

Reading Borough Council, New Directions

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Background information

Inspection judgements

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

Key for inspection grades

Grade 1	Outstanding
Grade 2	Good
Grade 3	Satisfactory
Grade 4	Inadequate

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made on www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of; the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body: and where appropriate the previous inspection report (www.ofsted.gov.uk); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the previous inspection.

In addition to reporting on overall effectiveness of the organisation, its capacity to improve further, achievement and standards, quality of provision and leadership and management, this inspection focused on specialist provision in:

- Information and communication technology (ICT) for users
- Arts, media and publishing
- Modern foreign languages
- Preparation for life and work
- Family learning

The council's other LSC-funded provision, and its Train to Gain and First Steps provision, was not reported on separately, but used to support judgements in leadership and management.

Description of the provider

1. Reading Borough Council (RBC) is a unitary authority formed in 1998. In October 2006 RBC merged together two separate organisations, Reading Adult Community College (RACC) and the Training Employment and Advice Shop (TEA Shop) to form one service which was re-branded as New Directions in June 2007. The new service started operation in June 2007. A new Head of Service took up post in late January 2007. New Directions is now a part of the Extended Services Portfolio within the Directorate for Education and Children's Services. The Lifelong Learning Board of Councillors provides governance for the new service. New Directions is the sole provider of RBC's adult and community learning programme, which is funded by Berkshire Learning and Skills Council (LSC). RBC is also a member of the Berkshire Train to Gain consortium.
2. New Directions provision contributes significantly to the council's vision for Reading. It aims to support people of all ages and abilities by providing opportunities for learning, enjoyment, knowledge acquisition and skills development. The council is strongly committed to lifelong learning. The provision continues to change in line with the government's priority areas. The Personal, Community and Development Learning (PCDL) offer is being maintained in line with the LSC's Adult Learning Safeguarding policy. This provision is not expected to grow but continue, targeted at deprived communities and the hard to reach adult groups.
3. Reading is one of the principal regional and commercial centres of the Thames Valley. The population of the borough is approximately 150,000. It is characterised by fewer people over the age of 65 than the national average for England and a rapidly growing population. Minority ethnic groups account for over 13% of the population which is high for the South East of England. Reading has grown and changed substantially in the past 20 years. Unemployment is relatively low. House prices continue to rise steeply, raising issues of affordability for low income families. While the town has an image of relative prosperity, one ward is among the 5% most deprived in the country. Learner achievement at key stage 4 is at the national average of 46%.
4. New Directions provides adult education in four RBC owned centres, one leased premises and a number of other schools and community centres in the Borough. The offer includes both accredited (FE) and non-accredited (PCDL) learning and in 2006/07 there were 1,342 FE enrolments and 3,672 PCDL enrolments. Train to Gain provision is new and offer at level 2 for teaching assistants and IT practitioners. The main provision includes: ICT for users, arts, media and publishing, modern foreign languages, preparation for life and work and family learning.

Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Inadequate: Grade 4
Capacity to improve	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Achievement and standards	Inadequate: Grade 4
Quality of provision	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Leadership and management	Inadequate: Grade 4
Equality of opportunity	Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

Sector subject area

ICT for users	Good: Grade 2
Arts, media and publishing	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Modern foreign languages	Satisfactory: Grade 3
Preparation for life and work	Inadequate: Grade 4
Family learning	Satisfactory: Grade 3

Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Inadequate: Grade 4

5. Achievement and standards are unsatisfactory, but many learners produce a good standard of work in the classroom. Retention rates are high, but success rates for accredited courses, a large proportion of the provision, are low. The Recognition and Recording of Progress and Achievement (RARPA) process is well established, but applied inconsistently. Most learners following Train to Gain programmes make slow progress.
6. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report's assertion that most lessons are good or better. Initial assessment is of variable quality and in general the use of individual learning plans (ILPs) and target-setting is weak. Teachers are mostly suitably qualified or are working towards an appropriate qualification. Most teachers' use of information learning technology is poor, but it is good in ICT provision.
7. RBC's response to social inclusion is good. The offer is broad and local partnerships with extended schools, children's centres and community groups have led to benefits for many learners. Some non-traditional learners successfully gain qualifications, and progress. RBC responds positively to the local community and employer requirements.
8. RBC offers a good range of advice, support and guidance for a diverse range of learners. Initial advice and career guidance is good, but induction arrangements are satisfactory. Some learners benefit from funded additional learning support and a range of assistive technology.
9. Leadership and management is inadequate. However, plans to transform the service are sound, radical and well advanced. Partnership working is effective and longstanding. The promotion of equality of opportunity and the management of resources are satisfactory. The arrangements for literacy, numeracy and language support are adequate. Action to improve success rates in accredited programmes over a three year period has been slow and ineffective. Curriculum management is weak in most areas except ICT. There is insufficient focus on performance management. The availability, understanding and use of management information are inadequate. Overall arrangements to improve the quality of the provision are ineffective.

