

# INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE

## INSPECTION REPORT ON ST HELEN'S SCHOOL

Full Name of the School	<b>St Helen's School</b>
WES Number	<b>312/2004</b>
Registered Charity Number	<b>420867</b>
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Chair of Governors	<b>Miss Rosie Fauch</b>
Age Range	<b>3-18 years</b>
Gender	<b>Female</b>
Inspection Dates	<b>9th to 12th October 2006</b>

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 has 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.

The inspection was not carried out in conjunction with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and the report does not contain specific judgements on the National Minimum Boarding Standards. It comments on the progress made by the school in meeting the recommendations set out in the most recent statutory boarding inspection and evaluates the quality of the boarding experience and its contribution to pupils' education and development in general. The full CSCI report can be found at [www.csci.org.uk](http://www.csci.org.uk).

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 St Helen's School for Girls was founded by businessmen in 1899 to provide a school for local children, and occupies a large open site of over 20 acres in north west London. The school is organised in three sections, each with separate teaching staff and its own dedicated buildings. The Senior School (from 11-18 years of age) contains 679 girls (29 of whom are boarders). The Junior School (ages 7-11) contains 247 girls, and Little St Helen's (ages 3-7) has 226 girls, of whom 108 are under the age of 5. Three year olds were first admitted in 2003.
- 1.2 The schools aims are to promote in the girls:
- a love of learning;
  - intellectual curiosity and independent thinking;
  - confidence and integrity;
  - a celebration of diversity and respect for others;
  - a commitment to using their talents and enthusiasm on behalf of the community;
  - the development of skills which will enable them to play a role on the national and international stage;
  - preparation for the world they will help to shape and lead.
- 1.3 Entry into Little St Helen's is mainly from local independent nursery schools. Such girls, together with others from preparatory and primary schools, proceed into the Junior School at age seven as a result of selective entry tests to assess academic potential. This is then followed up with an interview and the great majority of girls then stay on at St Helen's until the end of their school career. A further intake into Year 7 of the Senior School is based on the North London Independent Girls Schools Consortiums 11+ entrance examination. Further entrants join the school in the sixth form, on the basis of the entrance examination, GCSE results and interview, and many of these are attracted by the choice the school offers of the International Baccalaureate (IB) and A level programmes of study.
- 1.4 Girls take a variety of nationally standardised ability tests at several stages during their school career. Based on these, the average ability of girls on entry to both the Junior and Senior Schools is well above the national average. Where they are performing in line with their ability, therefore, girls will achieve results in the national tests at age 11 that are well above the average for maintained primary schools. At GCSE and A level, they will achieve results broadly in line with the national average for maintained selective schools.
- 1.5 The 3 weekly and 26 full boarders are drawn from a variety of international backgrounds. A facility for day boarding allows local girls to stay on at school until supper or beyond. The number of girls on roll has increased significantly over the last few years. Most day girls come from the local area, although many older girls use the school buses serving a wide catchment area in the north and west of London and into surrounding counties.
- 1.6 Two girls have statements of special educational needs, and the school has identified a further 60 with particular learning needs, the majority receiving specific support. Thirty one come from backgrounds where English is not the principal language and a few of these receive support for English language.
- 1.7 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school.

