

Summaries of Investor in People Reports 2015-18

Summary of Sept 2018 Report

(under new IiP Framework)

Assessment Summary: The Ashcombe School (hereafter referred to as ‘The Ashcombe’) was assessed for accreditation against the Investors in People ‘Developed’ Standard in September 2018. The assessment process comprised initial discussions around the organisation’s ambition, production of an assessment plan, administration of the online assessment and interviews with a representative sample of staff chosen from across the organisation.

In line with the evidence presented in this report, the decision has been made that the organisation satisfies all the requirements at a ‘Developed level’ in the Investors in People sixth generation Framework; and therefore, accreditation is awarded.

The Ashcombe has a well-defined ambition and ethos which is to remain a genuinely comprehensive school that provides pupils of all abilities with the opportunity to achieve high standards. ‘Calm and caring’ is one of the school’s values and this shapes the approach taken to supporting the pupils as well as leading and managing staff. There is a strong tradition of developing staff so that they can progress their careers (and to help retain them) and of building capability so that when people move on others are able to step up and take on responsibility.

Against the above backdrop the IIP ethos is an integral part of the culture. The school has held the IIP accreditation for almost 20 years and there remains a genuine and sustained commitment emanating from the top to looking after and investing in the staff and to making the school an attractive and supportive place to work. This approach is paying dividends as demonstrated by the positive findings from the latest assessment. People evidently gain great job satisfaction and are committed to doing their best for the pupils. They believe the recent change in leadership structure has been well managed and are excited about the future. Whilst a few suggestions for continuous improvement were made, it was evident from the survey results and the interviews that most people believe The Ashcombe is a great place to work. As people said:

“It’s a great place to work, it’s the support, I love working here, there are opportunities for professional development, they care about staff, they trust you”

“It’s really supportive, a happy place to work; we’re forward thinking...”

The assessment reaffirmed the strength of the school’s people management and development practices notably in areas such as understanding the external context, adopting the values, delivering continuous improvement and enabling collaborative working. There are some recommendations for continuous improvement and these are outlined on page 15. These are aimed at helping the school further advance its practices to sustain high levels of staff morale and retention and to support leaders’ determination to continue to be a successful and well-regarded school.

Organisational Ambition: The school’s ambition is to remain a genuinely comprehensive school that provides opportunities for pupils of all abilities to achieve high standards. It is also keen to sustain the strong and caring pastoral system and to offer pupils a wide range of extra-curricular activities. There is a strong drive for continuous improvement and investing in staff is seen as pivotal in sustaining the school’s success. The school has recently introduced a new leadership structure whereby the Head has stepped into the role of Executive Head and two members of the senior management team have stepped into the roles of Joint Heads of School. Its immediate priority is to ensure a smooth transition so that the school retains its ethos and values and continues into the future on a sound basis.

Leading and inspiring people: Leaders have worked hard to create transparency and trust using a wide range of channels to communicate the school's vision, purpose and objectives. In the interviews people said that leaders openly shared the school's plans with staff, as well as results. The recent early communication around planned changes at leadership level was cited as a specific example of the desire for openness and transparency. As people said:

"We're a very open school"

"Communications are excellent, there's a clear focus for each year"

"Communications are strong; I find Inset time really engaging, there aren't too many meetings scheduled"

The school has a long narrative of staff engagement and it was evident from the interviews that people understand and buy into the overall aim of providing a genuinely comprehensive education to the pupils. As one person said: *"You know the vision, there's an attitude of never giving up, we're truly comprehensive"*.

In terms of developing leadership capability, the school has a track record of providing opportunities for leadership development at all levels. The middle leaders programme is well established and expectations of line managers are articulated in job descriptions and through discussion (e.g. at curriculum meetings). Consequently, line managers (such as Heads of Department) know what is expected of them and there is clarity around the desired leadership and management culture at The Ashcombe. As the comments below show, leaders are well regarded:

"I have a lot of respect for them, they're so approachable, I respect their opinions and values"

"X is an inspiring advocate for comprehensive education"

"I like X's style, he's open to conversations, approachable, they all respond to emails"

Living the organisation's values and behaviours: The Ashcombe has a clearly defined ethos which is described as: calm and caring, opportunities for all, never give up, no-blame culture and an emphasis on self-driven staff development. The values are well understood. People said that *'every pupil matters'* and referred to aspects such as making sure that individuals *'can be who they want to be'*, being fully inclusive, *"focussing on the kids, giving them the opportunities to do well"*, being *"properly comprehensive"*, having a no blame culture and supporting one another. As people said:

"The values are obvious and reinforced in SMT behaviour, the drive to make all kids valued runs through the school"

"It's about inclusion, giving all students that chance, building good relationships between students and teachers"

Building capability: There is evidence that people's capabilities are actively managed and developed and of a strong desire to enable people to realise their full potential. The observation/performance management system is well established, and this provides the vehicle for line managers to have development conversations with people and ensure that learning and development needs are met. A shining example of good practice is the way in which new positions and opportunities to take on additional responsibilities are advertised each year and people are encouraged to apply for these.

