

Blundell's School

Inspection report for Boarding School

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| Date of last inspection | 22/11/2007 |

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

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| 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

Blundell's School is an independent day and boarding school for male and female students between the ages of 11 and 19 years. The school was founded in 1604. At the time of this inspection, there were approximately 360 boarders.

The site is spacious and is located on the outskirts of Tiverton, in Devon. There is a range of traditional, historical and purpose-built modern buildings which house the school's academic and boarding facilities. All day and boarding students are assigned to one of the seven boarding houses.

The town is approximately half a mile distant and has a good range of shops. There is ready access to other parts of the country through excellent rail, road and airport links.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a very positive, announced inspection, during which many students and staff told the inspectors how proud they are of their school. Although the school is particularly renowned for excellence in sport, music and drama, all individual achievements are celebrated equally. Blundell's offers a caring environment with a wide range of constructive activities and opportunities for all students.

Relationships between staff and students are excellent. Students respect the clear boundaries and high standards of behaviour expected. Almost everyone interviewed during the inspection commented that they are warmly welcomed into the Blundell's 'family'. Students say they feel happy and secure at this school.

Approximately 10 per cent of the children are from overseas. The school excels at helping students to achieve their potential. One student said: 'It is a great school to be in and offers us loads of opportunities. I love the sport side and the lessons are usually great. Boarding is brilliant'. Another said: 'It has afforded me great opportunities, helped me a lot in my academic work and the sense of community is great'.

The leadership and management of the school provides inspiration to the students. By the time they reach the sixth form, students are confident, articulate and well able to show strong leadership skills themselves. Staff are very well supported in their work and equally valued, no matter what their role. The management of boarding is excellent, with clear guidelines for staff and continuing training to

support them in their roles. The school constantly seeks to improve and recognises those areas where there is still some work to be done.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were 15 recommendations at the last inspection on 22 November 2007. All of these areas have been addressed in detail.

The school nurses have a clear remit to utilise their medical skills to support every aspect of school life. They inspect the boarding houses to monitor health requirements and oversee medication. Communication between nursing staff and all other staff has also improved, for example, they join the matrons' meetings. Recommendations they have made in respect of the boarding accommodation have all been acted upon.

Metal cabinets have replaced wooden cupboards in all the boarding houses to help ensure the safe storage of medicines. The senior nurse works hard to ensure excellence in infection control practice throughout the school. Nurses also participate in the school's food committees to advise on dietary requirements. Infection control procedures have been reinforced through better communication. Staff understand the need for good practice in this respect.

Fire safety continues to improve. The school has recently received a visit from the local fire and rescue service. They made one recommendation to upgrade the quality of the fire doors in the boarding houses. The school works closely with a private company to maintain equipment safely.

All boarding houses now have single shower cubicles available. There are communal showers, but these are supernumerary and students have the option of privacy. Window restrictors have been fitted in all the boarding houses. Electrical testing is undertaken regularly. A number of staff are now qualified to do this work.

The school has worked very hard to further improve consultation with students and parents. Both groups are consulted annually through questionnaires. Students are clear about how they may convey their views through individual staff or house meetings. There is an effective school council.

The school continues to work through a rolling programme of refurbishment. Since the last inspection, two boarding houses have been completely refurbished to a high standard. Those houses where works still have to take place are bright, clean and well maintained.

House-parents consider all the relevant factors when deciding on room allocation. Routine maintenance has also improved. A number of minor issues mentioned at the last inspection feedback meeting have been fully addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Health care provision at this school is excellent. Supported by sound policies and procedures, the school provides private, well-designed facilities and excellent communication between boarding, teaching and nursing staff. This ensures that students' health care needs are met.

A comprehensive programme of personal, social, health and citizenship education helps to ensure that students are prepared for everyday life. Nursing staff ensure that there is medical input into school decision making that has implications for students' health.

Medical confidentiality is strictly maintained. The location of the school's sanatorium helps to ensure that students may visit for advice or appointments without others seeing them. The sanatorium is staffed by four qualified, registered nurses. Doctors come to the school every day and pupils can see a male or female doctor, as they wish. One parent said: 'The sanatorium staff are lovely; very caring and professional'.

