

Dallam School

South Westmorland Multi Academy Trust, Haverflatts Lane, Milnthorpe, Cumbria LA7 7DD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this boarding school

South Westmorland Multi Academy Trust operates this school. Being a state school, all tuition is free. Students' parents pay for the cost of boarding, which is an affordable attraction of the school. The school is located over two sites, a day school and a separate boarding facility. The Heversham site accommodates the boarders and was founded in 1613. The main school campus is located on the edge of the local town centre.

A total of 141 boarders can be accommodated at the school. There were 41 students boarding at the time of the inspection.

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

Inspectors were aware during this inspection that a serious incident that occurred at the setting since the last inspection is under investigation by the appropriate authorities. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate incidents of this kind, actions taken by the setting in response to the incident were considered alongside other evidence available at the time of the inspection to inform inspectors' judgements.

Inspection dates: 14 to 16 March 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **requires improvement to be good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **requires improvement to be good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **requires improvement to be good**

The boarding school is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Date of last inspection: 25 September 2018

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Children told inspectors that they have good relationships with some residential staff. Observations of children at the boarding provision were positive and inspectors observed a sense of community at the boarding provision and children enjoying activities with staff.

Children told inspectors that friendships are important to them and that their friendships have improved their experiences at the school. One child said, 'The experience has been good because of my friends.' Another child said, 'There have been some good moments; living in a community of boarders has made it a positive experience.'

Children spoken to described an unsettled time with lots of staff changes. Children do not feel involved in day-to-day decisions about their lives. Children described changes in rules that they don't understand, and they don't feel that staff provide clear explanations.

The children can speak to an independent visitor. However, these arrangements are not effective because children said that they wait a long time to speak to the visitor.

Children enjoy various activities, such as boxing and trips out. However, some children said that there have been fewer activities recently.

Leaders and residential staff need to improve how they support children to develop their independence according to their individual needs. For example, children explained to inspectors that there have been changes to the time that they can spend in the local community and that staff do not consider their individual ages.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Children said that they feel safe. Most children could identify a key member of staff they would go to if they were worried or concerned. One child said, 'Some staff are good but depends on who they are.' However, changes to the boarding staff team and lack of continuity have undermined the strength of some relationships between children and staff. When asked, some children said that this has left them relying on their peers as their main support group.

Staff have not always had a good enough understanding of children's risks and behaviours. This is because the systems for gathering information pre-admission have been ineffective. Leaders and managers have recognised this and have improved the scope of questioning when a child is being considered for boarding.

Individual plans and risk assessments are satisfactory. They identify known and emerging risks and include basic strategies to manage these. A strength of these plans is the pastoral and emotional support that is offered to children who may have experienced trauma.

Children told inspectors that recent changes to rules have left them feeling controlled and restricted. This was a constant topic of conversation throughout the inspection, with many children feeling that these changes have been imposed without consultation or explanation. This is an unintended consequence of a serious incident that has led to a risk-averse approach that does not consider individual factors such as age, maturity, risk and vulnerability. This compromises children's opportunities to have the same experiences as their peers living at home.

A limited number of staff are available should children need support during the night. These staff can be contacted using a telephone on each of the bedroom corridors. Not all children have confidence in this system. Some children spoke about calls going unanswered and that setting off door alarms is the only way to get staff's attention.

There is a qualified nurse who oversees the children's health needs. The nurse has implemented new systems to manage children's individual health needs. There is a designated sickbay area for children to stay in when they are unwell. However, the physical environment does not meet children's needs if more than one child is unwell. Leaders recognise this and there is a renovation plan in place to address this.

At times, there is an over-reliance on staff goodwill. This is particularly during the day when boarding staff are not rostered to work. For example, when children are feeling unwell and in the sickbay, this is under the supervision of the nurse, who is limited in the levels of supervision and support she can offer if more than one child is in the sickbay. This has the potential to place children at unnecessary risk.

The designated safeguarding lead is experienced and knowledgeable. He takes decisive action quickly in response to safeguarding concerns and allegations. This includes sharing information, making referrals to external agencies and investigating concerns thoroughly through a multi-agency approach.

Safe recruitment practices are in place. All required checks are undertaken and verified before a staff member begins work. In addition to standard checks, a search of social media sites is also undertaken. This ensures that children are protected by the appropriate appointment of staff.

Some children are supported by an educational guardian. Leaders and staff do not consistently ensure that action is taken to check that educational guardians are suitable and promote children's welfare. Leaders have plans in place to address this.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

Since the previous inspection, there have been changes in the senior leadership team. A new headteacher is in post and he is supported by an interim head of boarding and an experienced designated safeguarding lead. This is the third head of boarding since the previous inspection.

Changes in the senior leadership team have impacted on the children's overall experiences and progress. The headteacher and interim head of boarding accept this, and they have plans in place to address the issues and improve children's experiences.

The school is part of a multi-academy trust. There have been changes within the trust and a new head governor is in place. The head governor was previously vice chair of the multi-academy trust, so he knows the school and the current issues. The governor is also the safeguarding governor, and he has completed relevant training in respect of this role.

Residential staff and education staff do not work collaboratively. This has had an impact on children's stability. Staff spoken to described poor communication between residential staff and school staff. However, staff told inspectors that the situation is improving.

Some of the points for improvement identified at the previous inspection have not been met. This is specifically in relation to staff qualifications and training.

Managers and staff do not receive regular supervision that is focused on children's experiences and needs, or recorded effectively.

What does the boarding school need to do to improve?

Compliance with the national minimum standards for boarding schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standards for boarding schools:

- There is clear leadership and management of the practice and development of boarding in the school, and effective links are made between academic and residential staff. ('National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools', 2.3)
- Effective arrangements are made to care for boarding pupils who are sick or injured. Boarders are accommodated away from other children where this is necessary to care for the child in question or to protect other boarders (e.g. from contagious conditions). Where boarders need to be cared for away from their usual accommodation, they are provided with good-quality accommodation, including toilet and washing facilities. The accommodation is staffed appropriately and provides boarders with appropriate privacy, taking into account sex, age and any special requirements. ('National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools', 7.3)
- Boarders are actively encouraged to contribute their views to the operation of boarding provision. There should be clear and easily accessible systems for boarders to provide their views and raise concerns. Boarders' views are considered in decisions about the running of the school and boarding provision and boarders are provided with feedback about their expressed views. Boarders are not penalised for raising a concern in good faith. ('National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools', 13.1)

Points for improvement

- The school should have procedures to ensure boarders' safety when off site but under the care of the school. These procedures should be proportionate and focus on managing assessed risks. ('National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools', 9.5)
- Staff should receive regular reviews of their boarding practice, with opportunities for training and continual professional development in boarding. ('National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools', 20.1)
- Whether an educational guardian is appointed by the school or parent/carer, the school should take appropriate steps to ensure that the guardianship arrangement is promoting the welfare, physical well-being and emotional well-being of the boarder. ('National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools', 22.3)

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.

Boarding school details

Social care unique reference number: SC040074

Headteacher/teacher in charge: Steven Henneberry

Type of school: Boarding school

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Inspectors

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