

Westminster Cathedral Choir School

Inspection report for Boarding School

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Inspector	David Coulter
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Choir School, Ambrosden Avenue, LONDON, SW1P 1QH
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Registered person	Westminster Roman Catholic Diocesan Trustee
Head/Principal	Neil McLaughlan
Nominated person	Neil McLaughlan
Date of last inspection	10/09/2008

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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

Westminster Cathedral Choir School is the only Roman Catholic boarding choir school in the country. All boarders are choristers and are an integral part of the Cathedral community. Boys are admitted from the age of eight until the age of 13. Choristers sing everyday during term time, the exception being on Wednesdays. The choir's duties extend to national and international engagements. Admission follows informal and formal voice trials. Every chorister receives formal musical tuition and the school prepares boys for common entrance and scholarships to leading public schools. The boys have opportunities to see their parents regularly every weekend. At the time of the inspection the school had 27 choristers. All choristers participated in the inspection through group interviews.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The aim of the announced inspection was to determine the nature and quality of boarding provision within the school and to determine how it was meeting the national minimum standards. Particular attention was paid to safeguarding procedures and arrangements for meeting the welfare needs of choristers. All key standards were examined. Information was obtained from interviews with boarders and staff, parents questionnaires, observations of choristers' activities and an examination of a range of records and documents. A full tour of the school, including boarding facilities, was undertaken.

Evidence indicates the school has made great progress in improving all aspects of boarding provision. Since the last inspection the senior staff team have updated all policies and procedures in line with recent legislative changes and best practice guidance. These policies have been translated into working practices that keep both choristers and staff safe in a range of different settings. Choristers are effectively supervised and supported by a group of well motivated staff. The recent refurbishment of the boarding department has been greatly appreciated by both boarders and staff. The new accommodation has been extremely well-planned and maximises the building's limited space extremely effectively. The refurbishment and redecoration programme has created high quality boarding facilities that are tastefully decorated and appropriately furnished.

Choristers continue to make considerable progress and perform successfully academically, musically and in sporting and extra-curricular activities. Choristers spoke in positive terms about their experiences in the school. While acknowledging that the life of a chorister can be demanding, they were also clear it is also stimulating and fun. They were all clearly aware that as members of a world class

cathedral choir they are provided with opportunities to participate in events of often national and international importance. During the last year they have performed on the first night of the Proms and sang at a service for the Pope during his recent visit to Britain. Staff are clearly aware of the unusual demands made upon choristers and are pro-active in ensuring their wellbeing is never compromised. Staff are to be commended on the work they have done to raise the standard of boarding. Although there are two recommendations arising from the inspection, both are aimed at further improving the existing provision which is now outstanding.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were three recommendations arising from the last report. All have been appropriately addressed:

Choristers' views are now regularly sought on the quality of food and their suggestions are incorporated into the menu planning process. Choristers reported a great improvement in the quality of food in recent times (NMS 24)

The introduction of newspapers and magazines and access to both a television and the internet provide opportunities for choristers to keep abreast of both domestic and international news (NMS 11).

The views of choristers about all aspects of their lives within the school are now regularly sought both formally through tutorial groups and boarders meetings and informally through discussions with staff and the introduction of a suggestions box (NMS 12).

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The concept of healthy living is promoted within the school and choristers are encouraged to eat wisely. Fresh produce is extensively used to create nutritionally balanced meals and choristers spoke in positive terms about the quality and quantity of food on offer. Catering staff are responsive to the needs of choristers and provide food that meets special dietary needs and cultural preferences. Snacks and drinks are available during regular breaks throughout the day. Staff monitor the eating habits of each individual to ensure they are eating appropriately. Cultural festivals and birthdays are celebrated with special meals. Although staff and boarders eat together, the dining area is somewhat spartan and does not create an environment conducive for social interaction.

The health and well-being of choristers is monitored on an on-going basis by boarding staff and the school nurse. There is an effective system that ensures health information and parental consents for medical interventions are obtained for all new choristers prior to admission. The boarding department benefits from the support of a local general practitioner who holds regular consultations in the boarding department. Boarding staff keep parents informed of the health and well-being of the

young people in their care.

In order to ensure there is appropriate emergency cover available at all times, all boarding staff are first aid trained. Treatment of minor ailments is carried out by the school nurse, boarding staff or the visiting general practitioner. There are clear policies and good working practices relating to the administration of medication. Systems have been established to ensure that choristers do not inappropriately access non-prescribed medicines. Very few of the choristers are in regular receipt of medication. Any chorister wanting to self-medicate has to demonstrate their competence before assuming the responsibility.

