

St Dominic's School

St. Dominic's School, Hambledon, Godalming, Surrey GU8 4DX
Residential provision inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this residential special school

The school registered as an academy in January 2018. It provides weekly boarding and day school for children, irrespective of gender, aged between seven and 19 years who have special needs. Pupils can also be emotionally vulnerable and/or have coordination and perceptual difficulties. There are a total of 24 residential places available and currently 16 residential pupils are using the residential provision. Staff provide residential accommodation in two separate buildings within the school grounds. One is for sixth formers and the other for younger pupils.

Inspection dates: 6 to 8 March 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The residential special school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of previous inspection: 7 February 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Key findings from this inspection

This residential special school is outstanding because:

- Young people who use the residential provision make exceptional progress from their starting points in education, functional independence and emotional well-being.
- The links between the school and boarding provision are seamless and mutually supportive to residential pupils.
- The school and boarding provision have an in-depth understanding of each young person's needs. They set realistic yet ambitious individual targets to help each young person to realise their full potential.
- Transitions into and out of boarding are thoughtfully planned. Staff identify, at an early stage, how best to help maximise the life chances for each residential pupil.
- All residential pupils move on successfully to suitable further education or employment.
- Staff interventions are evidenced based and are informed by a range of therapeutic, health and education specialists who work across the school and the boarding provision.
- Staff display genuine warmth and care to residential pupils. They support pupils with skill and subtlety, working alongside young people to provide guidance and care.
- Young people appreciate the support and care they receive. They enjoy spending time with staff and they have fun.
- The behaviour management strategies used in both the school and boarding provision are closely monitored, delivered by expert practitioners and effective.
- Young people get on well, make friends and develop social skills as a result of their residential experience.
- Young people, parents and external professionals described the school and residential provision in glowing terms. They all said how the creative approach, commitment to excellence and dedication of the staff make an exceptional difference to the lives of young people.
- The leadership team has high expectations and an ambitious vision for residential pupils. Leaders understand the lived experience of young people and closely monitor progress and the quality of care and support provided. They use this understanding to drive continuous improvement.
- The head of boarding is hands on and visible in the residential service. He contributes effectively to the strategic development of the whole school and provides effective support for boarding staff.

The residential special school's areas for development:

- Health information for residential pupils is not always clearly recorded in the residential care plans. These should include information on how to promote the health of young people in response to any identified health issues.

What does the residential special school need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure that all relevant health information is recorded on the young people's individual residential care plans.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding.

All residential pupils make excellent progress in education and enjoy the residential experience. They make outstanding progress in learning functional independence skills. This often has a lasting and profound impact on their quality of life and future life chances.

Direct feedback from residential pupils, parents and external professionals about the quality of care and the difference it makes to young people is overwhelmingly positive.

One residential pupil said: 'I love everything about the school. The staff are amazing, and I especially like the activities.' Another residential pupil said: 'The social skills I learn here are really good for me.' He went on to describe how learning to manage his behaviour has made a positive difference in school and at home. Another residential pupil said: 'For the first time in my life, I feel like everyone else instead of different.'

A parent reported that her son has made 'massive progress'. She feels that the residential experience is, for her child, more important than school. She said: 'He is so much more independent and staff are teaching him about family. He is learning to think about other people.' She went on to say: 'It's the first time he has ever had friends and he is learning social skills.'

Residential pupils and parents hold staff in high regard. A parent said of the residential staff: 'They couldn't have tried harder. His key worker really gets him from an emotional perspective, and they have turned him around.' Another parent described how her son's behaviour had improved significantly, and that he can now join in family activities and has rebuilt a previously difficult relationship with his sister.

The progress young people make in terms of education, emotional development and functional independence is directly attributable to the care and support provided by the transdisciplinary teamwork across the school and residential provision.

Each young person has a detailed assessment of their individual needs. This is informed by expert practitioners in therapeutic interventions, including school counsellors and a speech and language therapist. They spend time with young people and with residential staff and constantly evaluate and review assessments in light of the progress that young people make.

Because of the quality of individual assessments, staff are able to glimpse the world through the eyes of the young people. This means that they help young people to

achieve levels of functional independence that have a lasting and positive effect on their future life chances.

The school has developed its own sophisticated evaluation tool to measure progress against a range of indicators that go beyond educational attainment. This tool has attracted wider interest from the sector and been presented at national conferences.

Staff assess areas such as barriers to learning, organisational capabilities and cognitive and functional skills. This assessment and evaluation is used to inform a needs-led curriculum across the school and residential provision.

