

Aldenham School

Inspection report for boarding school

Unique reference number	SC019264
Inspection date	12/05/2011
Inspector	Tola Akinde-Hummel
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	07/03/2008

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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

Aldenham School is situated in a quiet area of Hertfordshire, although the large town of Watford, with its wide range of facilities is nearby. There are good transport links in the area, and fairly easy access to central London from the school. The school grounds are extensive and well kept, and provide a range of sporting activities for young people. Aldenham is a Christian foundation, and a full-time chaplain lives on site. The school offers boarding accommodation to pupils between 11 and 18 years old, and this can be on a full-time or flexible basis. The boarding accommodation is based in five separate houses, one is for younger boarders, one is exclusively for girls and the remainder are for boys.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a full announced inspection covering the Every Child Matters outcomes.

Aldenham school is a community that includes all staff and pupils connected to the school. Boarders overwhelmingly enjoy their experience at the school. Boarders feel well protected and cared for by staff.

Arrangements for safeguarding boarders at all levels are robust and sophisticated. This ensures that information is passed on without delay whether it is related to health and safety or child protection.

Housemasters/ mistresses are committed to their houses and work within teams that share the same vision and offer assistance to the boarders. The established counsellor, chaplain and medical team provide additional support to boarders enabling them to feel nurtured.

Boarders are encouraged to support each other and understand their role in making the environment conducive to study and a fun place to be.

Strong focused leadership ensures that staff have the opportunity to develop their roles and reinforce positive messages to boarders about their ability to achieve both socially and educationally.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no recommendations made at the previous inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The school has a very good system for delivering personal, social, health and citizenship education, which at Aldenham is called 'life skills'. The subject is delivered, to all pupils, in weekly tutor periods to groups of the same age and gender. All major topics are addressed, though some are focused on particular age groups, and those which are more sensitive or require more specialised knowledge, are delivered by outside speakers. Parents are made aware of the curriculum and policies and may discuss these with the school.

The pupils appreciate the excellent services offered by the medical staff in the school. The medical centre is housed in a self-contained suite. The three main bedrooms contain eight beds, they are warm, light, well-ventilated and nicely decorated and have amenities such as books and DVDs for boarders who are recovering. There is one bathroom and separate toilets for boys and girls. All the nursing staff are fully qualified with their registration up to date. One nurse is resident on the floor above the medical centre. House staff can easily contact the nurse if a child becomes ill during the night. Boarders in the medical centre at night, are looked after by the resident nurse. The school doctor is from a local practice and holds a surgery in the school every lunchtime. A female doctor from the same practice visits the school every fortnight, but if girls wish to see her in the intervening period, then they may go to the practice.

All safeguards are in place for storing medicines, and most medicines are given to pupils within the medical centre. The houses, many of whose staff are first aid trained, each have a locked medical cupboard which holds non-prescribed medicines. Excellent records are kept of any medication administered to boarders. The information is shared with the medical centre without delay electronically and in handwritten form. Every week, a nurse monitors the medication and the records in the boarding houses. Senior boarders are able to self-medicate but only if they have first signed to consent to, and subsequently follow, the sensible procedures for this. The medical centre has a procedure in place for managing medication brought to the school from abroad.

Boarders with health and welfare needs are appropriately identified and sensitively supported in the school. This information is shared on a need to know basis. Details of how to assist individual boarders are agreed with parents and guardians. Plans are amended as circumstances change and this information is shared to ensure consistency in support provided. Those boarders whose plans reflect their medical needs are well known and monitored by the school nurse.

Parents and guardians supply the medical centre with medical information about their children and, in the case of necessary information such as allergic reactions, this is disseminated to the adults in the school via notices and on the shared area of the school intranet. This information is available to teachers taking pupils on school visits.

