

Summerhill School

Independent school standard inspection report

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Reporting inspector	John Seal HMI
Social care inspector	Dawn Taylor

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Purpose and scope of the inspection

This inspection was carried out by Ofsted under Section 162A of the Education Act 2002, as amended by schedule 8 of the Education Act 2005, the purpose of which is to advise the Secretary of State for Education about the school's suitability for continued registration as an independent school.^{1, 2}

The inspection of boarding provision was carried out under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Care Standards Act 2000, having regard to the national minimum standards for boarding schools, in order to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and the government of the quality and standard of the service provided.^{3, 4}

Information about the school

Summerhill School is an independent democratic, self-governing boarding school for boys and girls aged from five to 17 years. The aims and philosophy of the school are based on those of A S Neill who founded the school in 1921. The Principal and proprietor of the school is the founder's daughter. The aims of the school are:

- to provide choices and opportunities that allow children to develop at their own pace and to follow their own interests
- to allow children to be free from compulsory or imposed assessment, allowing them to develop their own goals and sense of achievement
- to allow children to be completely free to play as much as they like
- to allow children to experience the full range of feelings free from judgement and intervention of an adult
- to allow children to live in a community that supports them and that they are responsible for in which they have the freedom to be themselves, and have the power to change community life, through the democratic process.

The school is registered for 90 pupils. At the time of the inspection there were 66 on roll, of which 58 were boarders and eight were day pupils. The school is located in the village of Leiston in Suffolk. Most of the pupils come from a wide range of international backgrounds and a few of them are at an early stage of learning English. There are no pupils with a statement of special educational needs and a very small number of pupils have been identified as having special educational needs

¹ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/contents.

² www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/contents.

³ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents.

⁴ www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/a00192112/boarding-schools.

and/or disabilities. The educational provision of the school and the boarding provision were both last inspected in November 2007.

Evaluation of the school

Summerhill School provides a good quality of education. It meets all the regulatory requirements for independent schools, which is an improvement from the last inspection. All the points for development outlined in the previous report have been addressed. The school meets its aims very successfully. Strengths of the school include outstanding pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and outstanding promotion of pupils' welfare health and safety, including effective safeguarding procedures. Pupils' behaviour is outstanding and they make good progress. The curriculum and teaching and assessment are good. The national minimum standards for boarding schools are met and overall effectiveness for the boarding experience is outstanding.

Quality of education

The good curriculum is underpinned by effective written policies and schemes of work. Planning for lessons in all subjects is set out clearly with units of work that have clearly identified objectives and resources. An outstanding feature is the way in which learning is closely tailored to match individual pupil's needs, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. A fundamental aspect of the school's curriculum is that learning takes place out of lessons as well as in them.

Pupils are free to choose whether or not they attend lessons. When not in lessons, pupils can be involved in whatever activity that captures their interest. These include making films, organising and performing in musical or dramatic events, and learning different languages. Physical activities include trampolining, skateboarding, riding bikes and climbing trees.

Pupils' personal, social, health and education are promoted extremely well. Pupils talk about the range of physical activities they can choose to take part in or organise themselves with regard to physical education. In addition to the many opportunities to be physical active in the grounds, sporting activities include football, basketball and using the local leisure centre. Discussions about smoking and substance abuse are promoted very well across the education and boarding provision. Skills in information and communication technology (ICT) are well provided for with opportunities for pupils, should they so wish, to gain qualifications. Almost all pupils choose to take GCSE examinations.

Pupils have an extremely deep understanding of work-related learning. There are important roles and responsibilities for pupils that are an integral characteristic of the school both in education and boarding. These are taken very seriously by the pupils. An example is how 'Beddies Officers' work alongside house parents to ensure

bedtimes are peaceful. Ombudsmen investigate any disagreements or inappropriate behaviour and if they cannot be resolved, bring them to the school meeting. Pupils say that they receive personalised advice and guidance on their next steps in education. Consequently, pupils go on to a wide range of courses, training and employment.

Teaching and assessment are good. Teaching is never less than good with some outstanding features. Key features of the best practice are the mature and co-operative interactions between pupils and staff that lead to closely-tailored activities matching the needs, abilities and interests of every individual pupil. As a result, all pupils have opportunities to acquire and develop a love of learning and interest in the world. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to tap into pupils' interests subtly and skilfully. Consequently, pupils become absorbed in what they are doing and make good progress, both in lessons and in the other activities they choose to do. Boarding and academic staff work very effectively together to coordinate provision. They have consistently high aspirations for all boarders in line with the school's ethos and values.