Parents praised the dedication of house-parents and tutors. One parent commented on the way in which they had ensured that their child's health needs were balanced with their educational needs. They had 'put a huge amount of thought and care into ways in which his boarding and academic life could be adjusted to fit in with his health'. Another parent said: 'I cannot fault the level of care given to our children'.

Emergency medicine is readily available if needed. There is a local minor injury unit in Tiverton, which is staffed day and night. The school employs a first response team of qualified paramedics to attend home sporting fixtures. There is also a doctor available on match days.

Dental care is usually arranged at home, but for overseas students or those needing dental treatment in an emergency, this is available locally. Other specialist treatment can be obtained if needed.

Parents complete an excellent, detailed and comprehensive questionnaire which covers their child's medical history and any special needs. Communication between nursing staff and school staff is excellent. Teachers and boarding staff can access an electronic 'need to know' list. This ensures that staff are made aware in general terms that a child might be experiencing some difficulties.

The storage, handling and administration of medicines in the school are sound. Medicines are ordered from a local pharmacy and delivered the same day. Children who are deemed to be competent and safe to look after their own medicines can do so. They have lockable storage facilities to help ensure that their medicines and other important items are kept safely. There is a clear audit trail for monitoring the

progress of medicines into and out of the school. Homely remedies may be administered, but must be on an 'approved' list, agreed by a doctor.

Students said that they are always well cared for when unwell. If they are taken ill at night, they wake the house-parent. There is a nurse on call each night, and she will visit the child in their boarding house. If necessary, she will admit the child to the sanatorium. This is always done very quickly if the symptoms present require this to reduce the risk of cross infection. Each house has a first aid box and all boarding staff receive updated training in first aid.

The school offers an excellent counselling service. The counsellor is based at the sanatorium and can see students through self-referral or through an appointment made by other staff. As a former teacher, she has an excellent understanding of some of the issues that can impact on children in boarding.

The nursing staff are fully involved in boarding and visit the boarding houses regularly. They offer support to the matrons, attend their meetings and sit on the pastoral committee. One parent commented: 'the pastoral care is excellent. The housemistress is very nurturing and approachable, as are the tutors. It is easy for parents to contact them with any concerns'.

Students are generally very positive about the food provided. Although there are some personal preference issues, almost all acknowledge that the diet provided is healthy. Meal times are friendly, sociable and orderly. The school kitchen is extremely well managed and achieved a five star rating for food hygiene at their last environmental health inspection.

Some parents and students commented on a relatively limited choice in the evening and an alleged over-reliance on pasta for that meal, but opinions varied on these issues. Inspectors sampled or observed all three meals at the school and found them to be very tasty and nicely presented. There is plenty of choice at lunchtime, with several hot dishes, a vegetarian option and a very good salad bar. Special diets can be catered for.

All students agreed that food has increased in quality and choice since the last inspection. In particular, the introduction of the salad bar on two evenings per week has been welcomed. Each boarding house has facilities for making snacks and drinks. Students have plentiful supplies of drinking water.

The school has excellent laundry facilities in place. Matrons wash and iron all personal laundry to an exceptionally high standard. Bed linen goes out to an external laundry service. No students complained about clothing going missing and there is a good system to help ensure that this does not happen.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The school has excellent policies and practice in place in respect of all safeguarding issues, including anti-bullying, child protection and behaviour management. There is an effective 'e-bullying' policy in place. The school has established a pupils' e-safety committee, to allow boarders to provide feedback on e-safety issues. Children and parents confirm that there is very little or no bullying in the school and that if a situation arose, it would be responded to very effectively.

There is a designated lead for child protection and also a deputy designated person of the opposite gender. This helps to ensure that there are no barriers for anyone wishing to discuss concerns about a child. Both staff have received local authority level 3 training in child protection. The school provides excellent training for all staff. Everyone interviewed, including students, monitors and staff at all levels, knew exactly what to do and who to contact if they have any concerns.

