

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

INSPECTION REPORT ON

Stowe School

Full Name of the School	Stowe School
DCSF Number	825/6001
Registered Charity Number	310639
Address	Stowe School, Stowe, Buckingham, MK18 5EH.
Telephone Number	01280 818000
Fax Number	01280 818181
Email Address	enquiries@stowe.co.uk
Headmaster	Dr Anthony Wallersteiner
Chair of Governors	Mr Christopher Honeyman Brown
Age Range	13 to 18
Gender	Mixed
Inspection Dates	27th to 30th April 2009

This inspection report follows the framework laid down by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). The inspection was carried out under the arrangements of the Independent Schools Council (ISC) Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership. It was also carried out under Section 162A(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002 as amended by the Education Act 2005, under the provisions of which the Secretary of State for Education and Skills accredited ISI as the body approved for the purpose of inspecting schools belonging to ISC Associations and reporting on compliance with the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003 as amended with effect from January 2005, May 2007 and February 2009.

The inspection was not carried out in conjunction with Ofsted, Children's Directorate, and the report does not contain specific judgements on the National Minimum Boarding Standards. In view of an impending Ofsted inspection, it does not comment on the progress made by the school in meeting the recommendations set out in the most recent statutory boarding inspection but it does evaluate the quality of the boarding experience and its contribution to pupils' education and development in general. The full Ofsted report will be found at www.ofsted.gov.uk under Inspection reports/Boarding schools.

The inspection does not examine the financial viability of the school or investigate its accounting procedures. The inspectors check the school's health and safety procedures and comment on any significant hazards they encounter: they do not carry out an exhaustive health and safety examination. Their inspection of the premises is from an educational perspective and does not include in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Characteristics of the School

- 1.1 Stowe School was founded in 1923 by its first headmaster, through the purchase of Stowe House, once the home of the Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, outside Buckingham. The neo-classical mansion is set in an 800 acre park which includes a landscaped garden widely regarded as the most significant in Europe and the embodiment of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. It owes much of its architecture and landscape design to Vanbrugh, Kent, Leoni, 'Capability' Brown, Adam and Soane.
- 1.2 Ownership of the grounds is shared with the National Trust, which also manages public access to the grounds and mansion by about 130,000 visitors a year. The mansion is leased to the Stowe House Preservation Trust, which is responsible for the considerable programme of refurbishment presently under way. The school is a member of the Allied Schools Group, which provides some financial guarantees and other support, though it has its own governing body which operates independently in almost all respects. The school makes full use of the mansion, grounds and temples, enjoys the extensive games facilities within the park, and also has a wide range of dedicated buildings including recently opened girls' accommodation.
- 1.3 The school was established as an evangelical foundation, and four governors are appointed by the Martyrs Memorial Trust. The first girls were admitted into the sixth form in 1974, but since 2005 it has provided co-education for pupils from age thirteen to eighteen. Most pupils are boarders. The current headmaster has been in post since 2003.
- 1.4 Pupils are drawn from both the surrounding area and further afield, and include a number of overseas nationals. At the time of the inspection, the number of pupils was 719, of whom 494 were boys and 225 were girls. The number of boarders was 618. The school has twelve boarding houses and day pupils are fully integrated into these houses for pastoral care. One hundred and eighty-eight pupils receive financial support from the school. Almost all pupils move to some form of higher education at the age of eighteen.
- 1.5 Stowe aims to provide for a broad range of academic ability. Pupils are admitted following Common Entrance or Scholarship Examination, and the analysis of standardised scores shows that the range of ability is above the national average; if pupils perform in line with their abilities, they will obtain results which are above the national average for maintained secondary schools. One hundred and nine pupils receive some support for learning difficulties or disabilities (LDD), of whom two have a statement of special educational need (SEN). One hundred and eight pupils have English as an additional language (EAL), of whom 48 are supported within school.
- 1.6 The vision for Stowe is of a school that encourages the highest academic and cultural achievement, and that continues to foster the development of Stoics who are as original and individual as their school.

- 1.7 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school. The year group nomenclature used by the school and its National Curriculum (NC) equivalence are shown in the following tables.