A well developed personal social health and citizenship education programme provides all pupils with excellent, age appropriate, guidance on social and health issues. Choristers, like other pupils in the school, are encouraged to be physically active and all regularly participate in sporting and recreational activities. Staff are clearly aware of the need to provide opportunities for choristers to play and all are provided with opportunities to access the school's recently refurbished playground at regular intervals throughout the day. There is an effective laundry system and bedding is changed regularly.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Since the last inspection, the senior staff team have undertaken a comprehensive revision of the school's policies and procedures to ensure they comply with recent legislative changes and new child protection guidance. All staff receive annual safeguarding training. Boarding staff draw upon these policies to develop systems and working practices that keep choristers safe. Staff spoken with are clearly aware of their individual responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any safeguarding concerns.

Although boarding does not operate in isolation from the rest of the school, choristers reside within a residential community with its own distinct culture. Staff have created a nurturing environment that supports choristers to develop their musical, academic and social skills. Choristers live very full and active lives that include regular choral commitments in the Cathedral and engagements in other settings.

Choristers reside within a community with clear expectations in regard to behaviour. Boundaries are clear and consistently applied by both teaching and boarding staff. There is a clear rewards and sanctions policy and staff make clear the relationship between actions and likely consequences. Choristers feel they are treated fairly by staff and confirmed they are provided with clear guidance on what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Staff reported that boarders are normally well behaved and accepting of guidance. The academic, musical and sporting success of each boarder is recognised and celebrated. Staff reinforce positive behaviour with praise and encouragement. Although the school has an anti-bullying policy, staff and boarders

reported that bullying is not an issue.

Boarding staff know the young people in their care and are extremely sensitive to their needs. While choristers are all treated as individuals with their own specific needs there is an expectation all will subscribe to the ethos of the school and participate fully in the communal life of boarding. The diverse nature of the boarding population has clearly helped create a tolerant atmosphere in which choristers of different ages, from a wide range of social backgrounds can peacefully co-exist. There is an expectation that senior choristers will act as good role models for those in the younger age groups and provide encouragement and support if they are upset or feeling homesick. The interaction between choristers and staff was observed to be based on mutual respect. It was evident that young people were relaxed and comfortable in the company of staff.

Staff ensure the safety of young people by working within a risk management framework that requires individual activities to be risk assessed and strategies developed to address any areas of potential concern. Risk assessments are subject to regular review and updated in response to any incidents. The school occupies a secure area within the cathedral complex. Boarding facilities are located on the upper floors of the school. Boarders accommodation is off-limits to other pupils and access to other areas of the cathedral are via locked doors. There is excellent security around the site and access to the school can only be achieved by reporting to staff at the entrance and signing in. Staff are very aware of fire safety and ensure all steps are taken to protect the young people in their care. The fire alarm system is tested regularly and evacuation exercises carried out. Fire safety equipment is regularly serviced.

The boarding department operates with a stable group of well-motivated and experienced staff many of whom also teach in the school. Both permanent and part-time staff have to successfully complete a comprehensive recruitment and vetting process before being appointed. Boarding staff work as a team and are clearly aware of their individual roles and responsibilities.

On admission, all choristers and their families are made aware of how to access the school's complaints process. No complaints have been made about any aspect of boarding since the last inspection. Choristers reported they would have no difficulty in reporting any personal worries or concerns to any of the boarding staff. An effective tutorial system ensures that the progress and well-being of each individual chorister is carefully monitored. Boarding staff maintain regular communication with parents and the head teacher provides a detailed weekly newsletter. Staff regularly seek out the views of choristers about all aspects of their lives within the school and address any concerns at an early stage.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Although the school has a clear Catholic ethos, many of the pupils are drawn from non-Catholic families. The population of the school is culturally diverse and contains young people from many different countries. Cultural diversity is celebrated and activities such as special meals are organised to celebrate national festivals. Both boarding and school staff reported that issues relating to discrimination based on race or religion have never been reported.

The school's central London location provides choristers opportunities to access a wide range of social and recreational activities. Recent activities have included visits to premiership football games, trips to the theatre, cinema, swimming and a visit to an indoor climbing wall. Choristers participate in all aspects of school life and are well represented in the school's sports teams and extra-curricular activities. Within the school site boarders can access a number of recreational areas including a large playground with purpose built play equipment. Choristers are also provided regular access to a library, computers, table tennis, television and a wide range of board games. Staff ensure there is a good balance of free and organised time.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The school has a well developed admissions policy that requires all prospective choristers to undertake a detailed academic and musical assessment. As all choristers have to reside residentially, trial stays are used to determine if they can cope with the unusual demands of a chorister's life. The full commitment of parents and the prospective chorister are required before a place is offered. New choristers are provided with a range of documents prior to admission that detail the nature of boarding provision. New choristers reported that the mentoring system was effective and that it had helped them settle in and establish relationships.

Choristers are regularly consulted by staff about all aspects of their lives within boarding and their ideas and suggestions are sought formally through regular tutorial group meetings and informally through discussions with individual staff. A suggestions box is also available. Choristers reported that staff respond positively to reasonable requests. Staff maintain frequent contact with choristers throughout the day and mealtimes provide opportunities for exchanging information. Boarding staff provide effective supervision without being intrusive and allow space for choristers to congregate and socialise together.