Residential staff use individual profiles to inform targeted interventions with residential pupils in order to enhance their social skills and to overcome barriers to learning. Staff understand the areas of strength and challenge for each young person; this means that residential pupils are encouraged to excel where they have high potential. Residential pupils learn coping strategies and build emotional resilience. This has a lasting and positive impact in all areas of their life. It also means that residential pupils experience success, feel valued and do not get left behind.

The school has a philosophy that 'everyone is a teacher'. Residential staff undertake direct work and organise daily living and activities for young people with a view to providing them with opportunities to learn. For example, in a game of trivial pursuits with residential pupils, staff supported young people to learn social skills such as taking turns, not shouting out answers, thinking about how to treat others and learning to cope with getting things wrong.

Residential staff work with skill and subtlety. They are passionate and committed and display genuine warmth and care towards the residential pupils. They are able to deliver targeted support based on sophisticated and in-depth assessment, in a way that feels natural and fun.

The views of young people are frequently sought and are used to inform care plans. In one example, a young person was consulted about the way staff should help him when he is having a bad day. He was able to inform staff about the language and form of words staff should use when he is upset. This approach keeps the lived experience of residential pupils at the heart of practice. It also reinforces positive learning and enables residential pupils to demonstrate insight into how they express their emotions and develop coping strategies.

The school undertakes detailed assessments of all pupils who are referred to the residential provision. The head of care ensures that any new admissions can be safely managed within the group of existing residents. New residential pupils have a planned induction to give them the best chance of settling in and enjoying their stay.

Residential pupils who leave the provision move on to education and employment opportunities that meet their individual needs and talents. Transitions are carefully

planned from an early stage. The school has high expectations for what young people can achieve. Residential staff support young people to attend taster days in further education placements. They communicate closely with teaching staff and advocate strongly for young people to ensure that each child receives the individual support that they need in order to succeed.

The school is accredited by the National Autistic Society. This means that it is considered to have met a range of quality assurance standards that demonstrate a level of competence, knowledge and expertise in meeting the needs of young people with autistic spectrum disorder.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

Residential pupils feel safe in school, in the residential provision and when out in the community. Staff know them well and identify areas where they may be vulnerable to harm. Staff provide close support and supervision to reduce risks and to promote well-being. Each residential pupil has an individual risk assessment and a dedicated care plan. These go beyond more obvious assessment of hazards and behaviour and, for example, assess how barriers to communication may limit capacity to understand instructions. In one example, staff identified that a young person was at risk of isolation within his peer group. Staff identified the need for close monitoring and provided a range of helpful responses. This included intervention from the therapy team and direct work with his key worker, to enable the young person to develop self-awareness and social skills. This improves his ability to fit in and to thrive within peer groups.

Staff take a holistic approach to understanding and managing risk. They understand the complex factors that may be at play when behaviours or dynamics give cause for concern. As with the example above, they recognise the importance of teaching social skills and resilience and of promoting emotional well-being when thinking about harm and risk. Young people benefit from social skills groups, individual therapies and mindfulness workshops. These sessions take place in both the school and the residential setting. Speech and language therapists work across the school and provide detailed assessments. These are used by residential staff to understand any barriers to communication or cognitive function that may impact on a young person's capacity to cope and to understand situations or instructions.

Interventions to help young people manage their day-to-day lives and to thrive are evidence based. They are informed by expert practitioners in the therapy team that provides consultation to staff. These practitioners also undertake direct work with young people. If concerns are such that young people need further assessment or treatment, they are promptly referred to external child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

Behaviour management incidents in the residential setting are infrequent. Young

people generally behave well. Behaviour incidents in school reduce significantly for young people who stay in the residential setting. This is because staff build positive and trusting relationships and are able to guide young people with skill and subtlety to promote positive behaviour. Residential pupils benefit from the shared living environment, learn how to make positive choices and discover how to interact in a considerate way with others. Young people describe staff as 'firm but fair'. One young person said: 'You can have a laugh with the staff. They are fun.' Another said of staff: 'They tell me good stories and make me laugh. If I am having a bad day, this helps me through.' It is evident that the excellent relationships, thoughtful intervention and genuine regard displayed by staff to young people helps to keep them safe and frequently prevents a small drama from becoming a crisis.

The school nurse is based in the boarding provision. This means that she knows the residential pupils well and is on hand to provide healthcare and advice to young people and staff. She keeps detailed individual health records and maintains a close oversight of practice in relation to the administration of medication. This means that young people receive the care and support they need to stay healthy. Medication is administered as prescribed, and this is recorded in line with safe practice guidance.

Not all of the health information held on the residential pupils health record is consistent with information recorded in their residential care plans. This means that residential staff may not have the full information they need to understand or to intervene to manage health concerns. In reality, because of the close involvement of the school nurse and the fact that residential staff know the young people well, this risk is small.

