



**ISI**

Independent  
Schools  
Inspectorate

**Focused Compliance and Educational Quality Inspection Report**

**Red Balloon Learner Centre Cambridge**

**March 2023**

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## School's Details

<b>School</b>	Red Balloon Learner Centre Cambridge
<b>DfE number</b>	837/6024
<b>Registered charity number</b>	1070224
<b>Address</b>	Red Balloon Learner Centre Cambridge Herbert House 57 Warkworth Terrace Cambridge CB1 1EE
<b>Telephone number</b>	01223 357714
<b>Email address</b>	admin@cambridge.rblc.org.uk
<b>Coordinator</b>	Ms Jessica Lechner
<b>Chair of proprietors</b>	Mr Ian Bryan Swain
<b>Proprietor</b>	Red Balloon Learner Centre Cambridge
<b>Age range</b>	11 to 17
<b>Number of pupils on roll</b>	35
<b>Inspection dates</b>	14 to 16 March 2023

## **1. Background Information**

### **About the school**

- 1.1 The Red Balloon Learner Centre Cambridge is an independent co-educational special school for day pupils. The school is a registered charity, one of five Red Balloon Centres, and is governed by a proprietor supported by a group of trustees. It is located in the centre of Cambridge in terraced properties.
- 1.2 The centre extended provision in September 2020 into an additional building.

### **What the school seeks to do**

- 1.3 The centre seeks to provide a combined educational and therapeutic programme for pupils who have not attended school for some time, following severe bullying or other trauma. Its aims include enabling pupils to be happy, supported emotionally and to feel valued by helping them to move into mainstream education, post-16 education, work-based training or employment.

### **About the pupils**

- 1.4 Pupils travel to the school from a wide area across East Anglia, representing many different family and cultural backgrounds. When they join the school, having in many cases missed significant periods of their education, the majority of pupils are assessed as having below average ability. Currently, 29 of the pupils have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Many have identified social, emotional and mental health needs, such as depression or anxiety. Other identified special education needs and/or disabilities include autistic spectrum conditions, dyslexia and physical and sensory difficulties. No pupils have English as an additional language. Each pupil works on an individual programme which includes both educational and therapeutic work.

## 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. 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](#).

## 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.**

### **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, but inspection evidence confirms that teaching enables pupils to make good progress in the context of Part 1 paragraph 3(a).
- 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, 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 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.
- 2.9 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**

- 2.10 The school makes appropriate checks to ensure the suitability of staff, supply staff and proprietors, and a register is kept as required.
- 2.11 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**

- 2.12 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.

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

## **PART 6 – Provision of information**

2.14 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.

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

## **PART 7 – Manner in which complaints are handled**

2.16 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.

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

## **PART 8 – Quality of leadership in and management of schools**

2.18 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 wellbeing of the pupils.

**2.19 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.

**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 excellent.
- Pupils achieve highly and make rapid progress from their starting points.
  - Pupils show excellent attitudes for their own learning as well as providing mutual support for classmates.
  - Pupils' communication skills are excellent in relation to their abilities. They listen attentively, speak articulately and write creatively.
  - Pupils demonstrate excellent knowledge, skills and understanding in the subjects and activities they study.
- 3.2 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.
- Pupils develop high levels of confidence and self-esteem soon after their arrival at the centre.
  - Pupils build strong relationships with staff and classmates.
  - Pupils highly value difference and inclusivity, retaining pride in themselves as individuals.
  - Pupils have an individual passion for subjects such as art or music and this is where many of them gain spiritual satisfaction.

#### Recommendation

- 3.3 The school is advised to make the following improvement.
- Enable pupils to increase the extent to which they contribute positively to others in the local community.

#### The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements

- 3.4 The quality of the pupils' academic and other achievements is excellent.
- 3.5 Pupils make outstanding progress in English and mathematics from their starting points. Most pupils, including those with autism spectrum conditions, have an educational health care (EHC) plan. They commonly enter the school in Year 9 or 10, at which point their attainment is low, due to previous disruption to their learning. Many have a history of absence from school and lack the behavioural skills required for learning on arrival in the school. By the end of Year 11, attainment has risen rapidly, the gap between their standards and those achieved by others nationally having narrowed substantially. This is because each pupil's skills and aptitudes in these subjects are developed carefully from the



moment they enter the school. All parents who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that their child's particular individual educational needs are met. In recent years some pupils have gained GCSE grade 9 in English and mathematics, whilst several have gained GCSE qualifications at the highest grades in subjects including Italian, Polish and science. These achievements reflect the school leadership's success in promoting the school's aims to enable all pupils to learn and feel able to attend school. Leaders, staff and trustees are fully committed to promoting a strong ethos for nurturing pupils' learning.