## **2. THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION**

### **The Educational Experience Provided**

- 2.1 The quality of the educational experience provided is good with some outstanding features. The provision is completely consistent with the schools aims and philosophy and makes a major contribution to the academic success achieved by girls of all ages. St Helen's girls do indeed enjoy learning, display mutual respect for each other and the wider community, and are very well prepared for adult life. The school has made important improvements to the education provided since the last inspection. The broad and balanced curriculum at all stages has been enhanced by a wider choice of subjects and the introduction of the 113 and the international GCSE examination in mathematics, English and the sciences. The additional opportunity to study three languages in Years 5 and 6, and drama now timetabled from Nursery to Year 9, contribute effectively to the aesthetic, linguistic and creative development of the girls. Extra curricular activities have been increased for all year groups. Curriculum links between the different parts of the school have been strengthened by the formation of the curriculum development group and the appointment of the new deputies and senior teachers in the Junior School and Little St Helen's. The school is fully aware of the need to instil intellectual curiosity and independent thinking in all the girls and has numerous initiatives in place to address this.
- 2.2 The curriculum provided gives girls a very good grounding in skills and knowledge, as well as stimulating interest and learning in a wide range of subjects throughout the school. It also gives opportunity for girls to achieve high standards of literacy and numeracy and acquire skills of reasoning, speaking and listening. The schools two weekly timetable cycle, with hour long lessons, provides flexibility and extends learning opportunities.
- 2.3 All sections of the school provide a broad and balanced curriculum. Topic work and special themed weeks consolidate the core curriculum in the Junior School and Little St Helen's. These allow links to be explored between subject areas and contribute significantly to the wider intellectual development of the girls. The opportunity for independent learning is also provided through various problem-solving days in other year groups. In the Senior School, girls choose from 14 GCSE options. In the sixth form, the curriculum is impressively rich, with A level and the IB being offered at both higher and standard level in most subjects. This effectively provides 58 different subject groups. A wide range of modern foreign languages, in particular, is offered throughout the school, with French from Year 1, a choice of three languages from Year 5, and the addition of Mandarin, Japanese, Russian, Greek and Italian available in the Senior School.
- 2.4 The extensive range of extra curricular activities, links with the community and opportunities for voluntary service and work experience enrich the girls' educational experience in many ways and fulfil the key school aim to use their talents on behalf of the community. Activities are offered to all girls from Year 2 and attendance is monitored carefully. Opportunities to serve the community arise as part of The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and the schools links with a number of local care homes. The activities programme is available both in the lunch period and after school, and provides girls with many opportunities to participate in team sport and creative activities such as music, drama and art. A particularly valuable feature is the opportunity for girls themselves to set up and run clubs for others.
- 2.5 Comprehensive arrangements are in place for preparing girls for the next stage of their education. With the majority of girls transferring directly from one stage of the school to the next, induction and familiarisation for the transfer is achieved smoothly. Links between Little St Helen's and the Junior School are very good, based on regular meetings between the heads of school and subject coordinators. This pattern is repeated on transfer to the Senior School, and involves the deputy heads of section and heads of department. Transfer of information and girls records is carried out effectively.

- 2.6 In the Senior School, a comprehensive careers programme is in place. Girls expressed their satisfaction with the advice and help they received for GCSE and Sixth form option choices, and in their research for and applications to university. Virtually all the sixth form leavers over the last few years have entered university or college courses, with an impressive array of destinations and courses being chosen. The great majority of girls gained their first choice of university and course.
- 2.7 Detailed schemes of work are in place across the whole school. These have recently been reviewed in the Junior School and refer to literacy, numeracy and National Curriculum levels. Planning for meeting the needs of the whole (albeit narrow) ability range is considered through various approaches, although these are not always spelt out in detail in all subjects. As the role of the new director of teaching and learning develops, such issues can be taken further, and stronger links established between all three sections of the school to provide a consistent approach. Monitoring of Senior School schemes of work by the deputy head (curriculum) is carried out during the annual interviews with heads of department.
- 2.8 Two girls with statements of special educational needs have thorough and fully implemented individual education plans which are reviewed annually. Nationally standardised data is now being used to identify the exceptionally able and those who may be underachieving. Although such data is available to heads of department and is used to analyse past examination results, it is not yet used fully to influence planning in all subjects. Girls with varying degrees of dyslexia have been identified, as well as those who may require additional support in mathematics or English, which is provided through specialist individual lessons and by subject teachers. Girls with English as an additional language are screened before the offer of a place and on arrival. They receive good support through extra lessons. Prompt sheets for dyslexia, English as an additional language and the exceptionally able, are available to help teachers in their lesson planning.
- 2.9 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the curriculum [Standard 1].

### **Pupils Learning and Achievements**

- 2.10 Girls are highly effective learners across all ages and abilities. They achieve high levels of knowledge, skill and critical and creative understanding across all their subjects and activities, and they apply these very effectively in many ways. A love of learning features at the top of the schools aims and the school is more than fulfilling its desire to produce girls who find evident fulfilment in their academic work and learning, and show intellectual curiosity and independent thinking. The quality of achievement and learning noted in the last inspection has been maintained and, in some areas, exceeded and it remains a very strong feature of the school. In the last few years, the school has initiated a variety of new approaches and strategies to improve still further the girls' independent learning skills.
- 2.11 Girls are very well grounded in the knowledge, skills and understanding that is developed in a wide range of subjects and activities. By the age of five, girls show high standards in achieving the early learning goals. In Year 3, they have an impressive understanding of scientific terminology, and can complete sequencing tasks in English very competently. In Year 6, girls understand the equivalence between decimals and fractions. In the Senior School, girls frequently demonstrate their higher thinking skills. For instance, they apply theoretical concepts and prior knowledge to unfamiliar situations very well, and make valid predictions. This was seen, for example, in a Year 12 co-ordinate geometry lesson, a Year 7 physics lesson on temperature, and in a Year 13 biology lesson, where the girls successfully predicted the physiological consequences of heart valve malfunction.
- 2.12 Girls progress rapidly in all subjects. They are articulate and respond well to demanding open ended questions. They organise their own learning and take responsibility for it, seen to good effect in a Year 8 lesson in information and communication technology (ICT) where individual designs for a model boat were produced. Girls draw on knowledge across different subjects, for example in discussing global warming in a French lesson. Across the curriculum, interesting and stimulating activities provide valuable opportunities for girls to be creative and imaginative.
- 2.13 Levels of relative attainment between classes in all sections of the school do not show significant variation across subjects or between different age groups of pupils. Levels of observed attainment relative to girls' abilities are high across all parts of the school.