All boarding staff take on an academic role. As a result, all staff's knowledge and understanding of the next steps for pupils' learning is good. Challenging debates and coaching sessions are commonly seen. One pupil spoke of the helpful 'maths clinics', drop-in sessions where pupils could share difficulties or challenges with the teacher. Another pupil spoke of how she felt her teacher was 'learning alongside' her about her country of origin.

The philosophy of the school encourages pupils to be independent and free of formal monitoring and evaluation of their progress; nonetheless, the school knows how well each individual is doing and some individual pupils' work is kept. There are some outstanding examples of marking and assessment. For example, in history written comments are made on why a piece of work is good and points for development are given. However, much assessment information is anecdotal, varying from teacher to teacher and pupil to pupil, which is in keeping with the aims and philosophy of the school.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils continues to be outstanding. Pupils have exceptionally positive attitudes towards their school life, both boarding and education. They are proud to be 'Sumerhillians'. Their pride is translated into being keen ambassadors who promote their school's philosophy at national and international events. Attendance is above average, including for the day pupils. The school's aims and philosophy regarding how pupils live their lives and learn supports them in developing mature and responsible attitudes to living in a community. At the heart of the school is the democratic approach to the running of the school. Key events each week are the school meetings: pupils and staff meet to share and discuss information and make decisions as a community of equals. During

these meetings, pupils are extremely skilled in assuming roles such as Chair, Secretary and Ombudsmen. Challenging issues are raised, for example, how the rare incidents of inappropriate behaviour by a very small number of individuals are addressed by discussing and voting on any consequences. Pupils develop clear views on how to live their lives and there is a tangible atmosphere of tolerance and harmony. For example, pupils from different countries learn and live side-by-side, often helping each other to learn different languages or improve their English. Several pupils told inspectors that the school 'is like a family'. The school provides pupils with an outstanding understanding of institutions and services in England through the democratic approach taken across the school and in lessons such as citizenship where pupils are encouraged to explore how decisions are made in Parliament.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The education and boarding promotion of pupils' welfare, health and safety is outstanding. The national minimum standards for boarding are met. Safeguarding policies and procedures are robust. All staff are fully trained in child protection at requisite levels and alert to possible concerns, in line with the philosophy of the school. This is clearly stated and known to parents who send their children to the school. The school's approach to boarding and education is all-encompassing. The definition between freedom and licence is clearly defined to ensure individuals' freedoms are protected. Staff know the pupils very well, leading to highly positive relationships. Pupils who spoke to inspectors and completed questionnaires said they felt extremely safe and cared for. One of them said: 'I love Summerhill, it is a great place where I feel I can be myself. I feel super-safe, it is like my second home.' Pupils are confident that any problems or difficulties can be dealt with through the school meetings. Pupils have many opportunities to live healthy lifestyles through choosing a range of physical activities, many of them outdoors. Risk assessments are taken very seriously and are up-to-date and secure. The democratic approach to how the school runs ensures that pupils develop a high level of respect for the privacy of others. Pupils are prepared for their future lives and responsibilities extremely well. The buildings and grounds provide a safe environment to try things out. The school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors

The school has effectively carried out the required checks on all staff and proprietors prior to their appointment to make sure there are no reasons why they should not be employed to work with children. The required checks are recorded in a single central register.

Premises and accommodation at the school

The school and its grounds comply with regulatory requirements. Boarding accommodation is provided with regard to the national minimum standards for boarding schools. Classrooms and boarding accommodation are in good condition and suitable for the curriculum and numbers on roll. The accommodation has different areas, reflecting the needs of the pupils' ages. There are good facilities and comfortable dormitory accommodation areas, which continue to be developed. There are areas with long-established names; San, Cottage, House, Shack and Carriages. Some bedrooms are more personalised than others, based on individual choice. There are public spaces, including a lounge, music room, and library. The accommodation and grounds form an integral part of the values, culture and history of the school. The grounds consist of wooded areas, trees and diverse areas of paths, undergrowth, grass meadows, playing field and tarmac.