School	NC name
Upper sixth	Year 13
Lower sixth	Year 12
Form 5	Year 11
Form 4	Year 10
Form 3	Year 9

2. THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The Educational Experience Provided

- 2.1 The school provides a high quality, all-round education, which contributes well to pupils' academic and personal development and which is fully consistent with its commitment to the pursuit of intellectual, cultural and sporting excellence. Both the extensive and exceptionally varied activities programme and the high level of support for pupils with LDD and EAL, are outstanding. Since the last inspection, the Year 9 curriculum has been broadened and time devoted to practical creative subjects has thus been increased.
- 2.2 The curriculum promotes all aspects of pupils' development fully. Within a nurturing environment carefully designed to enable each pupil to succeed, the wide range of opportunities is well suited to their individual interests, aptitudes and needs. Both parents and pupils are pleased with the wide range of subjects offered. Listening, speaking and numeracy skills are developed as pupils progress through the school. To promote reading, pupils are expected to review a book each term and the reviews appear in their reports.
- 2.3 In Year 9, pupils' education covers all subject areas. Those with strong linguistic potential can take two modern foreign languages in addition to Latin. The large number of aesthetic, physical and creative subjects is enabled by a rotation of art and design and technology (DT) courses. The visual education course is designed to heighten pupils' awareness and knowledge of Stowe's magnificent historical and architectural heritage. Senior pupils said that "Vis Ed" added considerably to their appreciation and understanding of their surroundings. In Years 10 and 11, those not choosing religious studies (RS) devote one period a week to spiritual and moral education (SPAMed) exploring ethical issues and developing a considered response to moral questions. In the sixth form, the wide range of subjects includes history of art, which is taken by an unusually large number of pupils. The curriculum is well planned. Clearly worded policy documents are included in the staff manual and department handbooks contain schemes of work covering medium- and long-term planning.
- 2.4 Information and communication technology (ICT) lessons enable each pupil to make maximum use of the extensive computer facilities throughout both the teaching and boarding areas. Courses for the European Computer Driving Licence and Diploma in Digital Applications help pupils to develop skills for use in all areas of study. Each pupil is encouraged to own a laptop and excellent technical support is provided. Many educational resources, including items of homework, are available on the school intranet, and staff and pupils communicate a great deal by e-mail. This focus on using ICT equips Stoics well for life in the 21st century. The library has been considerably refurbished and an on-line catalogue installed; it has a full-time librarian and assistant and is open for longer than previously. Though this refurbishment is not complete, the library is used by significant numbers of pupils as a learning resource centre; it provides a very scholarly setting for their work.
- 2.5 Personal, social and health education (PSHE) is taught by experts to whole year groups. Lectures are sometimes followed up in single-sex tutor periods, but time is limited due to the increased focus on academic monitoring. However, pupils do discuss such issues with house staff as well as with their peers. They particularly appreciate the sex and relationships education provided by the nurses attached to their houses. However, they feel that some PSHE topics are covered too frequently, with insufficient discussion and follow-up.

- 2.6 Lessons in school are complemented by field work, foreign trips, residential visits, music and theatre performances, visits to places of interest and a wide range of talks from visiting speakers. A lecturer at Buckingham University had recently given a series of talks on the poems of Sylvia Plath. Earlier in the school year time was set aside for the Stowe Festival, which encompassed a wide range of cultural and scientific activities.
- 2.7 The excellent extra-curricular programme, which is an integral part of school life, provides outstanding opportunities for enrichment and contributes significantly to pupils' personal development. Pupils of all ages said it was one of the best features of the school. Careful planning means that the programme allows maximum access for the greatest numbers of pupils, and appeals to all abilities. Particularly talented individuals engage in a variety of pursuits, moving from a games practice to a play rehearsal or the art school in a single afternoon. Sport is an important element and pupils enjoy an impressive variety of competitive and recreational team and individual sports, ranging from aerobics to beagling, fly-fishing to rugby, and weight-lifting to yoga. Pupils take part with enthusiasm, responding both to the immense opportunities and to the extensive, beautifully landscaped grounds which make outdoor activities particularly attractive.
- 2.8 The equally varied and extensive non-sporting programme includes activities as diverse as creative textiles, current affairs, community service and web wizards. The combined cadet force and The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme are popular, and include military, expeditionary and outdoor activities. An extensive range of choirs, orchestras and bands provides for pupils of all ages and abilities, and leads to a plethora of concerts, master classes and workshops. The art and drama departments offer a similarly diverse range of opportunities. The school magazine, *The Stoic*, reveals a vast range of other activities, including the XX group for younger pupils whose aptitude and interest in their work leads them to undertake extended projects, the Pitt, literary, geography and classical societies, the headmaster's essay society and many more.
- 2.9 Preparation for the next stage of pupils' education is excellent. Tutors provide good one-to-one support to pupils selecting GCSE and A-level subjects. The reinvigorated careers department, in new premises, has increased its profile and provides proactive guidance. Pupils are encouraged to start thinking of possible careers in Year 10, using interactive careers software. Through *Connexions*, they have access to a professional personal adviser and a comprehensive database and library of information. They are encouraged to organise work experience for themselves. Careful preparation for university applications is emphasised in Year 12, together with the importance of AS-level results.
- 2.10 Equal access to the curriculum is provided for all pupils, including those with LDD or EAL, who receive outstanding support. The Skills Development Centre plays a vital and fully recognised role in supporting their education. The dedicated team of three full-time and five part-time staff is led well and provides excellent individual teaching to support pupils' needs in a well-resourced centre. Classroom assistants provide valuable and reassuring help in some lessons; teachers recognise those needing learning support and use strategies to help them. The school meets the needs of pupils with statements of SEN.
- 2.11 Similarly, excellent support is provided for those with EAL. In weekly sessions, they are prepared well for the International English Language Testing System test, required for university admission. The department also oversees the cultural integration of these pupils with conspicuous success; they are well integrated into both their own classes and the rest of the school.

