



ISI Independent
Schools
Inspectorate

Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Reports

Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London

September 2021

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School's Details

School	Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London	
DfE number	310/6204	
Registered charity number	1109947	
Address	Red Balloon Learner Centre – Northwest London 13 Kenton Road Harrow Middlesex HA1 2BW	
Telephone number	020 8864 6433	
Email address	admin@nwl.rblc.org.uk	
Headteacher	Mrs Cathy Taylor	
Chair of governors	Ms Geraldine Norris	
Age range	11 to 16	
Number of pupils on roll	27	
	Seniors	27
Inspection dates	21 to 24 September 2021	

1. Background Information

About the school

- 1.1 Red Balloon Learning Centre – Northwest London is an independent co-educational day school for pupils between the ages of 11 and 17 years. The school is a registered charity governed by a group of local trustees and is one of four centres in the Red Balloon group. It opened in April 2008 in a semi-detached house in a residential area of Harrow. The school has recently been granted approval to extend its provision into a nearby building. At the time of the inspection the building was not ready, and eleven pupils were receiving outreach provision from additional staff who have been appointed for the new centre.
- 1.2 During the period March to August 2020, the whole school was closed. During this period of closure, the school provided remote learning materials for all pupils.
- 1.3 In the interests of infection control during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, inspection evidence was gathered partly remotely and partly on-site to reduce contact within the school setting.
- 1.4 In line with the direction given by the Department for Education (DfE) at the time, no evaluation has been made of the nature or effectiveness of any provision made during the period March to August 2020, including its impact on pupils' learning, achievement or personal development. Any concerns relating to pupils' welfare during this period which directly relate to measures implemented by the school have been considered.
- 1.5 During the lockdown period of January to March 2021, all pupils other than the children of key workers or vulnerable pupils received remote learning provision at home.
- 1.6 In 2020 and 2021, public examinations were not held. For pupils who would have been expected to take these examinations, centre-assessed and teacher-assessed grades were awarded.

What the school seeks to do

- 1.7 The school aims to provide individual full-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 to make the transition either to mainstream education for pupils aged below 16 years or into education or training for those over 16 years.

About the pupils

- 1.8 Pupils come from a wide range of backgrounds and travel to the centre from throughout London. The school's own assessment indicates that pupils have a very wide range of abilities. All pupils are identified by the school as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) including dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and all have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Two pupils have English as an additional language (EAL) and receive specialist support for their English.

2. Regulatory Compliance Inspection

Preface

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is approved by the Secretary of State to inspect schools which are, or whose heads are, in membership of the associations which form the Independent Schools Council (ISC) and report on the extent to which they meet the Independent School Standards ('the standards') in the Schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014. Additionally, inspections report 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. Inspections also comment on the progress made to meet any compliance action points set out in the school's most recent statutory inspection.

ISI inspections are 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 FOCUSED 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 standards have been inspected in detail. These are the standards on safeguarding; measures to guard against bullying; arrangements for pupils' health and safety; arrangements to check the suitability of staff; the provision of information; the handling of parents' complaints; and other related aspects of leadership and management. In addition, the standards relating to supervision of pupils, admissions and attendance and maintenance are also included. 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 standards and requirements can be found here: [The Education \(Independent School Standards\) Regulations 2014](#).

COVID-19: Inspection judgements do not cover the period March to August 2020 inclusive.

Key findings

- 2.1 The school does not meet all of the required standards in the schedule to the Education (Independent School Standards) Regulations 2014, and associated requirements, and should take immediate action to remedy deficiencies as detailed below.**

PART 1 – Quality of education provided

- 2.2 Pupils take GCSE examinations in their final year at the school. The small numbers involved prevent reliable comparison with national averages for maintained schools.
- 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 Pupils receive relationships and sex education in the senior school, except in so far as they are lawfully excused. The school has consulted parents and published a written statement of its policy which has regard to the relevant statutory guidance.
- 2.5 The standards relating to the quality of education [paragraphs 1–4] are met.**

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

- 2.6 Principles and values are actively promoted which facilitate the personal development of pupils as responsible, tolerant, law-abiding citizens.
- 2.7 The standard relating to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development [paragraph 5] is met.**

