ISI Independent Schools Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Reports

Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading

February 2020

Contents

School's Details

School	Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading
DfE number	870/6011
Registered charity number	1136446
Address	Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading 220-222 Kings Road Reading Berkshire RG1 4JJ
Telephone number	0118 958 3004
Email address	admin@reading.rblc.org.uk
Headteacher	Ms Tristan McGuinness
Proprietor	Dr Caroline Herbert
Age range	11 to 17
Number of pupils on roll	22
	Key Stage 3 6 **Key Stage 4** 16
Inspection dates	4 to 6 February 2020

1.   Background Information

About the school

1.1   Red Balloon Learner Centre Reading is an independent co-educational day centre for pupils aged 11 to 17 years. The centre is a registered charity governed by local trustees and is one of four centres in the Red Balloon group. It opened in November 2011. The centre is organised into two sections: Key Stage 3 for pupils aged 11 to 14 and Key Stage 4 for pupils aged 14 to 17. A new headteacher was appointed in January 2019.

What the school seeks to do

1.2   Red Balloon Learner Centre supports young people who self-exclude from school and are missing education because of bullying or other trauma.

1.3   The centre aims to provide full-time and part-time recovery programmes that encompass education, personal development and well-being. It seeks to create a caring environment which enables the pupils to regain self-confidence, to make academic progress, and either to transfer to mainstream education or, for those over the age of 16, to access training.

About the pupils

1.4   Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds, mostly from white British families living within a 15-mile radius of the centre. The centre's own assessment indicates that the pupils have a very wide range of abilities. All of the pupils are identified by the centre as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), which include dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autistic spectrum conditions. Every pupil has an education, health and care (EHC) plan. No pupils have English as an additional language (EAL).

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The registration authority for independent schools is the Department for Education (DfE), which directs inspection according to a specified frequency or at any time where the DfE has particular concerns about a school. The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is the body approved by the Secretary of State for the purpose of inspecting schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and reporting on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Accordingly, inspection records whether the school meets each of these standards, which are arranged in eight Parts, each of which is divided into separate paragraphs. Additionally, the inspection reports on the school's accessibility plan under Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996. It comments on the progress made by the school in meeting the compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

All association independent schools will have an inspection within three years from April 2016, in accordance with the Framework and DfE requirements. The inspection may be of COMPLIANCE ONLY or a combined inspection of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY AND COMPLIANCE depending on a number of factors, including findings from their most recent inspection. Schools judged not to meet the standards may also be subject to a progress monitoring visit before their next routine inspection. The progress monitoring visit will judge whether the school has taken the necessary action to meet any un-met standards identified at their previous inspection.

The inspection was also carried out under the arrangements of the ISC Associations for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of their membership.

This is a FOCUSED COMPLIANCE INSPECTION which was combined with an inspection of EDUCATIONAL QUALITY, the report of which appears later in this document. The COMPLIANCE inspection reports only on the school's compliance with the standards. The standards represent minimum requirements and judgements are given either as **met** or as **not met**. All schools are required to meet all the standards applicable to them. Where the minimum requirements are not met, this is clearly indicated in the relevant section of the report and the school is required to take the actions specified. In this focused compliance inspection, key regulations and standards have been inspected in detail. These are the regulations on safeguarding; measures to guard against bullying; arrangements for pupils' health and safety, arrangements to check the suitability of staff; the provision of information to parents; the handling of parents' complaints; and other related aspects of leadership and management. The remaining standards and requirements are deemed to continue to be met unless evidence to the contrary has been found.

Inspections do not include matters that are outside of the regulatory framework described above, such as: an exhaustive health and safety audit; compliance with data protection requirements; an in-depth examination of the structural condition of the school, its services or other physical features; contractual arrangements with parents; an investigation of the financial viability of the school or its accounting procedures.

Inspectors may be aware of individual safeguarding concerns, allegations and complaints as part of the inspection process. Such matters will not usually be referred to specifically in published reports in this document but will have been considered by the team in reaching its judgements.

Links to the full regulations and requirements can be found here: The Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014.

Key findings

2.1   The school meets the standards in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, and associated requirements and no further action is required as a result of this inspection.

2.2   Some pupils take GCSEs, but the small numbers involved prevent reliable comparisons to be made with national averages.

2.3   The curriculum is documented, supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work for the pupils and covers the required breadth of material. The teaching enables pupils to make good progress, encompasses effective behaviour management and is supported by suitable resources. A suitable framework for the assessment of pupils' performance is in place.

