

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 has been registered as an academy since January 2018. It is set in large, picturesque grounds within a small rural community. Weekly boarding is available for children aged between seven and 19 years old. Five boys are currently using the residential provision. While other accommodation is available, currently all children stay in one of the residential homes. The residential provision is due to close in July 2020.

Inspection dates: 19 to 21 November 2019

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: 26 February 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The residential provision is an invaluable service to the children who use it. Children flourish through having the opportunity to socialise and having the time to learn independence skills in a real-world setting. Children can explore who they are and how to form friendships and relationships. They are able to be themselves in a safe and calm environment with like-minded friends and peers. Parents and grandparents consistently report that their children have increased in confidence, become more organised, and have 'never been happier'.

Each child has a bespoke plan to support them for moving on from the residential provision. Consideration is given to a range of post year 11 opportunities such as employment, and to teaching children the independence skills that they will need to thrive. This extends to how to manage in the community and how to gain confidence in using public transport. The staff are incredibly committed, despite the looming closure of the residential provision, and they are working to ensure that the children who remain in placement thrive and exceed expectations.

The staff practice is based on a learning approach which is a genuine 24-hour curriculum across the school and residential provision. Children benefit from effective joint working with speech and language and occupational therapy support. They learn through drama and play, and through bespoke packages of support. Input from the residential team provides a valuable insight into children's needs and also informs the assessments and interventions provided by the therapeutic services.

Life skills and social interactions, such as budgeting, cooking, household chores and using public transport, are taught naturally in real-life situations. Time is available for children to learn at their own pace, without fear of getting it wrong in front of their peers. Targets are designed to be challenging but achievable, and are broken down into specific objectives. Goals and targets are closely monitored, and even the slightest improvement is recorded and celebrated. This helps children to reach their full potential and improves their future life chances.

Children are listened to, and their views genuinely form part of the school development plans. The student council has effected change in many areas, including activities, play equipment, and the installation of new water fountains. Records of the meetings are clear in identifying what has been actioned, and the reason why other suggestions cannot be actioned. The children have also been involved in choosing a school charity to support, thus increasing their understanding of others' needs and environmental concerns.

Emotional well-being support is available across the school and children name many trusted adults, including the independent listener who regularly visits the school and boarding provision. Children who may be suffering from high anxiety or stress are supported through particularly difficult situations in their lives with a consistent

approach from an empathetic and non-judgmental staff team. Staff support children to understand healthy lifestyles and how this benefits them. This support includes access to the well-equipped gym and learning to make healthy food choices. For example, the boys made a particularly ambitious homemade ramen.

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

There is a particularly strong safeguarding ethos across the school. Children are well protected through proactive responses by staff to any issues or concerns. All staff are fully aware of each child's vulnerabilities and do all they can to protect children and teach them how to keep themselves safe. Of particular note was the strong response to a radicalisation concern and how well the school continued to liaise effectively with a multi-disciplinary team, escalating concerns in a non-alarmist manner – but recognising that there was a potential, realistic risk.

Safeguarding processes are thorough, and concerns are reported to partner agencies when necessary. The school has made appropriate use of the designated officer in the local authority, and has strong links with the safeguarding advice for schools professional. Weekly safeguarding meetings ensure that issues do not drift and that follow-up action is taken. Welfare concerns are regularly reviewed, and staff ensure that action is taken if it is felt that the child's needs are not being met. The school currently does not have a recording system to explain its rationale for why an issue does not need to be referred on to external professionals.

Children are supported to understand different types of relationships. In particular, they are shown how to seek and give consent, and are helped to build the confidence to say no and to understand when someone else has said no. Staff work confidently with children who are exploring their sexuality. They teach children to understand appropriate social touch, and relationships are supported sensitively. This helps children to explore and develop healthy relationships in a safe and supportive environment. Advice and guidance on how to best support children who have a range of complex needs is provided by the therapies team, whose members seek external guidance as needed.

Staff genuinely recognise all behaviour as communication, and work with the children to understand what they are trying to convey. Children are supported to learn more socially appropriate ways to express how they are feeling without demeaning their self-worth or individuality. In addition, the school's presence in the community champions diversity and promotes social integration.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The senior leaders in the school have extremely high aspirations for all children. This is reflected in how staff interact with children and support their progress. Effective joint working across the school is particularly noteworthy. The ethos that the school is non-hierarchical in approach is rooted in reality. All staff's views are respected, and

there is acknowledgment that staff with different roles in the school have expertise in varying aspects of the children's care and education. As a result, all are involved in helping to develop goals and targets alongside children.

Leaders and managers have keen oversight of the residential provision and the quality of care and support provided to children. The service development plan is a fluid document and is regularly reviewed in terms of the improvements made against the national minimum standards. The leaders and managers strive to exceed these standards and they are able to demonstrate how care practice helps children to make exceptional progress.

The evaluation of practice and thoughtful care planning reflects children's individual targets for continued development, which enable all children to succeed beyond expectations. Despite the knowledge that the service will be closing at the end of the academic year, the service development plan is aspirational and care practice is keenly focused on making sure that the children who remain in the service make excellent progress and move on positively.

Training is reflective of the children's needs. Staff say they feel well supported by the senior leaders, who they say are visible and always available, either in person or on the phone, often coming in to provide support in difficult situations. Senior leaders are part of the residential rota and spend time with the children. This reflects the school's ethos of being non-hierarchical and also ensures that senior staff have good oversight of care practice and understand the impact that this has on children.

There is strong oversight and governance in the school. Senior leaders are open to governors' visits and welcome feedback and constructive criticism from the independent visitor. They also make good use of feedback from the student council to effect change across the school. This has helped the senior leaders to continue to move forwards and maintain the high-quality service in the residential provision, in challenging circumstances.

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

Recommendations

- Record a clear rationale when making a decision not to refer potential safeguarding concerns to partner agencies.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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

Jennie Christopher, social care inspector



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