

Plymouth College

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Chris Passmore
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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

Founded in 1877, Plymouth College is an Independent Trust coeducational day school with boarding. The school currently has approximately 600 pupils of which 124 are boarders. The main college is sited close to Plymouth City Centre and supports a preparatory school on another site close by.

The college attracts pupils from countries across the world and is one of the few accredited International Baccalaureate 'World School's' in the South West area.

Most of the boarding accommodation is provided within the main college site and split between College House boys (Colson), College House girls (Manamead) and Station House (Sixth form, male). There is a further separate boarding house known as 'Captains' on the site of the preparatory school. This accommodates male and female boarders who are members of the elite swimmer's group and have the most rigorous timetable of training and study. It has its own staff team and boarders are mini-bussed to and from the main college site.

The college aims to encourage and motivate young people through quality learning and meaningful opportunities. The college has a sporting emphasis which is supported by high quality facilities, expertise and training programmes. There is a strong sense of community within and about the college where individual success and achievement, sporting, academic or personal, is recognised and celebrated.

Summary

This was an announced full inspection of the college and focused on the key national minimum standards for Boarding Schools together with some non key standards. The overall judgement for the college is good but there are some individual standards within the outcomes staying safe and organisation which are considered to merit an individual judgement of outstanding. The college has improved its organisation and operation significantly since the last inspection; it has developed its boarding numbers, increased its boarding facilities, made changes to the senior management team and increased the boarding staff group. The college is a cosmopolitan community of students who are encouraged to be respectful of each other, supportive towards each other and to achieve to the best of their individual potential. The college has an inclusive and open culture and encourages boarders to form strong bonds with their fellows. The improvements in boarding provision, practice, policy and procedure since the last inspection place the college on a strong footing in terms of meeting the standards for boarding schools. The management of boarding is strong with clear direction and reflective thinking regarding practice and future development. Observations regarding practice or policy were made during the course of the inspection but none reflected any fundamental shortfalls or influenced the outcomes for boarders in any way. The college's self- assessment of how it meets standards, identifies improvements and plans to develop these is very comprehensive and open. It is a true representation of the operation of the college and therefore no further recommendations arise from this inspection.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This was the first inspection by Ofsted but recommendations were made at the last inspection by the previous regulating body. These were based on issues of practice as well as procedure. The college has acted on all the recommendations made since the last inspection thereby improving its practice in boarding, conditions for boarders and strengthening arrangements for their safety. The college is clear regarding its vision for the future and reflective in its approach to care and meeting the changing needs of its boarding population.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The college has good arrangements in place to promote and safeguard the health of pupils and boarders.

There is a comprehensive programme of health and personal care delivered through the college's curriculum. The school nurse has an input into this programme and is heavily involved with pupil life and welfare beyond immediate physical health care. There is an effective pastoral care system within the college that alerts key staff such as the nurses to issues that may have wider personal welfare implications. These pupils are then monitored and appropriate advice or counselling offered.

There are very well-established links with the local health centre where boarders can be referred for particular medical matters or seen in college by the nurse practitioner from the health centre for more general health issues. Screening for these appointments takes place through a telephone triage system and the level of consultation always involves a General Practitioner's decision. The school nurse manages all referrals to the local GP for more complex health issues and the GP takes responsibility for any further specialist referrals. There are therefore good links with other health services specialising in emotional health care, mental health as well as sexual health and relationships advisors.

Boarders from overseas are registered with local health services and the school nurses take particular care to ensure these students understand the differences between this Country's systems of health care and their own. Boarders requiring care outside of school hours are initially looked after by boarding house staff but the school nurses are available by phone in the event of any query. Boarders who are unwell can remain in their boarding house if necessary and are looked after by boarding staff through the day. In any event the boarding staff will notify the school nurse who monitors patient well-being.

Arrangements for the administration of medicines are clearly laid out and boarders know who to report to and how to access any regular medication. The school nurse has a system in place for boarders to take responsibility for their own medications. These arrangements are subject to individual assessments of competency and then monitored by boarding staff.

The quality of catering and arrangements for the provision of meals are good. All the college's catering requirements are provided by a commercial catering company and overseen by an on-site catering manager.

Pupils are provided with a wide ranging choice of main meals at lunch and dinner. All are prepared using fresh produce, where possible and cooked by a team of chefs on site. Menus

are colour coded to indicate the nutritional balance of the meal being selected and run on a cyclic basis being revised roughly each half term.

Boarders reported breakfasts as being substantial with an excellent choice of cereals together with cooked or continental style food choices. At weekends routines are changed and a brunch is served. In addition to routine daily meals there are frequent celebration menus created for boarders, the most recent of which was a Valentine's menu.

The catering manager has regular meetings with the school council, which includes boarders, and the head of boarding to discuss menu plans, likes and dislikes and there was evidence to support changes being made as a result. The boarders also have their own 'boarders council' and it was evident from the records of these meetings that menus and food issues generally are discussed and boarder's comments and requests fed back to the catering manager through the head of boarding.

Catering staff are skilled at noting individual eating patterns and providing a discrete service to those pupils with particular dietary needs. Catering staff are fully included in the college's safeguarding programme and report any concerns relating to eating patterns or welfare to the relevant person.