- 2.14 Girls attainment in national tests at ages 7 and 11 is high in relation to their abilities, results over the last few years being far above the national average for maintained primary schools. Attainment at GCSE is good in relation to girls' abilities, results being above the national average for maintained selective schools. At A level, girls' attainment is high in relation to their abilities, results being well above the maintained selective school average. Nationally standardised measurements indicate that progress in recent years to GCSE has been significantly above national norms, with a similar picture for progress from GCSE to A level. Results for the first cohort of girls taking the IB examinations have been of a standard similar to the schools A level results.
- 2.15 High achievement is seen beyond the classroom in a very wide range of activities. Discussions with girls revealed their positive appreciation of all the activities on offer, and of the ways in which achievement is recognised through commendations, presentation of certificates in forms and in assembly. Girls achieved significant success in English Speaking Board examinations in Little St Helen's, and in ballet and music examinations throughout the school. Girls performed well in the National Junior Maths Challenge and the International Maths Olympiad, as well as, achieving individual success nationally in history, chemistry and physics competitions, an international French poetry competition and the British chess championships. Significant success has been achieved on the games field, with national, regional and county representation in a wide range of sports.
- 2.16 Girls at all levels in the school are highly articulate and orally competent, readily and sensibly expressing their opinions. They read and write fluently, often in a variety of extended pieces of work and in a very wide range of subjects. An impressive example was some empathetic written work in Year 7 religious studies on Aborigine life. Girls' writing is frequently detailed and shows evidence of critical thought and creativity.
- 2.17 Girls have well developed mathematical skills. They apply mathematical concepts with great success, particularly in the Senior School; for example, in a Year 13 biology lesson statistics were accurately applied, and in a Year 12 economics lesson graphical skills were well used. ICT is an influential aspect of girls' learning. Their use of the interactive whiteboard in modern foreign languages and English, for example, increases their personal involvement in acquiring new vocabulary and grammar. The use of ICT is firmly embedded in girls' work at all ages.
- 2.18 Girls are able to think independently from an early stage in Little St Helen's and the Junior School. A sharp focus on independent learning enables girls to ask questions, plan their own work and find out for themselves. Through their investigative work, they show intellectual curiosity and initiative. Even in the nursery classes, girls are independent learners. They help to tidy up, choose activities and use the interactive whiteboard on their own very confidently. Girls undertake independent study effectively, and in Year 2 they researched information competently for projects on Constable and Margaret Thatcher, using books and the internet. Junior School girls are accomplished in organising their work independently when carrying out investigations in science and mathematics. Independent learning is now a well established feature in the Senior School. Girls are also good listeners and this skill has a significant place in many lessons.
- 2.19 In many lessons in the Senior School, and from examination of girls' work, it was apparent that a very high level of skill in note taking is a major feature in the girls' learning. This was evident, for instance, in a Year 13 psychology lesson, and in a Year 12 English lesson, where note taking and discussion flowed naturally together, and helped girls to acquire new understanding.
- 2.20 All girls work effectively in groups. In Year 11, they commented on how much sharing other peoples opinions helped them to formulate their own ideas in literature. A Year 13 theatre studies group used a group activity to develop an understanding of directorial skills, and a Year 7 physical education group worked collaboratively in pairs with great success to improve their swimming. Year 3 girls learnt from each other in a group investigation task on shadows.

- 2.21 In all lessons, girls readily and quickly settle down to work. They persevere in the tasks set them and a sense of involvement and enjoyment is created.

They are adept at building on existing knowledge when a new topic is being introduced. This feature of learning through making connections was apparent in many lessons, for example in a Year 9 mathematics lesson where girls used their analytical and reasoning ability to cope with the transformation of a reciprocal graph.

- 2.22 Girls attitudes to their work are highly commendable; they are strongly involved in all that they learn. They show genuine interest in the subject matter, and are frequently not content with the information given to them, insisting on knowing more. One girl was overheard in the corridor exclaiming to another "I really love maths!"

### **Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development of Pupils**

- 2.23 Throughout the school, the quality of the girls' personal development is extremely high, maintaining the strengths acknowledged at the time of the last inspection. The relationships between the staff and girls, and among the girls themselves, are characterised by courtesy and friendliness. Girls develop confidence and self esteem within a safe and purposeful environment. The impact of the schools ethos, which permeates all that it does, makes a significant contribution to the girls' personal development. It is fostered in many aspects of life at St Helen's so that the school is highly successful in achieving its aims.