PART 3 – Welfare, health and safety of pupils

- 2.8 Good behaviour is promoted, and bullying is prevented so far as reasonably practicable. Provision is made for first aid. A disability access plan is in place.
- 2.9 Staff are unclear with regard to current statutory guidance about safeguarding and how it applies within the context of Red Balloon in Harrow. The school does not monitor the effectiveness of training sufficiently in order to ensure that staff understand and implement consistently safeguarding requirements. Although information regarding safeguarding, behaviour, bullying and pastoral care are entered on to a central electronic recording system, the information is not categorised clearly in order to ensure that correct action is taken, including, when appropriate, referral to children's services and the local authority designated officer (LADO). Governance relies on reports from the head teacher and there is insufficient monitoring of safeguarding and detailed discussion of the annual audit of safeguarding.
- 2.10 There are no appropriate records of staff health and safety training. It is not clear who is responsible for managing each aspect of health and safety. Potential hazards around the premises have not been addressed, including uneven pathways, cleanliness of the kitchen and storage of food, rubbish around the site and ensuring restrictors on all windows. There is a suitable fire policy and fire risk assessment. Alarms and fire extinguishers have been suitably checked and termly fire drills carried out and recorded. However, no records relating to fire training could be produced. The signing in and out of pupils and staff is not completed diligently so that it is not clear exactly who is in the building should a register need to be called in case of a fire. There is no central system of registration and the attendance of pupils in the centre and those receiving outreach education is not recorded clearly. There is no strategic overview of risk assessment. Staff do not contribute sufficiently to the risk

assessments and do not use and amend them particularly when pupils are engaged in off-site sport and activities.

- 2.11** The standards relating to welfare, health and safety in paragraphs 9, 10, 13, the requirement of Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010 (accessibility plan) and the ban on corporal punishment under section 548 of the Education Act 1996 are met, but those in paragraphs 7(a) and (b), 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 are not met.

Action point 1

The school must put in place and monitor the effectiveness of a programme of training which enables governors, leaders and staff to understand and implement consistently the requirements of current statutory guidance relating to safeguarding [paragraph 7(a) and (b)].

Action point 2

The school must identify clearly the categories and reasons for entries made in the central safeguarding record. Such entries must detail the reasons for making or not making a referral, monitoring that has been put in place and subsequent actions taken, including when a local authority threshold is not met [paragraph 7(a) and (b)].

Action point 3

The school must clarify who has responsibility for all aspects of health and safety, ensure that there is regular checking of the premises, supported by systematic record keeping of all of the required checks and ensuring that all hazards are removed without delay [paragraph 11].

Action point 4

The school must ensure that appropriate health and safety and fire safety training is in place and that accurate records of such training are maintained and monitored by leadership and governors [paragraphs 11 and 12].

Action point 5

The school must ensure that there is a centralised system of registration and that registers are maintained accurately for all pupils including those who are receiving education off-site, so they can be properly supervised [paragraphs 14 and 15].

Action point 6

The school must ensure that appropriate risk assessments are in place and effectively implemented [paragraph 16(a) and (b)].

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

- 2.12** The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.
- 2.13** 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

- 2.14** Suitable toilet and changing facilities, and showering facilities where required by the standard, and appropriate accommodation for pupils' medical and therapy needs are provided. Acoustics and lighting are appropriate; water provision is adequate.

- 2.15 The premises are not maintained to a standard commensurate with health and safety. Although adequate outdoor space is available for outdoor recreation, it has not been well-maintained so that there are uneven paths, a very high step from the main building into the garden, accumulated rubbish, and garden tools stored in a shed without a door or lock. Some security arrangements are inadequate.
- 2.16 **The standards relating to the premises and accommodation in paragraphs 23, 24, 26 and 27 are met, but those in paragraphs 25 and 29 are not met.**

Action point 7

The school must ensure that all security arrangements are adequate [paragraph 25].

Action point 8

The school must ensure that the premises, including the outdoor areas, are monitored systematically and suitably maintained [paragraphs 25 and 29(1)(a) and (b)].

