

Royal Alexandra & Albert School (The)

The Royal Alexandra & Albert School Foundation

Royal Alexandra & Albert Junior School, Gatton Park, Reigate, Surrey RH2 0TD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this boarding school

The Royal Alexandra and Albert School is set in a rural area of Redhill, within a large estate. The school is a state-maintained school of just over 1000 pupils. Of these, 440 are full boarders and approximately another 500 are 'flexi-boarders' who spend extended days in the residential provision. The school provides residential care for pupils from seven to 18 years old in nine boarding houses.

Inspection dates: 6 to 8 March 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The boarding school provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the school contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Date of last inspection: 18 November 2014

Key findings from this inspection

This boarding school is outstanding because:

- The school provides a secure environment in which children and young people flourish, achieve academically, stretch their abilities and develop social skills.
- The school's extensive programme of recreational opportunities is characterised by the attitude of, 'if it is possible to provide what a pupil is interested in we will make it happen'. Thorough risk assessments ensure that all activities are delivered as safely as possible.
- The school uses highly effective strategies to promote positive behaviour.
- Managers and staff are adept at identifying the strengths of pupils and harnessing these to the advantage of all boarders. This includes improvements to the environment suggested by school councils and the mentoring of younger pupils by their older peers.
- The process of induction into boarding lays a successful foundation for a very positive experience in boarding.
- Extensive support for pupils with histories of poor engagement with their learning, or experiences that have had a negative impact on their education, means that most progress far better following admission, some remarkably so.

The boarding school's areas for development:

- The school has not taken sufficient precautions to ensure the safety of staff or pupils were a fire to occur.
- The complaints policy reads as though it applies only to issues raised by parents, even though it also covers complaints made by pupils and staff. On occasion, the response to concerns has not been as rigorous as possible, or has not been recorded.
- Risk assessments are sound, but are not always recorded or easily accessible to staff working with the boarders concerned.
- The great majority of boarders were not aware of the role of the independent listener, or confused her with other people.

What does the boarding school need to do to improve?

Compliance with the national minimum standards for boarding schools

The school does not meet the following national minimum standards for boarding schools:

- The school complies with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 (7.1). Specifically, to undertake remedial work recommended in fire risk assessments within reasonable timescales; to include the designated smoking area in risk assessments; and to ensure that routes to emergency exits from premises are kept clear at all times.
- The school has, and follows, an appropriate policy on recording and responding to complaints that is compliant with the relevant regulatory standards (18.1). Specifically, to ensure that it is clear the policy relates to complaints made by pupils and staff as well as parents; that complaints are rigorously investigated; and, where a complaint is made in writing, that a written record is made of the response.

Recommendations

- Improve boarders' knowledge of the role of the independent listener and how she can be contacted.
- Ensure that assessments undertaken to reduce risks for boarders in the sleeping accommodation are recorded and retained in pupils' case files.
- Ensure that assessments undertaken to evaluate potential risks posed by a member of staff after an allegation has been made against them are recorded and retained in safeguarding files.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The great majority of pupils spoken to by inspectors said that they thoroughly enjoy being in boarding. Many said that coming to the school was the best-made decision for them. Several commented on staff making the residential provision a 'home from home' or 'like a big family'. For some, this gives a degree of nurturing that they do not experience elsewhere.

Spending time with friends and taking part in a range of experiences not otherwise

available to them is highly valued by boarders. A few said that there was not enough to do, but the majority thought very differently. One commented: 'If you are bored, it is because you are not making the most of what is on offer.' The school has a wide range of safe outdoor and indoor areas, which ensure that the pupils have a choice of leisure facilities whatever the weather.

Parents value their children's increasing independence and growing maturity; this is fostered by the school. Many pupils who struggled to manage routines such as getting ready for school or doing homework fare much better when they start boarding. The structure of the day 'takes away the battle', as a family member commented. One pupil said: 'I would not be where I am now if it were not for this school – I'd still be messing around on my console instead of getting down to work and making something of my life.'