- 3.6 All the pupils who responded to the pre-inspection questionnaire agreed that their teachers know their subject well and all parents agreed that teaching enables their child to make progress. A small minority of pupils did not agree that most lessons were interesting. However, inspection evidence from discussions indicated that this view was not widely held. Pupils who spoke to inspectors explained that their responses reflected their enjoyment of some but not all subjects, rather than the nature of the lessons themselves. They emphasised that they very much enjoy the projects and subjects they select for themselves. Some pupils choose to continue their post-16 education at the school to build on their significant successes and support them in their transition into further education.
- 3.7 Pupils have excellent attitudes to learning, particularly in their project work and personally negotiated objectives. They complete all tasks set and take a great pride in the presentation of their work. Pupils make very rapid improvements in their behaviour and attendance. They arrive in lessons with high expectations and are very keen and eager to learn. Pupils confidently communicate with their teachers as both active listeners and active participants. In most lessons, they concentrate hard for as long as they are able and show great pleasure when they succeed in their tasks. Pupils readily ask questions when they are not fully clear about what is to be done and venture to respond even when less sure of knowing the correct answer.
- 3.8 Soon after arrival at the school, pupils develop high level communication skills, which they had previously been too anxious to use. They converse naturally with both adults and their peers during shared lunchtimes and share information about their learning articulately in class. Pupils become willing contributors in lessons, eagerly answering questions and responding well to praise and encouragement. Significant progress is achieved in national drama examinations, with pupils gaining successes at distinction level. Year 10 pupils spoke, listened and wrote persuasively when writing about *Lord of the Flies*. They effectively analysed characters, theme and plot to create character profiles, diary entries, key events of chapters and extracted key quotations from the text to support their findings. Many pupils become fluent readers by the time they are ready for the next stage of their education or training. For example, in a GCSE English lesson, pupils confidently read a character's lines in a play and paused purposefully to clarify anything that they did not understand. More able pupils exhibit a very high level of individual writing capability to produce personal and relevant creative work at the highest level for GCSE English.
- 3.9 Pupils demonstrate excellent knowledge, skills and understanding in a range of subjects. They confidently apply prior learning in new situations when undertaking their work. For example, Year 11 pupils use revision quizzes effectively to aid their preparation for GCSE biology. Pupils appreciate the way that the centre enables them to negotiate and personalise their own curriculum. This motivates individual pupils to gain deep knowledge and understanding in areas of chosen interest. For example, Year 11 pupils used glass windows to list numbers in German and practised this through physical movements and chanting numbers in sequence. There are many excellent examples of art, photography and science on display around the centre. This is illustrated by the way pupils develop their scientific skills through practical experiences, project work and presentations. A Year 11 wall display that started with a focus on photosynthesis developed, like the tree at the centre, into covering all the necessary topics for GCSE plant biology, such as flowers and pollination. Pupils who spoke to inspectors said that this work helped them answer biology questions better. Pupils grasp opportunities to undertake GCSE or nationally recognised qualifications in drama, music and art because of the way

they have individualised their own curriculum pathways. As a result, some achieve distinction in national drama and music qualifications and high GCSE grades in art.