2.4   The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.

PART 2 – Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

2.5   Principles and values are actively promoted which facilitate the personal development of pupils as responsible, tolerant, law-abiding citizens.

2.6   The standard relating to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development [paragraph 5] is met.

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

2.7   Arrangements are made to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils by means that pay due regard to current statutory guidance; good behaviour is promoted; bullying is prevented so far as reasonably practicable; health and safety requirements are met, including those relating to fire safety; provision is made for first aid. Pupils are properly supervised; admission and attendance registers are maintained, as required, and there is a strategic approach to risk assessment. A disability access plan is in place.

2.8   The standards relating to welfare, health and safety [paragraphs 6–16], the requirement of Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010, and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996 are met.

PART 4 – Suitability of staff, supply staff, and proprietors

2.9   The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.

2.10   The standards relating to the suitability of those in contact with pupils at the school [paragraphs 17–21] are met.

PART 5 – Premises of and accommodation at schools

2.11   Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. The premises are maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety; acoustics and lighting are appropriate; water provision is adequate. Suitable outdoor space is provided for physical education and outdoor play.

2.12   The standards relating to the premises and accommodation [paragraphs 22–31] are met.

PART 6 – Provision of information

2.13   A range of information is variously published, provided or made available to parents, inspectors and the Department for Education. This includes details about the proprietor, the ethos of the school and the curriculum, and of the school's arrangements for admission, behaviour and exclusions, bullying, health and safety, first aid, details of the complaints procedure, and the number of complaints registered under the formal procedure during the preceding school year, and the provision for any with education, health and care plans or English as an additional language. It also includes particulars of the school's academic performance during the preceding school year, inspection reports and (for parents only) a report at least annually of their own child's progress. The safeguarding policy is posted on the school's website.

2.14   **The standard relating to the provision of information [paragraph 32] is met.**

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled

2.15   Parental complaints, if any, are handled effectively through a three-stage process, (informal, formal and a hearing before a panel of three, one of whom is independent of the school). Each stage has clear time scales, and at the third stage the panel can make findings and recommendations which are communicated to the complainant. Records are kept appropriately, including of any action taken, whether or not a complaint is successful.

2.16   **The standard relating to the handling of complaints [paragraph 33] is met.**

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

2.17   The proprietor ensures that the leadership and management demonstrate good skills and knowledge, and fulfil their responsibilities effectively, so that the other standards are consistently met, and they actively promote the well-being of the pupils.

2.18   **The standard relating to leadership and management of the school [paragraph 34] is met.**

3. Educational Quality Inspection

Preface

The EDUCATIONAL QUALITY inspection reports on the quality of the school's work. It focuses on the two key outcomes:

- The achievement of the pupils, including their academic development, and

- The personal development of the pupils.

Since the school was last inspected, the framework for inspection has changed. The current inspection framework uses different criteria and arrangements for grading from those used in previous inspection frameworks. The judgements made on this inspection are, therefore, not directly comparable to judgements made on previous inspections.

All independent schools are required to meet the requirements of the Independent School Standards. However, different inspectorates apply different frameworks that are suited to the different types of schools they inspect. The ISI terminology reflects quality judgements that are at least equivalent to those used by the national inspectorate, Ofsted. ISI reports do not provide a single overarching judgement for the school but instead give a clear judgement about key outcomes for pupils and information on the quality of the school's work.

The headline judgements must include one of the ISI descriptors 'excellent', 'good', 'sound' or 'unsatisfactory'.

Where necessary, National Curriculum nomenclature is used to refer to year groups in the school.

Key findings

3.1   The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.

- All pupils make good progress across the curriculum with the majority exceeding initial expectations upon arrival at the learner centre.

- Pupils' speaking, listening, reading and writing skills are well developed.

- Attitudes to learning are good.

- Pupils do not always understand how to improve their work because they are not given clear enough guidance and feedback when their work is marked.

- Pupils often find it difficult to work collaboratively, preferring to work on their own or with an adult rather than their classmates.

3.2   The quality of the pupils' personal development is good.

- Pupils develop high levels of self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem due to the highly supportive environment.

- Pupils' decision making is well-developed as a result of frequent opportunities to improve this skill.

- Pupils have a clear understanding of right and wrong.

- Pupils develop a secure understanding of how to stay safe and healthy.

Recommendations

3.3   The school is advised to make the following improvements:

- Help pupils to develop their understanding of how to improve their own work by ensuring staff provide pupils with effective and helpful assessment, guidance and feedback.