"The school is good at giving development opportunities; they're advertised well"

"There are lots of opportunities to change roles and responsibilities, to do something different; they're very open to suggestions for development"

"I have had a huge amount of guidance from those around me; they develop you as an individual and a practitioner"

Executive Summary for June 2017 Report

The Ashcombe School has been accredited as an Investors in People organisation since 1999. For many years, it has opted for an annual review against the Standard to provide a 'health check' on the state of staff morale, pre-empt potential concerns and identify areas for continuous improvement. Since the last review visit in June 2016 the school has converted to academy status and joined with two other like-minded schools to form the South East Surrey Schools Education Trust. In addition to this change it has continued to face various challenges associated with the external environment such as implementing changes to the national curriculum, working within budget constraints and recruiting teachers.

The latest review took place on 22nd June 2017 and it was reassuring to note that, despite all the change, the principles of Investors in People remain firmly embedded in the culture at The Ashcombe. The visit affirmed the schools many strengths and good people practices. Of note are:

- the strong leadership from the top (and active role modelling in terms of creating transparency and trust),
- the shared ethos ('The Ashcombe ethos'),
- the sustained commitment to and level of support for learning and development (despite budget constraints) and
- leaders' understanding of the external environment and impact this has on the organisation.

It has been a challenging year for governors and staff yet, despite the increased work pressures, morale appeared high. Whilst there are a few minor frustrations, people believe that The Ashcombe is a great place to work as evidenced by the range of positive responses to the question 'What's it like to work here?' (see below). Factors cited that foster this positive sentiment include the: social atmosphere, support network, balance between curriculum and pastoral side, opportunities to develop and sense of community. As people said:

"We work long hours but we support one another, there's a sense of community in the work room..."

"There are opportunities to develop your teaching practice, I'm given space and time to develop...."

"It's a big school but has a 'little school' feeling"

"The atmosphere in the staff room is good, people stop and try to help; it's not a 'jobsworth school', I never feel I can't ask"

"I love working here, it's a very supportive school; there's a good balance between the curriculum and the pastoral side"

"There's a culture of working hard...it's challenging but very fulfilling, it's a positive environment, the teachers really want the best for the children"

"Anyone new becomes not just a colleague but a friend...staff are very friendly and supportive of one another"

"You're given a lot of autonomy here, you don't feel micro managed"

"It's an interesting job, I like the variety, the people, the camaraderie; communications are good within the team"

"The Ashcombe has a strong ethos, SMT are very 'present' here, everyone is on the same page, we all know what's going on, the school has a calm feeling"

- **Leading and inspiring people**

In terms of motivating people to deliver the school's objectives, people remarked on the level of support they receive from line managers, Heads of Departments (HODs) and colleagues: *"There's support from*

your HOD and colleagues, you're not afraid to ask for help". People also said that SMT was encouraging and appreciative of the work people do. "With X at the helm you feel you are in as good a place as you can be"

- **Living the organisation's values and behaviours**

People said that there was a focus on staff and student well-being and referred to The Ashcombe as a kind school with a calm atmosphere. They used words such as inclusive, caring, open and communicative. They also said that staff are encouraged to develop positive relationships with pupils and to support other staff: *"Staff help one another, people do care, the atmosphere is nice"*.

- **Managing performance**

People know what's expected of them and how their role fits into the bigger picture: *"I'm expected to know the kids well and I feel that I do"*.

- **Building capability**

There is strong evidence for this indicator and a range of development opportunities is made available to teaching staff. The scheme whereby people can approach the Head once a year if they wish to take on extra responsibilities is well established

- **Delivering continuous improvement**

There is evidently a focus on continuous improvement. People are aware of how they can contribute to improving their performance and the ways of working within the organisation e.g. through discussion within departments and at curriculum level. People also said that SMT is open to suggestions and ideas (*"It's an environment where we know that management is open to ideas"*).