Boarders' surveys reveal a varied opinion about the meals provided. Boarders spoken with said that the quality of meals has improved considerably. One boarder pointed out that, 'the school try to accommodate all palates and prepare international meals for us, so that we can also sample food from other cultures.' Boarders state that breakfast is their favourite meal. The external catering team present a variety of food and healthy options to pupils. Posters and information encourage a balanced diet.

Boarders with special dietary or religious needs are known to the catering team and are provided with appropriate meals without fuss or unnecessary attention. Catering staff receive first aid training and training is also provided in the use of adrenaline pens and defibrillators.

The space in the dining area is limited. Plans are in place to use the space differently to reduce queues and improve the presentation of the servery. Boarders and day pupils contribute their ideas to the food committee. However boarders believe they would benefit from separate meetings with the head of catering to address their breakfast and evening meal suggestions. The school has a central tuck shop available outside of mealtimes and boarders also have tuck shops in operation within their houses.

The matrons have a good system in operation to ensure that boarders have access to clean clothes and bed-linen at all times.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders at Aldenham school report that they are encouraged to operate as a community and speak out against bullying when it arises. The school has a discreet box in the main area of the school where pupils can post a note to raise an issue about bullying. Boarders have excellent support systems in place to tackle any bullying behaviour. Boarders are confident that when such issues are raised with staff, these are taken seriously and swiftly dealt with. The school ensures that support and education are provided to the victim and the perpetrator. Where appropriate, counselling is also offered. Detailed policies and procedures support the practice of dealing with bullying around the school.

Aldenham school has a robust procedure in place for dealing with all child protection allegations and concerns. The school has an established designated senior person and deputies to manage allegations and liaisons with the local authority designated officer. Staff receive annual refresher training and full training every three years from the local county council. Both teaching and non-teaching staff are clear of their responsibility to be vigilant and report any concerns. This includes whistle-blowing. The designated senior person, deputy and headteacher are trained at the same level and are all familiar with issues that have arisen in the school. Relationships and consultation with the county council are highly effective. The school's county council liaison officer stated: 'The designated senior person raises concerns and seeks advice

appropriately, the school is open and receptive to discussions.

Aldenham School has a complaints procedure which is available and accessible. This procedure explains the various stages of the process. The school works hard to manage and resolve the majority of complaints at the informal stage. The school does not have a high number of complaints. Records of complaints are detailed and demonstrate that these are handled effectively. Boarders also take their informal complaints to their housemasters and matrons. One parent commented: 'We had some teething problems in the beginning, I am very satisfied with the speed and professional manner in which they dealt with and completely resolved these.'

Aldenham School place a great emphasis on encouraging and rewarding positive behaviour. Units of rewards are designed to recognise effort achievement and citizenship within the school community. Boarders' surveys and discussions state that they are treated fairly and punishments are not excessive or unreasonable. Records show that punishments in the houses are kept to a minimum. Any issues that occur during the school day do not interfere with the activities or experiences of boarding. General behaviour in the school is commendable and pupils are relaxed and polite.

The school has a system of appointing prefects who are supported by staff to undertake duties within the houses and school to help maintain order. This is a role that prefects see as a privilege and their duties are carried out with the highest level of pride and sensitivity. Prefects are provided with training by the designated senior person in matters of safeguarding. They are also trained to listen by the school counsellor, and meet on a weekly basis with the deputy headteacher. Prefects state that their training was detailed and informative. Prefects are considered to be approachable and fair.

Aldenham has excellent policies put into practice for ensuring the safety of all in the community from the risk of fire. The fire alarm system is maintained by an outside contractor, and all the certificates to evidence the regular servicing and maintenance of it are up to date. Evacuation routes are well signed, and by experiencing at least two drills in each term, all boarders know how to evacuate the buildings quickly and in an orderly fashion.

Boarders are happy with the level of privacy they have in the boarding houses. Staff always knock before entering bedrooms and respect boarders' personal space.