- Improve pupils' ability to work collaboratively by providing effective guidance about how to learn together and ensuring pupils put this learning into practice.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

3.4   The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is good.

3.5   Pupils across a wide range of abilities, all of whom have SEND and many mental health issues, make good academic progress in relation to their individual starting points upon arrival at the learner centre. Most pupils have self-excluded from school or were missing education because of bullying or other trauma-related circumstances. As a result, many have gaps in their education due to lengthy periods of non-attendance and associated difficult personal circumstances. When pupils enter the learner centre, their attainment is always below the expected levels for their age. Pupils, at whatever point in their education, respond well to the way they are openly welcomed. They successfully re-engage with their learning. Centre records show that their attendance rises from below 70 percent to above 90 percent by the end of their first year and in subsequent years. This increase in attendance enables them to settle into the centre, get back on course and regain the confidence to learn. As a result, work in books shows that a large majority make good progress over time and a small minority make excellent progress. Progress is equally strong for all ages and for different categories of learning need.

3.6   All pupils take responsibility for meeting personal objectives in EHC plans agreed with them and their parents. They understand the importance of negotiated pathways because they quickly come to trust the learner centre's leadership, teaching and therapy teams. In discussion with inspectors, pupils said that they feel a sense of ownership around chosen studies, projects and accredited courses they

follow. Overall comparisons with national data are not viable as the number of pupils is small. In 2019, the majority of pupils in Year 11 achieved GCSEs in a small range of subjects, including English, mathematics, science, history, art, craft and design. A few pupils achieved grade 7+ passes in English, art and design, exceeding initial expectations upon arrival at the learner centre. A small minority of parents, who completed the pre-inspection questionnaire, indicated that suitable advice about choices of subjects and careers and the development of skills for the future was not as good as it could be. However, inspectors and most pupils found this not to be the case. The learner centre ensures that there is a regular forum involving pupils and their parents to focus on preparing for adulthood. This forum helps identify suitable curriculum pathways and required employability skills. The learner centre tracking of destination shows that most pupils progress on to level 2 courses at colleges or go on to apprenticeships. All pupils who left last year remain in further education, apprenticeships or employment. This is clear evidence of the learner centre's success at ensuring that pupils are well prepared for their chosen futures.

3.7   Pupils consolidate existing skills and knowledge and learn new concepts because of highly effective lesson planning. Staff know how to pitch work at precisely the right level of challenge for pupils of different abilities. Pupils display secure levels of understanding across different areas of learning and use their skills in different academic subjects, such as utilising numerical skills effectively when measuring materials in design and technology lessons or mixing correct quantities of chemicals to make slime in science. Pupils deepen their understanding through careful listening, discussion, debate and written work. For example, in English, pupils were observed to become less reliant on prompts to structure their writing. As a result, pupils produced well-written paragraphs with accurate spelling and neat handwriting. Most pupils develop their creative skills effectively. For example, in art and silk screen lessons, being able to manipulate a variety of media, enabled them to create different stencilling techniques to produce a final product. In design and technology, pupils applied their knowledge of 'opaque', 'transparent' or 'translucent' to re-purpose a range of materials, such as coffee capsules which were made into a curtain or a cereal packet turning into a box file. They also gain additional knowledge and understanding about the rapid diminishing of the earth's resources and the hazards of plastic waste.

3.8   Pupils develop good communication skills especially during daily community room meetings. At these meetings, pupils engage in discussion with members of staff about the previous day's experiences and how they had spent their evening. Through good-quality dialogue, pupils develop the vocabulary and the capacity to say what they think and to be able to explain what the listener is thinking. As a result, they develop good skills to 'voice openly' what they are thinking. Pupils communicate their learning effectively through oral or pictorial presentations. They increase their vocabulary and uncover deeper meaning when they read because adults focus closely on a short piece of text and then analyse it line by line. Pupils use dictionaries effectively to check their spelling and widen their vocabulary. They successfully apply the communication skills they have developed at the learner centre in the wider community. For example, pupils articulate meal choices to restaurant staff when on centre trips or order appropriate equipment when visiting leisure centres.