The school achieves excellent outcomes for students in terms of fair and appropriate discipline. Observation shows that the school provides a cheerful, friendly but well-ordered environment where students feel safe and relaxed. This in turn, supports their learning and personal development.

Students commented that they feel very safe and secure in the school. They have a lot of freedom. Several parents said that the balance between freedom and discipline is a happy one. One parent said 'the housemaster ensures clear discipline and standards and the boys respect and like him'.

The inspectors met many of the young people appointed as 'monitors'. These students understand the limitations of the role and can explain how and when a sanction may be applied. Although there is no formal training for them, there is an induction. The head of boarding explained how he ensures that the sanctions given are appropriate. Any monitor applying unreasonable sanctions is given guidance. If they continue to make mistakes in this respect, they are not permitted to continue in that role.

All sanctions are recorded and are subject to management monitoring. They may consist of 'sides', a written account on a subject chosen by the monitor or staff member. Serious issues may be dealt with by 'gating', which effectively prevents the young person from leaving the school site for a period of one, two or in extreme cases, three weeks. This penalty would not be given lightly and the the school, ensures a clear and consistent approach to discipline. Students say that they find most of the tasks assigned to be acceptable.

The headteacher has an effective system for responding to the very rare complaints he receives. These are well recorded and kept confidential. The complaints policy allows for informal resolution of issues, which is good practice.

Boarders' accommodation is well protected from risk of fire. There is fire equipment in all the buildings. An external company services all the equipment and some alarm systems have been replaced. Students and fire safety records confirm that there are regular fire drills, including those held at night. There was a minor issue around the need for matrons to be inducted into testing of individual call points, in those houses with new alarm systems. The private company concerned addressed this during the inspection.

Boarders enjoy good levels of personal privacy. There are relatively low numbers of boarders in each dorm in the refurbished houses. There are safe and private places to change and shower. All students have private space to store personal items.

The school follows robust and effective staff recruitment policies and practice. A number of the senior management team have undertaken training in safer recruitment. All new staff are subject to all the recruitment checks required by legislation. They are not started in post until these are complete. Regular visitors to the boarding houses, for example, house-parents' friends, are also checked through the Criminal Records Bureau. Staff files are very well-maintained and there is an effective single central register to help monitor recruitment checks and other personnel matters.

All boarding houses are safe and secure from unauthorised access. They have keypad entry systems on their doors and a CCTV system provides enhanced security. Although the campus is divided by a public road, measures have been taken where possible to improve site security. For example, an eight foot fence has been erected around one of the boarding houses. One boarder said: 'I feel safe and secure. The security system makes you feel at ease'.

Rigorous risk assessments are conducted on all sporting and high risk activities, including external activities. The bursar oversees the premises risk assessments and health and safety checks on all parts of the internal and external parts of the premises. These have been completed to an exceptionally high standard, complete with photographic records of any issues to be addressed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The school has a 'sport for all' policy. There are extensive sports facilities at the school with pitches, fives and squash courts, all-weather surfaces and an outdoor swimming pool. There has been significant investment in improvements to outdoor play areas. There is a fully equipped gymnasium and some more limited gym facilities in the boys' boarding houses. There are plans to provide gyms in the girls' houses, too.

Students were keen for the inspectors to hear about the particularly active drama

department, which provides evening group activities. Boarders showed the inspectors the impressive new music building, which provides exceptional opportunities for learning instruments and for relaxation. There are newly-refurbished study facilities and purpose-built IT suites, so students are very well provided for.

The school organises a wide range of activities off site, including horse riding, climbing, Ten Tors, ice skating and paintballing. The Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme is currently under review, but the school has a very active Combined Cadet Force, which was conducting an exercise during the inspection. There are less physically challenging activities for those who just wish to relax, such as jewellery making, relaxing with friends or going shopping.