- 2.24 Girls develop strong spiritual awareness as a result of the broad range of opportunities offered through the curriculum. The school comprises a variety of cultures and religions, all of which are respected by the community. Regular assemblies are held, with prayers and time for reflection, some led by girls and some by staff. Prefects led a Senior School assembly on Ramadan during the inspection and, during periods of fasting, Muslims and members of other faiths are able to congregate at lunchtime in an area away from the dining hall. The school chapel is available to all and may be used for quiet and reflective time, as much as for religious purposes. Various religious societies exist, including the Jewish society, and membership is open to members of all faiths or none.

- 2.25 Girls self awareness is good, their self esteem high and they are confident in their relations with their peers and elders. Achievements are celebrated at all levels, in form time, in assemblies and on notice boards around the school. In the Senior School, an outstanding and particularly pertinent lesson on the theory of knowledge required girls to produce or choose a piece of art or literature as a basis for a discussion on truth in art. The level of awe and wonder within the lesson was tangible and demonstrated the ability of these able sixth formers to reflect on their own experiences and the consequent effects upon their development.

- 2.26 Religious studies is compulsory throughout the school up to Year 11 and is offered at GCSE and in the sixth form at both A level and 113. This enhances both the girls' spiritual and moral awareness. The major world religions are studied and, as the girls mature, they explore philosophical and ethical issues, such as abortion, good and evil, peace and justice, and poverty and wealth, throughout the world. An active Amnesty International group exists within the school.

- 2.27 The moral development of the girls is at a high level. Numerous opportunities exist within the main and the wider curriculum to support this. Girls mix across the years and sections of the school, especially in their houses, and older girls are respected as role models. Boarders have the opportunity to develop social skills within a broader framework, sharing accommodation and additional time with each other. Pastoral staff, including form tutors, are seen as accessible by the girls and they are important arbiters of moral behaviour. Circle time in Little St Helen's, and the personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) programme in the Junior and Senior Schools, are times during which to explore moral issues safely, including the nature of friendship. Girls are well mannered and respectful of each other.

- 2.28 Social awareness amongst the girls is very high. Plentiful opportunities exist from an early age for girls to undertake and fulfil responsibilities, and to show commitment to the school community. High expectations of behaviour are evident around the school and girls understand that self discipline is encouraged alongside responsibility for their own learning. On the very rare occasions when they are reprimanded, they understand that they are at fault and are keen to avoid further misdemeanours. Fund raising for charity is encouraged at all levels of the school, often led by the houses. The PSHCE programme provides opportunities for girls to learn about public institutions and services in England. A lesson on Parliament and democracy led to a class developing their own policies in health, education and transport, ready for a class debate and election. A thorough audit has been conducted on the provision of PSHCE topics within other curriculum subjects.
- 2.29 The cultural development of the girls is excellent and builds very successfully on the diverse cultures represented within the school community. It is achieved also by the high standards of spiritual and moral awareness clearly evident within the school. Everyday life, friendship groups and teaching all recognise and respect the wide variety of cultures - for example, a music lesson studied African and Indian music structures. Visits, residential courses and a very broad programme of activities give the girls many very worthwhile openings to develop their awareness of their own and other cultures. The school promotes tolerance and harmony between different cultural traditions very well.
- 2.30 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils [Standard 2].

#### **The Quality of Teaching (Including Assessment)**

- 2.31 The good quality of teaching throughout the school is a very significant factor in promoting effective learning and high standards. Since the last inspection, standards have been maintained. Teaching makes a major contribution to fulfilling the schools aims. The school has made good progress in recent years, focusing on the crucial relationship between teaching and learning.
- 2.32 Teaching is nearly always well adapted throughout the school to meet the learning needs of the girls. The schools initiatives to promote independent learning and to provide for the exceptionally able are steadily helping the teaching to stimulate further learning opportunities for girls in lessons and in their private study. Very occasionally, the range of teaching methods used did not enable some of the girls to learn as effectively as in the best lessons.
- 2.33 Expectations in the best lessons are high and many excellent opportunities are provided for girls to take responsibility for their own learning. Well planned and challenging tasks, and the highly effective use of stimulating and probing questions, encourage girls to think critically and learn for themselves, often at a level well beyond that expected for their age. In these outstanding lessons, progress is rapid. Year 1 girls made very good progress in a shared reading lesson on rhymes, with tasks very well matched to the needs of each girl. In a few lessons, where the teaching was more directed, girls worked diligently but received fewer opportunities to learn and think for themselves, and progress slowed.
- 2.34 Planning of lessons is thorough and well structured in all areas of the curriculum and across the whole age range. The most effective teaching in the Senior School has clear learning objectives, with a variety of activities and learning opportunities that fulfil these objectives in a sharply focused, active and well organised manner. A significant feature of the planning of many lessons in Little St Helen's and the Junior School is the integrated links made between subjects. This supports a curriculum where teachers are able to extend girls skills and knowledge in one area to enrich their learning in others. At each stage, girls are provided with a learning environment in which creativity and expressiveness are explored and valued. Good examples abounded in the lessons seen, such as the effective use of noughts and crosses in Spanish, and puzzles for working with fractions in mathematics.
- 2.35 A particularly strong feature of the teaching is the quality of the relationships between girls and their teachers. Teachers know the girls well and are very supportive, and the guidance given to individuals is valued. In Little St Helen's, teachers use their knowledge of each girl to shape provision to her strengths and needs. They have a perceptive understanding of girls' aptitudes and previous attainment.