Staff encourage positive behaviour through awards for individual pupils or for chore groups that are the best at doing their jobs. One boarder commented on how the introduction of an award had lifted the standard of behaviour of everyone in his houses: 'Boys used to do their best to get the award, but now that standard is what everyone normally expects.' This is an area of significant achievement.

A programme of refurbishment is underway and those boarders who live in houses that have been completed are happy with their accommodation; others see the improvements made elsewhere and are dissatisfied. In some of the houses that have not yet been refurbished, the shower blocks have ongoing problems. Some furniture, particularly in bedrooms, has not been replaced for many years and, while still functional, it looks worn. Maintenance staff generally make swift repairs in the houses, but there are accounts of other matters, like the flooding of paths, taking far longer to get funding approval.

A wide range of ethnic backgrounds is represented among the pupils; this is not reflected among the staff or the senior management team. Nevertheless, the school celebrates the richness of different cultures, including a production by sixth-formers for Black History Month and cultural days that allow pupils to try food from different countries. The show and the meals were very popular.

One boarder spoke of being able to fast during Eid, explaining the benefits in terms of breaking down barriers for others. 'They might say, "there's Hamad [not his actual name], he's fasting so he's a Muslim – but I like Hamad!'" This illustrates the spirit engendered: that minority groups do not just require particular consideration, but have a positive influence on life in the school.

Weekly house meetings provide opportunities for pupils to contribute to the boarding provisions. Numerous councils provide them with further avenues through which they can effect change across the school. These are promoted and well supported by staff.

Food in the dining hall provides plenty of variety in meals, with choices of hot and cold food, including vegetarian, vegan and halal options. Nevertheless, food generated the most criticism from pupils, with them wanting to have bacon served more

frequently and wanting sugar to put on cereals at breakfast the most common requests. Managers have been unable to convey that the standards they adhere to preclude their compliance with such requests.

New boarders are assigned 'buddies' to support their admissions and there is an excellent induction pack for them that is written in a friendly but clear way. They also have a peer listener, usually an older boarder, to support them further. As a result, pupils feel informed and welcomed, and have found making friends easy.

Despite the large numbers of pupils who board, staff manage to find time to give pupils excellent individual support where needed. Pupils were able to name staff who they would go to if they had worries and they said that they felt confident about raising complaints without retribution. They also thought that staff were sensitive to how they are feeling. One said: 'They will flag up if they think you are not safe and come and talk to you.'

Although a few pupils who responded to Ofsted's survey said they had experienced bullying, inspectors found that the school had an exemplary record of dealing with incidents. Boarders said: 'Staff put a stop to it straightaway when they see it or hear about it'; and, 'There's no joking around about it, staff deal with it seriously.'

Some pupils have experience of possessions going missing and believe other children or young people have taken them. CCTV in strategic areas has reduced the problem considerably and boarders are provided with lockers, a house bank for money and passports, and lockable wardrobes, these provisions are not always used. Not all of the youngest children are given keys because those who are issued with one often lose them. Indeed, staff find that many 'stolen' items have actually only been mislaid. The older and more responsible the pupils become, the less this is an issue.

Boarders are able to contact their families and friends using personal mobile phones, or one of the 'Skype rooms' that are in each house. As a result, they are able to maintain frequent communication with key figures in their lives.

Many pupils that the inspectors met had exceptional qualities: resilience, ambition, empathy, a desire to make the most of their opportunities and personal confidence. There is strong evidence that the school has engendered these qualities, and that the pupils' potential has accelerated because of their experience of boarding. Managers and staff have been remarkably successful in improving the life experience of children and young people, and in expanding their future life chances.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Managers and staff identify and evaluate risks well, leading to effective action that helps pupils to remain safe. These include the decisions made about who boarders should share dormitories with, which take into account health issues and previous behaviour, as well as individual preferences. These risk assessments are sometimes included in the minutes of meetings or in communication records, but are not collated so that it is possible to easily identify the rationale behind the decision, or

the development of thinking over time.