Capacity to improve

Satisfactory: Grade 3

10. RBC demonstrates satisfactory capacity to improve. Although the effectiveness of steps taken since the last reinspection in January 2004 are mostly inadequate, the service has been through a significant period of upheaval and change. RBC recognised the need to bring about radical improvements six months before the inspection. A thorough and detailed review has been undertaken. Some of the positive outcomes to date include: clear plans to focus the provision on quality outcomes; better data collection and much improved management information systems (MIS), increasingly effective monitoring of the quality improvement plans; good and improving retention rates; rising standards of work in the classroom; good integration of new provision. However, success rates remain low, targets for quality improvement across the provision are not set consistently and curriculum management is mostly weak.

11. The self-assessment process is satisfactory and inspectors had some confidence in the accuracy of RBC's self-assessment report (SAR). The process routinely takes learners and teachers views into account and moderation of the SAR is satisfactory. The SAR identified most of the strengths found by inspectors, but missed some key areas for improvement. Inspectors disagreed with some of grades awarded for curriculum areas, but the ICT report was very accurate. Action plans based on the evidence in the SAR are satisfactory.

Key strengths

- Sound, well advanced and radical plans to transform the service
- Good provision in ICT for users
- Effective partnership working
- Good focus on developing learners' confidence and self-esteem
- Good range of advice, support and guidance for a diverse range of learners

Key areas for improvement

- Success rates in accredited provision
- Curriculum management
- Understanding and use of management information system
- Initial assessment and target-setting for learners
- Arrangements for using recognising and recording progress and achievement (RARPA) effectively
- Proportion of good or better learning sessions
- Performance management
- Use of information learning technology

Main findings

Achievement and standards

Inadequate: Grade 4

12. Achievement and standards are unsatisfactory, but many learners produce good standards of work in the classroom. For example, in art and craft classes learners produce a wide range of work including intricate stained glass. In preparation for life and work provision, most learners improve their social skills, increase their self-esteem and confidence. In family learning, the development of parenting skills is often good.
13. Retention rates are high and have steadily risen for both accredited and non accredited provision. In 2006/07, they were 86%.
14. The RAPRA process is well established and used effectively in some curriculum areas. Achievement rates derived from this process are high. Generally however, the recording of learners' personal aims and the monitoring of achievements is not sufficiently robust for inspectors to use the data with confidence.
15. Success rates for accredited courses are low. Over a 3 year period, from 2004/05 to 2006/07, overall SR for accredited provision fell from 48% to 45%. This is well below national averages. In particular the success rates for PLW national tests results are low. This provision constitutes a significant proportion of RBC's funding. At the module level, some English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) achievement rates are very good.
16. Most learners following Train to Gain programmes have made slow progress. Of the 51 learners who should have completed their Teaching Assistants national vocational qualification (NVQ) level 2, none have yet passed.

Quality of provision

Satisfactory: Grade 3

17. Quality of provision is satisfactory Teaching and learning is satisfactory. Inspectors did not agree with the self-assessment report's judgement that a high proportion of lessons are good or better. Few lessons are outstanding and inspectors' observed a number of unsatisfactory lessons. In most areas, course and lesson planning are satisfactory. In the better lessons, teaching is lively and good use is made of stimulating activities. Learners respond particularly well to tasks that encourage them to share their ideas and experiences. In art, teachers use a range of activities to further extend and challenge learners. ICT teachers provide particularly good individual support for learners during workshop activities. Language teaching is generally lively and stimulating.
18. Weaker teaching is categorised by teachers talking too much. Paired or group work does not always have a clear purpose. On preparation for life and work courses there is often an over reliance on worksheets and little reference to learners individual goals. Initial assessment is of variable quality and often subject to local interpretation. In general, the use of ILPs and target-setting is weak. Most teachers are suitably qualified or are working towards an appropriate qualification. Learning resources are generally satisfactory and good in ICT. However, preparation for life and work classrooms are often bland and uninteresting. Most teachers use of information learning technology is poor, but it is good in ICT provision.