PART 6 – Provision of information

- 2.17 A range of information is 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.
- 2.18 **The standard relating to the provision of information [paragraph 32] is met.**

PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled

- 2.19 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.
- 2.20 **The standard relating to the handling of complaints [paragraph 33] is met.**

PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools

- 2.21 Red Balloon Learning Centre provides a warm and caring environment for the pupils where individual needs and circumstances are understood. However, leadership and the staff are unclear regarding the detail of the statutory requirements and how to implement them effectively. Appropriate and rigorous training is not in place for governors, leaders and staff. There is insufficient monitoring by governors and inadequate challenge to the school leadership in order to ensure that all of the standards are met consistently.
- 2.22 **The standard relating to leadership and management of the school in paragraph 34 is not met.**

Action point 9

The school must put in place effective systems for monitoring the implementation of the school's policies and procedures, ensuring that appropriate training is in place and action is taken to address any weaknesses identified without delay [paragraph 34(1)(a), (b) and (c)].

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.

The headline judgements apply 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 sound.

- The achievement of pupils across almost all year groups and subjects is at least satisfactory and sometimes good.
- Pupils are usually successful in gaining places of their choice for the next stage of their education and training.
- Most pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills for learning are appropriate, taking into account their age, starting points and additional needs.
- Pupils' restricted computer skills impact their ability to use information and communication technology (ICT) effectively across the curriculum.
- Pupils' attitudes to learning are mostly positive.

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

- With support, most pupils reflect meaningfully on their feelings, strengths and areas for development. A small number of pupils reflect on the spiritual aspects of life.
- Most pupils make positive decisions with regard to attending the centre, choosing their curriculum subjects and managing their behaviour.
- Most pupils are respectful of one another, interact positively and are able to distinguish right from wrong.
- Some pupils are aware of other cultures and religions.

Recommendations

3.3 The school is advised to make the following improvements:

- Strengthen pupil progress by developing the tracking of pupils across all subjects including more detailed entry information and all outcomes from assessments.
- Raise pupil attainment by ensuring that targets set by pupils and staff across all subjects are clear, challenging and measurable as exemplified by targets set in English and mathematics.
- Strengthen pupils' development of ICT skills so that they can use ICT effectively to support their learning across the curriculum.
- Strengthen pupils' spiritual development by including more opportunities for spiritual development across the curriculum and in school life.

- Enable pupils to collaborate with each other during academic activities in order to solve problems and achieve agreed goals.
- Extend links with the local community and wider society in order that pupils can make a positive contribution to others.
- Develop pupils' awareness and understanding of other cultures building upon the experiences and heritage of pupils, families and the staff.
- Ensure that pupils understand about consent, boundaries and how to keep safe by implementing fully the school's sex and relationships scheme of work.

The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

- 3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is sound.
- 3.5 The achievement of pupils across almost all year groups and subjects is in line with the school's aim to provide individual recovery programmes that encompass education, personal development and well-being, enabling pupils to move into an agreed placement on leaving Red Balloon. Pupils enjoy some success in additional activities including art, horse riding, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and outdoor education. For example, pupils have recently achieved success in an art competition organised by an independent schools' association.
- 3.6 GCSE results for 2021 indicate that most pupils attained their predicted grades or above in English and mathematics, with a small number of pupils achieving qualifications in art and design, computer science and combined science. Pupils state strongly that they have been able to achieve success in examinations because they can plan their own curriculum and teachers plan lessons based on their interests. The school's transition and induction programme is effective in enabling pupils to re-enter education after trauma and often long absences from school. Although the tracking of pupil progress and attainment enables staff and pupils to set targets to support pupils in attaining their predicted grades, the accuracy of these is impacted by limited information being entered into the tracker including detailed baseline information and the outcomes from reading assessments. Targets set in maths and English raise progress and attainment because they are clear and measurable. Target-setting is not as well-developed across the other subject areas which restricts pupils' progress and attainment.
- 3.7 Pupils are usually successful in gaining places of their choice for the next stage of their education and training. Most pupils who spoke to the inspectors said that regular careers discussions that they engage in are helpful and that guidance given enables them to choose the subjects and qualifications they need for college and their chosen careers. Pupils also stated strongly that opportunities to go on work related experience linked to their interests and outdoor education sessions helps them to achieve academically and personally.
- 3.8 Pupils' knowledge and skills for learning are mostly appropriate taking into account their age, ability and additional needs. In art therapy most pupils communicate their ideas using a suitable range of tools and materials. Pupils are particularly proud of the drawings they have produced in their sketch books. Work produced by pupils in science indicates that some pupils understand key scientific principles. During discussions, older pupils spoke confidently about cell structure, digestion, the periodic table, the earth and forces. Although worksheets support the pupils in understanding and remembering scientific knowledge opportunities for investigation and conducting experiments are limited, which restricts pupils' interest, progress and attainment in science. Pupils said that they enjoy music therapy, and that music helps them to regulate their emotions. Most pupils listen to a range of music and understand how music is created. Some pupils learn a musical instrument and enjoy performing confidently with staff particularly during impromptu sessions during break times. Those pupils who choose to go to the off-site facilities provided by a nearby school engage with sports and physical activities when encouraged to do so. Some pupils take part in a range of sports including