3.9   Pupils make strong progress in mathematics because of the relevant learning activities provided. They are motivated because mathematics lessons almost always involve practical work and the use of effective resources. Pupils are competent users of mathematical language. They show good understanding of terms such as 'calculate', 'measure' and 'estimate'. Pupils demonstrate the ability to transfer their numeracy skills to other areas of learning, such as in food technology where they transfer their knowledge of division to split ingredients into equal parts or groups. They successfully build on skills learned in previous lessons. For example, in a lesson on everyday mathematics, they successfully built on previous knowledge about angles, to measure acute angles of an open door or scissors and used the two hands of a clock to increase their understanding about obtuse angles. Pupils successfully reinforced their knowledge about number-related facts, such as prime numbers and perfect numbers during the maths-inspired fundraising 'Number day'.

3.10   Pupils are confident users of information and communication technology (ICT). They successfully used search engines and bookmarks to find out about the academic requirements for college carpentry courses. They effectively used word-processing programmes to complete a goal-setting task and web-based document sharing to write a curriculum vitae. In science, pupils use video technologies to develop a good understanding about everyday household substances. Pupils use hand-held devices effectively to view famous artists' work and create their own ideas for two-dimensional and three-dimensional work in art and design.

3.11   Pupils show good application of thinking skills. For example, they responded very well to open-ended questions about 'where', 'when' and 'why' during heated discussions about the meaning of positive relationships in personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE) lessons. Pupils develop a good range of vocabulary as a result of using reference books and magazines on display in the library. Pupils quickly develop creative writing techniques, such as the use of similes and metaphors. A very small minority of pupils who completed the pre-inspection questionnaire did not agree that marking and feedback help them improve. Inspectors found that pupils are not sufficiently able to improve their work from assessment grades or comments that are over-generous in praise. This is because new approaches to assessment and tracking, explored by the school's leadership, have not been consistently applied across all subjects, particularly for younger pupils. Although there are occasions when pupils work well together collaboratively, pupils often choose to work on their own with an adult in order to avoid working with their classmates. This is often in response to the anxiety pupils experience during the day which takes time to resolve. However, some members of staff with similar pupils, get them back on track by modelling the benefits of collaborative work.

3.12   The pupils demonstrate good attitudes towards learning and show good, sometimes excellent, initiative and independence. Their attitudes improve quickly after their arrival. This is because careful consideration is given to how pupils are grouped and to creating the best environment to support their learning. Pupils present their achievements to parents at regular 'presentation days', well recorded in newsletters. They produce good-quality art, based on the work of famous artists, which is then displayed in city-wide art exhibitions. Pupils enjoy successes in music, for example through gaining awards for drumming skills. They focus well and rise to challenges. For example, pupils can be seen concentrating for long periods of time to develop skills when playing different rhythms on drum sets or guitars, during one-to-one music sessions. Pupils compete in swimming tournaments proudly talking about the gold medals they achieve.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

3.13   The quality of the pupils' personal development is good.

3.14   Pupils make good progress in developing their social and emotional skills while at the learner centre. The well-being curriculum successfully reflects the aims of the centre for all pupils to develop their self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. The close working partnerships between the new leadership and governors ensure that pupils' personal development is good, given the initial complex starting point that pupils have on arrival. The whole school workforce makes sure pupils achieve well because they believe in the leadership's vision. Pupils gain a thorough understanding of past events and are able to plan for the future. This is because excellent, trusting relationships, built up over time, enable them to concentrate, work hard and enjoy their education. Individual pupils gradually deal with anxieties and problems because of the close relationships with the learner centre's therapist and staff, who help them to tackle possible risks, caused by the pupils' physical weakness or their vulnerability to self-harm. As a result, pupils' confidence and self-belief improve and they focus better on their studies.

3.15   Pupils make effective decisions on a daily basis. These can be about relationships they enjoy with staff and classmates, day-to-day methods of study or decisions regarding their subjects and the examinations or certificates they might take. Pupils take more initiative for their own personal

development and progress as they get older, for example, by talking to staff about future career options and further education. They develop social skills by choosing to participate in team games during breaks and before and after school. Pupils make good use of opportunities to make decisions in specialist rooms, for example, to set up and follow through their own experiments. They make effective decisions in food technology lessons by choosing which foods they wish to prepare and selecting appropriate ingredients. Staff very quickly spot if a pupil is becoming overwhelmed with stress or anxiety. When this happens, pupils are supported in decision making to take time away from their learning until they are ready to have another attempt at their work.