19. RBC offers a broad range of accredited and non-accredited courses. The portfolio enables learners to build on previous achievement or experience. Some non-traditional learners, including those with special learning needs, gain qualifications, and progress through different routes into further learning, employment or new activities. RBC responds positively to the local community and employer requirements. For example they offer and assess Train to Gain provision in the workplace. This includes NVQs for IT Users (ITQ) and teaching assistant NVQs. Many learners plan to progress onto different levels once they complete successfully. Course design is responsive to learner feedback and to identified community needs. For example, wine tasting training or local businesses and IT for Pakistani men. Local partnerships with extended schools, children's centres and community groups have led to benefits for many learners. Joint projects in family learning and parenting courses have resulted in some learners gaining employment within very short periods of time. RBC enrolls many learners from groups who are often under-represented in education such as carers, ex-substance abusers, young offenders and those with physical and mental health problems. Some courses combine essential skills training with vocational qualifications in occupational areas such as childcare. RBC provides a range of well attended enrichment activities.
20. RBC offers a good range of advice, support and guidance for a diverse range of learners. Teachers' support their learners well and some offer advice on personal, health and social issues. Retention is good and many learners with the help of mentors, volunteers and peer buddy arrangements, overcome significant barriers to their learning. Induction arrangements are satisfactory and the learner handbook contains clear information about RBC's services. Respect for others is promoted throughout the organisation and learners feel safe. Initial advice and career guidance is good with many learners becoming members of RBC's highly responsive, drop-in employment service located in the centre of Reading. The provision includes independent careers' advice, up-to-date benefits information and they can access free training resources. Pre-course advice received during taster sessions is good. Personal enquiries are handled in friendly manner and most learners experience a seamless service throughout the enrolment process. Some learners benefit from funded additional learning support, but there is no systematic monitoring of outcomes. There is satisfactory use of a range of assistive technology to support learners with a wide range of learning and physical disabilities. Individual support is provided in many classes for learners with learning difficulties, but initial assessment is not always linked to their learning plans. Crèche facilities are available to learners at subsidised rates.

Leadership and management

Inadequate: Grade 4

Equality of opportunity

Contributory grade: Satisfactory: Grade 3

21. Leadership and management is inadequate. However, plans to transform service are sound, radical and well advanced. Six months before the inspection, RBC recognised the need to restructure and realign its community provision. The objective was to ensure that a future service would play a key role in helping the council achieve economic wellbeing and renewal for Reading. The creation of New Directions was deemed insufficient to bring about the necessary improvements in quality, management and learner achievement. A thorough review of all key components of the service has resulted in sound plans to transform the service. The proposal has already achieved interim council approval, in readiness for full implementation. The review process is being handled well and staff remain well motivated.
22. Initiatives to promote social inclusion are good. New Directions now provides a good advice and guidance service and a range of programmes in priority areas. The offer for individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities and mental health needs and those facing exclusion from learning is good. Partnership working is effective and longstanding. RBC staff are actively involved in a range of strategic and working groups that research and plan provision across Reading. RBC and their partners have a good record in jointly bidding for funding. They respond flexibly to business and community needs. Outreach workers work closely with a range of organisations to engage hard to reach learners. Staff work closely with external specialist agencies for example, community mental health and disability organisations.
23. The promotion of equality of opportunity is satisfactory. RBC's policy for equality of opportunity is comprehensive and up-to-date. RBC fulfils its obligations under the relevant race relations, disability and equality legislation. RBC's response to Disability Discrimination Act requirements is good. Staff development and training in equality of opportunity is thorough. Equality of opportunity information for learners at induction is appropriate. The promotion of equality and diversity in teaching and learning is improving. In some instances, learners' understanding of diversity issues is weak.
24. The management of resources and development of staff are satisfactory. Every year staff are encouraged to undertake professional training. Activities include equality of opportunity, ILT, health and safety and RAPRA. However, attendance at some staff development activities is poor. In some areas, too few teachers have teaching qualifications. The availability of information learning technology has increased, but its impact on learners is still minimal. Centres are generally well equipped and friendly, but some classrooms are underused.
25. Arrangements for literacy, numeracy and language support are satisfactory. The provision of individual additional learning support has increased and is good in some areas. Arrangements for safeguarding learners are satisfactory. RBC has an up-to-date policy; staff are Criminal Records Bureau checked and understand their responsibilities.
26. Curriculum management is poor in many areas. Some areas are without a named manager and there is too much variation in practice. Marketing, enrolment and referral have

improved, but some learners fail to receive information on course changes. There is inconsistent use of recently updated documentation. Initial assessment is sometimes poor and insufficiently robust to inform the planning of learning. Target-setting is weak. For PCDL courses, processes to measure and record learners' progress and achievement are not established sufficiently. There is insufficient focus on performance management.

27. The availability, understanding and use of management information are inadequate. Arrangements for the collection of data have improved since the previous inspection and new systems are in place. However, insufficient progress has been made to develop relevant reports and to train staff at all levels. RBC does not analyse the performance of different groups sufficiently. Managers do not effectively use data to inform decisions about target-setting, self-assessment and quality improvement.
28. Since the previous inspection, there has been inadequate improvement in the quality of provision. Action to raise success rates in accredited programmes was slow and ineffective. Although overall rates have improved, they remain well below national averages and have declined in the largest area of provision preparation for life and work. RBC recognises slow progress and the lack of consistency, in implementing new quality arrangements. There is too much variation in the standards found on many courses. The lesson observation process is detailed and thorough, but has had insufficient impact to raise standards above the norm. Sharing of good practice is satisfactory in some areas, but poor in others.