Specific objectives for this review

Q. What attracted **new staff** to work at The Ashcombe? What impression did they gain from the website, previous IIP report etc of the school? Has the school lived up to expectations? What will help to retain people?

New staff and trainees said that they were attracted to the school by its reputation and ethos and the fact that it appeared to be genuinely comprehensive. The impression gained from the website and the reports of external professionals (such as Ofsted and IIP) was of a school that is well-managed and has strong leadership, a strong ethos (of caring and not giving up on any child) and a calm, friendly, supportive culture. People were also impressed by the openness during the interview day and the fact that the Head has a hands-on style. The school had evidently lived up to people's expectations. As they said:

"It has lived up to my expectations, I've been lucky with the level of support and guidance"

"It's not a 'shouty' school, there's a genuine love of working with children"

"It's a friendly school, all the way from SMT down, it's very relaxed; SMT walks into lessons but you don't feel judged, it could be unnerving but it isn't...."

Practices that will help to retain people include: maintaining the breadth of development opportunities, providing strong leadership and support, sticking to the Ashcombe ethos, maintaining standards and providing an environment *"where I'm continuing to learn"*.

Q. Given the financial context and budget constraints, do people believe the school remains committed to their **continuing professional development**?

People said that there were still opportunities for development despite funding and budget cuts. There were various examples where people had been offered external training soon after they joined (and even before). People valued the fact that they could approach the Head if they

wished to develop by taking on extra responsibilities (the annual application process). They also valued the fact that if they didn't apply it wouldn't count against them.

Q. Is the school doing enough to support teaching staff handle **increased pressures** e.g. is it adopting a sensible approach to implementing national curriculum changes?

People said that there was a culture of working hard and of high standards. However, they said they weren't expected to be at school all the time but could decide whether to stay at school to work late or take their work home (although people have to build their confidence to do this). As one person said: *"People seem to want to be here, they work hard because they want to"*
People also said that the Head was good at helping people to manage (and cut back on) their workloads and encouraged people not to become buried under perfectionism (i.e. people are not expected to keep all 'plates spinning' all the time).

Investors in People Report 2016 Summary

Executive Summary

Like many schools, the Ashcombe is operating in an increasingly challenging environment and faces a number of external pressures. However, its leaders continue to take a measured approach to adopting new initiatives and implementing change and this approach is valued by staff. People believe that leaders have the best interests of both the pupils and the staff at heart. Since first becoming accredited in 1999 the school has continued to sustain the Investors in People ethos and fine tune its people practices over the years. This year's health check affirmed the school's many strengths and good practices. Aspects of the IIP framework which are particularly strong are:

Building capability – people's capabilities are actively managed and developed which allows people to realise their full potential; there remains a strong commitment to supporting learning and development and providing people with opportunities for continuing professional development and progression; of note is the level of opportunity given to newly qualified teachers

Leadership – leaders provide active role models, lead by example and are trusted by people; they are passionate about doing the best for the school and the pupils and motivating staff to deliver; the style of leadership and management emanating from the top (which centres on supporting and getting the best out of people) continues to work well and is valued by people

Creating sustainable success - the school retains a strong focus on the future; leaders are good at embracing change and keen to 'stay ahead of the curve'; where change happens it is communicated in a timely and transparent way; the move to become an academy and the review of support staff are specific examples in this respect

During the visit people were asked to describe what it's like to work at the school as responses to this question give an indication of the state of morale. Interviewees were great advocates of The Ashcombe and these are just some of the comments that demonstrate that it remains a great place to work:

"I feel lucky to work in a school where it's not solely results driven; there's an encouraging atmosphere; it's about getting the best out of the kids; people genuinely care for the children"

"The senior team is not afraid to make changes quickly, to drive things through, it's the best atmosphere I've worked in"

"It's the best senior team I've worked for; they're mindful of the staff and how they're feeling"

"It's a very good school to work in in the current climate; the Head believe in a comprehensive school; he'll fight to keep staff; we're not too affected by government changes; the school is in good hands"

“They’re good at motivating you to achieve personally; they push you to progress; they’re excellent at cpd and create opportunities even in small departments”.

“They’re very supportive, they see us as individuals, it comes from the Head, there’s a genuine open door policy, you can have a frank discussion, you’re cared for...”

1. Leading and inspiring people

There was a range of positive comments about the motivating style of leadership from the top to achieve good results. People understand the school’s objectives and believe that these have been well communicated. They value the level of transparency around future strategies (e.g. the move to academisation) and trusted that leaders would do the best for the school. As people said:

“The Head really cares, his main concern is the kids, he genuinely cares for the staff, SMT follows his ethos and lead....”

