

The Royal Masonic School

Inspection report for boarding school

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Inspector	Tola Akinde-Hummel / Seka Graovac
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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

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

The Royal Masonic School for Girls is set in Rickmansworth Park, close to Rickmansworth. The school was originally founded as a Masonic charity in 1788 and became an independent school open to girls from all backgrounds in 1978. The school has a pre-preparatory and preparatory department and a senior school. Full and weekly boarding is available to girls from the age of seven to 18. There are five houses divided into age groups. All of the houses are on site and have resident house staff.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This full, announced inspection looked at the key national minimum standards under the Every Child Matters outcomes. The Royal Masonic School is managed by a very committed headteacher who has vision and determination. The school provides first class care and support to boarders. The senior leadership team work extremely well together and their highly effective communication is a strength of the organisation. A parent added, 'This is a well managed school with a caring attitude to learning and pastoral aspects of education. There is a palpable "can do" attitude to all issues and questions, most refreshing.' Overwhelmingly, girls are happy at the school and feel privileged to be there. One boarder commented, 'It's awesome! It feels like a family and that I am a part of something special.'

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, the school was asked to address issues relating to self-administration of medication, some issues of privacy in a boarding house and to update training for house staff. All these areas for improvement have been met. Boarders are now formally assessed for their ability to self-administer and medication is kept securely by them. This reduces the risk of any accidents and ensures boarders are ready to take on this responsibility. The issue of privacy has been improved by changing the boarding houses and purchasing screens for the new accommodation. Boarding staff have attended a number of training courses relevant to their role. This has enhanced their understanding of their unique position of caring for boarders and enabled them to apply their learning in practice.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The school promotes boarders' health very effectively. They receive consistent encouragement and support from teaching and boarding staff to adopt healthy life-styles. They receive clear information on how to promote their health through a very comprehensive and creatively delivered programme of personal, social, health, moral, economic, spiritual and citizenship education. Formal teaching sessions on various topics are complemented by a wide range of workshops delivered by school staff and external speakers. The variety of teaching methods ensures that boarders' interest is captured and that they have opportunities to explore the personal significance of what is being said. The school chaplain is available to support boarders' spiritual journey and help them to make positive choices.

All staff, boarders and parents are familiar with the school's clear policies on the use of alcohol, smoking and illegal substance. These policies are consistently followed in practice with the positive impact. The incidence of boarders exposing themselves to the health risks of this kind is very low.

Extensive recreational and sports facilities are available to boarders, encouraging them to exercise. Although many activities take place, the school has a quiet and calm atmosphere. The atmosphere is conducive for reflection and learning about the importance of balancing different types of activities, such as taking on challenges as well as just relaxing with friends.

The school provides a wide range of healthy and delicious meals for boarders to choose. The catering provision is exceptionally well managed. Great attention is given to every single detail of the food provision; from involving boarders in planning of the meals and using local suppliers, to managing a large dining hall in ways that encourage eating as a pleasant social occasion. A great variety and clear labelling system for food served, ensures that the food meets boarders' special dietary, medical, religious needs, as well as their preferences. Boarders made very positive comments about the food at the school. A school leaver said that the best things about school that would always stay in her mind were friendships and food.

The school nurses make a significant positive contribution to the promotion of good health. Their professional competence and caring attitudes have won the trust of boarders and other school staff. The medical centre is very well resourced and exceptionally well managed. Through effective team work and liaison with external professionals, the nurses ensure that boarders have easy access to medical attention and advice. Boarders' health is appropriately monitored and the arrangements for them to receive nursing, medical, dental and optical attention when needed are effective. Appropriate first aid and minor illnesses treatment are available to boarders at all times. Boarders report that they are very well looked after when ill. The medical centre has nine beds for the use of ill boarders who require to be monitored by nursing staff throughout the night.

Communication between the nursing staff and the boarding staff is excellent. In addition, there is exceptionally thorough written guidance, safe medication training and practice and clear individual written welfare plans. These enable boarding staff to effectively assist in promoting boarders' health and managing any specific physical or emotional health needs. Promotion of emotional health, self-awareness and resilience is also effectively supported by the school's experienced qualified counsellor.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The Royal Masonic School has a highly effective and detailed policy and procedure on bullying. Results from the survey and discussions with boarders demonstrate that bullying is not a feature in the school. The head of pastoral care coordinates a successful network of support that enables boarders and day pupils to address issues as they arise. Boarders can access support from the 'friendships' mediator', a teacher in the school, who works on the premise that no blame is apportioned. The school counsellor, chaplain and class teachers offer support and convey the message that bullying is not tolerated. In addition, the school operates a peer mentoring system called "big sisters", who are selected following application. They are trained to listen by the school counsellor, and meet with the head of pastoral care on a regular basis. Staff are sensitive to issues relating to privacy, and boarders confirmed that this was the case. Additional support required for younger boarders is undertaken in a safe manner. This teaches younger boarders how to maintain their own privacy.