It is rare for boarders to make allegations, but on an occasion when a young person accused a staff member of hurting him during a restraint, senior managers assessed that it was safe for the adult to remain on duty. This risk assessment was not recorded in writing, which could leave the school open to criticism later if those involved were unavailable or not able to recall their rationale easily. However, a manager drew up an assessment during the inspection that demonstrated the decision was justified.

Assessments that are formulated to consider risks associated with vulnerable pupils are thorough documents, taking into consideration strengths as well as concerns and the actions taken. As a result of these assessments, coherent plans for improving students' well-being are put in place across the school by the staff.

The school provides 250 activities each week, ranging from the headmaster's board-games club to scuba diving. Sports that have inherent dangers are subject to additional consents, rigorous risk assessments and safety measures that often go above minimum requirements. These include monitoring of the qualifications of instructors, pupil-to-staff ratios and the availability of safety equipment. The process and the rigorous attention to detail are exemplary.

In addition, dynamic risk assessments are of the highest order, illustrated by one that took account of changing circumstances on an overseas trip during very cold weather. The staff member in charge spoke about taking decisions, including spending additional money in order to ensure pupils' safety, confident that senior managers would not question this later. Such confidence allows staff to make the best decisions to optimise safety.

Pupils take free time in the local area in small groups. Staff are on duty in the vicinity to offer support should it be required. When intelligence suggests that particular areas are 'hot spots' for drug or other criminal activity, managers put bans in place. These measures mean that pupils can access the local community safely.

Managers and staff are vigilant for potential drug use among pupils, and take appropriate action to educate, monitor through drug testing and, rarely, exclude if necessary.

Regular training and discussions underpin a strong safeguarding culture. The safeguarding team is familiar to the staff and pupils and the policies are well known and consistently implemented. The staff who spoke with inspectors were aware of the action they should take if they have concerns about a manager, although the policy lacks clarity about the process to follow if the designated safeguarding lead is implicated.

The process that is normally activated following a complaint is robust with, depending on the stage reached, the headmaster assigning a member of the senior management team to investigate and the headmaster providing oversight and reporting back to the complainant. Records have not always been clear about

whether the complainant was satisfied with the response. The letter informing them of the outcome does not explain what to do if they remain dissatisfied.

On two occasions, responses fell short of expectations. One of these occurred when an email to 'register a complaint' was responded to as an informal concern once the instigator had been spoken to. No record was made of the rationale for this, or of the response to it. The other was regarding a complaint that was brought to the attention of the board of governors, but not thoroughly pursued. It was initially said that the individual concerned was trusted, and that his word on the matter was sufficient; circumstantial, but not conclusive, evidence was also cited. An inspector was able to satisfy himself that the complaint was groundless on the production of written evidence not hitherto requested.

Safer recruitment protocols are followed that meet the requirements of 'keeping children safe in education', including taking up references and making sure that full employment histories are obtained. Where those who make employment decisions know candidates, the headmaster has put counterbalances in place, such as an independent person observing the selection process. This helps to prevent the appointment of unsuitable people.

The deputy headteacher for pastoral and boarding sends safeguarding update newsletters to parents to disseminate information, particularly about online safety. This promotes vigilance at home, extending the influence of the school to keep pupils safe.

Health and safety procedures are generally satisfactory, but recommendations for remedial work following fire risk assessments have not all been completed within specified timescales, and indeed were not scheduled at the time of the inspection. In addition, the assessment stated that there was no designated smoking area on the premises; there is such an area and inspectors noted hazards such as there being no facility for safe disposal of cigarette butts and damage to the covers of seating. In one house, a bicycle had been left in a corridor which was a route to a fire exit. In the event of a fire, these factors could have increased the risks to staff and pupils.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The headmaster and the deputy head of pastoral and boarding have created a strong culture of striving for the best outcomes for pupils and high standards for the boarding provision. They demonstrate a desire to examine practice and identify how they can make improvements, even if current standards are good. Methods of achieving this include the links made with other boarding schools and local educational establishments to share good practice, and to invite other professionals to evaluate their provision.