“X is awesome, great, takes it all in her stride, she’s approachable yet still authoritative”

“They’re inspiring, they’ll come to your lesson if you need help, you don’t feel embarrassed to call SMT, they check in with you....”

2. Living the organisation’s values and behaviours

The Ashcombe values and ethos has been well communicated. People evidently share the school’s values, especially the drive to maintain high standards, having high expectations of the children and putting the children first (the ‘every child matters’ approach).

“Every child matters.... this lives through the school, everyone teaches to that, there’s inclusion for all”

“The whole ethos is not just about getting good GCSEs, as teaching assistants we provide emotional and behavioural support, we make sure the children are ready and happy to learn”

3. Empowering and involving people

There is evidently a culture of trust and ownership where people feel empowered to make decisions in line with their level of responsibility and act on them. In terms of participating in decision making people said that the SMT was open to suggestions for improving things.

“You’re encouraged to try new approaches, there’s an openness to new ideas and everyone’s opinions are listened to, it keeps the school up to date and moving forward”

“People feel listened to; the senior team takes things on board”

4. Managing performance

People know what is expected of them and how their role contributes to the bigger picture. They recognise that the school’s success is reliant on everyone achieving their individual objectives. There were also a number of comments about the level of teamwork and way in which staff support one another.

“We’re a community, we support one another, there are no cliques, there’s good teamwork; sharing is encouraged and people are generous with their time”

5. Recognising and rewarding high performance

Most people feel that their contribution is recognised. As one person said: *“SMT are aware of your commitment to the job, they’re not afraid to compliment you”.*

However, some people felt that there could be more recognition for the “solid performers” (i.e. staff who are hardworking and consistently do a good job) as well as the “high flyers”. Some people were also seeking more vocal expression of appreciation (e.g. by way of a thank you or a quick email) when people go above and beyond (e.g. put in extra hours to make things happen).

6. Structuring work

There is evidence that roles are designed not only to deliver the school’s objectives but also to create interesting work for people. This was confirmed by interviewees who said their work was interesting and used their skills and capabilities. As one person said: *“Every day is different; there are lots of opportunities for progression”.*

This indicator also looks at collaborative working and this is an aspect where there is some scope for continuous improvement in terms of encouraging people to work across the school more to share information and expertise (see Recommendations above).

7. Building capability

This aspect remains a particular strength of the school and people's capabilities are actively managed and developed. People believed that the school is good at creating opportunities for individuals to develop in line with their aspirations but said that there was no pressure if they did not wish to progress. As people said:

"They're really proactive and progressive at creating professional development opportunities"

"They're not afraid to say 'I think you would benefit from this course'"

Another theme of this indicator is 'employing the right people at the right time' and aspects such as resource and succession planning are also strong.

8. Delivering continuous improvement

This is another strong area. People said that the school was always looking for new ways to improve and that the focus on continuous improvement was part of the school's ethos, especially in terms of supporting learning. The "big push" on BLP was cited as a specific example in this respect.

9. Creating sustainable success

Leaders evidently have a clear understanding of the external environment and the impact this has on the organisation. Within this context people said that the school had a focus on the future and was responsive to change. The move to an academy was a 'hot' topic and people said that they trusted the Head to make the right decision: *"He has the best interests of the school at heart"*. They also said that he was always one step ahead of the game and good at keeping people *"in the loop"* regarding the plan for the future to ensure the continued success of the school.

Investors in People Report 2015 Summary

Executive Summary

"It's a very positive place to work, the people are incredibly friendly and supportive and willing to discuss what's going on"

The above is just one of the many positive comments that interviewees made about the school and sums up the people-centred culture. The Ashcombe has been accredited as Investor in People (IIP) organisation since 1999 and for a number of years has chosen an annual review against the Standard to provide a health check on the level of staff morale. This approach is testament to the strong commitment that emanates from the top to maintaining the Investors in People ethos and demonstrates the genuine concern for staff well-being.

Like many schools, The Ashcombe is operating in an increasingly challenging environment as a result of changes to national education policy and Ofsted requirements as well as funding cuts. However, the school's leaders continue to adopt a careful and measured approach to implementing change which is valued by staff. People are made aware of the 'bigger'/national picture and the external pressures the school faces but trust that leaders will do what's best for The Ashcombe. As a result of funding cuts the school has recently completed a review of support staff. Whilst this has understandably been an unsettling time for people they felt that the process had been managed fairly and professionally.