3.16   Pupils' spiritual understanding about what it is to be human enables them to tackle previous failures. A number of pupils articulated, in discussion with inspectors, their acceptance of failure as an integral part of learning. Pupils' appreciation of the non-material aspects of life is good because staff and pupils are able to discuss these issues on a number of occasions. This is further developed through the observance of cultural days or religious festivals, often centred around lunchtime and food which allows for forthright discussion. Pupils communicate freely their love of art. For example, they talked enthusiastically about their trip to the William Blake exhibition and demonstrated a thorough knowledge of Blake's views on mythology and religion. They used this information effectively to communicate their own beliefs when talking about their favourite paintings or poetry.

3.17   Pupils understand right from wrong. They consider that school rules are fair because they play a role in designing and enforcing those rules. Pupils and staff agree that, while pupils' behaviour can be unpredictable at times, it improves rapidly. All pupils develop strong bonds and trust with staff and between themselves. This helps them to distinguish right from wrong and to behave in a responsible manner. Older pupils listen respectfully to the opinions of others, for example, on the use of mobile phones during the school day. They learn self-discipline and a clear understanding of the need to be accountable for their own behaviour. As pupils develop confidence in staff and make friends, they also begin to relax and enjoy school.

3.18   Pupils make good progress in their social development and behaviour. A few pupils are often unable to manage their behaviour when they first arrive at school. However, behaviour records show that, once they settle into the nurturing environment of school, their behaviour improves, often dramatically. Pupils demonstrate how to travel independently and visit a range of locations in order to broaden their horizons. For example, during the inspection pupils planned and organised a visit to a bowling alley and travelled there independently. Older pupils go out at lunchtime independently to eat lunch or to shop. Staff are often on hand but recognise the importance of pupils learning how to behave in a range of social settings. Pupils show good development of leadership skills when taking responsibility for daily tasks, such as organising place settings in the community room at lunchtime.

3.19   Pupils know that they are valued members of the community, and they act responsibly. The learner centre is very successful at enabling pupils to learn how to manage their anxiety so that they can learn in a classroom environment. The new learner centre leadership has ensured that the school has continued to improve since the previous inspection. There are now frequent opportunities for pupils to use their skills in the local community. These not only help pupils learn effectively but also prepare them well to become productive citizens. The pupils are very keen on animal care and readily collect donations for animal sanctuaries. Recent access to therapeutic horseback riding enables pupils to attempt new physical challenges. In discussion with inspectors, pupils said that they can emotionally share thoughts, failures, setbacks, dreams and goals with a horse, which helps them a lot. Pupils participate enthusiastically in school activities, which aim to help others, when organising 'treats' at important events, such as birthdays.

3.20   Pupils of all ages have a good understanding of diversity within society and show respect and appreciation for other cultures. They understand that everyone is different and has his or her own needs and aspirations. All pupils and parents who completed the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that the learner centre treats their children fairly, regardless of gender, faith, race or needs and that the centre actively promotes respect and tolerance of other people. Pupils say that their individuality

is acknowledged and respected by staff and most other pupils. They respect others' requirements for time and space when they are feeling unsettled or uncertain. Pupils understand that new pupils may need help and support to settle into the routines of their school. A few pupils struggle with their own identity and culture and, therefore, struggle to respect the cultural identity of others. The learner centre successfully challenges this, for example, when celebrating Chinese New Year by making dragons and lanterns. As a result, pupils had positive conversations with each other regarding the celebrations. In food technology, pupils have studied cultural diversity through cooking. They research which ingredients to use and the flavours that are prominent in particular dishes, such as Polish breadsticks on holocaust remembrance day or stir fry during Chinese new year.

3.21   Pupils' knowledge of staying safe and the benefits of being physically and mentally healthy is good. Pupils understand the need to follow healthy, balanced diets. The vegetarian lunch reinforces some of what they have learned in science. They work effectively alongside teachers and support staff to prepare healthy meals. Pupils understand that physical exercise helps them to stay fit. They make good use of visits to the sports hall where they partake in a range of physically challenging activities. Pupils feel safe and protected throughout the day because classroom systems are well-organised. They are confident about knowing how to keep themselves safe in risky situations. Pupils have a good understanding of the rules for safe use of the internet and social media.

4.   Inspection Evidence

4.1   The inspectors observed lessons, conducted formal interviews with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with the chair of governors, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended community room meetings. Inspectors visited the learning support and educational resource areas. The responses of parents, staff and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires were analysed, and the inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

Inspectors

Mr Desmond Dunne   Reporting inspector

Mr Robert Pugh   Compliance team inspector (Former headteacher, local authority school)

Mr Jeremy Hart   Team inspector (Director of sixth form, GSA school)