Choristers are kept informed of national and world events and are provided with access to newspapers, the internet and television. Being a multi-cultural school, staff are particularly adept at relating the significance of major events to the whole school community. As a day school with boarding, the school benefits from the involvement of pupils with a life beyond school. Choristers attend classes with day pupils and

establish many friendships that can often lead to home visits.

Boarders are encouraged to maintain regular contact with their families via a free phone and e-mail. Parents can contact school staff at any time. Evidence indicates that boarding staff are good at maintaining contact with parents and provide regular progress reports. Parents are welcome to visit at set times and are invited to special events. Staff are aware of the difficulties some parents from outside London can face in visiting regularly and aim to ensure that choristers do not feel unduly disadvantaged. Staff provide an exciting activity programme every Saturday for those choristers not being visited by parents.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Since the last key inspection boarding accommodation has been subject to a comprehensive refurbishment programme which has greatly improved the quality of the provision. The refurbishment was well planned and carried out in sympathy with the character of the building. Choristers now reside in three large age-appropriate rooms that have been reconfigured to maximise privacy and increase storage space. Choristers reported that they were generally good at respecting each others designated area. All the boarding areas were observed to be clean, bright and appropriately furnished. Choristers confirmed that their beds were comfortable and that mattresses are regularly changed. Choristers are clearly appreciative of the improvements and special mention was made of the lounge area which is now an extremely popular place in which to relax and play. Staff areas are completely separate and are off-limits to boarders.

The refurbishment programme has included the upgrading of toilet and shower areas to a very high standard. There are currently adequate showers and baths to meet the needs of the current boarding population. Although the boarding area was found to be comfortably warm and draught free, a number of senior choristers reported that it can get very warm during hot summer days. Records indicate that the buildings receive regular maintenance and there is a rolling programme of redecoration and refurbishment.

There are suitable arrangements for choristers to access pocket money. Treats are provided by parents and distributed by staff at appropriate intervals.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The school has produced a range of high quality publications and a website that details the educational and boarding provision within the school. The publications make clear the school ethos and role played by choristers within the wider Cathedral

community. The publications and website are regularly updated.

The boarding department operates with a group of experienced and well motivated staff. Staff are provided with a general job description and a staff handbook that details their specific roles and responsibilities. Permanent staff receive additional support from two gap students who assume limited, well defined responsibilities. The head of boarding provides extremely effective leadership and is widely respected by both staff and boarders. The school benefits greatly from the development of clear unambiguous policies and procedures. Within boarding these have been translated into sound working practices. Staff access regular training opportunities and are provided with an annual appraisal.

Daily routines provide a clear and consistent structure for choristers. Each day choristers need to ensure they are in the right place, at the right time with the right equipment. Such demands require each chorister to develop self-discipline and organisational skills. New choristers are introduced to their responsibilities gradually by both staff and senior choristers. Staffing levels are maintained at appropriate levels that allow staff to provide effective supervision across the site. Support at night is provided by sleeping-in staff. All external activities are subject to a risk assessment process to determine appropriate staffing levels.

The boarding department, like the rest of the school, operates within a risk management framework. The deputy head is responsible for health and safety matters and checks health and safety policies relating to the boarding site. His work is monitored by a committee of school governors. The school is not risk-averse and pupils are encouraged to participate in adventurous activities. However, all such activities are appropriately assessed and are managed by suitably qualified leaders. Responses to emergencies and the staff cover are determined as part of the planning process. Choristers get the opportunity to participate in school trips as well as choral tours. All such trips are subject to the school's rigorous risk assessment process.

As a chorister's day extends beyond those of their fellow pupils, staff have to ensure that the demands upon them do not become excessive. Choristers confirmed that life as a chorister is both stimulating and demanding. The senior staff team constantly strive to ensure that choristers have appropriate time for academic study, musical and choral practice, recreation, cathedral commitments and rest. Choristers suggested that a reorganisation of the Saturday timetable could, without much disruption, result in a longer period of free time.

The promotion of equality and diversity within the school is outstanding. The school has a clear ethos based on Catholic teaching. The school community is one in which respect for others is promoted. It provides education for young people with a range of academic abilities. Choristers occupy a significant position within the school and play an important role in the life of the Cathedral. Although the school is justifiably proud of its choristers and their achievements, all pupils are treated as individuals with their own particular talents and abilities. The multi-cultural composition of the school provides a unique opportunity for all the pupils to gain insights into different cultures. The excellent personal social, health and citizenship education programme

challenges pupils to consider the circumstance of others including those less fortunate than themselves.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Compliance with national minimum standards

The school meets all the national minimum standards, with the exception of any listed below. To ensure that the school meets the national minimum standards the school needs to...

- refurbish the refectory area to enhance choristers dining experience (NMS 24.5).
- give consideration to a reorganisation of the Saturday timetable to provide choristers with more free time (NMS 27.3).