Boarders and their families can be confident that the school has a thorough system for ensuring all non-teaching staff are recruited and selected in line with safer recruitment procedures. Key staff have undertaken the safer recruitment training. The human resources manager is effective in ensuring that all staff employed are subject to interview, Criminal Records Bureau checks and references to ensure they are suitable to work within the school setting. A full induction is organised for staff and key policies and procedures are readily available and understood.

Despite the open nature of the site and the two public footpaths that cross it, the school has a good level of protection from unsupervised contact. A vigilant porter at

the main gate, with a barrier and intercom across it, key-pad locks on most buildings, and CCTV coverage, allow the school staff on duty to have good knowledge of the whereabouts of visitors to the school. All visitors are issued with a photo identity badge. Unless having the permission of a member of staff, day pupils are restricted to the common areas, usually the downstairs of each house, with only the boarders having access to the dormitory areas. All the houses are locked securely and safely at night. Boarding staff provide constant supervision of the boarders thus minimising risks.

The bursar devotes much time and energy to ensuring that all hazards in the school are minimized, and all certificates proving maintenance and servicing contracts are up to date. The house parents have developed a generic risk assessment for the boarding houses, and each house-parent reviews this at least once a year with the bursar having overall control of these and other assessments. Where necessary, these are updated to manage and minimise risk. Accidents are properly logged and the bursar follows up each one to learn lessons and prevent a repeat of the problem.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders enjoy an extensive range of activities at Aldenham School. Twice weekly activities are programmed into the school timetable. Staff identified a gap in provision for boarders at the weekends and have addressed this by organising trips and activities chosen by boarders. International boarders new to the country are given a cultural induction to the United Kingdom. Boarders appreciate the efforts made by staff. Teaching staff within the school volunteer to participate and supervise these organised trips. Boarders are able to take advantage of both indoor and outdoor pursuits. The development of the gym has been a success and female students are able to use the facilities exclusively at certain times of the week. One boarder commented, 'there are plenty of different activities, games and events so we are not bored'.

Boarders know how to access the school counsellor and can make private arrangements to contact her. Staff and prefects make clear to boarders the limits of confidentiality. A large number of boarders are able to identify people that they would seek support from. This list included tutors, house staff, the chaplain, matrons and their peers. In all areas of the school and boarding houses telephone numbers are displayed of people boarders can contact if they wish to talk in confidence.

The IT manager has created a sophisticated system that promotes internet safety. It is recognised that the boarders' main protection is in their learning the correct use of the internet and being able to safeguard themselves. The IT policy is in place to address the use of school equipment and the consequences of any misuse.

Boarders at Aldenham School say that they do not experience discrimination. The school sets out their position on discrimination within the school's equal opportunities policy and within the anti-bullying policy. A strong learning support and English as an

additional language team ensure all boarders receive excellent support and feel included in the life of the school. The boarding community represents a number of nationalities and the school celebrates this diversity through the personal, social and health education programme, activities, menus, social pursuits, assemblies and arts. Good attention is paid to issues of disability and arrangements are made to ensure pupils with disabilities are well supported. One parent commented: 'They have done everything to accommodate my child's needs, I can't praise them highly enough.'

Boarders believe they have ample free time and do not feel overstretched; there are however times when they have taken on too much. Discussions with tutors and teachers relieve the pressure to ensure that a healthy workload is maintained.

Boarders have ample space and provision to study within the boarding houses and in the school library.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders have the opportunity to express their opinions about the way in which the school is organised. This is done through the school council and school food committee. At any time boarders are able to express their opinion to the house staff team about possible changes or improvements. Boarders do not have separate forums to address issues pertinent to boarding which do not affect the main school such as house meetings. Boarders are keen to make additional formal contributions about the boarding provision but presently do not feel that their views are fully heard.

Boarders use a range of methods to communicate with families and are supported to maintain contact. Most use their own mobile telephone or email with social networking sites being popular for older boarders. Boarders from abroad are able to access voice calls over the internet to maintain contact with families, relatives and friends. This is available and reliable in all houses.