- 3.10 The pupils have very proficient numeracy skills. Year 10 pupils accurately used steel marble pinball games to explore probability. They also demonstrated the ability to use apparatus to determine weight and capacity. Year 11 pupils competently plot parallel vectors and move onto more challenging work to plot quadratic equations. More able pupils effectively apply the four mathematical operations to algebraic fractions and can draw and interpret parabolic curves. Pupils transfer their knowledge and understanding in a number of other subject areas. Year 9 pupils accurately measured material to be used in the construction of a puppet theatre. Year 10 measured cooking ingredients effectively whilst baking. They used scales to measure out quantities accurately and changed amounts from recipes for two when preparing the food for four. Some were able to do this without help, whilst others needed assistance.
- 3.11 Pupils are confident and effective users of information communication technology (ICT) to support their learning across the curriculum. Year 8 and 9 pupils use software to produce presentations on topics such as magnets and magnetism, Halloween and vampires or a wide range of resources about the sinking of the Titanic. Older pupils use spreadsheets in day-to-day activities such as generating costs for shopping lists or for the ingredients to make pancakes or cookies. Pupils of all ages use word processing and the internet to research topics such as sign language, big cats and Newcastle. Older pupils are adept at using mixed media. For example, Year 10 music pupils demonstrated an excellent grasp of how to record their own lyrics and harmonies, using a digital audio workstation to enhance the high-quality performance aspect of their own work.
- 3.12 Pupils demonstrate effective study skills. They identify strategies to help them communicate about and develop their skills and talents. For example, a Year 10 history research on King James I led to a detailed interest in witchcraft during that period. Pupils talked enthusiastically about information gathered from the internet about cut cats thrown into streams and rivers as an attempt to create a tempest that could kill the king. In Year 11 English pupils made perceptive comments about a just society only being achieved if all individuals feel a sense of social responsibility after reading the text of *An Inspector Calls*.
- 3.13 Pupils thrive on individual timetabled support with trained therapists and staff such as combined art and English lessons where pupils engaged effectively in solving murder mysteries whilst completing different artistic works. Pupils who spoke to inspectors talked positively about creative activities such as graffiti art, drama and music. Year 11 photography pupils produce portfolios enhanced by visits including the Tate Modern. They demonstrate an effective use of leading lines, framing and shadow depth of field to provide a focus on the subject of a photograph. Post-16 pupils produce portrait canvases of the highest quality. Several pupils participate in The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme (DofE) and complete skills development in cycling, swimming, martial arts, sewing and baking. Pupils who spoke to inspectors talk very positively about centre trips and residential visits. This gives many of them special opportunities to mix with the public and to develop essential social skills.

### **The quality of the pupils' personal development**

- 3.14 The quality of the pupils' personal development is excellent.
- 3.15 Pupils make outstanding progress in their personal development as a result of excellent team work between staff, therapists and mental health professionals. The school's learning environment gives them the confidence to change their attendance habits dramatically, from being school refusers to being present for every session. Once settled at the school, pupils take increased responsibility for their own behaviour. This supports their own drive to make both social and academic progress. Pupils nurture their own emotional development very well. They gain higher-level social skills through work experience or work-related learning, such as placements with a digital wireless technology company, theatrical backstage experience or volunteering in primary schools to work with younger children.

They become very reflective of how well they are doing and how they can improve further. Those who choose to leave at age sixteen are engaged in employment, education or training in line with the aims of the school.