What learners like:

- Tasters to give you an idea what classes will actually be like before you enrol
- The chance to change courses after the first few sessions
- Good prior information and guidance with learner handbooks that tell you all about what to expect
- Flexible courses to meet personal needs
- ‘Crèche facility allows me to attend classes’
- ‘Being able to work at my own pace’
- Really value the opportunity to develop my skills to my children better
- ‘Really interesting to meet other parents in similar situations.’
- ‘I didn’t know how to communicate, but with my teacher’s help I have travelled very far. I even entered a competition and I wrote a story.’
- ‘As my teachers are highly motivated and they like their job, it helps me enjoy my class.’

What learners think could improve:

- More communication about alternative courses available following cancellations
- Accommodation - sometimes too cramped for activity classes;
- Noise from next door classes
- ‘More varied learning materials. I would like to be able to take my workbook home’
- ‘Filling in all these forms (individual learning plans) are very artificial’
- ‘These lessons are not enough for me. I want to be under pressure. I want to learn more.’

Sector subject areas

ICT for users

Good: Grade 2

Context

29. The offer includes courses in office software applications, digital imaging, use of the internet and web design. Three quarters of the ICT provision is non-accredited, but accredited courses are available at entry level and at levels 1, 2 and 3. Courses are offered at two of RBC's own centres, local schools, community centres and a centre for young parents. Courses range from 5 to 36 weeks, mostly taking place in the day or evening as two hour sessions. At the time of the inspection, there were 253 learners enrolled on 29 classes. The majority were female, with 17% from minority ethnic groups.

Strengths

- Good achievement of individual learning goals
- Good retention rates
- Particularly good teaching in workshops
- Good support for learners
- Very good programme management

Areas for improvement

- Ineffective use of individual learning plans

Achievement and standards

30. Learners make good progress in achieving their individual learning goals. Most increase in confidence, develop appropriate skills and can explain what they have learnt. Learners from disadvantaged areas, many of whom failed to achieve at school, achieve externally accredited qualifications. Many learners progress from entry through to level two and some to level three. Advanced learners are helped to progress onto another provider. There are many examples of learners who after completing their course enter employment. Others become volunteer learning assistants at RBC after following appropriate training.

31. Retention rates are good. For the last three years, retention in accredited classes has fluctuated between 81% and 89%. In PCDL classes, they are even higher, and in one year reached 93%. Attendance at classes is satisfactory at 83%.

32. Learners' work and progress in lessons is at least satisfactory and sometimes good given the learners' backgrounds and the courses they are undertaking. Success rates on accredited qualifications are satisfactory.

Quality of provision

33. The teaching in workshop sessions is particularly good. Inspectors did not observe any inadequate teaching and much was good or outstanding. Teachers routinely vary their activities from individual teaching to whole group activities. They are very good at developing background knowledge and understanding and building on underlying concepts. Learners are challenged regularly through the use of good question and answer technique.
34. Support for learners is good. Learners receive good advice before enrolling. At outreach centres, they are routinely given an exit interview upon completion of their course. RBC provides a good range of adaptive technology. In RBC's own centres, each computer room has a desk which is adjustable for wheelchair users, a computer station with a large screen monitor and a large letter keyboard for the visually impaired learners. Teachers adjust the computer settings to assist learners with visual impairment. For learners attending outreach centres there is good additional support. Learners speak positively about the help and support they receive during difficult times in their lives. If required, specialist support is available to help learners in classes. Crèches, available in many centres, make it possible for many women to attend relevant courses.
35. The range of programmes offered is satisfactory. Accredited programmes have been rationalised to create an appropriate ICT portfolio. Good use is made of workshops to teach different courses in the same class; particularly where there is insufficient demand to run separate groups.
36. The use of ILPs is ineffective. The planned outcomes used to measure learners' progress are too broad. Interim and final targets are not set by date. Learners record the exercises they have completed or the pages they have read in their textbook but not the skills they learned. Teachers do not record where and how learners can improve their skills.

Leadership and management

37. Management of the programme area is very good. Communications between all staff are good. Team meetings take place regularly and part time teachers receive financial support to attend. Meetings always include an element of sharing good practice. Teachers routinely share learning resources and are increasing pioneering the use of RBC's fledgling virtual learning environment (VLE). Quality improvement strategies are well established. The targets from last year's quality improvement plan were realistic and have been achieved. Observation of teaching and learning has been effective in raising standards. IT specialists carry out observations; teachers value the process. Observation reports are written well and contain clear judgements. Grades are moderated and detailed action plan are followed up. The SAR is mostly accurate. All staff contribute to the writing of the SAR and feel appropriately involved.
38. Resources for learning are good. Specialist equipment is up-to-date and software is at industry standards. Internet connections are sufficiently fast and reliable. Furniture is good, although in some outreach centres individual desk space is insufficient. Most workshops have a good range of learning resources. Teachers are increasingly using ILT and are starting to make good use of the VLE. However, the range of learning materials available for more advanced learners is limited. ICT teachers are well qualified and experienced. Arrangements to promote equality of opportunity are satisfactory. Inspectors

observed some examples of teachers including equality and diversity issues during lessons.