2.12 The school provides a wide range of enhancement for its most gifted pupils, such as societies, clubs and teams and, in many classes, teachers adapt their teaching successfully to ensure that these pupils are challenged.

2.13 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the curriculum [Standard 1].

Pupils' Learning and Achievements

2.14 Pupils at Stowe achieve well across a wide range of experience and activity, thus fulfilling its aims. It has maintained these high standards since the last inspection.

2.15 From when they arrive, pupils respond well to literary texts and questions, and write creatively. They develop a wide range of ICT skills to support work across the curriculum, including the use of multi-media, photographic and office software. Their imagination is shown in sophisticated and multi-rhythmic music from Africa, their appreciation of the setting in which they live through their understanding of neo-classical architecture, and their understanding of facts and concepts in subjects such as biology.

2.16 As they move towards GCSE, pupils develop their linguistic skills rapidly, engaging in confident conversation in foreign languages, or applying their literacy skills to subjects such as history. Increasingly they think for themselves, apply their knowledge and understanding to new situations and reason clearly. They continue to apply a wide range of ICT skills to activities as diverse as experiments in physics and composition in music. They apply their grasp of mathematics to work in science and see plays in English in their historical context.

2.17 A-level students talk confidently both in class and around the school, listening to each other carefully and expressing themselves articulately. Their knowledge and understanding of subjects ranging from English to economics increases rapidly, as does their ability to think issues through or to apply what they know to new situations. Work in art shows a mature understanding of what they are trying to convey, and pupils bring a considerable sense of the unique place in which they go to school to a broad range of topics in art history.

2.18 Throughout the school, pupils of all abilities and needs make similar progress, as a result of support both in class and elsewhere. For pupils with LDD this reflects increased confidence as well as developing skill; for the most able pupils it frequently reflects open-ended questioning which encourages them to think for themselves and to work independently.

2.19 At GCSE pupils obtain results which are well above the national average for all maintained secondary schools, and thus good for their abilities. The school obtains over twice as high a proportion of A*/A grades as is the case nationally. At A level, pupils obtain results which are above the average for all pupils taking A level and they obtain a much higher proportion of A/B grades than is the case nationally; these results are in line with those in maintained selective schools and are also good for pupils' abilities. Almost all pupils progress to university or to specialist colleges in art, music or drama, and the great majority obtain places at their first choice of institution. Pupils also succeed in competitions such as the Mathematics Challenge and the Design Prize.

2.20 Many pupils produce notes of a high standard and only a few show poor organisation in their books. Overall, they use opportunities for independent work and research well, although some learning is too dependent on copying notes or downloading information. They ask their own questions to extend their understanding and are active and intelligent participants in class discussion. They work well both in pairs and in groups, supporting each other in tasks such as revision and collaborating effectively in activities such as theatre and sport.

- 2.21 In almost all lessons, pupils are focused and attentive, showing a purposeful approach coupled with tenacity and perseverance. Written work is generally presented well. Occasionally poor behaviour or lack of attentiveness in class impedes the learning of a few pupils or that of others. However, along with staff, pupils show an outstanding commitment to sports and other activities.
- 2.22 Outside the classroom, pupils excel in a wide range of activities, ranging from high standards of performance in drama and music to considerable success on the sports field. Recently the intermediate swimming relay team was ranked eighth in England, the hockey team was in the county cup final, the lacrosse team was in the national schools semi-final, and the rugby team reached the last eight in the Rosslyn Park Sevens. Many individual pupils played sport at national level. In music a group won first prize at the Oxford Music Festival and a recent performance of *The Boyfriend* was highly acclaimed; concerts, such as that held during the inspection, are of high standard. In creative textile activities, pupils made garments ranging from pyjamas to ball gowns to their own design; in fly fishing two fish were caught as an inspector watched. Work in art, photography and design is imaginative and skilful, with pupils working independently and purposefully to develop their own personal style.

Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development of Pupils

- 2.23 Pupils' personal development is outstanding overall. It meets the school's aims to develop a lasting sense of moral, social and spiritual responsibility and to provide a caring environment in which pupils learn to consider the rights and needs of others. It has built on the strengths at the time of the last inspection.
- 2.24 Pupils show considerable appreciation of the beauty of their environment and value their cultural heritage. This contributes to their spiritual well-being and development, creating a sense of awe and wonder and giving pupils space to escape from others and contemplate the metaphysical. They develop into confident, friendly and articulate young people who relate easily to those they meet. Their self-worth is supported by a strong house identity and by the emphasis in house assemblies on positive rewards rather than on negative sanctions. Regular attendance at chapel and opportunities to attend the carol service, Lenten addresses, Christian union and other groups enable pupils to develop their spirituality; these opportunities are increasingly appreciated as pupils move up through the school, although the nature of the morning services does not always fully engage pupils or create an appropriate sense of occasion.
- 2.25 Pupils have a strong moral code which is supported by lessons, activities, assemblies and house activities. This was seen in coursework on the occupation of France during World War 2, Year 9 history assignments on the holocaust, and discussion in SPAMed on ethical and moral obligation. Pupils understand the need for rules in a school and for consequences when they break them: they heard plain talking in house assemblies about what is right and wrong, and about the importance of standing up for what is morally right in chapel. A PSHE lesson for Year 9 outlined the possible consequences of bullying.
- 2.26 Pupils show outstanding social development. They work well together in class, in activities and in the house, and involve themselves fully in the life of the school. Pupils are supported in their social development by belonging to a house. They recognise and respect social differences and are accepting of others. Positive corporate activities such as assemblies, drama productions, teams and activities foster a sense of achievement and contribution, as does the school's recognition of kindly acts outside school. Tutor time promotes responsibility and pupils show increased awareness of this as they move up through the school; for example, they contribute to the school community as house and school prefects or as members of the peer support group.

- 2.27 Pupils gain a broad general knowledge of public institutions and services through SPAMed classes and other lessons, through activities such as current affairs, colloquia and the headmaster's essay group and through raising social awareness within the house. The school council is effective in putting forward suggestions and pupils feel it provides worthwhile contact with the headmaster.
- 2.28 Pupils are keen to celebrate difference. The school prides itself on nurturing and valuing individuals and thus not stifling individuality, which helps pupils recognise the needs and viewpoints of others in the community. Pupils spoke positively about the Stowe Festival, held for a week in October, which offered a huge range of cultural events, including a very wide range of music, rock bands, drama and workshops. Thus the celebration of pupils' own culture is a strength, and the presence of a significant number of pupils from other countries in the school gives opportunities to mix with other pupils and share their culture with them.
- 2.29 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils [Standard 2].

The Quality of Teaching (Including Assessment)

- 2.30 Teaching is good overall and a significant amount is outstanding. This high quality of teaching supports the school's aim to foster the development of pupils as individuals. The school has built successfully on the quality of teaching in the last inspection.
- 2.31 Teaching is almost always well planned, drawing on a wide range of stimulating and interesting activities which reflect pupils' different needs and maintain a healthy balance, for example between theory and practical in biology. Lessons are fast-paced and lively, encourage pupils' motivation and benefit from the energy and commitment that teachers bring; only occasionally does pace flag, or conversely provide too little time for reflection.
- 2.32 Teachers show a thorough knowledge of the subject. They explain concepts clearly and share their enthusiasm. Teachers also know pupils well, giving them a considerable amount of individual help which pupils say they value greatly. Teachers are supportive and easily available for additional support, both in and out of the classroom as well as through the clinic system. They maintain excellent relationships in almost all lessons and generally manage behaviour well; in only a few lessons do they fail to deal with distractions.
- 2.33 Their close knowledge of pupils enables teachers to match tasks closely to their abilities and needs. They provide simple tasks followed by more demanding ones in geography, ask questions of differing difficulty in economics, set open-ended questions to the most able pupils in biology to encourage their independent learning, and set plenty of extension work in English. Less able pupils are given additional support and direction; only occasionally are they set work which is too hard. Those with LDD appreciate both the way that work in class is matched to their needs and the support they receive outside lessons; for example they are asked closed rather than open questions in sports science. In some lessons, gifted and talented pupils are set extension tasks and asked more demanding questions in class.
- 2.34 Teachers frequently make skilful use of challenging questioning to tease out pupils' understanding or assess their knowledge. They ensure that all participate and progress well. They engage pupils in dialogue to develop their ideas. One pupil said: "teachers make things easy but also challenging". Teachers offer additional challenge through a 'must, should, could' system of choices and contribute much to a climate of learning. Only occasionally does a didactic approach limit pupils' own thinking or closed questioning restrict learning.