Boarders' views on meals varied, as is usual, but from observation meal times are busy but sociable and pupils generally eat well and heartily. Snacks and drinks are available in the boarding houses throughout the course of the evening and boarders often have 'treat snacks' with special events such as birthdays or dvd evenings.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The college has good arrangements in place to safeguard the welfare of pupils and practice is underpinned by outstanding health and safety awareness and risk assessments.

While the college acknowledges bullying is never totally eradicated its awareness of modern bullying types and responses to them is good. There are good systems in place to identify potential issues and the practice of the college is to support both the bully and the victim in whatever way is appropriate. Boarders responses to questionnaires and their discussion groups showed them not to be subject to bullying themselves and confirms the college acts promptly to deal with such issues where they do occur.

The college has a robust child protection policy and good internal arrangements for the reporting of incidents or issues of concern. Staff throughout the school are trained in basic child protection awareness and any staff member can and does report independently and directly to the designated person. Prefects are also made aware of basic child protection principles and appropriate responses. The designated person has developed the safeguarding policy in line with the appropriate operational procedures that apply to all members of the South West area child protection group and has working links with members of the Local Safeguarding Children Board. There is good awareness of the wider safeguarding issues for all pupils. For example arrangements for a whole school performing arts event were underpinned by good, pragmatic safeguarding arrangements. More specific arrangements were made before building contractors were allowed on site in order to protect boarders and their privacy.

Boarders reported they considered the disciplines used in boarding to be fair. Boarding prefects have limited powers of discipline and are always accountable to the house master or mistress. Positive behaviour is encouraged and rewarded through house schemes. Bedroom tidiness forms an integral part of these arrangements and was seen in action. Personal possessions are respected and boarders can make use of a personal locker or have lockable facilities in their rooms. Staff working in the boarding house are vigilant to protect personal possessions and will hand-in items they feel may be vulnerable to house staff for safekeeping. Boarders reported there to be general respect for personal property throughout boarding and that personal privacy was also respected by all.

Arrangements to protect boarders in the event of fire are good with regular fire drills at varying times when boarders are in occupancy. Key staff are trained as fire marshals and the fire fighting and detection equipment is maintained and serviced by specialist contractors. Boarders confirmed they had fire drills take place at 'unsocial hours' and all knew what to do and where the appropriate muster points were.

The college has adopted an outstanding approach to risk assessment, hazard analysis and safe recruitment. Risk assessments have been updated and redrafted into newly designed documentation and the college has engaged the services of an external competent professional to monitor and maintain these as well as provide expert advice on health and safety matters. Hazard analysis and maintenance is well managed by the bursar's department using an electronic management and monitoring system. Boarding house breakages and repairs are managed through this system and have proved an effective means of providing timely repairs. Off site and high risk activities are well managed by the deputy headteacher with oversight from an external advisor from the local authority and are equally comprehensive in their content and coverage.

Arrangements in place for staff recruitment and the vetting of volunteers is also excellent and exceeds the criteria for this standard. A cross section of staff files chosen at random showed the recruitment and vetting system in place to be robust and consistent. The bursar maintains a single central register of vetting checks as well as a Criminal Records Bureau disclosure register and the same criteria for disclosure evidence before commencing duties is applied to academic and care staff equally.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Boarders benefit from opportunities to regularly participate in activities arranged as part of the college's extended day as well as those provided in the boarding house. The boarding house notice board has details of the arranged activities for the term and includes cinema trips, 10 pin bowling, attending a basketball game, ice skating, golf, the local snow centre and an in-house competition. Boarders have supervised use of college facilities for sports and each boarding house has varying levels of electronic games and entertainment systems in place. At weekends and during half terms there are opportunities for more organised outings, activities and group social events as well as personal time in the locality. Boarders appreciate these opportunities and described their time as full, with little time for television.

There were clear responses to questionnaires indicating boarders are aware of those adult figures within and outside of the college they can turn to for advice, help or counselling. Boarding house notice boards carry photographs and contact details for the independent

listener and boarding governor links. No one felt isolated or lacking in choice of confidants. One comment in a questionnaire response stated, 'Since my first day I have enjoyed every moment. You have rough days but people around you create such an atmosphere that it lifts you up'.

The college has good arrangements in place to integrate boarders of different nationalities within the boarding houses and encourages pupils to be mutually supportive through the school. School provides additional help for those with English as an additional language and there is a citizenship programme to develop awareness and tolerance of ethnicity. Boarders feel well integrated describing the boarding group as 'like an extended family'. The college recognises different nationality calendar dates and celebrations. The catering department provides at least one European, Asian and vegetarian option at each main meal time.