Provision of information

The school provides clear, accurate and up-to-date information for current and prospective parents, carers, inspectors, Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE) on request. There is a clear and helpful prospectus and the website is being updated. The school has very established aims and objectives which are extensively shared with parents and carers, pupils and staff. This ensures that all parents are well-informed about the education and boarding provision. All the questionnaires returned from parents and carers were highly positive. How the school shares information with parents and carers is clearly explained. The school's philosophy is that any information shared can only be done with the pupils' agreement.

Manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school's complaints procedure meets the requirements.

Leadership and management of boarding

Leadership and management of boarding are outstanding. Boarding and the individual experience of the child lies at the heart of Summerhill School. Strong community values contribute to boarders' personal and social development. Many boarders speak highly of the school. They state, 'The house parents are brilliant', 'Summerhill is everything that I could ask for', 'I love Summerhill, it is a great place where I feel I can be myself', 'Boarding life is fantastic. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else', 'Best school...I could not have had a happier, more fulfilling time here'. The whole school community has a very clear view and understanding of the strengths of the boarding experience at Summerhill. Individual or groups can suggest improvements or changes by proposing them during the school meetings. The community can then vote on the proposal and, if the majority agrees, the changes

are actioned and implemented. This democratic process ensures consistent re-evaluation of practice and individual's experience. The Principal and Vice Principal provide valued support to the boarding staff team and are actively involved in the day-to-day life of the school. The house parents are energetic and enthusiastic, and have excellent relationships with the boarders. They are fully aware of the diverse nature and needs of the boarders' and ensure they all are enabled to grow and flourish by creating a safe and welcoming family atmosphere.

Compliance with regulatory requirements

The proprietor has ensured that the school meets all The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010, schedule 1 ('the Regulations').

National minimum standards

The school meets the national minimum standards for boarding schools and associated regulations.

What the school could do to improve further

While not required by regulations, the school might wish to consider the following points for development:

- continue to explore best practice in strategies and mechanisms of assessment which are in keeping with the school's philosophy and aims.

Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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The quality of education

Overall quality of education		✓		
How well the curriculum and other activities meet the range of needs and interests of pupils		✓		
How effective teaching and assessment are in meeting the full range of pupils' needs		✓		
How well pupils make progress in their learning		✓		

Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

Quality of provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	✓			
The behaviour of pupils	✓			

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The overall welfare, health and safety of pupils	✓			
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Inspection judgements

outstanding	good	satisfactory	inadequate
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Overall effectiveness of the boarding experience

Overall effectiveness of the boarding experience	✓			
Outcomes for boarders	✓			
Quality of boarding provision and care	✓			
Boarders' safety	✓			
Leadership and management of boarding	✓			

School details

School status	Independent		
Type of school	Democratic, self-governing, boarding.		
Date school opened	13 March 1921		
Age range of pupils	5–17		
Gender of pupils	Mixed		
Number on roll (full-time day pupils)	Boys: 3	Girls: 5	Total: 8
Number of boarders	Boys: 30	Girls: 28	Total: 58
Number of students with a statement of special educational needs	Boys: 0	Girls : 0	Total: 0
Number of students who are looked after	Boys: 0	Girls : 0	Total: 0
Annual fees (day pupils)	£3,735–£8,931		
Annual fees (boarders)	£8,568–£14,889		
Address of school	Westward Ho, Leiston, IP16 4HY		
Telephone number	01728 830540		
Email address	office@summerhill.co.uk		
Headteacher	Zoe Readhead		
Proprietor	Zoe Readhead		

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



7 October 2011

Dear Summerhillians

Inspection of Summerhill School, Leiston, IP16 4HY

We really enjoyed our recent visit to your school. Thank you for making us feel so welcome. We met with groups of you, observed lessons and looked at your work. Everybody we talked to told us how much they enjoyed themselves, how happy they were and how extremely safe they felt. All the inspection team totally agree with what you told us. The inspection found that the school provided you with a good educational experience with outstanding features and your boarding experience is outstanding.

Some of the outstanding features we found included:

- how well you get on with each other and the very impressive way the school meetings are run
- the way you choose to do things in lessons and around the school
- how your teachers help you discover things during lessons
- your behaviour in lessons, around the school and where your boarding provision
- how the school keeps you safe, happy and prepares you for your future lives.

We talked with Zoe and your teachers about how you can all look at the progress you make in your activities. We agreed that you may want to think and discuss how each of you can compare what you have done in different activities to see how they have changed during your time at the school.

Yours sincerely

John Seal
Her Majesty's Inspector