- 2.35 Teachers make good use of resources. For example, in a SPAMed lesson, pupils were totally engaged by the excellent use of internet film clips, coupled with the teacher's energy. ICT is used well in many lessons, for example in geography, business studies, economics, music, DT and RS; interactive whiteboards are also often used well. A biology lesson was enhanced by good use of a wonderful collection of mole, swan and rabbit bones.
- 2.36 Much marking is of high quality and provides pupils with prompt, helpful feedback and advice as to how to improve their work. Pupils appreciate the way that e-mail enables work to be returned quickly. A minority of marking is of lower quality, or is not done consistently.
- 2.37 Assessment successfully monitors pupils' progress. All assessment data, including internal and external examination results, are stored centrally on the school administration system allowing a pupil's progress to be tracked from the time they join the school. This enables pupils to be set target grades after discussion with their subject teachers at the start of each term. Three weekly orders, based on the previous three weeks' work and known as TWOs, are sent to parents regularly throughout the year; pupils are awarded a grade for attainment and a grade for effort. The information they provide is appreciated by both pupils and parents. It is discussed firstly between housemasters and tutors and then between tutors and pupils; pupils may then be rewarded or sanctioned. Rewards include trips to the cinema or dinner with the headmaster. Pupils who fall short of expectations are given report cards which monitor their progress in class. Pupils may also be recommended to the various academic clinics to improve their standards.
- 2.38 Assessment information is used well by tutors and house staff to monitor pupils' progress, and heads of departments are beginning to make similar use of it to monitor progress within their subject. At present this is done particularly well in English, geography, modern languages and mathematics.
- 2.39 The school meets the regulatory requirements for teaching [Standard 1].

3. THE QUALITY OF CARE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The Quality of Pastoral Care, and the Welfare, Health and Safety of Pupils

- 3.1 Dedicated staff provide outstanding pastoral care through the holistic and empathetic support they give to pupils in line with the school's aim. In this regard the school has maintained the high standards of pastoral care seen at the last inspection. In most other aspects of pupils' welfare they are well cared for but there are shortcomings in child protection and safer recruitment.
- 3.2 Excellent arrangements for pastoral care are well supported by staff. Pastoral care remains solidly based in houses, where an excellent, hard-working team of housemasters and housemistresses is supported by resident assistants, matrons and visiting tutors, all of whom provide an excellent and strong lead. House matrons are crucial to pastoral guidance and care. The linking of nurses to specific houses has increased their involvement in pastoral care and education, to complement their medical work. The formation of a peer support group at the suggestion of the head boy and head girl has been a great success. In addition senior prefects were responsible for a shift from advertising sanctions to promoting achievements. This has been welcomed by the pupil body, who believe that it has led to an improvement in general behaviour. Thus both staff and pupils play a significant role in pupils' care. In houses, impressive social qualities are instilled, developed and encouraged.
- 3.3 Pupils receive excellent support and guidance, on both academic and personal issues. All staff recognise the need to provide a patient listening ear and the new management information system allows the efficient transmission of information. As a result, house staff are aware of issues as they arise and deal with them promptly. Pupils said that they were clear that they have an adult they can approach for pastoral help if needed, although in some written questionnaires pupils were less sure. Housemasters, housemistresses and tutors' termly reports are thorough and indicate a good and knowledgeable relationship with pupils.
- 3.4 The quality of relationships between pupils and staff and amongst the pupils themselves is a real strength and is supported by informal, mutual respect between staff, both teaching and non-teaching, and most pupils. Similarly, pupils respect each other and enjoy one another's company. An excellent induction programme ensures that new friendships are made quickly when pupils arrive.
- 3.5 Pupils are familiar with the sanctions for bad behaviour and see them as fair. The provision of outstanding role models by both staff and senior pupils ensures that the expected norm is mature and responsible behaviour. Incidents of verbal bullying are initially and effectively dealt with by older pupils. Peer help is seen by pupils as very important. The clear and robust anti-bullying policy is rarely needed but is implemented as required.
- 3.6 In most respects, child protection policies and procedures are correct, but recruitment procedures are unsatisfactory in that staff from overseas are not always fully checked in the UK as well as in their own country, and on one occasion checks on a governor were completed late. In addition, governors do not review the child protection procedures annually as required. The school handbook provides excellent advice and staff also receive appropriate training, both when they arrive and at the required intervals. The school takes suitable fire precautions and holds drills, checks and servicing regularly. Health and safety are overseen by a health and safety committee, and involve risk assessments for activities both at school and elsewhere. The school keeps appropriate records of admission and attendance.