- 2.36 Teachers are well qualified, have a thorough knowledge of the subjects they teach, and explain subject matter clearly. Teachers frequently convey a passion for their subject. This well directed specialist subject knowledge contributes well to the girls high achievements and rapid progress. Occasionally, in Little St Helen's and the Junior School, when subject specialists provide tasks that are not well matched to age and ability, girls do not achieve such high standards.
- 2.37 Teaching is well resourced. Teachers make effective use of time and resources to enthuse and motivate girls and to support their learning in all curriculum areas. Interactive whiteboards are used with increasing expertise by both teachers and girls. Careful planning and the provision of well organised enrichment activities add substantially to the girls learning experiences. Lessons frequently made good use of current affairs, drawing on issues arising in the media as examples.
- 2.38 Teachers manage their classes well and high standards of behaviour are maintained. Their enthusiasm and ambition for the girls to do well is apparent in lessons. They are successful in maintaining the girls' involvement, and praise and encouragement are widely used, which adds to the girls' enjoyment of their learning and develops self confidence.
- 2.39 A range of formal and informal assessments are effectively used to evaluate and record girls' achievements, progress and needs. The methods used provide a thorough basis for informing reports on girls' attainment and progress, and they help teachers short term planning. The school recognises the need to monitor these varied assessment methods to ensure that they are consistently used and are in line with the schools stated assessment principles.

In all year groups, girls frequently receive good quality verbal feedback during lessons and this greatly helps to move the learning forward. Homework is set consistently, and supports class work, consolidates new learning and provides girls with opportunities to work independently on particular projects. Marking is nearly always frequent and conscientious, making it clear to girls why aspects of their work are good and, particularly in the Senior School, identifying areas for improvement.

- 2.40 Appropriate arrangements are in place for girls' performance to be evaluated according to the schools aims and with reference to national norms. For the very youngest girls, good use is made of the Foundation Stage Profile. National tests and examinations, taken at ages 7, 11, 16 and 18, provide valuable information on girls' attainment and progress in relation to national norms. Such data is used increasingly by departments to monitor girls' progress through the school and to track under achievers.
- 2.41 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 The quality of pastoral support and care is excellent, and is one of the outstanding features of the school. Very effective and extremely thorough measures are taken to safeguard and promote pupils welfare, health and safety. This was highlighted by the parents' questionnaire and also by the girls themselves, many of whom singled out the encouragement and help provided by staff. As one Year 5 girl commented, "We are all made to feel important". A Year 10 girl described St Helens as "a caring school which encourages us to perform to the highest level possible". These high standards of pastoral care enable the school to achieve so successfully its stated objectives to instil a sense of individual responsibility, to set high standards of behaviour, and to know, understand and value the needs of each girl. The good practice identified in the previous inspection report has been improved further to ensure that this vital area of school life is given the high priority it deserves. All heads of section now have deputies to take on specific roles in monitoring the care of the girls.
- 3.2 The staff, particularly through the commitment of tutors and form teachers, provide very effective support, guidance and monitoring of girls progress. This is also achieved through the improved careers programme. Girls feel that they always have someone to talk to. They receive regular feedback on their achievement, progress and pastoral development. The significant contribution of welfare and support assistants in the Junior School and Little St Helens provides the younger girls with a real sense of belonging to the community. Senior school girls and boarders have access to a confidential listener.
- 3.3 The staff are assisted by comprehensive and well planned pastoral arrangements, supported by the high quality records that move efficiently between the schools, as girls transfer between sections. These are used well by heads of section as an important source of information about girls, especially when in contact with parents. Induction to all areas of the school is effective, well planned and comprehensive. Very good communication between pastoral teams throughout the school exists, and this is assisted by the recent creation of the pastoral development group, allowing senior staff from all three schools to review and monitor pastoral provision and to ensure that girls' needs are met.
- 3.4 The quality of relationships between staff and girls, and among the girls themselves, is excellent across the whole school. Girls are complimentary about the friendly and supportive nature of these relationships, and believe that teachers treat them with respect. Girls, especially the younger ones, report that, in all their dealings with staff, they felt encouraged, supported, valued and well cared for.
- 3.5 Measures to promote good discipline and behaviour are very effective, and are well understood by staff and girls. Codes of conduct exist throughout the school, and these are known and respected. The Senior School code was drawn up by the student council, and each class in the Junior School and Little St Helen's formulated their own set of class rules and signed up to them. A good system of rewards and sanctions is in place. The former is used constantly and effectively, creating well motivated girls who have a desire to succeed. The sanctions system is not often used but recording procedures for misdemeanours are effective.
- 3.6 The school promotes an atmosphere of no tolerance towards bullying and has a policy which states just that. Girls confirm that, on the very rare occasions when bullying occurs, it is efficiently dealt with by staff. Very thorough child protection procedures are in place, underpinned by an effective child protection policy. Training for staff is updated regularly and complies with statutory requirements. Comprehensive staff recruitment checks are carried out for teaching and non teaching staff. The headmistress and deputy head (pastoral) are the designated members of staff responsible for child protection. Meals of good quality and variety are provided and a positive atmosphere prevails in the dining room at meal times. Girls' health and medical needs are well met by the school nurse and welfare assistants, and by the weekly visits of the school doctor.