39. The use of data to monitor and improve performance is unsatisfactory. Across the provision attendance is not monitored routinely. Analysis of learner performance by category such as gender, age or ethnicity does not take place at course level.

Arts, Media and Publishing

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

40. Most provision is non-accredited and the offer includes pottery, dressmaking, mixed media, creative writing, singing, photography and craft. There is one accredited course in dressmaking, but this will not be offered in 2008-09. Most classes run for ten or twelve weeks a term, in two hour sessions. Most are in the day or evening, with some taster sessions and additional classes offered at weekends and during the summer school holidays. Courses are offered at RBC's three main adult education centres and a number of community outreach venues. At the time of inspection there are 395 learners on non-accredited courses and eight completing their accredited course.

Strengths

- Good standard of learners work in arts and craft courses
- Good retention rates
- Particularly challenging range of activities to develop learners' skills
- Good additional support for learners

Areas for improvement

- Insufficient use of ILPs to support learning
- Insufficiently developed curriculum offer
- Weak aspects of curriculum management

Achievement and standards

41. In arts and crafts courses, learners produce a good standard of work. Intricate pieces are created from a wide range of media, such as pencil, water colour and stained glass. Many learners learn how to take account of scale during the design process. Some groups produce seasonal greetings cards and other marketable work. The ability of learners to work independently and with confidence has increased. Some learners progress onto higher education as well as participating in exhibitions, competitions, fashion shows and local choirs.

42. Retention rates are good. In 2006/07 for both PDCL and FE courses the rate was 88%. Achievement based on RBC's own RARPA data is satisfactory overall, but the process is unreliable. Success rates on accredited courses are satisfactory. Attendance at lessons during the inspection week was satisfactory at 77%.

Quality of provision

43. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. In art and design learners benefit from a wide range of particularly challenging activities. Experienced teachers plan their lessons well. They are good at developing learners' skills to maximise their potential. In some of the better lessons, learners develop intellectual skills of reason and critical appraisal. Teachers routinely record learning through the use of digital cameras. Photographs are then used to inform the assessment of a learner's progress. In many lessons however, teachers do not

always fully address individual needs. Generally, verbal feedback is appropriate, supportive and motivates learners.

44. Additional support for learners in arts and craft is good. Where required, learners are able to access and use adaptive resources to enable them to participate fully in classes. For instance, use is made of a modified potter's wheel for learners with restricted mobility and an overhead light source to help visually impaired learners work on intricate pieces.
45. Overall, the use and availability of learning resources is satisfactory. Teachers make effective use of a range of stimuli, and in a few better classes, information learning technology is used to further support the learning.
46. Learner progression is satisfactory. While many learners do not progress beyond a certain level, they often follow different but related courses each year. For others there are higher level courses to build on the skills already attained.
47. The use of ILPs to support learning is insufficient. Often, teachers and learners fail to recognise the value of ILPs. Often there is no clear link between ILPs and how learners' progress during their course. In better classes, teachers have adopted their own methods successfully, and assessment is satisfactory. In many courses initial assessment is not robust enough to start the ILP process.
48. The curriculum offer is insufficiently developed. The range of performing arts and music classes is very narrow and in some areas is reducing. Opportunities for progression, while satisfactory on some courses, are very limited on others.

Leadership and management

49. Some aspects of curriculum management are weak. The area of arts, media and publishing is the responsibility of a manager in charge of a number of other curriculum areas. Given the breadth of these management responsibilities, there is insufficient focus on the development and improvement of standards within the area.
50. Generally however, teachers feel well supported. Targets are set at both the curriculum area and course level, but data is not used sufficiently to inform the process. Wider research and consultation does take place and stakeholders views are taken into account. Staff are generally suitably experienced, but many teachers do not hold an appropriate teaching qualification.
51. The processes to quality assure the provision are mostly satisfactory. Teachers are observed fairly regularly and in most cases the resulting report is well written and useful. However, in some cases the observer does not record any developmental action points. While verbal suggestions are routine, the monitoring of suggested improvements are poor. The self-assessment process is inclusive. Teachers and learners contribute through individual course evaluations. However, specific areas for improvement identified at this stage are often not included in the final report.
52. The promotion of equality of opportunity is satisfactory. In the better lessons teachers use a range of cultural references selected from source materials. Classrooms are accessible for learners with a physical disability. Learners identified with additional learning needs are supported well.