Against this challenging and changing backdrop, the school is to be congratulated on retaining its Investors in People accreditation. The school's people practices are well-established and many are exemplary. Of note is the well-defined ethos which is well-understood and espoused by people throughout the school, the level of encouragement for professional development and the breadth of opportunities that continue to be made available to people, the level of support for NQTs, the strong role modelling from the top of effective leadership, the culture of trust and ownership where people feel empowered to make decisions and the commitment of the staff to doing their best for the students and way in which they support and collaborate with one another to achieve this aim.

During the assessment people were asked to describe what it was like to work at The Ashcombe as this question often serves as a litmus test of the state of staff wellbeing and morale. As ever, interviewees were great advocates of the school. Many people remarked on the strong team spirit, the sense of camaraderie amongst the staff and generosity of support. These are just some of the comments that demonstrate that, despite some perceived (and minor) imperfections, The Ashcombe remains a great place to work:

“I’m happy to come in every day”

“I like it, the people are friendly and supportive, and I feel I’m backed up”

“The staff are amazing, really supportive”

“I love working here, it’s a good team, and you feel part of the community”

“I’ve made a lot of friends here, people seem to care”

“It’s welcoming and friendly, the team is supportive, and you’re asked to contribute”

“Staff relationships are strong, it’s a flexible working environment, and there are no barriers to doing things to enrich the pupils...”

“I enjoy my job, it’s a lovely place to work, a nice environment, very professional, we’re a good team, we all pull together”

Strengths and areas of good practice

The assessment against the IIP standard affirmed the school’s many strengths and good practices. Maintaining these practices should benefit the school by helping to attract new teaching staff into the school (which is an increasing challenge for all schools), retain people (again this is a challenge given the increasing pressures of teaching) and ultimately sustain the school’s reputation as a ‘good’ school. For the record, areas of notable strength are:

Building capability – the school’s leaders are keen to nurture talent and they strive to provide people with opportunities for professional development and progression; the Development Opportunities scheme (where staff are able to apply once a year for opportunities to further develop their leadership skills) is well-established and a shining example of good practice; this aspect remains a particular strength and allows people to realise their full potential; people value the breadth of opportunities for development (see quotes below); maintaining this approach will help to ensure that people enjoy their work and that the school retains people

“There are lots of opportunities to advance my professional development”

“They’ve progressed me so far since I’ve been here”

“I like new challenges and they recognise that”

Leading and inspiring people - the school’s vision and strategic intents have been clearly defined and senior leaders inspire and motivate people to deliver against these; as one person said: *“I like the fact that there are strong values and there’s a very clear vision which hasn’t changed over the years”*; there is also strong role modelling from the top in terms of the desired leadership and management culture and a calm and measured approach to leading, managing and developing people; this style of leadership is valued by people and sets the tone for the school (as the latest Ofsted report commented)

Wellbeing – the recent Ofsted report found that the pastoral care was exceptional and that *“each member of the community is valued and their well-being matters to everyone”*; the findings from this latest IIP assessment support this statement; leaders take a personal interest in staff and people feel that they genuinely care about their welfare (see quotes below); they are keen for people to develop and take on extra responsibilities; however people said that they weren’t *“frowned upon”* if they weren’t willing or able to take advantage of these opportunities (depending on their personal aspirations and circumstances); people also said that they are encouraged to have a life outside of the school and that leaders were supportive if people wished to ‘step back’ e.g. work part-time; the school is keen to retain staff, especially NQTs (where there is a challenge in attracting trainee teachers into the profession); there is high level of support for this group and the *‘hug an NQT’* week is a shining example of good practice in this

respect; maintaining your efforts in this area will help to maintain the high level of morale that was evident amongst staff and to retain staff against a backdrop of challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers

“The staff are lovely, thoughtful, they care about you and your welfare”

“They treat us as individuals, they look after us as a staff really well, and you feel valued”

Creating sustainable success - the school has a focus on the future and is responsive to change; leaders have a clear understanding of the external environment and the impact this has on the school; strategy development is robust and there is a measured approach to implementing change, which is valued by people; people believe that they are kept well informed of the ‘bigger picture’; maintaining this approach will help to sustain levels of commitment and buy in to change and enable the school to sustain its success

“There are lots of chats about the ‘national picture’; X (the head) tries to keep the whole school informed of changes; you’re updated at every Inset day; there’s foresightno rash decisions”

“There’s a measured approach to picking up on new initiatives and considering what will work for The Ashcombe; there’s no knee-jerk reaction, there’s contemplation and reflection....there’s a medium-term strategy”