



**ISI** Independent  
Schools  
Inspectorate

**INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS INSPECTORATE**

**EDUCATIONAL QUALITY INSPECTION**

**SUMMERHILL SCHOOL**

**2 TO 3 NOVEMBER 2016**



## SCHOOL'S DETAILS

<b>School</b>	Summerhill School			
<b>DfE number</b>	935/6016			
<b>Registered charity number</b>	1089804			
<b>Address</b>	Summerhill School Westward Ho Leiston Suffolk IP16 4HY			
<b>Telephone number</b>	01728 830540			
<b>Email address</b>	office@summerhillschool.co.uk			
<b>Principal</b>	Mrs Zoe Readhead			
<b>Proprietor</b>	Mr and Mrs A Readhead Partnership			
<b>Age range</b>	5 to 18			
<b>Number of pupils</b>	65			
	<b>Boys</b>	37	<b>Girls</b>	28
	<b>Day pupils</b>	8	<b>Boarders</b>	57
	<b>Years 1 to 6</b>	14	<b>Years 7 to 11</b>	42
	<b>Sixth Form</b>	9		
<b>Inspection dates</b>	2 to 3 November 2016			

## PREFACE

The registration authority for independent schools is the Department for Education (DfE), which directs inspection according to a specified frequency or at any time where the DfE has particular concerns about a school. The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is the body approved by the Secretary of State for the purpose of inspecting schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and reporting on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

All association independent schools will have an inspection within three years from April 2016, in accordance with the Framework and DfE requirements. The inspection may be of COMPLIANCE ONLY or of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND COMPLIANCE depending on a number of factors, including findings from their most recent inspection. Schools judged not to meet the standards following their inspection may also be subject to a progress monitoring visit before their next routine inspection. The progress monitoring visit will judge whether the school has taken the necessary action to meet any un-met standards identified at their previous inspection.

Inspections do not include matters that are outside of the regulatory framework described above, such as: an exhaustive health and safety audit; compliance with data protection requirements; an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features; contractual arrangements with parents; an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures.

The inspection was also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

**This is an EDUCATIONAL QUALITY inspection, reporting on the quality of the school's work.** It focuses on the two key outcomes:

- The achievement of the pupils, including their academic development, and
- The personal development of the pupils.

Since the school was last inspected, the framework for inspection has changed. The current inspection framework uses different criteria and grade descriptors from those used in previous inspection frameworks. The judgements made on this inspection are, therefore, not directly comparable to judgements made on previous inspections.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to in the published report but will have been considered by the team in reaching its judgements.

Both Ofsted and ISI inspect and report on the Independent School Standards Regulations. However, they apply different frameworks that are suited to the different types of schools they inspect. The ISI terminology reflects quality judgements that are at least equivalent to those used by Ofsted. ISI reports do not provide a single overarching judgement for the school but instead give a clear judgement about key outcomes for pupils and information on the quality of the school's work.

**The headline judgements must include one of the ISI descriptors 'excellent', 'good', 'sound' or 'unsatisfactory'.**

## INSPECTION EVIDENCE

The inspectors observed lessons, conducted formal interviews with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with the proprietor, observed a sample of formal and informal activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended a school meeting. Inspectors visited boarding houses. The responses of parents and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

### Inspectors

Mr Timothy Holgate	Reporting inspector
Mr Richard Feldman	Team inspector (Former second deputy head, HMC school)
Mr Jeremy Gear	Team inspector (Headmaster, IAPS school)
Dr Robin Harskin	Team inspector (Academic deputy head, IAPS school)
Mrs Pamela Hutley	Team inspector (Headmistress, ISA school)

## **CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>About the school</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>What the school seeks to do</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>About the pupils</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Recommendations from previous inspections</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3 THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' ACADEMIC AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4 THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>5</b>

## **1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

### **About the school**

- 1.1 The school was founded in 1921 by the educationalist A S Neill, and has occupied its current site since 1927. It was established on democratic, self-governing principles that promote the freedom of the individual which continue to this day. The school educates boys and girls between 5 and 18 years of age. Boarders are accommodated in different buildings grouped according to age. The school is owned and managed by A S Neill's daughter, who acts as principal and proprietor. Other members of the family are involved in the school's management.

