

Reading School

Reading School

Main House, Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LW

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this boarding school

Reading School is a selective maintained school with academy status for boys aged 11 to 18. There are 1,074 pupils in the school as a whole, of whom 76 are boarders. Boarders are accommodated in two separate boarding houses: South House and East Wing. The school does not offer weekend boarding. The school is situated close to the centre of Reading, Berkshire and has good access to all facilities in the local area.

Inspection dates: 4 to 6 February 2020

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	outstanding
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	outstanding
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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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: outstanding

Date of last inspection: 31 January 2017

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

A particular feature of the houses is the extraordinarily positive relationships between year groups. Younger students agree that 'it is like living with your older brothers'. As boys progress through the school, they welcome greater privileges and responsibilities. By the time students reach the sixth form they have developed an exceptional level of maturity, including the value of being role models to younger students and positively contributing to the lives of others.

There is an extremely well-organised and comprehensive process of induction for all boarders. Visits and overnight taster stays are in place so that students can experience boarding life before admission. Staff are sensitive to students' individual needs and they provide outstanding levels of nurture and support to all students.

Staff are able to evidence the sustained improvement that students who have complex needs have made and there is significant progress for all students. The boarding environment has helped pupils to develop social skills and confidence in interacting with peers and adults and to talk with self-assurance. The academic and social progress of boarders is exceptional, such that the experience enhances their life opportunities.

Students feel that they have 'the best of both worlds'. They live in a family environment in which they have access to tutors with expert knowledge of the subjects they are studying. This is because many of the adults working in the residential provision are also academic staff.

Boarders have a choice of staff that they can turn to for guidance and support. This includes helping with homework, someone to talk to about difficulties that they may be experiencing and guidance on how to manage their daily lives. Information about an independent visitor and the children's commissioner is visible in each house.

The physical environment is safe and secure, and there is a programme of investment to bring all areas up to a good standard. However, inspectors identified areas where cleaning and minor repairs would have improved the environment. Maintenance staff addressed these during the inspection.

Students have enthusiastically embraced a new arrangement in which they purchase food and drinks in their houses from an allocated budget. This helps them to learn independence skills as well as influence their experience of boarding. Staff encourage older students to cook and do their own washing. The school acknowledges that there could be some improvements to the facilities. For example, a standard domestic oven would be more suitable for students to use.

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

Leaders and managers draw on a wide range of data to inform safeguarding practice, including local trends in child criminal exploitation, domestic abuse and knife crime. Briefings for staff are shared with other schools in the area, which find them valuable sources of intelligence. The school has joined with a county hospital to research the impact that a nationally promoted festival held in the area has on the safety of young people. Although this is at an early stage, the proposal, together with the adoption of a national charity's audit tool for safeguarding, demonstrates a commitment to the highest achievable standard of practice.

The actions of staff mean that vulnerable students have a strong sense of being safeguarded and of their welfare being promoted. Leaders and managers have the well-being of students central to their decision-making and staff build relationships that enable students to confide in them and find support. For some students, this is life affirming.

Leaders and managers provide the resources and support required to maintain placements in the school, following their ethos to develop the whole person. Meeting students' welfare needs is not just to advance academic achievement, although this is often the outcome, but to help them become effective and confident individuals. Students are, therefore, more likely to find ways to manage challenges rather than rely on unhelpful coping mechanisms, such as going missing.

Recruitment procedures are extremely thorough. These checks include the governors and 'gap year' students, as well as the school and boarding staff. This helps to prevent the recruitment of unsuitable people, while regular monitoring of all staff ensures continued protection.

Leaders and managers have enhanced the security of boarding houses, which contributes to the high level of safety that the students report. Strict procedures are in place for those members of staff who live on-site with their families, including written terms and conditions of their accommodation.

The school had a full fire audit in 2017; however, records for all but the most serious remedial work recommended by the contractor were hard to locate. Inspectors were eventually able to verify that staff had addressed all the issues, although the school had been slow to action some recommendations. The Environmental Health Officer visited in 2018 and staff have acted on the recommendations made. However, records of this remedial work were, again, hard to locate during the inspection.

The matrons are suitably qualified and have a wealth of knowledge about a wide range of health issues that the boarders may have. They are well equipped to provide sensitive care to boarders who, for example, may be experiencing home sickness, well-being and mental health problems.

The staff have training in safe medication administration practices, and well-organised records and monitoring ensure that errors are identified quickly and are extremely low in number. No serious errors have occurred. Boarders self-medicate when assessments demonstrate that they are sufficiently responsible and are provided with safe storage facilities to do so. This practice prepares them for adult life.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Boarding is integral to the life of the school, exemplified by the fact that the headmaster is also head of boarding. Many practices that have proved successful in the residential provision have transferred to the whole school. All staff, whether working in boarding or not, are expected to have an understanding of the importance of the provision.

Staff are justifiably proud of their relationship with boarders and have a 'whole team' approach to working with them. They bring their own interests and skills to benefit the students' experiences, including cooking, sports and computing. Carefully selected gap year students further contribute to this. House masters successfully create a culture of collective responsibility in boarding, with boarders understanding the importance of security for the houses and of feeding back their experiences.

Leaders and managers take boarders' views seriously, prioritise gaining their opinions and make changes wherever possible in response to feedback. The students talked about the improvements to meals as evidence of the impact of their views being heard. The students are able to raise concerns and make complaints, but they say they rarely do as they enjoy the boarding experience.

The school's complaints policy concentrates on those complaints made by adults. This means that records of complaints are not always focused on the views of children, even where children have made the complaint. There are other areas in which recording is not sufficiently thorough. These include maintenance records, the reasons for major sanctions, staff supervision and chronologies for complex safeguarding concerns. None of these have had a direct impact on boarders, but the shortfalls make it more difficult to evidence action taken or provide the rationale for them.

The governing board provides a sounding board for senior managers and general oversight of the operation of the school. However, detailed scrutiny is sometimes limited, with few visits being made to boarding houses, a lack of monitoring of actions following the fire risk assessment, and a reliance on the reports of senior managers regarding safeguarding matters rather than an examination of records.

Staff are inducted into their roles in boarding. Most of the training which informs their practice is done as a whole school, so no additional training is required, although a 'counselling for non-counsellors' course does help the staff to assist

boarders. An understanding of, and the ability to promote, the culture of boarding is crucial to appointments.

Senior managers use staff appraisal and their review to promote the continuous improvement of the boarding experience. All performance development plans have a target relating to boarding included in them and staff visit other boarding schools across the country to identify good practice that they can incorporate here. The headmaster uses contacts with other schools, associations and agencies to consult and obtain advice to inform critical decision-making.

What does the boarding school need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- That the records specified in Appendix 2 are maintained and monitored more thoroughly by the school and governing board who should take action as appropriate. (NMS13.8) In particular, staff supervision and risk assessments under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005.
- That the issues specified in Appendix 3 are monitored more thoroughly, and action is taken to improve outcomes for children as appropriate. (NMS 13.9) In particular, that each incident or occasion is evaluated by managers who record their monitoring.
- That staff are made aware if a boarder leaves the premises during hours when there are no adults awake in the house. (NMS 15.5)
- That the school's complaints policy gives guidance as to what should happen when a student or other child makes a complaint, that records focus on the impact on the child or children and that the child's view is sought in regard to being satisfied or otherwise with the outcome. (NMS 18.1)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC054201

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Type of school: Boarding School

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Inspectors

Chris Peel, social care inspector (lead)

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