- 3.7 All necessary measures to reduce risk from fire and other hazards have been taken. Fire practices are carried out regularly and the school undertakes a detailed assessment of risk from fire. Risk assessments are completed for all relevant areas of school life, including educational trips and visits, and these are monitored by the deputy head (pastoral). Arrangements to ensure health and safety are effective, and the school has due regard for its relevant obligations. The school has a very thorough health and safety policy, including a detailed policy for first aid. The health and safety committee meets regularly and monitors the safety and security of the school site as it grows, develops and changes.
- 3.8 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the welfare, health and safety of pupils [Standard 3].

### **The Quality of Links with Parents and the Community**

- 3.9 The school has formed an extremely good partnership with its parents and developed very productive links with the local and wider community. This close relationship with the home and family, and with the world outside school, makes a strong contribution to the fulfilment of the schools aims. The school has improved still further the very good standards seen in the last inspection. Electronic means of communication have enabled the school to improve the speed of response to parental enquiries and comments, and the email weekly newsletter and DVD prospectus have improved communication further. The quality of reports has been enhanced significantly.
- 3.10 Nearly 500 parents responded to the pre inspection questionnaire. Responses revealed a very high level of satisfaction with the education provided for their children in all three schools. In the Senior School, parents commented very positively on the help and encouragement their daughters receive from staff, the quality of pastoral care and the academic progress made by the girls. They also approved of the values and attitudes that the school instils in their daughters, and the judgement of staff. In the Junior School and Little St Helen's, these features were also noted and, in addition, these parents of younger girls commented on the outstanding academic results, the kindness of staff and the standards of behaviour. One Year 2 parent commented, "We are proud to send our daughter to St Helen's". A Senior School parent felt that "The school has helped both my girls grow in self confidence and made them more independent and respectful of others".
- 3.11 A small minority expressed some dissatisfaction with the opportunities to discuss girls' progress, the provision of homework, the encouragement to be involved with the school, and the mechanism for the resolution of complaints or concerns. However, the inspectors did not agree with these views. The reporting schedules, parents' evenings and other opportunities for parents to contact and meet with school staff to discuss girls' progress are clear and effective. No evidence was found that the quantity and use of homework is inappropriate. The school welcomes parental involvement on many formal and informal occasions, and the parents association is flourishing. Informal procedures to raise concerns, a clear and comprehensive formal complaints policy, and speedy resolution of concerns by email, all provide satisfactory opportunities for complaints to be resolved. However, a few parents feel that the mechanism for telephone messages left for staff to be promptly returned is not always fully efficient.
- 3.12 The school works very hard to foster strong links with its community of parents, who are encouraged to be involved in supporting the many school events that take place. The school actively promotes membership of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) with wide representation across the school. This body is very active and organises a wide range of well promoted and successful events, such as a barbecue for new parents, a firework evening, a disco, a quiz night and a fun day, which all attract large attendances and have a positive impact on the life of the school. The PTA also raises considerable sums of money to purchase additional equipment that has benefited the whole age range of girls. Parents are informed of their daughters' homework timetable at the beginning of each academic year and also of coursework deadlines well in advance. This enables parents to be involved in supporting their daughters learning.