Modern Foreign Languages

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

53. At the time of inspection, 411 learners were following 41 non-accredited courses. Provision is offered at three of RBC's main sites and two community venues. Thirteen learners were following an accredited course in British Sign Language (BSL). Foreign languages currently running include Arabic, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish. Courses are offered at seven different levels and in the daytime and evening.

Strengths

- Good retention rates
- Much lively and stimulating teaching

Areas for improvement

- Ineffective measurement of learners' progress
- Inadequate curriculum management

Achievement and standards

54. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Retention rates are good. In 2006/07, 94% of learners were retained on BSL accredited courses. In the same year, 78% of learners following non-accredited foreign language courses successfully completed. The standard of learners' work is generally satisfactory and in some cases good. In lessons where teachers actively use the taught language throughout the lesson, including at beginner level, learners' skills and confidence in listening and speaking develop well. At higher levels, many learners' reading and writing skills improve considerably. RBC's recorded achievements on non-accredited courses are not reliable, due to weaknesses in the RARPA system used to record non-accredited learning outcomes. Success rates on accredited BSL courses are low.

Quality of provision

55. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. Many teachers create lively and stimulating lessons through a variety of activities and games. There is generally a good focus on developing the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. Learners enjoy their lessons. Schemes of work are designed around themes that appeal to the specific groups. Learners at higher levels contribute significantly to lessons with presentations on subjects of interest. Homework is set and marked in detail and returned promptly. Teachers ensure that learners who miss classes are sent the lesson content and homework by post or email. In less successful lessons, the learning outcomes for the courses itself and individual lessons, are too broad to be achievable. Not all teachers use choral repetition where it would be helpful to improve pronunciation. Teachers make little use of information learning technology. Some do not use pair and small group work sufficiently to ensure learners have opportunities to speak.

56. RBC offers a satisfactory range of courses. In addition to the standard eight languages already identified, Mandarin Chinese, Polish and Russian are available if the demand is sufficient. To stimulate demand RBC occasionally offers 10 week introductory courses. The range of German courses covering five levels from beginners to advanced is exceptional. However, RBC cancels too many courses offered in the prospectus. No courses run on employers' premises. There are few enrichment activities. RBC successfully promoted BSL courses during the summer, but was then unable to meet the resulting demand when two of its BSL teachers left.
57. Initial advice and guidance are satisfactory. Pre-course information has improved and frontline staff are well briefed. Course titles in the prospectus now relate better to course levels, but course information is still not entirely clear. Taster arrangements are good and allow potential learners to sample classes. However, clear course outcomes are not specified unless potential learners request this information. There is no self-test of the specific language skills needed for each course.
58. Support for learners is satisfactory. Teachers provide mostly good support for learners in their classes. Many have a good awareness of the needs of learners particularly those with a physical disability such as a hearing and/or sight impairment. Where possible volunteers provide support for learners with specific difficulties, although this help is not always effective. Some learners have one to one sessions with their teacher or are sent recordings made by them. Generally, teachers receive little training on how best to support learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. Progress on the installation and use of hearing loops is slow.
59. Attempts to measure learners' progress are ineffective. In general, however, systems for recording progress and achievement have improved since 2006/07. Teachers are now clearer about what is acceptable as evidence of competence for non-accredited courses. Initial assessment used to clarify each learners starting point is routine. However, the language skills required for each course, are too loosely defined. Learners' progress is recorded whenever it occurs and specifically at the end of a course. However, as the expected learning outcomes of a course are often not specific enough the exercise does not add value. The recording of learners' individual personal goals is unsatisfactory. Teachers' make their own judgements about learners' achievements without moderation.

Leadership and management

60. Curriculum management is inadequate. Although improvements have been made to processes such as initial assessment and recording of progress, their impact is minimal. Areas for improvement identified by inspectors were not all identified in the SAR. Managers do not make enough use of essential data. Insufficient analysis of programme defects has led to ineffective actions. Communications with teachers and centre staff are not always satisfactory. Although a small range of useful staff development events are offered, attendance is often poor. Teachers have insufficient opportunities to share good practice. Some learning resources are unsatisfactory. Teachers are appropriately qualified in their subject and many are native speakers. However, only one third have a higher level teaching qualification. Teachers do not use information learning technology effectively and most new interactive whiteboards and data projectors are not yet operative. The supply of language resources is very limited.

61. Quality assurance is unsatisfactory. Observations of teaching and learning by a specialist linguist are rigorous and effective. However, in 2006/07, the target of 50% of teachers to be observed at least once was not achieved. Teachers use learner evaluations well and incorporate their suggestions into lesson planning. However, in general the quality improvement plan for 2006/07 was ineffective. There is no system for the internal validation of non-accredited achievements. Equality and diversity are unsatisfactory. Teachers have little understanding of promoting equal opportunities beyond catering for different individual needs. Diversity issues seldom feature in schemes of work. No analysis of participation rates is undertaken.