### **What the school seeks to do**

- 1.2 The school seeks to offer pupils the opportunity to live as equal members in a democratic community. It expects that this experience will 'enable pupils to grow in a family environment; free from the usual social prejudices found in most other schools, in particular, gender-based prejudices'. The school thus aspires to develop a marked confidence and friendship between the sexes, and between all age groups. A key aim is to allow pupils to develop at their own pace and follow their own interests. Freedom for the individual is considered by the school to be of primary importance and hence pupils are encouraged to be free to do as they like, provided this does not interfere with the freedom of somebody else. It expects that both pupils and staff will be answerable to the whole community.

### **About the pupils**

- 1.3 The school educates 65 pupils; 37 boys and 28 girls, nearly all of whom are boarders. Pupils are drawn from families around the UK and overseas, particularly continental Europe and the Far East, who seek the distinctive education that Summerhill offers. Classes are small and pupils of different ages may be accommodated in the same class. Pupils in Years 10 and 11 study for GCSE and International GCSE (IGCSE) examinations. A small number of pupils in Year 12 stay on to take GCSE courses or pursue individual projects around the school. The number of pupils requiring support for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is 7 and they receive support for their learning. None has a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. The school has 40 pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) and all receive support for their English.
- 1.4 National Curriculum nomenclature is used throughout this report to refer to year groups in the school.

### **Recommendations from previous inspections**

- 1.5 The previous full inspection of the school was conducted by Ofsted.

## **2. KEY FINDINGS**

2.1 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.

- Pupils have strong communication skills and demonstrate a high standard of ICT competence.
- Pupils of all ages develop exceptional attitudes to their learning and exhibit high levels of initiative and independence.
- Their success owes much to dedicated teachers who are supportive of pupils' individual needs and give generously of their time.
- Some pupils' numeracy skills are underdeveloped.

2.2 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.

- Pupils develop strong self-confidence and a growing awareness of the need to organise themselves efficiently and work independently.
- They clearly understand that the decisions they make have consequences, both for themselves and others.
- Pupils have a pronounced awareness of right and wrong, and display a strong sense of responsibility towards the school community.
- Their excellent personal development is significantly influenced by the boarding experience, and by school leadership that promotes and implements the school's philosophy and values.
- Pupils' awareness of current affairs and the challenges facing those less fortunate than themselves is underdeveloped.

### **Recommendations**

2.3 The school is advised to make the following improvements:

- Explore ways to raise the profile of mathematics and numeracy throughout the school.
- Enhance pupils' knowledge of current affairs, and their experience and awareness of the wider community.

### **3. THE QUALITY OF PUPILS' ACADEMIC AND OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS**

- 3.1 The quality of pupils' academic and other achievements is good.
- 3.2 Pupils throughout the age range achieve well in their chosen academic work, and in the projects and activities with which they are involved. In this fully democratic school where pupils decide their learning opportunities and experiences for themselves, they achieve success in pursuing their own goals and aspirations. They are helped, shaped and nurtured by the clear educational philosophy and practice which underpins all aspects of life at the school, and provides pupils with genuine autonomy and independence in their learning. Pupils progress at different times and rates during their school careers as they learn to know themselves and recognise their interests and ambitions. The school community acknowledges that success and achievement are not solely manifested in academic and intellectual endeavours, but in the growth of an individual's character and talent, a concept that older pupils are well able to express and explain.
- 3.3 Taking into account the pupils' ages, abilities, linguistic backgrounds and previous school experience, pupils' subject knowledge, skills and understanding are good. Their creative ability is excellent, as demonstrated by the quality of their artwork, craft and technology skills, music making and photography. Many pupils attain a high level of achievement through their own endeavours and interests, and in the many independent projects undertaken. These range from ambitious reading projects and textile and fashion creation, to woodwork of a professional standard and drama productions. The most able and talented pupils build successfully on their own motivation and enthusiasm for independent learning, sometimes by tackling work well above that expected for their age. Some attempt GCSE courses on their own initiative at the age of 12. Others enrol on online Open University course modules or pursue individual research, such as an investigation into the physiological effects of sunburn. Pupils' success owes much to the small class sizes and the attention that they receive from the dedicated staff, who are supportive of pupils' individual needs and give generously of their time. Pupils also benefit from the individualised learning pathways that they map out with their teachers. Every parent responding to the pre-inspection questionnaire felt that the school addresses their children's educational needs well. All pupil respondents indicated that teachers are approachable and helpful if they require help with their work.
- 3.4 The following analysis uses the national data for the years 2013 to 2015, the most recent three years for which comparative statistics are currently available. Results at GCSE have been similar to the national average for maintained senior schools; those at IGCSE have been similar to worldwide norms. Inspection evidence gained from these results, pupils' performances in lessons, an analysis of class and project work, and responses of pupils in interview indicate that pupils including those with SEND and EAL make good progress during their time in the school. Those with EAL generally make excellent progress in improving their command and understanding of English. All pupils responding to the questionnaire felt that the school provides them opportunities to learn and make good progress.