Arrangements for safeguarding children and child protection in the school are excellent. The headteacher is the designated senior person and has two deputies. All receive regular training from the county council. All staff in the school receive a safeguarding induction pack and also attend training so they know who to report concerns to. The headteacher has developed a good relationship with the schools liaison officer, who said, 'The school ring for consultation and the ethos of safeguarding and the presence of the senior leadership team is very strong.' Discussions with the local authority designated officer support this opinion. Staff are informed of safeguarding issues on a 'need to know' basis and the school ensures that confidentiality is rigidly maintained. Procedures for educating staff, students and parents about issues of e-safety are comprehensive, and boarders report that they are effective in practice.

Boarders report that they understand how sanctions are used and believe that these are fair. The school provides information to parents, pupils and teachers about sanctions and rewards. This information is available in electronic and written form. Although the school does not focus on sanctions, the majority of misdemeanours carry a verbal warning first. All sanctions are relevant to the breach, for example, incorrect use of mobile phones will result in the withdrawal of the phone for a specified period. The more serious breaches of school rules are recorded and managed by the headteacher. Again these are few in number, involve parents and are satisfactorily resolved. Boarders can receive rewards for academic, sporting and

community contributions. These far outweigh any sanctions. House points also act as a motivator for pupils to make an effort and behave in an acceptable manner. Behaviour in the school is excellent and pupils are friendly and helpful. The complaints' policy and procedure is known to parents, guardians and boarders. The school has a very low number of complaints and these have been dealt with at the informal stage.

The practice for recruiting staff in the school is outstanding. All headteacher appointments (which include the boarding house staff) must answer additional questions in relation to safeguarding. Application forms, qualifications, references, criminal records bureau checks and interview records are all in place. Ancillary and office staff records are equally impressive. They include risk assessments for employees not working with pupils but awaiting criminal records bureau checks after all other checks are completed. The acting bursar has a clear overview of contractors and tradesmen working in the school at any given time. Those occasional tradesmen who require access the campus in term time are always accompanied when on site. Records show that the school uses only taxi and coach firms whose drivers have been thoroughly checked.

Boarders are well aware of the relevant fire evacuation procedures. There is good documentary evidence about frequency and nature of evacuations, and effective record keeping relating to the testing of fire equipment including sensors and extinguishers. The recently upgraded alarm system has been checked and approved by the health and safety committee and some doors have been upgraded to include magnetic door closers. All boarding houses are fitted with effective digital locks, and the boarders reported that they felt safe, and had no concerns regarding security. The school site covers a large area, but security patrols are operational in the evenings and at night. The use of closed circuit television is unobtrusive. All visitors to the school are required to report to reception, state their business and be provided with an identification card and sign the visitors' book. Pupils, staff and relatives who regularly attend the school observe the strict access arrangements and do not allow strangers into the buildings. The health and safety committee follows robust procedures for checking for identifiable safety hazards, with all electrical equipment subject to a rigorous programme of testing. A comprehensive audit has also been carried out of the window restrictors and glass on site, and protective film fitted as appropriate. Risk assessments relating to high risk areas, such as the swimming pool, are comprehensive, and boarders report them effective in practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The range of activities offered to the boarders is very comprehensive, and includes a huge range of sporting, musical, cultural and other activities, as well as a considerable amount of appropriate extra academic support. There is a great deal of positive engagement with the local and wider community through sport, music and other means, with local, national and international opportunities for the girls. There is also clear evidence of considerable engagement in charitable activities.

Membership of the "drill" team is highly prized, and there is participation in the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, Guides and Brownies. Boarders said, 'Teachers are very nice, they play with me, we go to nice places at the weekend'. One parent commented, 'In the lower years there is always plenty arranged and the girls are not left on their own.'

Boarders report that there is a range of members of staff to whom they could turn for assistance and guidance. The holistic approach to supporting boarders through the various stages of their development is carefully considered by the pastoral team and organised with care. The school counsellor is known to the students and used effectively. Boarders also call upon the school chaplain, the house staff team and any teacher in the school for additional support. Boarders stated, 'I really enjoy boarding, there are nice adults that I can talk to if anything is wrong,' and, 'Staff are comforting.'