Preparation for Life and Work

Inadequate: Grade 4

Context

62. At the time of inspection there were 505 learners following English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses, 184 in literacy, 71 in numeracy and 95 learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on discrete programmes. Most courses lead to an accredited qualification and are available from entry level to level 2. Learners usually attend either for 2 or 4 hours per week. The year is divided into two semesters: one from September to February and the other from February to July.

Strengths

- Good development of learners' personal skills and confidence
- Good collaborative working

Areas for improvement

- Low success rates
- Insufficient focus on learning outside the classroom
- Poor use of learning resources
- Inadequate curriculum management

Achievement and standards

63. Achievement and standards are unsatisfactory. However, the development of learners' personal skills and confidence are good. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities devise and perform an annual public performance in drama and ESOL learners at all levels are confident to express themselves and not afraid to make mistakes. Some entry level literacy learners produce ambitious work, including poetry and stories. Many learners are highly motivated, often by a desire to succeed at work or to help their children.

64. Success rates are low. In 2006/07 only 45% of learners achieved their target qualification. In literacy this was 53%, numeracy 68% and ESOL 30%. Using RBC's own approach to RARPA, the recorded success rate for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities was 84%. In some classes attendance is erratic although retention recorded centrally is good.

Quality of provision

65. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. On courses for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities there are some good lessons, typified by lively activities, particularly in pottery and music. The ratio of staff to learners is often high. However, in the weaker lessons, teachers are too dominant. Some ESOL teachers make good use of progressive tasks that build up learners' skills step-by-step. Teachers include stimulating activities in every lesson. Learners respond particularly well to tasks that enable them to express their ideas or share their experiences. In weaker lessons teachers talk too much; and learners talk too little. Lessons are often poorly structured. There is too much emphasis on paired

work for no apparent reason and ineffective use of group work. Few observed lessons made good use of peer coaching or role play. In the stronger literacy lessons learning is highly individualised. In the weaker lessons there is an over-emphasis on exam coaching, an over reliance on worksheets and little reference to individual goals on ILPs.

66. Initial assessment in literacy and ESOL is satisfactory. Learners are interviewed effectively and various diagnostic tools are used to assess current skills. Mostly, learners are placed on the right level course and there are good opportunities to change groups. However, initial assessment for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is inadequate. Teachers lack vital information about learners' support needs. Some learners find themselves attending inappropriate classes and there is insufficient co-ordination of planning to meet individual needs.
67. There are good initiatives to meet the needs of learners with mental ill health, for example taking provision into hospital wards. A community writing group has been set up as a result of this course. There are also some good instances of how literacy learning can be directly linked to learners' needs and interests. For instance, in one session a learner was working with a volunteer to prepare for a health and safety test, vital for working in the construction industry.
68. Learner support is satisfactory and teachers provide good personal support. In the better sessions for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, support workers have their roles carefully planned. Additional support funding is used effectively, to help ESOL learners with their fees. The volunteer programme attracts a diverse range of people many of whom train as learning support workers.
69. Learning resources are poor. Literacy, numeracy and ESOL classes take place in uninspiring classrooms. ESOL learners work predominately from worksheets, with only some use of tape recordings. Literacy learners receive poorly photocopied materials. Information learning technology is rarely used except in the better sessions for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There is often only one PC in each room and these are underused. In most rooms, the position of the teachers' desk or seat creates a barrier to group work.
70. There is insufficient focus on learning outside the classroom. Teachers do not take advantage of the many opportunities that learners' have in their every day lives to build on classroom learning. Learners are not sufficiently encouraged to develop independent learning skills. ILPs do not capture the full range of possibilities. Learners often express the view that the two or four hours they spend in formal classes are not enough to fully develop their skills.

Leadership and management

71. Leadership and management is inadequate. Collaboration between staff is good particularly between recently appointed fractional teachers and team leaders. There is strong commitment to bring about improvement. For example, strengthening links across areas of learning; improving the sharing of ideas; training volunteers and mentoring new teachers. Overall however, curriculum management is inadequate. RBC's skills for life strategy is out of date. There is insufficient promotion of numeracy for learners identified as weak and numbers on numeracy courses are low. Too many classes are cancelled. Publicity materials are difficult for some learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to understand. For learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities the curriculum offer is limited, with few opportunities for progression. Many teachers lack the necessary specialist training to work with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Progress towards teachers gaining level 4 qualifications is very slow. The service has been slow to adopt and promote the use of computers and e-learning. The long break during the summer often hinders learners' progress. The self-assessment report failed to identify some significant weaknesses. The use and understanding of data is poor. Improving low qualification success rates is not a priority for all teachers. National tests are not widely available on demand.

