

Keswick School

Keswick School Multi Academy Trust

Vicarage Hill, Keswick, Cumbria CA12 5QB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this boarding school

This is a mixed day and boarding school situated in a rural location on the edge of a small town. The Lairthwaite boarding house is situated on the school site and accommodates pupils between the ages of 11 and 18 years. Many boarders are from overseas. The school has academy status and has space for 52 boarders. The boarding house offers a mix of small dormitory, and twin bedrooms. Bathrooms are shared. There is a wide range of extra-curricular activities, many of which are provided by the local community.

The inspectors only inspected the social care provision at this school.

Inspection dates: 22 to 24 January 2024

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 **good**

The boarding 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.

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Date of last inspection: 9 October 2018

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children say that they enjoy boarding, and that it offers them chances to experience international friendships, progressive education, and access to leisure opportunities that they would not otherwise have. They say that staying in the school family, where staff and children enjoy each other's company and help and care for each other, minimises their homesickness. Boarding children say that their 'day friends' are welcome in boarding, and that there is flexibility around homework and mealtimes to accommodate their shared activities.

Staff know children exceptionally well. They use a confident, individual relationship-based approach to build trust that helps children to feel safe. One child said, 'I saw that other children who went to staff with their problems were helped with kindness, and so I was more confident to tell staff about my worries. I would not have been able to talk to you so easily a year ago. Staff have helped me to find my confidence.'

Children's individual areas in their shared bedrooms are reflections of their individual tastes. Little pieces of home, such as favourite teddies and family and pet photographs, are proudly displayed. Books, musical instruments, posters, trinkets, and other personal items help children to feel settled in boarding.

Children say that they can influence the unusually broad range of activity choice, and that this has improved under the leadership of the current head of boarding. For example, a fly-fishing group has evolved through one child's passion for the sport. Keeping chickens and hedgehog rescue initiatives are very popular. Children accept responsibility for the animals' care, and boarding staff ensure that there is effective assessment and management of risk. There is a project underway to seek permission from the governors to keep pygmy goats.

While outdoor activity is promoted, staff recognise that not all children enjoy this. The flexibility of arrangements means that children can cook, play indoor games, practice music or photography, or simply spend time relaxing with their friends. All children said that being comfortable in the house was one of the things that they particularly liked about boarding.

Children whose home is overseas form an integral part of the boarding group. Their presence adds a richness and diversity to the community, both in school and boarding. Their capacity to understand and use English is assessed from the beginning of their stay, and strategies are put in place to help children to improve. Staff actively promote a tolerant and welcoming atmosphere. All children are individually valued, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, cultures and interests. This is evident in the warm, helpful, caring and positive relationships between all age groups.

Children recognise and value their growth in confidence from when they began attending school. This is echoed by parents, who appreciate the increased communication from boarding through a weekly illustrated newsletter, and the personal approach of the staff, who will call parents to discuss their child.

Children understand and celebrate the progress that they make in all areas and see themselves as active partners with staff in their success. This is fostered by staff who form a safety net that supports children to think for themselves, take chances and make mistakes. Many children gave an example of something that they did, or did not, do and said how much they valued the opportunity to reflect and learn to avoid similar errors in judgement.

Older children are looking forward to a wide range of developmental opportunities and say that staff help them to think about their future academic or career path. Irrespective of their chosen route, each child feels valued and supported in their choice, whether it be taking a 'gap year', going to university, doing an apprenticeship, or having a job lined up while they think about their futures. This helps them to develop as confident, articulate, and well-balanced individuals, who are more able to deal with life's ups and downs.

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

Children say that they feel safe and understand that the rules in place are designed to keep them safe. Staff build warm and trusting relationships with them, so that children are confident to share their anxieties and concerns. Many children praised the non-judgemental support provided by staff because this helped them to explore their growing independence without worrying about the consequences of inflexible rules or disproportionate penalties. Incidences of poor behaviour are minimal.

When children are experiencing difficult times, such as homesickness or more-complex mental health challenges, staff are responsive and work tirelessly to support them and keep them safe. However, this very good practice is not always reflected in the policies in place.

The arrangements for safeguarding are sound and follow statutory guidance. Safeguarding leaders have links with the wider safeguarding community and are part of some local initiatives. Children talk to staff about their anxieties and worries related to their life outside of school. Staff take prompt action to follow local area processes for including external safeguarding professionals when they believe children to be at risk of harm.

The school has effective measures in place to ensure that overseas children spend the school holidays with appropriate adults as designated by their parents. They use photographic identification to ensure that children are met by the correct adult. They help children to travel safely by overseeing their travel arrangements. This focus on

children's safety outside of school time is an example of the commitment that staff have to ensuring that children feel safe and cared for well.