All students said that they have plenty of people with whom they can speak if they wish to discuss a personal problem. They have a wide choice of staff, from nurses and the counsellor at the sanatorium, to matrons, house-parents, tutors and the head of boarding. Some said that they would speak with the monitors, some the headteacher, and others speak with friends or family members. Contact numbers are provided for students to ring if they wish to speak with someone outside the school. The school is committed to equal opportunities and has identified areas where it could further improve, for example in providing girls with gym equipment inside their boarding houses. Minority ethnic groups at the school all said that they are valued and supported. They receive an exceptionally good induction into the school. There is an excellent learning support department. The headteacher made it clear that the school is not just about attaining good academic results; all students' achievements are valued equally.

Students do not report any unusual or excessively arduous demands on their time. Some students said that tutors had worked very hard to ensure that their workloads are manageable.

One student said: 'The school provides good sport and good music facilities. Academically they push me, but not so hard that I don't have time for other things'.

Some students did report that prep on a Saturday can take up a lot of time and intrude into their weekend. The school is currently reviewing how prep is organised in relation to weekend arrangements. Boarders have excellent facilities for study within the boarding houses and in the library. Boarding houses have wireless internet access. There are suitable safeguards around internet use.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

All boarders and staff commented on the warmth of the relationships between staff and boarders and how much everyone feels part of the school community. The student body is formally represented on the food committees and have plenty of other opportunities to contribute their views. House meetings are held at regular

intervals to discuss food, house business and activity plans. The school council meets once a term. The school has responded positively to students' views. For example, good conduct vouchers can now be redeemed at a large national retail chain, to make it easier for students to spend them.

Parents and students receive an annual questionnaire survey about how they perceive the school. The results actively inform management decision making, for example, students had a significant input into the way in which boarding houses have been refurbished. Numerous examples were observed of changes to routines and equipment which reflect student concerns.

Students have excellent access to communication systems which make it easy to keep in touch with family and friends. They can use social networking sites in the evenings, subject to suitable safeguards. Almost all have their own mobile phones as well as access to phones in the boarding houses. Students have a school email account.

Overseas students are exceptionally well supported when joining the school for the first time. All new boarders have a detailed handbook and calendar, which explain school life, timetables and expectations. There is a 'buddy' system in place and new boarders are introduced to the boarding houses very sensitively. One new boarder said: 'this is my first day at the school, and it's all good so far!'

International students have supper together with the house-parents and are given time to adapt to their new surroundings before the other boarders arrive. The school has an excellent English as a second language department which supports overseas students in their learning.

Students enjoy exceptionally good access to information and appropriate media. Newspapers and a wide range of periodicals are available in the library. The school has recently updated its impressive IT facilities. All boarding houses have wireless internet access.

The school is also involved in the local community. There are positive links with local authority and other independent schools in the area. Students are actively encouraged to support various charities through fund raising and volunteering. Monitors are closely involved in the organisation of events, and approximately £20,000 is raised each year.

Students gave examples of many people that they can talk to, from older peers to teachers, house and sanatorium staff, right up to the headteacher. Excellent relationships between staff and boarders were evident throughout the inspection. Boarders all report that they are looked after well and that staff are fair. The unique atmosphere in the school is fostered and supported by all the staff. Everyone is treated with equal respect. The headteacher sets a clear example by meeting and speaking with all the students. He invites small groups to sit with him each lunch-time, so that he can ask how they are and seek their views.

Any disagreements between boarders are responded to sensitively and if necessary, they may move to a different room in the boarding house.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Every boarder has either lockable storage built into their furniture, or a small lockable trunk. This ensures that personal items can be kept safely.

The school has seven boarding houses, which range in style from traditional Victorian houses to the modern, purpose-built upper sixth form accommodation. There is a rolling programme of refurbishment and this is well under way.

The older buildings have been imaginatively adapted. Both Petergate and Old House have been refurbished to a very high standard. For example, in Petergate, furniture has been individually designed to fit into the space available. The project has been very well planned, with excellent provision for day students and extensive new IT facilities. Students of all ages say that they really appreciate these changes. A parent described Petergate as a 'safe, happy place for boarding', with 'good facilities and well fitted out rooms'.

Gorton House and Francis House have yet to be refurbished. However, both are very comfortable. One parent commented that Gorton House is 'safe, warm, homely and friendly'. Westlake students were also very happy with their facilities.