Family Learning

Satisfactory: Grade 3

Context

72. At the time of inspection, 96 learners were enrolled on 10 family learning courses, based at eight venues around Reading. These include schools and community centres. Twenty seven learners were attending family literacy, language and numeracy programmes, while a further 69 attended wider family learning provision. Family literacy, language and numeracy courses include short family literacy and numeracy programmes. The programmes are mostly aimed at parents with children at the Foundation Stage, and Key Stages One and Two. Wider family learning provision includes programmes designed to encourage parent and child interaction such as, creative arts and craft courses.

Strengths

- Good development of personal, social and parenting skills
- Good standards of learners' work
- Particularly effective programmes for hard-to-reach learners

Areas for improvement

- Ineffective target-setting for learners
- Ineffective management of some aspects of the programme

Achievement and standards

73. Achievement and standards are satisfactory. Learners develop good personal, social and parenting skills. Many learners improve their skills, for example in helping their children to read better. Learners make particularly good progress in arts and crafts provision. Learners have increased levels of confidence and self-esteem. Many become more involved at their children's school and some work as volunteer readers or support assistants. A few learners have progressed from the family learning programme to work as a learning support assistant for RBC. The standard of work in learners' folders is good. Learners working on computers complete tasks to a good standard. Learners enthusiastically undertake many practical assignments, for example, adults and children making pieces of pottery together for the first time.

74. Learners' achievement on accredited courses is low, but retention rates are good. Few learners gained qualifications in 2006/07, especially in family, literacy, language and numeracy. Learners' achievement of ILP targets is satisfactory.

Quality of provision

75. Teaching and learning are satisfactory. On many courses, learners take part in a variety of well paced and challenging activities. They participate well in sessions and respond appropriately to questions. Teachers' effectively use praise and encouragement. There is a good variety of learning resources, and teachers sometime use information learning technology well. Course and session plans are adequate and learning outcomes are mapped onto the skills for life adult curricula. Lessons however, do not cater sufficiently for the diverse needs of learners that attend.

76. RBC provides particularly effective programmes for hard-to-reach learners. For example, they have sustained an impressive family learning programme with a local young offenders' institution over a three year period. Many of these young offenders, record stories and other learning materials, for their children to play at home, on tapes and CDs. RBC works in partnership with the local Primary Care Trust to provide programmes at schools where high percentages of parents are experiencing difficulties with their children. The service has also run healthy eating programmes targeted at Asian women and courses for parents with behavioural difficulties referred by social services. However, the overall range of programmes is only satisfactory. The family, literacy, language and numeracy programme is insufficiently developed. For instance, there are too few opportunities for family, literacy, language and numeracy learners to develop their literacy, language or numeracy skills through longer, intensive family, literacy, language and numeracy programmes.
77. The provision of information, advice and guidance, before the start of a course and at exit, is satisfactory. Learners receive satisfactory advice from teachers relating to progression. Teachers provide effective personal support for learners inside and outside the classroom. Satisfactory systems are in place to identify and support learners with additional support needs. However, RBC has not replaced a specialist who at one stage assessed and supported learners with dyslexia.
78. Target-setting is ineffective. At the start of a course, initial assessment does not adequately capture learners' skills levels or identify their developmental needs. On family, literacy, language and numeracy programmes, learners' levels of literacy, language and numeracy are not tested sufficiently. ILPs do not contain sufficiently detailed or measurable targets. Teachers do not receive support or guidance in conducting initial assessment or the setting of targets.

Leadership and management

79. Leadership and management is inadequate. Communication between staff is good and teachers participate in regular team meetings. Staff are satisfied with the support they receive from managers. The system used to observe teaching and learning is satisfactory. Observers' judgements are mostly sound and the grades awarded are appropriate. Teachers receive adequate levels of feedback following an observation. Managers and observers discuss information about areas for improvement identified during observations. However, there is no formal system to follow up identified actions. Teachers and learners complete thorough course evaluations. These contribute to improvements in the quality of programmes. The SAR for preparation for life and work is broadly satisfactory, but does not include sufficient detail on family learning. In general staff do not contribute effectively to the self-assessment process or sufficiently influence planning.

80. Resources are satisfactory. Most staff are qualified to level 4. However, no family, literacy, language and numeracy staff have, or are working towards, a relevant subject specialist qualifications in teaching literacy, numeracy or ESOL. Learners on most courses have satisfactory access to ICT. Teachers and learners use a satisfactory range of materials, resources and equipment.
81. The management of some aspects of the programme is ineffective. Managers do not provide teachers with sufficient information about the nature and purpose of some courses. Learners on some family, literacy, language and numeracy courses are not sufficiently clear that the essence of their programme is for them to improve their literacy, language or numeracy skills. Some programmes called family learning programmes do not meet national expectations. Managers do not use data to plan or evaluate the effectiveness of the provision. RBC has no clear strategic vision for the development of family learning. Learners on family, literacy, language and numeracy programmes do not have sufficient access to the national literacy or numeracy tests or qualifications available at entry level three. RBC plans to improve this in the future.