The designated safeguarding lead for the school heads a team of well-trained and competent safeguarding leads across the school and boarding provision. The safeguarding team holds regular meetings to discuss any concerns that may impact on the safety and well-being of young people across the school. School staff attend a daily handover with residential staff to ensure that any small worries or emerging problems are shared. This means that nothing is missed and that each young person is held closely within the team. Recording in relation to safeguarding concerns is excellent. When incidents occur, the school liaises effectively with external safeguarding agencies. All incidents are reviewed by the head of boarding and executive headteacher of the school. Swift action is taken to learn from incidents in order to reduce the chance that incidents will reoccur.

Staff undertake regular training in key areas of safeguarding such as the risk of exploitation and radicalisation and internet safety. They put this training into practice. Young people are given regular advice and support to ensure that they understand the risks posed by the internet and social media. They reported that staff speak to them regularly about this and that they understand why this is important. Staff are vigilant in this area and take prompt action to restrict access to mobile devices if necessary and to provide additional guidance and support in response to concerns.

Staff are aware that some young people using the residential provision are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation. They responded promptly to recent concerns and made a referral in line with the government 'Prevent' duty. This enabled the young people involved to access early help and support to understand the risks associated with right-wing and other extremist ideologies. This is a good example of the school and residential provision taking an extra step to challenge potentially worrying behaviour and to promote learning.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers across the whole school, including the boarding provision, promote an ambitious vision and have high expectations about what young people can achieve. They have a clear understanding of what support and intervention young people need in order to make progress. The quality of care and support is closely monitored and measured in terms of what difference the school and boarding are making for young people.

The shared ethos that 'everyone is a teacher' means that leaders value the input of all staff. Their expertise is utilised and deployed to ensure that the links between school and boarding are seamless. This means that residential pupils benefit from a 24-hour curriculum and they make outstanding progress in education, social skills and functional independence.

Leaders and managers have an eye for detail and pay close attention to staff's and young people's individual needs in all areas. They provide resources where they are needed. They give clear direction and support to senior and frontline staff. Staff across the school love working there. One staff member said: 'I love it. No day is ever the same. I enjoy seeing them [residential pupils] become lovely young adults.' All staff who spoke with the inspector reported similar themes and spoke passionately about the enjoyment they get from seeing young people make progress. Another staff member said: 'It's a very yes organisation. We can be very creative to meet individual needs, and there is no 'one size fits all'.'

Leaders and managers promote and model a culture of tolerance, inclusiveness and understanding across the school and boarding provision. A particular strength of the school and residential provision is the way they support young people who have special needs. Pupils in school and residential provision voice loudly and clearly their desire to be seen and treated as 'normal'. In response, they are assessed in terms of age-related expectations and are supported to make progress with this in mind. Each young person is assessed from a strengths-based perspective, encouraged to excel in what they are good at and helped to catch up in areas where they are able to improve. In this way, each young person is seen and treated as 'special' in the most positive sense of the word.

Staff receive regular supervision and appraisal. They are encouraged to reflect on what is going well and what areas can be improved. Morale is high and staff feel that

they are free to be creative in their work. They said that managers support them to think differently and to deliver care that is thoughtfully tailored to meet individual needs.

The head of boarding is experienced, qualified and effective in his role. He undertakes sleep-in duties and works alongside staff in direct work with residential pupils. He models good practice and understands the lived experiences of young people in the residential service. He understands what works and ensures that strategic decisions are firmly grounded, taking into account the challenges and the realities of frontline practice.

The school and residential provision have a number of highly competent and effective staff in key leadership roles. These include specialists in the therapeutic support team, the school nurse, behaviour and inclusion leads, head of sixth form and transitions, head of education and vice principal, and designated safeguarding leads. Their expertise, commitment and oversight in key areas of practice ensure that nothing is missed and that each young person is seen and heard. They provide keen oversight and valuable management information. This means that individual progress is closely monitored and that any trends or themes relating to progress are noted and addressed. The data and insight they provide make a significant contribution to the exceptional outcomes for pupils in the residential provision.

The governors of the school have a good insight into the quality of care provided and the difference this is making to residential pupils. They take a close interest in the residential provision and provide constructive support and challenge to drive improvement.

The leadership and management team has taken steps to improve the residential service in response to shortfalls identified at the previous inspection. Practice in relation to written risk assessments has improved. All actions in relation to fire safety have been carried out. Management monitoring has improved, and policies have been updated and reviewed. The learning and development programme for staff has also been reviewed and evaluated. This ensures that staff have the training they need to meet the needs of residential pupils.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the school knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.

Residential special school details

Social care unique reference number: SC013937

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Inspector

Lee Kirwin, social care inspector (lead)



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