- 3.5 Pupils have strong communication skills. They communicate very well orally, and many read widely and understand technical vocabulary. The quality of what they write is often imaginative and creative, and generally it is technically sound, especially for older pupils. Pupils listen carefully and appreciate each other's point of view with sensitivity, demonstrated for example by their confident contributions in the school meeting. Their numerical skills are sound; most can perform necessary calculations successfully but are not always able to explain their solutions and method clearly. They apply their numeracy appropriately when required in subjects such as science, woodwork, music, and information and communication technology (ICT). The number skills of some pupils are underdeveloped due to a lack of opportunity to exercise and develop their numeracy further. Many pupils show a high level of competence in ICT, and use their skills and expertise confidently and naturally to support their interests and enhance their learning. This was displayed successfully by many pupils, for instance in their use of coding and producing original software gaming modules, in their manipulation of digital images, and in one case by programming a computer microchip.
- 3.6 Pupils develop a good range of study skills. Many demonstrate a significant level of personal reflection and reasoning in their work and learning. For example, pupils with EAL analyse a range of different grammatical forms to come up with appropriate language to suit different situations. Biologists predict the correct inherited genetic characteristics based on their prior knowledge. An individual history project carefully evaluated the causes and end of the Vietnam War. Pupils learn from their mistakes, and make progress and enhance their learning as a result. For example, pupils in metalwork discover the appropriate choice of steel by testing the properties of manufactured objects for maximum strength.
- 3.7 Pupils enhance their learning effectively through play, personal and group activities, and initiatives. Many gain success in achieving individual goals in the activities they undertake. Pupils create their own extra-curricular programmes and make use of their leisure time as they wish. Many use this opportunity just to play, a key school aim. Pupils are physically active and refine new skills, whether for example on the trampoline or on rollerblades. They achieve particularly well in the creative and performing arts.
- 3.8 Pupils of all ages develop exceptional attitudes to their learning. They benefit strongly from their internally generated motivation and commitment, and are invariably keen to succeed in their chosen endeavours. Pupils in the youngest class were highly motivated and enthusiastic in their discussion of an English text and its background. All pupils display a high degree of initiative in choosing their own learning tasks, and frequently demonstrate their independence and strong personal commitment to planning and carrying them out. They demonstrate good collaborative skills in the many joint tasks and activities, and respond positively to encouragement and the expectation for them to take responsibility for their own learning.

#### **4. THE QUALITY OF THE PUPILS' PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- 4.1 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.
- 4.2 Pupils develop strong self-confidence and a growing awareness of the need to be self-reliant and independent. Most have a clear understanding of how to improve their learning. Within a school community where they have complete freedom to do what they want and organise themselves, most quickly manage their own time efficiently once they understand how to use freedom wisely and channel it into personally productive activity. They develop strong self-esteem through solving their own problems. Older pupils recognise that self-knowledge brings with it self-improvement, and that self-awareness can lead to appropriate changes in personal conduct and daily routines.
- 4.3 Pupils' self-discipline and a marked ability to understand what they want from their Summerhill experience means that they have a strong ability to make decisions based on appropriate information. As they get older, pupils demonstrate a growing awareness of their own ambition and personal aspirations. Pupils handle autonomy and independence well from the earliest age. Almost all have a complete belief in their freedom to make the right decision. Pupils clearly understand that decisions have consequences, both for themselves and others. Key factors in the pupils' strong personal development are the effectiveness of the school leadership which promotes and implements the school's unique philosophy and values with courage and confidence, and the dedicated staff who provide individual support and encouragement for pupils. Pupils' personal development and relationships are greatly enhanced by the experience of living together in a residential community. Questionnaire responses from parents were unanimous in feeling that the school successfully supports the development of pupils' personalities and their social awareness.
- 4.4 Pupils display strong self-discipline and effort, especially after committing themselves to a course of action. They demonstrate perseverance in planning and executing individual and group projects and personal challenges. A group of pupils of different ages built a boat over an extended period of time, large and secure enough for them all to sail across the swimming pool. An older pupil at the time of the inspection had completed 200 pages of his first novel.
- 4.5 Pupils' spiritual awareness is not marked or evident in an overt way, but many pupils do appreciate opportunities to be alone and some enjoy quiet reflection in the woods on the school site. Pupils learn to understand themselves through living in the school community. Some reveal their appreciation of non-material aspects of life, for example by going back to nature when foraging for mushrooms and cooking them in the wild; pupils spoke of visiting the beach to watch the sunrise over the North Sea. Pupils occasionally ask to attend church, and some pupils of the Buddhist faith meditate in their rooms. Christian and Catholic beliefs on evil and hell were discussed thoughtfully in class.