There are very good procedures for the induction and guidance of new boarders. Before arriving at the school, parents and pupils may gain a wealth of information from the website. Each new boarder receives a handbook from the appropriate boarding house which is both informative and interestingly presented, incorporating coloured photos of existing boarders being cared for and having fun. The written English is clear and accessible to young people. New boarders arrive at the start of term before the established ones, and go through an induction process which introduces them to the site, the staff, and other pupils. Each house has a mentoring programme for new boarders in order to help smooth their introduction to the school. This is particularly helpful to pupils for whom English is an additional language; where possible, they will be paired with someone of the same nationality.

Positive relationships exist between staff in the school and boarders. Staff recognise the unique situation boarders are in and promote an environment of tolerance and

understanding. Staff ensure that individual personalities are allowed to develop and boarders are treated fairly. One parent commented: 'I feel very secure leaving my child in their care'. Boarders gave examples of the effort staff make to support and meet their needs. One boarder said: 'The staff are really friendly and helpful here, I have never known anyone to refuse to help us'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Boarders have ample lockable facilities in their boarding houses. Boarders do not always choose to use these. They are regularly reminded to take responsibility for their personal belongings. Additional lockable storage is available to boarders if they request it.

Boarding accommodation at the school is of a high standard. The school has developed separate boarding accommodation for years seven and eight. This is the newest development. Other developments are underway that will benefit the school and in particular the sixth form pupils. All communal areas are large and comfortably furnished with quality furniture. Boarding houses manage their own budgets to repair and replace items and use this as they deem appropriate. It is clear that the boarding houses are individualised and reflect the personalities of the boarders and staff that organise the home.

Sleeping accommodation is comfortable and for senior boarders, suitable for study if they wish. All houses have sufficient toilet and washing facilities and boarders state the accommodation meets their needs. The school has a rolling programme of refurbishment and in the next phase some bathroom facilities will be upgraded. Boarders benefit from accommodation that is consistently cleaned to a high standard by dedicated staff who take pride in their work.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The school is very proud of its traditions and achievements and clearly states these, together with its aims and values, on its website and in the school prospectus. It emphasises that, notwithstanding its Christian foundation, it welcomes pupils of all faiths and none and in celebrating the diversity in the cultures and religions of its boarders, the school sees trust and lasting friendship at the heart of its ethos.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Boarders' cultural, physical, social and religious needs are taken into account and inclusive practice underpins the pastoral care provided. Boarders are encouraged to seek support and to lend their support to each other. Staff promote an anti-discriminatory approach and show an awareness of the effects of disability discrimination, homophobia, racism, sexism and religious intolerance.

There is strong focused leadership in the school from the chair of governors and headteacher to non-teaching staff. This holistic approach lends itself well to the success of the school and the positive attitude of staff and pupils.

The senior management team effectively monitor all complaints, accidents and sanctions. Risk assessments are completed by individual departments and houses and these are signed off by the bursar. Health and safety meetings take place and action is taken to minimise any risks identified.

Notice boards and discussions with house staff advise boarders of who is on duty in the houses at any given time. There are always staff available for boarders to consult and boarders do not report any situations where adult presence is scarce. Due to the close working relationships between staff, where necessary cover is always available for sickness and emergencies.

Aldenham School has a formal appraisal system for staff. House parents find this process useful. It is recognised that more could be done to incorporate the boarding duties into the appraisal system and recognise the work that is undertaken by house parents. Where appropriate, house parents and resident tutors are inducted into their roles in order to gain a full understanding of their responsibilities. All staff have detailed job descriptions which outline their duties and how these should be carried out. Staff have access to a variety of training relevant to their role looking after young people in a boarding environment. Books and publications are also available to staff.

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...

- ensure boarders contribute formally to the operation of boarding in the school with specific reference to house meetings and meetings about food provided in the evenings. (NMS 12)