

School inspection report

30 April to 2 May 2024

Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading

220–222 Kings Road

Reading

Berkshire

RG1 4JJ

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as ‘the Standards’.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Governors and leaders have a clear and realistic understanding of the school's strengths. Senior leaders have improved the school's administrative systems so that the organisation runs efficiently. Senior and subject leaders have been instrumental in improving the curriculum, personal development and teaching. Although day-to-day management of the school's business systems are effective, such as health and safety and recruitment, leaders over the longer term do not routinely look for trends or patterns to see where they could be even more effective in the quality and consistency of delivery over time.
2. Governors bring a wealth of relevant knowledge and experience to their roles. They ensure that leaders promote pupils' wellbeing effectively. Governors are skilled in supporting leaders and holding them to account for the school's work. Governors ensure that leaders have the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out their responsibilities effectively so that the Standards are met.
3. Leaders implement a curriculum that is carefully tailored to meet pupils' individual and often complex needs. Teachers plan and deliver engaging activities that help pupils regain their enthusiasm for learning. Through nurturing and therapeutic approaches, often consisting of individual support, pupils' confidence and self-esteem grows so that they are able to form positive relationships with their classmates and staff. The school is successful in reducing many barriers so that pupils behave well and engage positively in their learning.
4. The premises, including the medical room, are maintained to a suitable standard. Pupils are supervised appropriately throughout the day, including during breaks and lunchtimes. Secure risk assessment procedures ensure that risks which may affect pupils' welfare, health and safety are identified and mitigated. Leaders provide all the required information to parents and to all the local authorities placing pupils at the school.
5. The school's challenge programme helps pupils prepare for adulthood by helping pupils gain an understanding of human, social and economic matters. Through real-life activities, pupils develop their financial literacy by learning how to manage money and the benefits of budgeting to make sound financial decisions.
6. Staff tailor teaching activities to pupils' interests and needs effectively. They pay close attention to how well pupils learn. Staff are quick to spot any emerging misconceptions and skilfully adapt their teaching in response. As a result, pupils of all ages and abilities are well motivated and enjoy their learning. Pupils successfully gain appropriate qualifications in a range of academic and vocational subjects. When they leave, all pupils proceed to college or further training and sustain their placement.
7. Safeguarding permeates all aspects of leaders' work. The safeguarding team ensures that effective arrangements are in place to ensure that the latest statutory guidance is implemented. They also ensure that staff are appropriately trained and understand their responsibilities to help keep pupils safe from harm. Staff are vigilant in spotting any changes in pupils' mood and refer their concerns in a timely way. Understanding pupils' vulnerabilities well, staff take every opportunity to teach pupils how to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations, including when using the internet.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- strengthen the oversight of the school's business systems, such as health and safety and recruitment, over a longer time frame in order to spot where leaders could be even more effective in the consistent implementation of policy and practice.

Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

8. Reorganisation of leadership responsibilities is having a positive impact on the school's effectiveness in implementing its aims, ethos and policies. Leaders have developed subject leadership and improved curriculum planning and delivery. They have also strengthened systems, such as the tracking of pupils' progress and the recording of data related to attendance, behaviour and safeguarding. This has resulted in greater efficiency in ensuring that pupils' wellbeing and the increasingly complex needs of the cohort are met.
9. Governors visit the school regularly to check that policies and procedures are working well. They check to see that leaders have the right skills and knowledge to carry out their responsibilities proficiently. This enables leaders to run the school in accordance with its aims and ethos. Governors provide effective support and challenge to leaders to ensure that the Standards are met consistently, and the wellbeing of the pupils is actively promoted.
10. Leaders and governors ensure that the day-to-day management of the school's business systems, such as health and safety and recruitment, are managed effectively. However, leaders do not fully review all of this information over the longer term, to look for trends or patterns to see where they could be even more effective in the quality and consistency of delivery over time.
11. Pupils are taught by subject specialists. Subject leaders have a comprehensive overview of their subject and outcomes for pupils. Subject leaders have developed detailed and bespoke curriculum plans. In addition, leaders have introduced new qualifications which are well suited to pupils' individual and additional needs. This has raised pupils' expectations, ambition and life chances.
12. Leaders have introduced a teaching and learning training programme, which is having a positive impact on the quality of teaching. Leaders are providing detailed individual feedback and coaching, following lesson observations and have introduced new arrangements for staff appraisal. This is strengthening curriculum planning and delivery and improving pupils' outcomes.
13. The school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. There is an appropriate and well-reviewed accessibility strategy and plan. Suitable adjustments are made so that pupils can access their learning. Leaders have created an inclusive and accessible environment where pupils feel safe and secure so that they are able to thrive.
14. Central to the school's curriculum is its personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE) programmes. These are delivered effectively and promote pupils' wellbeing and pastoral care. These opportunities support pupils to understand the importance of tolerance and respect. Staff role model these behaviours to pupils. Pupils value the relationships that they develop with each other and with the adults who care for them. Pupils and staff mutually create a safe and harmonious community.
15. Effective steps are taken to identify, manage and mitigate the range of risks, including considering pupils' individual circumstances and vulnerabilities. Staff implement risk management procedures effectively so that pupils can enjoy their learning activities and extend their knowledge, skills and experiences within a safe environment. Leaders work closely with the most appropriate external agencies to support individual pupils when needed.