- 3.13 Parents are provided with a very good range of clear, well drafted, high quality information about the school. The annual review, school magazine, and parents' handbooks, as well as the school website and weekly email newsletter, all provide very effective methods of communicating important information. Through parents' evenings, pastoral evenings, and meetings to discuss subject options and study skills, parents throughout the school have good opportunities to discuss their daughters' progress. The timing of parents' evenings and the issue of reports take into account the particular academic needs of different year groups. In Little St Helen's and the Junior School, the timing and arrangements have recently been altered to respond to the views of parents. Reports are of good quality, with helpful and constructive comments given and targets set. A considerable improvement has been made since the last inspection in providing clearer guidance to girls on how their academic performance may be improved. Grade sheets are informative and are an additional opportunity for teachers to share any concerns with parents.
- 3.14 The school has worked hard to develop and foster very good relationships and links with the local community and has developed a wide ranging and extensive list of high quality opportunities to work with the local, national and international communities. The school takes this aspect of its mission very seriously and encourages the girls to become directly involved with community projects and charities. The school has very good links with Merchant Taylors' School, with whom girls take part in a wide range of activities, such as drama and the Combined Cadet Force. Girls are also involved in activities with local primary schools and a school for the blind, and raise money for a range of national and international charities. Community service takes place, for example by visiting local residential homes, carol singing, running a Brownie pack and participation in environmental projects. The school has established links with schools in France, Germany, Spain, Japan and Australia, and is actively exploring contact with schools in Italy, China and Russia. Girls also take part in work experience in France and Germany.
- 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 school provides a good boarding experience, and the opportunities offered to boarders support their education and personal development very well. The experience contributes significantly to fulfilling the schools aims and the specific principles on which boarding at St Helen's is based. Standards have been maintained, albeit for smaller numbers, since the last inspection. The school has also appropriately addressed the recommendations made in the last boarding welfare inspection. However, boarding does not at present have its own development plan.
- 3.17 Warm and supportive relationships are formed between the girls, who clearly enjoy each others company and the community life established within the house. Relationships with the boarding staff are equally positive, and these important adults are felt by the girls to be approachable and supportive, and provide a welcoming and reassuring presence in the house. Most of the 29 boarders are in the top three years in the school, and enjoy an appropriate degree of independence.
- 3.18 Boarders participate in the whole school activities programme at lunch times and late afternoons. Occasional trips are organised at weekends to places such as the cinema and local theme park, but the majority of boarders, particularly those preparing for public examinations, prefer to have the freedom to relax at weekends or keep up with their demanding work schedules. A number of informal activities are organised, many by the girls themselves, and boarders have enjoyed origami, cooking, craftwork for a local charity, and forming their own choir. Appropriate leave is granted to boarders to visit local shops or London, depending on their age.
- 3.19 The quality of boarding accommodation is generally good, with two common rooms and a kitchen area providing good opportunities for relaxation and socialising. A well equipped computer room, linked to the school network, is popular and well used. Most sixth form boarders enjoy the privacy of single rooms. The hard working resident boarding staff are joined, at times, by two other staff members and this team has responsibility for the girls' welfare and pastoral development. Routines and practices are well organised and well understood.

## **4. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT**

### **The Quality of Governance**

- 4.1 The school's governors provide excellent support that contributes significantly to the schools success. Governors are fully committed to the aims and purpose of a school educating girls from the age of 3 to 18 and have, in no small way, helped staff to achieve their ambitions for the girls. Governance has remained strong since the last inspection, and this has enabled the school to make very good progress in many areas.
- 4.2 The governing body draws on an impressively wide range of expertise among its members, who are organised into four sub committees overseeing finance and administration, buildings, curriculum and human resources. Governors are linked to the different sections of the school, and also to subject areas and departments. The structure helps them to keep well informed about pastoral and educational aspects, and the needs of staff and girls.
- 4.3 Governors are fully aware of their responsibilities and have drawn up a comprehensive statement of what governance means in this schools context. They receive regular reports of educational and financial matters, enabling them to monitor the schools life and work very effectively. The annual strategy day allows governors and the senior leadership team to come together to explore the future strategic direction of the school. When completing each cycle of the school development plan, governors rely on and value the input of the staff. Although governors have carried out a review of the school's arrangements for safeguarding girls' welfare, this has not been formally documented.
- 4.4 Relationships between governors and the staff are enhanced by the regular contact and visits made by governors linked to different parts of the school. Governors sometimes observe lessons and shadow one or two girls through their daily routines. They receive the weekly email from the school, and occasionally have email contact with junior girls and boarders. Governors have made helpful contributions to parents and staff meetings and have given practice interviews to senior girls. Staff also meet governors at various informal lunches and at many school events.