cricket, football and rounders. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about their riding lessons and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, stating how these experiences help them to develop knowledge and skills that support their learning. Pupils stated during discussions that they learn more effectively because of the way staff continually praise them and celebrate their achievements.

- 3.9 Most pupils listen and respond appropriately to their peers. They ask relevant questions and with encouragement from staff give extended answers that express arguments from different perspectives and their opinions. Pupils said that they feel able to communicate because staff understand them and do not pressurise them when they are having difficulty expressing themselves. Most pupils read fluently with good understanding. Pupils said that they enjoy learning about different types of literature and are particularly enjoying learning about the current topic linked to the genre of horror. Some pupils write clearly and accurately adapting their language and style for a range of purposes, contexts and audiences. For example, inspectors saw an outstanding account of Romeo and Juliet set in a fast-food chicken take away. Most pupils were keen to speak to inspectors and were able to speak confidently about their work, interests and aspirations. They appreciate the individual support they receive from their teachers and support staff and all said that their experiences at Red Balloon Centre have enabled them to attend school and to learn in a way that is meaningful to them.
- 3.10 Most pupils can read, write, order and compare numbers to 1 000 000, understanding place value and negative numbers. With support they solve a range of problems requiring them to add, subtract, multiply and divide. Some pupils self-check their work and can rectify errors independently. Some pupils can identify multiples and factors and understand what is meant by prime numbers, factors and composite numbers. They can recognise and use thousandths and relate them to decimal equivalents and percentages. With support they can simplify and manipulate algebraic expressions to maintain equivalence. Pupils described how they enjoyed quadratic equations and how they could use ratios and scale factors in engineering. Some pupils can apply formulae to calculate and solve geometric problems including area of triangles and circles. They accurately use ruler and compass constructions and demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of Pythagoras' Theorem and how it can be applied when solving problems involving right-angled triangles.
- 3.11 Some pupils use ICT effectively to support their learning across the curriculum. For example, when using games, writing and when designing posters and presentations. However, most pupils have limited knowledge and skills with regard to computing, for example, understanding algorithms and the use of programming languages and logic to solve computational problems. Some pupils assimilate knowledge from different sources including online. With support they identify key points, recall information and ask questions.
- 3.12 Pupils' attitudes to learning are mostly positive. The vast majority of pupils find it challenging to collaborate with their peers, preferring to work individually with the support of a member of staff. The vast majority of pupils responded positively to the pre-inspection questionnaires. During discussions they say that they appreciate how staff incorporate their interests into their lessons and this has really helped them to be positive about school, their learning and their next steps. Parents who responded to the questionnaires are overwhelmingly positive stating that they appreciate the way that their children have been supported to a point where they can access education, make progress and experience success.
- 3.13 Governance and leadership are dedicated to the pupils and families who attend Red Balloon Learning Centre – Northwest London. They are aware of areas for development and are committed to making improvements without delay.