16. A suitable complaints procedure is available on the school's website and is implemented effectively. Leaders respond appropriately to any concerns raised and in a timely manner.
17. All the required information regarding policies and procedures is available for parents and prospective parents on the school's website. All pupils are in receipt of an education, health and care (EHC) plan, which is funded by a local authority and reviewed annually. Leaders furnish local authority officers with all the required information about how the public money is spent to support its pupils. Parents receive suitable reports and regular updates, both electronic and face-to-face regarding their child's progress and attainment across all subjects.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

- 18. All the relevant Standards are met.**

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

19. The curriculum covers all the required areas of learning and has been designed to help pupils re-engage in their learning and to meet their needs. While it focuses on helping pupils to gain an increased sense of self-worth, it also develops academic potential and promotes pupils' social and emotional wellbeing. The curriculum is further enhanced by aesthetic and creative activities, such as art and music with a focus on practical real-life activities.
20. Pupils gain a range of qualifications matched to their interests, abilities and aptitudes, including functional skills, GCSE and or/other accreditation. Pupils make good progress from their starting points, and meet the targets set in their EHC plans. Staff recognise that the process of preparing pupils for examinations can be extremely stressful for pupils. Staff carefully scaffold support for pupils to access the increasing demands of the qualifications and accreditation. As a result, pupils gain an increased sense of self-worth, with many growing less anxious.
21. Teachers plan activities which are appropriate to pupils' needs. Staff use their expertise to explain new concepts effectively. They pay close attention to how well pupils learn. Staff are quick to spot any emerging misconceptions and skilfully adapt their teaching in response. This helps pupils to make connections in their studies so that they can recall their learning. Teachers support pupils well with a nurturing approach to learning. Pupils benefit from intensive and flexible teaching. Where needed, pupils receive one-to-one support. Pupils' individual preferences for learning are considered carefully and help to remove barriers to learning. Adaptive teaching resources, such as enlarged visual diagrams and fidget toys are deployed to reduce anxiety so that pupils are ready to learn and make good progress.
22. Teaching emphasises the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Through effective questioning and discussion pupils develop their skills and confidence in speaking and listening. Adults demonstrate the language they wish pupils to use. They also give pupils the skills to select the most appropriate level of formality in language to use for different occasions. The focus in developing this communication/life skill helps prepare pupils for adulthood and the workplace.
23. There is an effective assessment framework in place to track pupils' progress. A range of measures, both formal and informal, check pupils' aptitudes on arrival at the school so that their needs are correctly identified. All subjects use a standardised tracking system to collect additional data which is shared with all staff and tracks pupils' academic progress and wellbeing. This enables subject leaders to identify any gaps and target appropriate support.
24. Pupils participate in a wide range of recreational and enrichment activities which supports their personal development. Pupils engage in a variety of activities, including animal care, auto skills, Christian charity mentoring, coding and woodland studies. Participation in these activities expands pupils' leisure horizons, self-confidence, and emotional wellbeing. They are also able to explore and acquire new areas of interest and learn new skills.

25. Staff successfully promote fundamental British values by modelling mutual respect and tolerance in their interactions with pupils and other staff. This in turn helps pupils not to judge people based on stereotypes, such as faith, race and sexuality. Pupils learn to be respectful of different groups, both within the school and in the communities where they live.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

26. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

27. The physical education and recreation curriculum is flexible and carefully tailored to meet pupils' needs. Many opportunities are provided to engage pupils in sport and physical pursuits such as badminton, dodge ball and indoor cricket at local sports venues. Enrichment activities, such as go-karting, horse riding and trampolining allow pupils to try out new activities which extend their recreational horizons. On Fridays, pupils and staff participate together in fun-based community activities such as laser tag designed to develop pupils' self-knowledge, social skills and teamwork. Pupils understand that taking part in physical activities can impact positively on their mental and physical health and wellbeing.
28. RSE is delivered through PSHE lessons and the school's challenge programme. It has been carefully designed to meet pupils' precise needs. Parents have been consulted regarding its content and delivery. Topics such as consent, appropriate sexual behaviour, drugs awareness provide pupils with strategies to cultivate and maintain healthy and respectful relationships. When specific pupils need it, individual mentors provide one-to-one sessions to support pupils' bespoke needs, and to support them to access lessons with their peers in the longer term.
29. The creative curriculum helps pupils gain a sense of fulfilment and increases their confidence and self-esteem to express their deeper emotions. For example, when studying surrealism pupils considered what might be the moral purpose in the minds of artists such as Salvador Dali and Joan Miró when they produced their works.
30. Staff deploy effective strategies to reduce pupils' anxiety and stress. For example, they use reflection sheets to assess how pupils are managing their behaviour and engaging with their subjects. There is a chill out room where pupils can take time out for periods of quiet reflection. These actions help pupils to learn how to communicate and manage their heightened feelings and emotions and take responsibility for how they respond to different social situations. These techniques are successful in helping pupils to return to their lessons in a timely way.
31. Pupils are respectful towards staff and each other. Staff are focused in developing pupils' academic and personal potential by removing any barriers so that pupils are ready and able to learn. They take great care to nurture and support pupils so that they feel calm, confident and comfortable at the school. Relationships are positive and bullying is rare.
32. Pupils learn how to tolerate and respect people who may have a different experience of life to their own. A small proportion of pupils arrive at the school with pre-conceived misperceptions or elements of prejudicial views. Through challenge and open discussion, staff can correct these views so that pupils understand how damaging articulating these views can be on others. Over time, pupils tolerate and celebrate each other's differences.
33. Leaders have established effective partnerships with the seven local authorities that commission places at the school. This enables them to understand and meet pupils' needs by targeting specialist support such as counselling, educational psychology, art, music and speech therapies. The seamless integration of therapeutic approaches helps to support pupils' emotional and physical health and wellbeing.

34. The premises and accommodation are well maintained. Suitable steps are in place to ensure that the site is safe, and all reasonable action is taken to prevent risk. Effective procedures are in place to reduce the risk from fire. Regular fire evacuations take place during the day. Leaders take effective action to support pupils' individual needs when conducting risk, health and fire checks. Health and safety procedures and record-keeping meet requirements and are supplemented by checks conducted by external professionals.
35. A suitable medical room is available for pupils who are unwell. Effective protocols are in place for the administration of medicines, which are securely locked away. Record-keeping and communication with parents are appropriate.
36. Pupils are very well supervised, including at break and lunchtimes, in accordance with their individual plans and needs. Staff ensure that they are always on hand to support pupils' different needs.
37. Suitable policies and procedures are in place to ensure that attendance and admissions registers meet requirements. Information on any missing children, or those pupils who join or leave the school at non-standard times, are reported to the local authority. Leaders work closely with pupils, their families and local authority to improve pupils' attendance to the school.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

38. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

39. Pupils typically enter the school after extended periods of absence from school, and with complex needs and attitudes. Through a well-planned careers programme, teachers carefully guide and support individual pupils, and their parents, in making realistic next step career choices. Working with a local recruitment company, leaders have developed a programme to support pupils in preparing a curriculum vitae and practising their interview skills. As a result, pupils feel well prepared for the next stage of their education. In the last two years, all leavers have proceeded to appropriate further training or college.
40. Pupils' understanding of human, social and economic matters is carefully planned and promoted through the school's challenge programme. Pupils develop their financial literacy skills by learning how to apply them to real-life economic situations. For example, older pupils were given a salary and had to decide how the money would be allocated to pay various household bills when considering the cost of running a home. Younger pupils learn to recognise and appreciate the value of goods such as when saving their pocket money to buy a bicycle. These activities help pupils to learn how to manage their money and the benefits of budgeting to make sound financial decisions. These important life skills help prepare pupils for adult life in British society.
41. Pupils are encouraged to be of service to their community by undertaking a range of responsibilities which helps to develop their personal and social skills. With appropriate support, pupils take responsibility for making and selling cakes and badges to raise funds for local community charities. In the curriculum, teachers provide valuable opportunities for pupils to develop their own initiative such as deciding which materials to use when making worry boxes in design technology.
42. The PSHE curriculum and school's challenge programme helps pupils to understand the diverse nature of modern society and the importance of respecting difference. Pupils recognise individual characteristics that are protected in law. They understand what makes individuals special and about the different types of relationships and partnerships. Pupils are tolerant of, and celebrate, each other's differences. Pupils develop an appreciation and understanding of the diversity of cultures, traditions and values other than their own by, for example, through their study of different artists and cooking lessons.
43. If teachers plan activities where political issues are considered, they present a balanced range of views, as set out in the staff code of conduct policy. Educational outings to the Reading War memorial on Armistice Day and visits from different faith leaders, help pupils to appreciate, understand and respect religious and political difference. These 'live' experiences help pupils gain a broad understanding of tolerance issues in different countries across the world.
44. Staff model appropriate approaches to help pupils understand the principles of right and wrong and promote the school's aims and values. Pupils learn that building respectful relationships is central to British values. They understand the benefits and protections they offer when its citizens respect democracy and abide by the law.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

45. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

46. Safeguarding leaders are well trained and have established effective procedures that help to ensure pupils' safety and wellbeing. Leaders have drawn up a comprehensive child protection policy which follows the latest guidance. It provides clear guidance to staff so that they are confident in what they need to do if a safeguarding concern arises. Staff have undergone all the statutory training, including courses to prevent extremism.
47. Leaders provide a curriculum to support pupils to learn about how to keep themselves safe. The information and communication technology (ICT) and PSHE curriculum, and the school's challenge programme are regularly reviewed and adapted in the light of emerging trends and patterns of behaviour. For example, teachers plan and deliver lessons about online safety that present different scenarios for pupils to consider how they would feel and what actions they would take. This, together with similar activities, helps pupils to learn how to stay safe online. Effective filtering and monitoring systems are in place to monitor any inappropriate or harmful online activity.
48. Pupils feel safe physically and emotionally in the school and are comfortable to speak with a trusted adult if they have a worry or concern. An online concern box, accessible via a QR code, is also available for pupils to report any concerns should they feel unable to discuss matters directly with staff. Leaders use this system effectively to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing.
49. Leaders have established effective partnership working with the seven local authorities that commission places at the school. They also work effectively with other external agencies. They seek advice or make timely referrals to relevant agencies, such as children's services and the local authority safeguarding officer as required. These professional relationships enable the safeguarding leaders to consider and collate a wealth of information about each pupil so that staff can identify risks and put in place robust safety plans so that pupils' needs are met.
50. Suitable pre-employment checks are in place and are appropriately recorded in the central record of appointments.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

- 51. All the relevant Standards are met.**

School details

School	Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading
Department for Education number	870/6011
Registered charity number	1136446
Address	Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading 220–222 Kings Road Reading Berkshire RG1 4JJ
Phone number	0118 958 3004
Email address	admin@reading.rbic.org.uk
Website	www.redballoonlearner.org/locations/red-balloon-reading
Proprietor	Dr Caroline Herbert
Chair of governors	Mr Alasdair Pearson
Headteacher	Ms Michelle Masters
Age range	11 to 17
Number of pupils	23
Date of previous inspection	4 to 6 February 2020

Information about the school

52. Red Balloon Learner Centre is an independent co-educational day school for pupils in Reading who have missed extended periods of education in previous educational establishments. The school supports pupils who have experienced bullying and trauma and/or who have physical ill health, autism or social, emotional, mental, health (SEMH) needs.
53. The school is owned by a single proprietor, who is also the president of the Red Balloon Educational Trust Ltd, which is a registered charity. The proprietor and board of governors of Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading oversee the educational, welfare and financial arrangements of the school. A new headteacher was appointed in October 2022.
54. All pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
55. Currently there are no pupils in the sixth form.
56. No pupils speak English as an additional language.
57. The school states its aims are for pupils to regain their self-esteem and grow as individuals to reach their goals. It seeks to help them develop the confidence and skills to reintegrate with their peers and to successfully return to mainstream education, or move to alternative provision, further education, training, or employment.

Inspection details

Inspection dates

30 April to 2 May 2024

58. A team of two inspectors visited the school for two and a half days.

59. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, all of which were accompanied by senior leaders
- observation of registration periods
- discussions with pupils and examination of samples of their work
- discussions with the headteacher, senior leaders, other members of staff and three governors, including the chair
- reviewed processes for the provision of enrichment, PE and sports activities at offsite facilities
- scrutiny of curriculum documentation, a range of policies, and other documentation and records made available by the school.

60. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

How are association independent schools in England inspected?

- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

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