- 4.6 Pupils have a pronounced awareness of right and wrong, and display a strong sense of responsibility both for themselves and for others. Some find the required self-discipline challenging when first joining the school. Most pupils behave responsibly towards others, they regard this as common sense and instinctively know that it is the right thing to do. Pupils respect the school rules as they have ownership of them. They can and do change these through the school meetings, which represent a true embodiment of the school's democratic ideals. Pupils display a strong collective responsibility at these meetings to resolve disputes and occasional misbehaviour, and demonstrate a clear commitment to restorative justice. Their confidence to do the right thing owes much to the close, supportive, respectful and mutually trusting relationships between pupils and with staff.
- 4.7 Older pupils are well aware of options and consequences in terms of leading a balanced lifestyle, as appropriate to their age, and recognise the choices that they can make as well as their consequences. Younger pupils are not all clear about the concept and benefits of a balanced diet. Pupils throughout the school feel safe, secure and well looked after. They know that they can receive support for any emotional and health concerns. Pupils provide each other with sensitive and effective support for emotional worries and concerns.
- 4.8 Pupils display a strong sense of responsibility both for themselves and for others, and those with specific roles discharge them sensitively and effectively. Much is achieved by pupils' collaboration and co-operation in running successful activities and events. Many pupils feel that much of their lives is shaped by their independence rather than in collaboration, but they nevertheless demonstrate high levels of teamwork for the common good. The 'beddies' officers, the ombudsmen and the many school committee members put themselves forward and are chosen by their peers. Pupils recognise the significance of these posts and gain satisfaction from helping others, ensuring that the community runs smoothly, which is the common goal that they say they all strive for. They understand that they have a responsibility to listen to others' feelings and explanations in cases brought up at the school meetings, and ombudsmen display empathy when interceding on behalf of others. Pupils acknowledge that when working on committees there can be strong disagreements, but that after looking at the strengths and weaknesses of proposals they reach a compromise and a decision.
- 4.9 Pupils benefit greatly from and appreciate the international and multicultural nature of the school community. They gain an understanding of different cultures and lifestyles from their interactions with each other. Pupils of all nationalities mix freely, and are respectful and tolerant of each other. Those from overseas gain a good appreciation of and respect for the British way of life and culture. All pupils' questionnaire responses confirmed that the school encourages tolerance and respect for others.
- 4.10 Pupils are closely involved in the life of the school and contribute strongly to a practical realisation of the school's distinctive aims and philosophy. Engagement with the local and wider community is limited and is mainly evident through the pupils' involvement in projecting the school's ethos into the community. Pupils provide tours and talks to visitors, share the school's ideals with local junior schools and speak about the school to local and national organisations. Their efforts have gained them a British Youth Council Award for school democracy. Pupils have limited involvement in charitable work. Most are not particularly aware of current affairs or of the contemporary challenges facing those in society less fortunate than themselves.

- 4.11 Older pupils display a strong realisation that the decisions they make are highly relevant to their future lives and success. They feel that they have benefited greatly from the opportunities to learn valuable life skills, receive careers advice, and develop confidence and independence. Pupils recognise that their well-being benefits from their relationships with staff, who share and contribute wisdom and advice but as part of an equal partnership between staff and pupils. Younger pupils recognise the benefit gained from the ability to make decisions throughout the school and learn from their mistakes.