The college has developed as one of the country's leading establishments for high level sports achievements consequently those swimmers and athletes who aspire to the top echelons of their chosen discipline have rigorous training schedules in addition to their academic studies. The college has put special arrangements in place to accommodate the needs of these individuals designed to recognise and moderate the extreme demands of their days. They have additional rest opportunities, are not expected to take part in extracurricular activities and have specialist physiotherapy and medical input. An adult Olympian provides counselling to these young people and introduces them to coping techniques designed to help them manage the physical and emotional demands of their respective disciplines.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Boarders have an array of opportunities and means by which they can contribute to life in boarding. There are various in-house meetings and include a boarders council. The most recent minutes showed a wide range of topics are covered, action taken by staff or responses made. Topics discussed at recent meetings have influenced improvements to house kitchen facilities, specified what new games equipment is purchased and led to menu changes by the caterers. The school excels in the inclusive way it is approaching the refurbishment of College House and other boarding accommodation. Boarders are fully involved with design architects in the process of planning, layout, equipment choice, décor and the testing of furniture and flooring in relation to the refurbishment.

Contact with friends and family is maintained through a variety of ways, including the encouragement of letters from home as well as the now accepted electronic or mobile communication methods. The school is in the final stages of upgrading its internet connections throughout boarding with wireless networks access ports in bedrooms. There are plenty of private pay phone arrangements in place in the boarding houses or boarders have access to other phones in rooms which can be made private for the purposes of their calls.

Boarders confirm there is a comprehensive application and acceptance procedure followed by an induction to the school and its services and facilities. Support for new boarders is provided by experienced boarders in the form of a 'buddy' system. Boarders have written information regarding boarding routines posted on the in-house notice boards and through gentle reminders from boarding staff.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The boarding accommodation at Plymouth College is good overall but ranges between outstanding and satisfactory according to which boarding house is being considered. There is a major development and improvement plan in operation to improve the facilities for boarders across the whole provision.

Station House is the most recent conversion of an existing premise for sixth form boarding and provides individual bedrooms with adjacent toilet and bathing facilities. The ground floor is given over to an open-plan communal living area with a fully fitted kitchen and access to an external patio area. The conversion has been tastefully and thoughtfully designed, furnished and fitted and is finished to a very high standard.

College House is the main on-site boarding house and provides gender separated accommodation for the majority of boarders. It provides a mixture of single and multiple occupancy bedrooms but with no more than four beds in any one room. There is a development programme in operation here to reduce the number of larger bedrooms, provide upgrades to the bathing and toilet facilities and refurbish bedrooms and communal spaces. The girls accommodation benefits from one shower and bathing area upgrade and the new facilities provide greater levels of personal privacy together with hugely better quality fittings and finishes. In the boys accommodation one bedroom has been totally refurbished to trial new standards of bedroom furniture, flooring and layout. These alternative styles have been worked through by boarders with the design consultant so that the most suitable overall design is chosen for the major refurbishment of the house.

The third boarding house is Captain's House which accommodates the elite swimmers group and is on a separate site away from the main college. Boarders living in Captains House have more rigorous training programmes necessitating early starts and later evening finishes. In their location there is greater privacy, more quiet surroundings and the site benefits from external security arrangements at the entrance. The house provides good sized bedrooms with gender separation over two floors. There are ample communal facilities and each floor has its own well-stocked kitchen. There are plenty of toilet and bathing facilities but these are the most functional of all of the facilities across the boarding provision.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The overall arrangements for the organisation of boarding are good with an outstanding individual element in the leadership and management of boarding.

Information regarding the college, its ethos, opportunities and principles of boarding is contained in numerous documents available in hard copy or from the college website. Parents and boarders have essential information prior to arrival and this is supplemented by additional material available in the boarding houses or from key staff such as at the medical centre.

There is a clear vision for the development of the college and boarding is an integral part in that. This is driven by the enthusiasm and commitment to improvement demonstrated by the headteacher, governors and bursar. Boarding ethos and practices are strongly led and influenced by the head of boarding and his wife who are appropriately qualified and experienced in boarding

care and welfare. Boarding staff stated they are well supported and value the experience, support and mentoring they get from the head of boarding and his wife. There is a nominated governor who makes regular visits to the boarding houses, provides reports on these visits and liaises closely with the boarding staff. Other governors are also involved in boarding and have committed generously to an investment in boarding standards to secure its future role in the development of the college. This element is judged to be outstanding.

The boarding staff team has been developed since the last inspection. Staff have varied background experiences and do not all have a teaching role in the college. These factors mark a clear separation between college and home times and provide some normalisation to the boarding experience. Training opportunities are provided for boarding staff to develop their expertise in specific boarding practice. They also take part in wider whole school training events. Boarding staff have access to guidance and practice documentation in a variety of ways including a boarding staff handbook and the college's intranet service. There is a relaxed and homely atmosphere in the boarding houses and the rapport between staff and boarders is natural and open. There is a system of professional and personal development monitoring and staff report they can approach key figures such as the headteacher or head of boarding at any time for advice and guidance.

Boarders value their time in boarding and generally recognise the benefits of the structure it provides for issues such as prep and meeting training routines. Most of all they value the friendships developed through boarding and the fact they feel safe and well cared for by the staff teams.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Pupils from across the world are integrated into the school and supported to maximise their potential for learning and achievement. The college's citizenship curriculum encourages pupils to value each others and to recognise differences in ethnicity, faith and gender and this is continued in boarding.

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

There are no recommendations.