school has comprehensive policies covering equal opportunities and disability; it

supports minority groups among boarders and girls who have difficulty 'fitting in'. There is no evidence of any isolation of, or discriminatory approaches to, any minority pupil groups within the school. Additional learning support is available and the school works hard to ensure all pupils have the chance to develop their individual strengths and abilities. Girls from overseas appreciate the extra thought that is given to their individual circumstances and needs. Heads of house foster a close relationship with overseas parents so that they do not feel 'out of the loop' and are able to feel part of their daughter's educational experience. The school recognises different cultures by celebrating their festivals and the catering department also prepares special dishes, for example, Indian, Chinese and Italian. As the school is specifically Catholic and more than 95% of the school is Catholic, all teaching and worship is from the Christian perspective. Non-Catholics are welcomed into the services. The school has a disability plan which it puts into practice. Girls overwhelmingly said that friendship is the most important part of school life.

The school offers a wide range of extra curricular activities. All girls are encouraged to take full advantage of as many activities as their individual schedule will allow. There are sports competitions within the different houses. Girls from the five houses take part in inter-house competitions such as sport, music, drama, science and public speaking. At weekends there is a lot on offer for girls to do; equally there is also time for girls to relax in their bedrooms, common rooms or around the grounds. Events are posted on the weekend board so that everyone knows exactly what is going on. Girls are committed to working hard and time management forms part of the 'skills for life' programme. The girls have a very positive attitude and take their commitments very seriously indeed. They have a huge sense of pride in their school and are obviously happy.

Younger years have supervised prep periods in classrooms. Others can study in their rooms, the library or computer rooms. Some study bedrooms are very small with little storage space in a few of them. There are plans to improve this in the future.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The school has a clear admissions process and a very effective and comprehensive induction programme for new boarders. In addition to the age appropriate and comprehensive written information that new boarders receive, there is an effective mentoring system to help girls settle into their new environment. Senior boarders provide friendly guidance and support to the new boarders. Girls report that they felt included and fully accepted from their first day at the school. They describe the school's atmosphere as very welcoming, warm and friendly.

Excellent arrangements are in place to ensure that it is easy for boarders to contact their parents, family members and friends, in private. In addition to having their own mobile phones and laptops, girls have easy access to Skype booths and card payphones. No incoming or outgoing post is opened and emails may be checked by senior staff only if the school suspects inappropriate use.

The school works in close partnership with parents. The head of houses and other staff ensure that parents are kept well-informed. Parents are regularly consulted about the support that their daughters may need or receive. The school organises talks with parents on different topics. Parents are welcomed to attend sport fixtures, music and drama performances and various other special events. The school diary provides a detailed programme of all events. Parents are also welcomed to join the school for Mass on Sunday and for retreats. Through the Ofsted survey, the parents expressed a great level of satisfaction with the school and gave overwhelmingly positive responses to the questions asked. Some parents made additional comments, such as: 'the school is unique and provides a genuinely warm and supportive environment with excellent pastoral care' and 'we have been absolutely delighted in the way our daughter has grown emotionally and intellectually since becoming a boarder'.

The school regularly consults with boarders to enable them to contribute to the running of the school and development of boarding. In addition to house meetings, there are numerous committees girls can join to add their contribution to the development of a particular aspect of the school they are interested in, such as food provision, social events, ecological awareness and action, pet welfare and charities. Through charitable work and community service, boarders have good opportunities to learn about and contribute to the wider society. These meetings discuss and shape various aspects of the school life. The girls report that although the agenda is often led by teaching staff, they feel free to raise any issues that are important to them at those meetings. There is an open atmosphere in the school. The girls report that they feel that the school listens to their requests, for example, when purchasing new sofas, installing additional water fountains, allowing older boarders to use facebook and making arrangements to celebrate the royal wedding. Boarders receive regular feedback from the school and are given explanations when it is not possible to respond positively to their requests. Staff also give girls significant individual attention to ensure that they have additional opportunities to express their views on an individual basis.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The school operates a cashless system which all the girls are familiar with and like.

The accommodation provided to boarders is of good quality. Boarders have adequate space to store their personal belongings and safes for any items of value. The boarding house is a part of the school building and is situated over three floors, providing a range of dormitories, single rooms and group rooms. Each room is unique and some are quirky such as bedrooms situated in the eaves of the building. The boarding areas have a homely atmosphere, girls are able to personalise their space as they so wish. To ensure that each girl is able to share with friends of their choice, each term the Pastoral Deputy Head re-allocates rooms to meet this need. Resident staff provide supervision overnight. Boarders reported that 'being together

is fun'. Boarders have all their meals in the main school dining room, snacks are provided in the common rooms in the evening. The bathing and toilet facilities meet the national minimum standards, and there are future plans to improve these. The school grounds are beautiful and very well maintained. The surrounding area provides a safe space to play and boarders report that they enjoy barbecues and special events especially at weekends.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The school's website provides clear and comprehensive information about its boarding principles and practice. In addition, a number of documents and other printed material with helpful information are available to parents, boarders and staff. The information accurately reflects the actual welfare service and boarding practice. Strong leadership ensures that girls are well looked after and have what they need to grow into confident and successful individuals. A somewhat unusual arrangement by which the majority of girls belong to a house which is not geographically based is very well managed. Girls are looked after by highly motivated, professional and competent staff. Regular boarding staff meetings and discussions contribute to the consistency of the boarding practice and excellent communication.

Staff are very clear about their duties and responsibilities. At the beginning of their employment, they undergo a vigorous, detailed induction process. There is excellent management support, easy access to a wide range of comprehensive and clearly written policies and procedures, regular meetings and extensive training opportunities for all staff. Consequently staff are enabled to consistently provide a high quality support to boarders. Staffing levels are appropriately maintained to ensure effective supervision of boarders at all times, including when they are on school trips locally or abroad. The duty rotas and any other records kept by the school, such as the health and safety records, risk assessments, complaints and sanctions are meticulously maintained, reviewed and monitored and exceed the minimum requirements.

The record keeping is second to none. The school is exceptionally well managed. The excellent management team sets a very high standard of work. This in turn motivates the staff to provide the best quality support to boarders. It also models the behaviour for girls to aspire to achieve themselves. The staff report that the management team are very approachable, flexible and always have time to discuss any queries or concerns that staff may have. The boarders describe the management team and staff in the same positive way. They talk about them as being kind, caring and lovely people.

The outcomes for individual girls are outstanding. They receive excellent welfare support that addresses their holistic needs exceptionally well. The school has a strong learning culture and continues to strive to achieve and maintain excellence and push the boundaries of what is possible further. The management and staff use any opportunity to review and debate their practice with the aim of further

improvement.

All records are regularly monitored by the members of the school's senior management team. Pastoral questionnaires are used to ascertain boarders' and parents' experience of the boarding and welfare provision. Annual reports are presented to the governing body. The governors provide effective support to the management of the school and an additional level of quality assurance in relation to how the school safeguards girls' welfare, promotes their development and fulfils the school's Roman Catholic ethos.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Equality and diversity is threaded through the ethos of the school. The school has a comprehensive equality and diversity policy and the celebration of difference is promoted through religious studies, assembly and the 'Skills for Life' programme. The Chapel is at the heart of the school in a physical and spiritual sense; the spiritual life of the school is taken very seriously, but worn very lightly. At school the girls become involved with global projects acknowledging a range of religious festivals and customs and supporting local, national and international charities. The girls understand difference and see their friendship and community as an important part of being at the school. The school ethos is 'affirming equality whilst recognising diversity.'



ST MARY'S SCHOOL ASCOT