The quality of the pupils' personal development

- 3.14 The quality of the pupils' personal development is sound.

- 3.15 Most pupils show appropriate levels of self-understanding taking into account their age and special needs. Most pupils are not naturally self-reflective, but with support, react positively in discussions about their feelings, strengths and areas for development. By the time they leave the school, most pupils have developed the skills necessary for the next stage of their lives, including being prepared for college and work-related experience.
- 3.16 All parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire stated that the centre has enabled their children to develop self-esteem and to grow in confidence. The vast majority of responses to the pupil questionnaires were extremely positive in relation to how the centre enables pupils to develop personally. During the inspection several pupils spoke to inspectors reflectively about how staff at the centre have enabled them to attend school, manage their behaviour and emotions and enjoy school life. Most pupils make positive decisions about attending the centre, what they are going to learn and how they are going to behave. Some pupils make choices to miss lessons, therapy sessions and school, which inhibits their personal development and all-round well-being.
- 3.17 Some pupils appreciate the non-material aspects of life particularly during music therapy, art therapy and well-being sessions. Pupils said that these opportunities enable them to think about themselves and to cope when they are feeling anxious. Pupils in the well-being room were observed relaxing on cushions supported by staff who knew when to be silently present and when to engage with a pupil. Some subject teachers effectively plan spiritual development into their lessons. As a result, in an English lesson, pupils reflected deeply on poetry from the First World War and demonstrated remarkable empathy and understanding of what it means to be gassed.
- 3.18 Most pupils are enabled to distinguish right from wrong through the centre's restorative justice approach in which all staff are appropriately trained. During discussions some pupils stated that they had experienced bullying before they came to Red Balloon but that here everyone understood them and that the community was extremely kind and caring. Most pupils respect routines such as removing shoes before entering the well-being room without prompting. During discussion most pupils stated that circle time helps them to think about the rules they want to abide by within their school community.
- 3.19 Most pupils interact with each other with support and modelling from the staff encouraged by prompts such as the celebration log. Some pupils cooperate with each other during lessons. For example, during a science experiment two pupils worked with each other and the teacher to produce gases in test tube reactions. Several pupils enjoy musical improvisation sessions where they collaborate confidently with each other and the staff. During communal lunchtimes pupils interact positively with each other and the staff, enjoying this daily relaxed, social experience. After lunch this social interaction is continued successfully as staff and pupils engage in further conversations and games.
- 3.20 During discussion pupils stated strongly that they are proud of their community and how other pupils and staff accept them and value them as individuals. Some pupils successfully participate in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme up to gold level. The award includes service activities mainly facilitated within the Red Balloon community. During discussions pupils were aware of the needs of others in their local area and more widely. They stated that they would like more opportunities to help others.
- 3.21 Some pupils have an awareness of other cultures and religions. Within the school community most pupils are very respectful of each other's differences, enabled by teacher led reflections which take place in all contexts. Within the curriculum there are a small number of examples where cultural understanding and diversity underpin deep learning. For example, in an English lesson pupils considered war poetry and the partition of India from the familial and cultural perspectives.
- 3.22 Most pupils understand how to keep themselves safe, including when online. They know not to give personal details and to tell a trusted adult if they receive communication from someone they do not know or messages that are bullying or abusive. Pupils have awareness of nutrition through cookery classes and develop a wider understanding of choosing healthy lifestyles through personal, social,

health and economic education (PSHE) lessons. Some pupils are developing appropriate awareness with regard to adolescence including consent, social boundaries and keeping safe in personal relationships as the centre is in the early stages of developing its relationships and sex education scheme. Most pupils have a good awareness of supporting their mental health through choosing equine, art and music therapies, daily well-being time and group social and emotional classes.

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, the chair of governors and the safeguarding governor, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period, and attended tutor time and therapy sessions. 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

Dr Patricia Preedy	Reporting inspector
Mr Richard Curtis	Compliance team inspector (head of sixth form and housemaster, HMC school)
Mrs Rebecca Tear	Team inspector (head, GSA and HMC school)