### **The Quality of Leadership and Management**

- 4.5 The overall quality of leadership and management throughout the whole school is excellent, and provides clear direction and high standards of education and care to enable girls of all ages to succeed. The strengths of leadership and management are significant factors in enabling all staff to fulfil their roles in achieving the schools aims. Very good progress has been made since the last inspection in improving the monitoring of the schools life and work, in reorganising its management structure at all levels, and in strengthening the leadership role of senior staff. The school is aware of the need to ensure that these changes, many of them recent, are consolidated and integrated smoothly into its work.
- 4.6 The strength of the schools leadership is a telling factor in its success. A very clear vision of the schools mission and purpose is communicated to and shared by all. Both staff and girls strongly support the lead they are given. This is a school that knows where it is going, and how it intends to get there, and the dedicated senior leadership team, together with the hard working staff, have done much to create and sustain a high level of educational provision and pastoral care across the whole school.
- 4.7 Staff at all levels have helped to identify the schools needs, and the school is particularly responsive in adapting to change, with significant curriculum innovations, a changed focus on girls learning styles, senior staff reorganisation and building developments taking place in recent years. Through a wide range of meetings, many of them across the three sections of the school, staff are able to make their views known, and influence policy and practice. They have a key role in producing the school development plan, which focuses strongly on the pastoral and educational needs of the girls. Bodies such as the curriculum development and pastoral development groups promote strategic thinking about the future direction of all three sections of what is a very large school. The recent appointments of both the classroom skills teacher and the director of teaching and learning have enabled important initiatives to be launched, to improve classroom practice and promote independent learning among all the girls, although the work of these key staff has not yet been fully integrated across the whole school.

4.8 The school has a wide range of effective procedures and policies outlining its provision and guiding staff to make appropriate responses in all areas of education, pastoral care and welfare. These policies indicate clearly the principles on which girls' education is based, and are appropriately written to meet the needs of girls of all ages. The role of subject coordinators and heads of department is developing, and their leadership role is being more strongly identified, as they clarify the aims of their subjects and develop strategies to maintain high standards and improve the learning skills of girls. Procedures for reviewing and evaluating current practice, and for monitoring the impact of the curriculum, public examination results and learning are very strong.

A particular recent focus of the deputy heads monitoring of lessons in the Senior School has been to evaluate how effectively the schools aims are being realised in the classroom.

4.9 Staff development has a high priority. Induction arrangements for new members of staff, including newly qualified teachers, are thorough and effective. Staff support fully the principle of sharing good practice and lesson observation, and the staff appraisal system recognises the wider contribution of teachers, helps to produce targets for improvement, and links effectively with training and professional development. A similar staff development programme is in place for non teaching staff. Support staff in the Junior School and Little St Helen's are particularly well deployed.

4.10 The day to day administration of the school is unobtrusive, smooth and thorough, and the teams of hard working non teaching and support staff make an important contribution to the well being of the girls and the fulfilment of the schools aims. The efficient and well organised financial management and control of the school was confirmed by the financial advisers visit, and ample teaching and learning resources of high quality are available. The provision of electronic resources, including interactive whiteboards, is especially good.

4.11 The school meets the regulatory requirements for the suitability of proprietors and staff and for premises and accommodation [Standards 4 and 5].

4.12 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 This is a highly successful school. Its strong commitment to produce courteous, hard working and well rounded girls of integrity and independence has enabled it to meet its aims and stated purpose remarkably well. Girls achieve high academic standards and show strong personal development, helped in no small part by the excellent pastoral care, the good standards of teaching, and the excellent leadership and management shown by the headmistress and her staff. The quality of education provided by St Helen's equips girls very well indeed for adult life and the challenges of the world beyond school.
- 5.2 The school has made very good progress since the last inspection, enriching and extending the curricular and learning opportunities for the girls, reorganising the responsibilities of senior leaders and managers to reflect more strongly the importance of teaching and learning, and improving curriculum and pastoral links across the whole school. The school has now developed improved systems for monitoring its life and work.
- 5.3 The school meets all the regulatory requirements.

### **Next Steps**

- 5.4 The school has no significant weaknesses, and recognises the need to consolidate the many recent initiatives already in place. These include:
1. monitoring particularly the effectiveness of the varied assessment methods and use of data;
  2. ensuring that the work of key staff fully influences teaching and learning across all three schools.
- 5.5 No action in respect of regulatory requirements is required.

## 6. SUMMARY OF INSPECTION EVIDENCE

- 6.1 The inspection was carried out from 9th to 12th October 2006. The inspectors examined samples of girls work, observed lessons and conducted formal interviews with them. 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 the boarding house. 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.
- 6.2 A bursar from another school joined the reporting inspector on the preliminary visit as part of the Independent Schools' Bursars Association (ISBA) scheme, spending the day with the bursar's department. The principal findings have been included in the relevant sections of this report.

### List of Inspectors

T Holgate	Reporting Inspector
E Henson	Assistant Reporting Inspector
G Purt	Assistant Reporting Inspector
R Ainsworth	Head of Department, GSA school
A Ashton	Senior Manager, GSA school
J Atkin	Senior Master, HMC school
L Bartlett	Head, GSA Junior School
J Coles	Head of Department, IAPS school
J Le Poidevin	Head, ISA Junior School
R Martin	Head, GSA school
A McBay	Director of Academic Administration, HMC school
Y Wilkinson	Head, GSA school