The school has several ways for boarders to be able to raise their views, opinions and concerns, from a box to place anonymous reports of bullying in, to representation on the school council. The school has given the latter greater prominence since the last inspection, with the link member of staff now one of the

senior management team. Members of the council say that staff take up their ideas unless there is a good reason not to, which they always explain. Some suggestions are implemented quickly, but if they take longer staff will update council members by email. An example pupils gave was the problem of waterlogged ground near one of the houses, for which a temporary measure and then a permanent solution were put in place. This improves the experience of boarders and gives those on the council a means of having a direct impact on their environment and a sense of personal efficacy.

Leaders and managers frequently find creative ways to develop services and they commit resources to implementing these improvements. For example, plans are being finalised for boarders to make 'Dragons' Den' style bids for a pot of £1,000 to be spent on projects they believe would improve boarding. This is a tangible way for pupils to see the school investing in their ideas; it also provides an experience of presenting proposals and engages boarders who may not otherwise participate in more formal processes.

Managers and staff appoint older pupils as peer listeners and mentors, and have enabled two young people to run a polo club. Those given such roles demonstrate commendable maturity; this benefits them as well as those pupils they help.

Black pupils have assisted in the education and care of younger peers. They have, for example, explained appropriate and inappropriate language regarding race, including to pupils whose understanding may be limited as their first language is not English. Another example is the introduction of workshops on skin and hair care and requests that older pupils participate in order to pass on their knowledge and experience. This contributes significantly to children and young people valuing their own identities and those of others. One boarder who has been asked to help with future workshops said: 'In my last school I couldn't really be myself; here you feel like you can. It is more diverse, lots of different people, and I feel more comfortable.' Other young people made similar comments about feeling valued and included because of actions taken by the school, such as the introduction of unisex toilets across the site. This is an especially admirable outcome.

A recent development has been the appointment of a 'lead for disadvantaged students', whose role is to enhance the academic achievement and well-being of pupils regarded as needing additional help. This includes close contact with boarders who, for example, are looked after by a local authority, to ensure that individual learning plans or actions from statutory reviews are implemented, and to facilitate the integration of provisions for these pupils across education and boarding.

The placement of one such young person was said to be 'incredibly successful' by a professional, who described him as 'interacting with others in a very different way' compared to before his placement, and 'clearly thriving'.

Managers have increased counselling provision for pupils and an analysis of the services has shown that this has benefited some pupils significantly, enabling them to manage social situations, their education and concerns about family life more confidently.

In order to provide rounded care for boarders, managers and staff liaise well with other agencies. These include social workers, charitable foundations, providers of outward-bound activities and headteachers of virtual schools. When necessary, staff have pursued issues with other professionals on behalf of pupils, such as the convening of important meetings. In this way, children and young people benefit from cohesive services and timely interventions that meet specific needs and enhance their experiences.

Considerable effort and resources in terms of staff time and sometimes finances are in place to assist the few pupils who have been assessed as no longer suitable for boarding. This includes finding alternative placements or providing daily transport to enable pupils to continue their education in the school. There is an ethos that an interest in, and promotion of, a pupil's welfare does not end if they have to move elsewhere.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the school knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Children Act 1989 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the national minimum standards.

Boarding school details

Social care unique reference number: SC013933

Headmaster/teacher in charge: Mark Dixon

Type of school: Boarding school

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Inspectors

Chris Peel: social care inspector
Sarah Olliver: social care inspector
Suzy Lemmy: social care inspector



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