Each boarding house has its own character and a strong 'family' atmosphere. This is encouraged through inter-house competitions. Children are clearly very loyal to their houses and to the school as a whole. One boarder said: 'the house itself is excellent and the facilities are really good. If we need something, we can get it'.

There is limited space around the top bunk ladders in Gorton House, but the girls are able to ascend and descend from the top bunks using other imaginative means. Space around the bunks in some rooms in this house will be addressed during the planned refurbishment.

All the boarding houses seen have very good quality sleeping accommodation. There were a very small number of minor issues raised with the inspectors, which had not previously been raised with the school. These were all addressed during the inspection.

One parent commented on the space above the bunks in Westlake, which is occupied by the upper sixth students. The school has assigned rooms according to individual need; for example top bunks are often assigned to day students rather than boarders.

Every area of the school was spotlessly clean and tidy. There is an excellent cleaning

team who work very hard to ensure a pleasant environment for students and staff. All the boarding houses have sufficient toilet and washing facilities for the number of boarders. All wash hand basins were equipped with soap and towels to ensure effective hand hygiene.

All students use the boarding accommodation during the day for changing and relaxing when not working. Visiting sports teams use changing facilities in the sports pavilion. This helps to ensure boarders' privacy.

The school has a small shop where boarders can buy essential items. Boarding houses also stock personal requisites in case of urgent need. Boarders may also go into the town and visit local shops, subject to the school's safety provisions. One boarder said: 'I board with all my friends and my house-parent is really kind. Matrons also help with anything extra, like toothbrushes or things you need from the supermarket'.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. All students are welcomed equally to the school. Careful thought is given to overseas students and their needs. The school has strong links with a children's home in Nepal and with a school in Sri Lanka. Many overseas tours are undertaken in relation to sporting and cultural events and there is a Spanish exchange programme. This helps to promote international understanding.

All students are treated as equals, irrespective of their background, academic level, gender or personal circumstances. Achievement at all levels is rewarded, especially for students with specific individual learning needs. One member of staff said: 'Blundell's is very good at helping everyone to be the best that they can be'.

The school has identified areas where further work is needed, for example in terms of access for disabled students. So far this need has not arisen in boarding, and all the new academic buildings have been designed with this in mind. The senior management team are confident that they could find a way to make boarding at Blundell's available to any child with a disability should the need arise.

The school provides excellent and readily accessible information to members of the public, students and parents. There is a comprehensive website and range of high-quality literature available which explains what the school has to offer. Boarding students and parents receive a handbook, which tells them everything that they need to know to inform them about the school.

The headteacher is supported by a highly effective senior management team, who have clearly defined, delegated roles. The headteacher remains very aware of, and involved with, the day-to-day operation of the school. Boarding has continued to

grow and develop under his headship over the past six years. The school is currently at capacity, with boarding proving to be a popular choice for students and parents.

The bursar line-manages a large number of key staff, including those responsible for recruitment, the maintenance and cleanliness of the premises and the financial operation of the school. Other members of the senior management team have delegated roles in terms of discipline and child protection, as well as providing a contact point for any staff who have concerns about a student. The school is managed by a board of governors. They meet twice a term and manage the school through a number of operational committees. There are sound plans in place to enable the school to respond to any unforeseen crises affecting students.

The head of boarding oversees all the boarding houses and supervises the boarding staff. He ensures that they receive comprehensive induction training and that they have all the necessary qualifications in place. Boarding staff receive clear guidance to help them perform what can be a complex task. There is an excellent staff handbook available which contains all the policies and procedures that they need to guide them. There is an effective appraisal system for all boarding staff.

Boarding houses are well staffed, with the capacity for emergency back up help if required. There is a strong and continuing drive for improvement, with staff working hard to maintain high standards at all times. Any issues identified which affect boarders' welfare are quickly addressed.

The quality of risk assessment and risk management throughout the school is exceptionally high. External consultants provide risk assessments on the premises. These are clearly and very detailed. Any off-site trips are well staffed and supervised to ensure student safety. Staff and senior managers work very effectively together to ensure that students are safe, well supported and happy in the school.