Leaders have founded a regional consortium for boarding schools, to share best practice and learn from other professionals about innovative approaches to boarding.

The governors demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding. The governor who is responsible for safeguarding works closely with the designated safeguarding leads and takes their responsibilities seriously. The boarding governor, along with the chair and safeguarding governor, visit boarding and spend time with children. The independent listener is experienced and has worked previously in boarding. They visit regularly and are known to the children.

Children feel confident to be able to make a complaint, grumble, or suggestion and have confidence in the process. For example, the '£4 Friday' treat got amended to '£4.35 Friday' when the meal deal cost went up in the local area. One child negotiated a later bedtime because of their age. Staff routinely listen to children's views, and their opinions influence boarding life. This minimises dissatisfaction and complaint because children play a significant role in shaping their own experiences.

Staff are recruited safely. The head of human resources oversees recruitment and understands the needs of the boarding house staff team. Staff training includes changes in government guidance about safeguarding children in schools. Processes for filtering, monitoring and managing low-level concerns are known by staff.

Children are encouraged and trusted to take risks, including going out independently, taking part in community groups, and working locally. This gives children opportunities to talk to people who are not connected to the school about any concerns they may have. This promotes openness and transparency in the culture of boarding.

The successful initiative 'not in my school', developed alongside children, provides an opportunity for children to raise any concerns that they may have, along with the opportunities in the boarding house, including using a QR code to alert staff to unacceptable behaviour. Older children talked about the respectful relationships between them, where sexual bullying or harassment are not tolerated and where individual choice and personal privacy are promoted. One prefect said, 'It simply wouldn't happen here, everyone understands it is not acceptable and, if it did, it would be reported and dealt with immediately.'

Yoga, outdoor activity, play, and warm relationships underpin a holistic approach to supporting children to feel secure and happy. The school recognises and responds promptly to the challenges that children face through poor mental health. Boarders have priority access to the school counsellor as they are recognised as more vulnerable because they are living away from home.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leaders are appropriately experienced and qualified and understand the principles of safe and effective childcare. Leaders and managers actively promote a culture where children and their happiness are central to all development of the boarding experience.

Leaders promote a vision where success for each child means that they are developing their interests and capabilities to be well-rounded individuals who achieve their goals. Children are equipped to manage current and future challenges to their well-being and prospects.

Over the last two years, a change in some members of the leadership team, including the head of boarding and members of the governing body, has enabled the school to reappraise its development plan and further develop a relationship and mental well-being approach to supporting children.

Roles and responsibilities within boarding are shared between the head of boarding, a boarding development manager, and a temporary deputy boarding manager. Leaders have yet to specify clear accountabilities for each role. The development plan for boarding does not include clear criteria for success and has not been approved by governors.

Some staff appointments are very recent. A nurse role has been replaced with a person responsible for first aid. This means that there is an ongoing review of policies and procedures that support how staff understand and are equipped to manage children's health needs, and this is a work in progress. The safeguarding policy has recently been updated, but this, and recent training for all staff, does not include the necessary amendments, such as understanding the arrangements for multi-agency expectations for all practitioners.

Governors take an active interest in boarding. They understand children's needs, and support improvements to the boarding environment, quality of staff training, and to ensuring that children's views are considered and incorporated in any self-evaluation of boarding.

Staff understand children's academic progress, but also measure children's progress in their ability to enjoy life, gather experiences to support wider social and emotional learning, and make and sustain healthy friendships.

Where children need support to make progress, leaders ensure that there is a comprehensive and shared whole-school response to identify and meet those needs. They listen to children about whether the support is working, and are flexible in their approach. Education and boarding staff spoke warmly of their colleagues and the flexibility of each team to focus on bringing out the best in children. Education and boarding staff work together to share information and support strategies that are regularly reviewed.

Staff supervision and reflective practice are being embedded within boarding. Staff say that they can identify new training opportunities, such as a counselling course, mental health and well-being courses, or risk assessment training that will help them to do a better job. Often, such training is then adopted for the whole team. Staff feel valued and well supported in the work that they do.

What does the boarding school need to do to improve?

Points for improvement

- The school's governing body monitors the effectiveness of the leadership, management and delivery of the boarding and welfare provision in the school and takes appropriate action where necessary. In particular, oversee the revised boarding development plan.
- There is clear leadership and management of the practice and development of boarding in the school. In particular, clearly define the roles and responsibilities between the managers of the boarding house.
- The school maintains the policies and documents described in Appendix A. In particular, review the safeguarding healthcare and first-aid policies to capture current changes in staff roles and updated guidance.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children 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.

Boarding school details

Social care unique reference number: SC034907

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