- 3.7 In the medical centre, pupils benefit from care provided by a team which combines nurses and local doctors; they all work well together, as they do with matrons in houses. Their work is supported by a school counsellor and by the peer support group, whom the counsellor has trained. Pupils have a vast range of opportunities to take exercise, both in organised games and around the grounds. They enjoy a wide variety of choice at meals, showing good awareness of healthy options, and both servery and dining room provide an attractive ambience for school meals.
- 3.8 The school meets most of the regulatory requirements for the welfare, health and safety of pupils [Standard 3]. In order to meet all the requirements, the school must:
- (a) ensure that the governors undertake an annual review of the school's child protection policy and procedures and that safer recruitment procedures are followed fully [Regulations 3.(2)(b)].

The Quality of Links with Parents and the Community

- 3.9 The school has built a strong and effective partnership with parents and appropriate links with the wider community. It meets its aims of working with parents to do the best for their children and has developed new initiatives to involve parents since the last inspection.
- 3.10 The overwhelming majority of parents who responded to the questionnaire sent before the inspection were very positive about the education and support provided for their children. They were most satisfied by the quality of the teaching and the curriculum, the attitudes and values of the school and the range of activities and provision for boarders, with all of which the inspectors agreed. There were no issues raised by a significant number of parents.
- 3.11 Despite the wide geographical distribution of boarders' homes, which makes regular involvement of parents difficult, many matches are supported well, as are concerts and plays. However, some parents feel that the school could be more active in encouraging new parents to attend. Houses organise popular 'at homes' and 'father and son' matches, and parents sometimes help with activities such as cricket. The newly-formed Stowe Parents' Association has recently organised 'journey-breakers', providing refreshments at exeat and the start and end of terms to give further opportunities for parents to meet socially and informally. They plan more initiatives to involve parents in the life of the school.
- 3.12 Parents are provided with clear and comprehensive details about their children's work and progress, and also about the school. Termly reports are invariably thorough and informative, with especially thoughtful remarks from tutors, housemasters and housemistresses which reveal a deep understanding of pupils' abilities and attitudes. Personal reports written by pupils themselves often touch on important matters and exemplify the good understanding and trusting relationships between staff and pupils. In between reports, TWTs keep parents up to date at frequent intervals. Regular letters from the headmaster keep parents abreast of the school's activities, and the school website is also a significant and helpful source of information for parents. The *Column* newsletter and parents' directory have been welcomed as extra ways of strengthening the flow of communication and opinion.
- 3.13 The school handles parents' concerns with care. It has an appropriate complaints procedure, and in the sample of correspondence inspected, the headmaster dealt openly and sympathetically with more serious complaints, often writing at considerable length and in accordance with the policy.

3.14 The school promotes positive links with the wider community, both in the local vicinity, further afield and abroad, and instils in its staff and pupils a strong sense of social responsibility and respect for the local community. The Luffield Festival draws together pupils from local schools for creative workshops and performances; musicians have been performing around the country and recently on a tour to Spain. Many pupils organise the numerous charity events; these are well supported and often hugely successful. For example, during the inspection a recital was being arranged to support work with blind children in the Gambia. Active steps are being taken to encourage greater participation in the *Service at Stowe* programme which includes visiting elderly people and working in charity shops; a particular highlight is the Christmas Party for local residents. The school plans to strengthen its relationship with a youth centre in London, and some senior pupils will work in their GAP Year at a school in South Africa, to strengthen links following the success of the Branson Scholars who came to the school from South Africa this year.

3.15 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the provision of information and the manner in which complaints are to be handled [Standards 6 and 7].

The Quality of Boarding Education

3.16 The boarding experience has some outstanding features and adds considerably to pupils' educational and personal development. It meets the school's aims. In their houses, boarders are happy, valued and relaxed.

3.17 The outstanding relationships between boarders are both positive and supportive. The relationships between boarders and adults who care for them are also excellent, creating a happy and supportive environment. Boarders show a sense of purpose and are courteous both to each other and to visitors; they have a strong loyalty to their house. They are confident that, should they have a problem, they can turn for help to a housemaster or housemistress, tutor, matron or senior pupil, knowing they will find support. Matrons are particularly appreciated and provide a homely touch. House prefects supervise prep and younger pupils' bed times with the support of the duty tutor.

3.18 The provision of activities is outstanding. A comprehensive programme of games and clubs takes place during the day, and boarders also use some school facilities such as the computer suite, library, gym and weights room, during or after prep. At weekends, pupils may be taken out to the cinema or for a pizza, whilst Saturday evening social events are organised for and between houses. The sixth form enjoy using their own centre after prep and at weekends. Pupils may choose to take part in organised trips on Sundays to activities such as paint-balling, karting, high-wire adventure and shopping.

3.19 The quality of accommodation is generally good and is at its best in the new girls' houses; the school is aware of a few shortcomings, such as limited common room space in one house, which need attention. Resources are otherwise good, with ample kitchen space together with table tennis tables, pool tables, televisions, data points to the school network and a number of computers for those boarders who do not have a laptop. Boarders enjoy full use of the grounds in the summer months.

4. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The Quality of Governance

- 4.1 Governors give strong leadership in most respects, both to the school and to its liaison with the other stakeholders at Stowe, but their management of a small number of important issues such as the oversight of child protection and staff recruitment is less secure. Their management of the heritage aspects of the school enables it to gain great benefit from its setting, as was the founder's aim. Their commitment to excellence has made a particular contribution in areas of teaching. They have built on their leadership of the school since the previous inspection.
- 4.2 The governing body has a shrewd picture of the skills and experiences it needs and its structure meets the needs of the school very well. It enables governors to contribute effectively to internal school business and external relationships. Governors bring a wide range of relevant experience and expertise, including in the field of education. This enables them to support the school's work, value its staff, challenge it where necessary and liaise closely with the headmaster and senior staff. They have a clear sense of priority and pursue these priorities well alongside the headmaster. Strategic planning is imaginative and well thought through, based on a close knowledge of the school and its needs.
- 4.3 Generally, governors are clear about their responsibilities, although they have not been aware of their duty to review child protection policies and procedures regularly, or to check on recruitment processes. In contrast their oversight of health and safety is thorough, as is that of medical support and other aspects of care and welfare.
- 4.4 Over the years, governors have created a structure for the management of the mansion, estate and school, which meets the school's needs well. They work very effectively with the other stakeholders, such as the National Trust and the preservation trust, to the considerable advantage of the school.

The Quality of Leadership and Management

- 4.5 The school benefits from strong leadership and management in almost all respects; structures have been redefined and strengthened since the last inspection. However, some aspects of staff recruitment have not been properly managed. All levels of leadership fully support the vision of achieving the highest academic and cultural standards whilst fostering the development of Stoics who are as original and individual as the school.
- 4.6 The headmaster's very strong leadership gives the school a clear sense of direction which emphasises continuous improvement; it has been communicated effectively to parents, friends of the school, staff and pupils alike. Senior management is strong, cohesive and focused, bringing both complementary skills and a commitment to the vision expressed in the school's strategic planning. The clear educational direction and leadership provided by those with senior management responsibilities are reflected in the quality of education and the achievement of Stowe's aims.
- 4.7 The present structure for overseeing the work of departments is highly effective at disseminating information and monitoring success. However, the school is aware that meetings of heads of departments chaired by the deputy head (academic) are too large for effective debate. Some heads of department would appreciate greater involvement by the headmaster in these discussions and feel that this would raise the status of the forum.

- However, heads of departments appreciate the annual opportunity to discuss their department's external examination results with the headmaster and deputy head (academic), and find this to be a highly effective vehicle for communication.
- 4.8 Clearly defined management structures within academic departments ensure the effective communication, implementation and evaluation of policies, despite some inconsistency in departmental leadership and vision; departments check and review the effectiveness of teaching and the quality of pupils' learning and achievement, as well as promoting and sharing good practice.
- 4.9 Leadership and management of pastoral care are strong, contributing significantly to the quality of the school's pastoral care. Housemasters and mistresses meet the headmaster, the deputy head (pastoral) and other senior managers weekly to discuss pupils' education, care and welfare; recent discussions have included the success of co-education, rewards and sanctions, the role of tutors and social activities for pupils.
- 4.10 The school places a high priority on the successful recruitment and retention of high quality staff. Requirements for checking staff and governors before they take up their appointments however have not been met on all occasions. Some staff from overseas have been checked in their own country but not in the United Kingdom, and on one occasion governors' checks were completed late. New staff are supported well through induction and mentoring. The school provides appropriate support to newly qualified teachers, and new staff benefit from a short but supportive induction programme. However, the school is aware that it does not provide heads of department with formal induction and in-service training, although they receive a good deal of informal support; this leads to some inconsistencies in implementing the school's vision for education and in the quality of middle management leadership and decision-making.
- 4.11 The appraisal system works well; it is used to inform departmental planning and assists significantly in the motivation and retention of high quality staff. Members of the senior management team (SMT) have been appraised by the chair of the governors' education committee and an educational management consultant. Heads of departments are appraised annually by a member of the SMT. Other teachers and technicians are regularly appraised by heads of departments; outcomes relating to review and professional development, as well as any proposed training, are logged on the school's management information system.
- 4.12 Financial management is prudent. The school has appropriate budgetary procedures for departments and other areas. Expenditure is monitored by the bursar. The governors are well informed by the headmaster of areas in the school requiring capital investment.
- 4.13 School policy documents are comprehensive and accessible; the staff handbook is excellent. The school runs smoothly and this results, in part, from the high levels of support from non-teaching and support staff, whose expertise and hard work make a significant contribution. The school is equally fortunate to have a strong group of prefects who provide effective leadership and offer commendable initiative; particularly impressive have been their introduction of a peer support programme and a pupils' achievement board, as well as their plans for the annual summer ball.