There is excellent support for all identifiable minority groups, and the school is very responsive to the individual needs of students from different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. A prayer room, open to all, has been opened in response to a request from Muslim students. Students with limited skills in English were ably supported by staff and their peers. Arrangements for dealing with culturally sensitive diets were very comprehensive. It is clear that any boarders with issues are identified and sensitively supported to participate in the school community to enable them to fit in and establish a position for themselves. Boarders demonstrate a maturity and kindness towards each other that allows this to take place.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There are a variety of formal and informal routes by which boarders can express their views. The most effective of these was the regular informal communication between boarders and house staff, and hence to the head of boarding. School committees take appropriate account of the views of boarders; in particular the school council's system of representatives is very effective. Boarders quote clear examples of their involvement leading to changes in practice for the benefit of all, including changes to menus, greater freedom for some younger pupils and a sharper student-led focus on community events. Regular student view surveys are held of about a variety issues, and the school council was recently involved in developing the questions for one such survey.

Boarders maintain private contact with their parents and families. Students are able to contact their families by phone, email, and also voice calls over the internet to relatives abroad. There is also careful access to mobile phones. Parents have access through the management information system to relevant information about their daughters' academic progress, rewards and sanctions.

The school has a detailed process for induction and guidance for new boarders. All boarders and their parents or guardians receive a handbook outlining what they

should expect from boarding. Boarders find this useful and have additional support from a 'buddy' to assist with familiarising themselves with new routines. International boarders benefit from a longer induction; the school takes into consideration the additional adjustment these students make to the country and the school. Staff and students familiar with international boarders' native language, assist with the induction and some written information is provided in their mother tongue.

Boarders reported that there are very good relationships with staff. Boarding house staff demonstrate their commitment to boarders in a number of ways including: making themselves available to them; listening to their wishes about making the houses feel homely; maintaining appropriate confidentiality and assisting them to reach their personal goals. Boarders from a variety of houses stated, 'We have a very good housemistress and a very good assistant. They are kind and considerate,' and 'The staff are always trying to do their best for us.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Boarders live in five boarding houses on the school premises, divided into year and age groups. These premises have changed and improved since the previous inspection. Two of the boarding houses are available for year 12 and year 13 students, two houses cover senior students and one house includes younger boarders from year two up to year seven. The majority of these younger students are from year five to seven.

The lounge areas in the boarding houses are well-furnished and inviting. The two lounges in the younger boarders' house provide separate areas for the younger and older boarders. Boarders are able to spend time relaxing and also have space to be creative or take exercise in other areas. Boarders are provided with warm and comfortable sleeping accommodation. All rooms have sufficient ventilation and they are able to personalise their areas with posters and pictures as they wish. Effective pocket money systems are in place, and boarders confirmed that they are able to lock away their possessions, and that any instances of loss or disappearance are rare. The toilet and washing facilities in the boarding houses exceed the number required by the standard. There is meticulous supervision for younger boarders to ensure they are not at risk of burns and scalds, or trips and falls in the bathrooms.

Boarders enjoy high standards of cleanliness in the boarding houses due to the work of a dedicated team. Staff make a lot of effort to accessorise and personalise the facilities to make them more homely. Comments from boarders include, 'I love the school and I love boarding', and 'I wish I started boarding earlier it is such fun.'

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The school's boarding principles and practice are clear and available to students, parents, guardians and staff. This effectively reflects the nature and ethos of boarding at The Royal Masonic School.

The practice of equality and diversity in the school is outstanding. Boarders of whatever social standing, ability, culture, race and religion, are treated equally. Attention is paid to ensure inclusion for all boarders is encouraged and supported. This is also expected of staff, and the message is clear.

The head of boarding has been in the present role for one year, although has many years of boarding experience. He has been actively encouraged by the headteacher to develop this role and lead by example. The headteacher has introduced a more reflective approach to learning and boarding tasks, to help further improve the school. The headteacher is actively involved in the boarding provision and boarders enjoy the opportunity to speak with the headteacher. The senior leadership team is strong and highly effective. Good regular communication takes place within the school and relationships between house staff, medical staff, pastoral staff and the main school are professional and positive.

The school has an effective management plan to cope with all relevant emergencies, but the school's rigorous process of self-evaluation has identified this as an area for further improvement. The acting bursar regularly reviews all records relating to accidents, and makes reports through the RIDDOR system when appropriate. Risk assessments for trips and visits are also effectively monitored. The headteacher and head of pastoral care monitor all complaints, sanctions and rewards to ensure these are effective and fair. Any boarder whose behaviour means they have to leave the school, are actively assisted by the school to find an alternative, as the school believes that all pupils deserve another opportunity.

Boarders confirm that they are adequately supervised by staff and they know how to find assistance at all hours of the day and night. The work of gap assistants is also effectively monitored by a member of house staff. Boarders can be confident that they are looked after by staff who understand their role and responsibilities. All staff have clear job descriptions and are able to carry out their tasks effectively. Regular housemistress meetings enable staff to discuss any issues that arise and manage these appropriately. All staff have training specific to boarding duties and develop an understanding in emotional development, transition and the needs of overseas boarders. A probation and appraisal system is in place to monitor the work and leads to additional developments of boarding practice.