- 3.16 Pupils have excellent relationships with staff in one-to-one sessions and with one another in small group work. They share and take turns during weekly circle time sessions and discussions in class. Pupils listen to others with respect, and are courteous to visitors. A very large majority of pupils who responded to the questionnaire agreed that the school teaches them how to build positive relationships. All parents who responded agreed that the school's relationships and sex education prepares their child effectively for life in modern society. Soon after arrival pupils gradually grasp opportunities to work together and develop their social skills. The change in self-esteem and confidence enables them to engage in the support of classmates. They do this by adopting the same strategies of praise and encouragement that has worked for them. Pupils are thoughtful and calm as they move around the school buildings, and they collaborate well in activities such as DofE. Pupils of different ages mix well together, including at the summer residential where they impress supporting staff with their effective organisational skills.
- 3.17 Pupils show a high level of respect and caring attitudes towards each other and staff. They embrace difference and do not tolerate any form of discrimination or prejudice. All parents who completed the questionnaire agreed that the school actively promotes values of democracy, respect and tolerance of other people. Pupils value each other's individuality because they are interested and respectful of the different cultural, medical and mental health backgrounds of classmates. Year 11 pupils talked enthusiastically about trips to religious buildings and meeting with people of different faiths. Pupils are proud of the detailed knowledge and understanding they have about their specific medical and mental conditions. They appreciate that adults across the school recognise and listen to their needs and are willing to embrace these attributes to recognise the talents they can develop.
- 3.18 Pupils have an individual passion for subjects such as art or music and this is where many of them gain spiritual satisfaction. In a Year 10 personal, social, health and economic education (PSHEE) philosophy and ethics session pupils demonstrated their capability to engage in critical arguments and problems related to dealing with life situations. They presented clearly and adequately their own ideas and contributions. Year 11 pupils demonstrate meditation skills and use these for reflection by going outside to find a quiet space. Pupils in Years 10 and 11 talked with maturity about music, art and photography as being a spiritual expression of what is in their heart and soul. This is exemplified by the high-quality music they create and their own personal vision of reality in the artwork they produce.
- 3.19 Pupils develop effective independent decision-making skills when negotiating their curriculum choices. They demonstrate a positive approach when accessing therapy and identifying interests such as animal care or music. Many were previously not confident enough to make decisions about their learning. However, they quickly mature at the school and their decision-making improves as a result. For example, in Year 10 mathematics pupils worked out the *n*th term in their own time. This contributed to greater understanding and the ability to apply this learning to more challenging problems. Pupils make decisions to have a mental health day or a break from work during times of high anxiety. They decide to use the talents they have such as through recording songs they have written themselves. The skills gained enable them to lead discussions in circle time or contribute positively in class. As a result, they are more able to communicate and make sensible choices about those things that have an impact on their lives.
- 3.20 Pupils articulate well their knowledge and feelings about rights and wrongs. In lessons and around school, their behaviour is at least good and usually outstanding. They respond very well to high expectations and positive staff role models. Pupils appreciate the consistent approaches in managing behaviour and effective use of praise. Some pupils, on arrival at the school, have little self-control over their actions and often behave impulsively. They learn to recognise what may trigger these reactions and signs that betray the onset of unacceptable behaviour. Moral behaviour improves as the pupils become happier and more mature. Records show the significant progress individuals make in taking

more responsibility for their actions. For example, by taking themselves away from things that are troubling them before they reach crisis point. As a result, occasional incidents are resolved quickly and classrooms are quiet and harmonious places. Pupils respect the school's use of unconditional positive regard where they are valued as a person rather than on the basis of their success in particular subjects or topics.

- 3.21 Pupils of all ages demonstrate an excellent community spirit. They participate with staff in communal mealtimes where they help clearing up after lunch and taking out the waste bins. If anyone is ill or has a birthday, pupils will often make an appropriate card. A school recipe book was produced for charity fundraising with pupils' own recipes and many help at the school's annual open garden event. Pupils learn about democracy, through the election of different political leaders across constituencies in Cambridge. A small number of pupils engage in activities in the Cambridge locality through work experience, and this contribution to others significantly helps improve their own development of communication skills. However, many have not yet developed the confidence to get involved and contribute positively to others in the local community.
- 3.22 Pupils are happy, relaxed and see the school as a safe and friendly haven. Those who spoke to inspectors say they feel safe, secure and well cared for. All of the parents who responded to the questionnaire agree that the school provides a safe environment to learn, and all pupils agreed that the school is a safe place to be. Pupils demonstrate an excellent grasp of how to avoid risk and danger. As the greatest threat to a pupil's safety sometimes comes from themselves, staff are highly skilled in reducing unsafe behaviours and preventing any mental health issues arising. Pupils who spoke to inspectors said that the communal lunchtime provides effective guidance on how to keep themselves healthy and to avoid unhealthy diet and habits. Pupils use equipment safely and abide by the rules for the safe use of the internet. They understand the importance of this and the dangers of misusing social networking sites. Through well-chosen topics in personal, social and health education they are increasing their awareness of the negative effects of drugs and alcohol. They enjoy participating in regular exercise at the local leisure school, including swimming, climbing and kickboxing.

## 4. Inspection Evidence

- 4.1 The inspectors observed lessons, had discussions with pupils and examined samples of pupils' work. They held discussions with members of staff and with a group of trustees, observed a sample of the extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection period. Inspectors visited the learning support and educational resource areas. Inspectors considered the responses of parents, staff and pupils to pre-inspection questionnaires. The inspectors examined curriculum and other documentation made available by the school.

### Inspectors

Mr Desmond Dunne	Reporting inspector
Ms Helen Newman	Compliance team inspector (Head of human resources, HMC school)
Mrs Elizabeth Harris	Team inspector (Former director of music, IAPS school)