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- 4.14 The school meets most of the regulatory requirements for the suitability of proprietors and staff [Standard 4]. In order to meet all the requirements, the school must:
- (a) ensure that full checks are carried out on all staff recruited from overseas and that checks for governors are always carried out before they take up their appointments [Regulations 4.(2)(b); 4C.(2)(d); 4B.(4)(a); 4C(6)(b)];
 - (b) for the same reason ensure that recruitment procedures fully reflect the additional requirements for boarding schools [Regulation 4.(2)(e); Regulation 4C.(2)(g)].
- 4.15 The school meets the regulatory requirements for premises and accommodation [Standard 5].
- 4.16 The school participates in the national scheme for the induction of newly qualified teachers and meets its requirements.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Overall Conclusions

- 5.1 Stowe School provides its pupils with an exceptional range of opportunities within a unique setting, reflecting its commitment to the pursuit of intellectual, cultural and sporting excellence. The combination of individual support, together with a significant amount of outstanding teaching, enables pupils not only to achieve well academically but also to develop independence of thought and mind. Only in a minority of lessons is there a lack of pace or focus, or too much input by the teacher and too little by the pupils. More frequently, teachers use a wide variety of activities and methods, plan well for pupils of differing abilities and needs, and use shrewd and challenging questions to extend pupils' knowledge and understanding. In particular, pupils with LDD or EAL receive outstanding support both individually and in class. The curriculum is enhanced by courses in the visual arts and on spiritual and moral education, though provision for PSHE is less fully developed. The vast range of activities and the considerable individual support for pupils are made possible by the exceptional commitment, dedication and hard work of teaching and non-teaching staff. Pupils develop self-confidence, self-awareness and concern for those around them. They work well together, both in class and around the school. Boarding houses provide a supportive and friendly environment for day and boarding pupils alike. Within the houses, housemasters, housemistresses, matrons and tutors provide outstanding pastoral support and educational direction, aided on the one hand by an exceptional information management system which quickly highlights issues needing addressing and on the other hand by the outstanding role models provided by staff and senior pupils alike. However, governors and senior management have failed to ensure that all aspects of child protection and safe recruitment procedures are followed fully. In other respects, the school benefits from strong and cohesive strategic and day-to-day leadership by governors, headmaster and senior staff, but the roles of heads of department and the function of the curriculum committee are not consistently effective, as the school is aware.
- 5.2 Since the last inspection, the school has broadened the curriculum and developed new initiatives to involve parents more fully in the life of the school. It has built successfully on its strengths in many areas. The school has adapted successfully to the introduction of girls throughout the school.
- 5.3 The school complies with most of the regulatory requirements, but does not at present meet Standard 3 (welfare, health and safety) and Standard 4 (appointment of staff).

Next Steps

- 5.4 To develop further the high quality of education it already provides the school should take the following steps.
1. Review aspects of academic management, in particular to:
 - ensure that there is an appropriate forum for the effective discussion of academic issues;
 - ensure that the academic management of the school is seen to have equal status with the pastoral;
 - improve training in academic leadership for middle management;
 - as a result of these developments, make the quality of pupils' education more consistent.

5.5 In order to meet all the regulatory requirements, the school must:

- (1) ensure that the governors undertake an annual review of the school's child protection policy and procedures and that safer recruitment procedures are followed fully, in particular that full checks are carried out on all staff recruited from overseas and that checks for governors are always carried out before they take up their appointments [Regulations 3.(2)(b); 4.(2)(b); 4C.(2)(d); 4B.(4)(a); 4C(6)(b)];
- (2) for the same reason ensure that recruitment procedures fully reflect the additional requirements for boarding schools [Regulations 4.(2)(e); 4C.(2)(g)].

6. SUMMARY OF INSPECTION EVIDENCE

- 6.1 The inspection was carried out from 27th to 30th April 2009. The inspectors examined samples of pupils' work, observed lessons and conducted formal interviews with pupils. They held discussions with teaching and non-teaching staff and with governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended registration sessions and assemblies. Inspectors visited boarding houses and the medical centre. The responses of parents and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined a range of documentation made available by the school.

List of Inspectors

Mr Ian Newton	Reporting inspector
Mr Gregg Davies	Head, HMC School
Mr David Ewart	Head, HMC School
Mr John Richley	Former Director of Studies, HMC School
Mr Simon Smith	Second Master, HMC School
Mrs Apple Szyjanowicz	Director of Studies, GSA School
Mrs Susan Tierney	Deputy Head, GSA School
Mr David Warwick	Teacher and former Head of Department, HMC School