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Context

In January 2019, there were 36 independent special schools in Wales, four more than in January 2018. Independent special schools educate pupils from 3 to 19 who have a wide range of needs, including autistic spectrum disorder and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Many of the schools are small and pupils usually live in children's homes attached to the schools. A minority of these schools also educate day pupils or pupils who reside in children's homes not attached to the school, and these placements are funded by local authorities.

In addition to full inspections, Estyn carries out regular monitoring inspections of independent special schools, normally every 12 to 18 months. This year, we inspected seven independent special schools and carried out monitoring visits to 21 schools. The findings from all inspections and visits have informed this report.

Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

Compliance with Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

In inspections of independent special schools, we judge the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003 (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).

Six of the seven independent special schools inspected and just over three quarters of schools visited as part of the monitoring process complied with all of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. Where schools had shortcomings in compliance with regulations, these related to the quality of education provided, the welfare, health and safety of pupils, the suitability of proprietors and staff, and the provision of information. All schools who do not meet regulations are required to submit a plan to the Welsh Government to show how they will make the required improvements. Estyn monitors compliance with the regulations at the next monitoring visit.

Standards

Standards are notably more positive this year than in recent years. In six of the seven independent special schools inspected this year, and in three-quarters of the schools visited as part of monitoring, pupils make at least good progress in their learning in relation to their starting points and abilities. Many pupils develop their literacy skills well. For example, they improve their reading skills effectively from their baseline scores and develop more secure writing skills. Many pupils consolidate and improve their numeracy skills and become more confident in applying these across the curriculum, and in relation to real life contexts that support their future independence well, such as budgeting and travel.

In these schools, pupils make particularly strong progress in developing relevant communication and social skills. They listen carefully to each other and to teaching staff, and answer questions confidently using subject specific language accurately. Many pupils develop their thinking and problem-solving skills well. For example, they plan and prepare their own meals or apply the skills they learn in school to work experience placements in the community. This helps them to become more independent in their daily lives.

In one of the schools inspected and in around a quarter of the schools visited this year as part of monitoring, pupils make inconsistent progress in developing their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Generally this is because they do not use these skills regularly enough in real-life situations or apply them purposefully in subjects across the curriculum. In these schools, the presentation of pupils' written work is poor, and there are insufficient opportunities for pupils to achieve qualifications that support vocational progression or future learning pathways.

Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

In all of the schools inspected this year, and in nine-in-ten of the schools visited as part of the monitoring process, many pupils make at least good progress in improving their standards of wellbeing and their attitudes to learning. In these schools, pupils develop productive working relationships with staff who support them very effectively to develop their self-esteem and resilience when faced with challenges in learning. As a result, many pupils learn to manage their anxieties successfully and improve their behaviour in relation to their individual needs.

Many pupils attend school regularly and are punctual for lessons. In lessons, they work effectively both independently and with their peers. They take pride in their work and are eager to share their achievements and the progress they have made in their learning with visitors. In these schools, many pupils develop their leadership skills appropriately and contribute constructively to the life of the school and the local community.

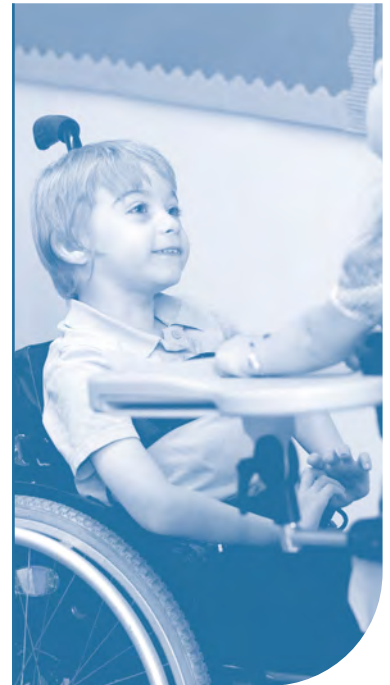
During their time at school, many pupils develop a secure understanding of healthy lifestyles, and learn how their choices will impact on their future lives. For example, many pupils take part regularly in physical exercise and explain the benefits of a healthy diet. Importantly, many develop their understanding of healthy relationships through well-planned therapeutic interventions and their personal and social education.

In four of the schools visited as part of the monitoring process during this period, there were shortcomings in the attendance and behaviour of a few pupils. These pupils make limited progress in managing their behaviour and do not engage well in learning. They do not respond well to staff support and leave lessons and activities early without completing tasks.

Teaching and learning experiences

In five of the seven schools inspected and in around half of the schools visited as part of the monitoring process, teaching and learning experiences are at least good. In these schools, the school provides a broad and relevant curriculum that meets the needs of pupils well. Curriculum planning has a strong focus on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, as well as the wide range of skills that pupils will need in their future lives. For example, schools plan outdoor education, activities to develop independent living skills and opportunities for work experience.

In these schools, teachers use secure subject knowledge to plan challenging lessons that build suitably on pupils' prior learning. Teachers and learning support assistants work together constructively and know their pupils' strengths and areas for development extremely well. They share high expectations of pupils' behaviour and progress and provide highly effective support and challenge for pupils. They tailor the curriculum skilfully to individual pupils' needs and provide a stimulating variety of well-planned activities that extend pupils' problem-solving skills.



Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

In two of the schools inspected and in around half of the schools monitored, aspects of teaching and learning experiences require improvement. Generally, this is because teachers set learning activities that lack challenge and are not tailored well enough to pupils' abilities and needs. Teachers rely too much on a limited range of approaches to teaching such as the use of worksheets, and do not include enough opportunities for pupils to develop their independent learning. In these schools, there is a lack of continuity and coherence in curriculum planning, and teachers do not provide enough opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills progressively across the curriculum.

Care, support and guidance

Provision for the care, support and guidance of pupils is good or excellent in six of the schools inspected, and is a strong feature in around seven-in-ten of the schools visited as part of the monitoring process. In these schools, teachers and leaders gather a wide range of evidence to monitor and track pupils' progress in learning. They consider this information carefully together with data on attendance, behaviour and other aspects of pupils' wellbeing to provide a robust record of the progress that pupils make over time. They use this information skilfully to put in place a range of interventions that support pupils' needs very well.

A particularly effective feature of this work is the partnership between teaching, residential and therapeutic staff. This well-co-ordinated joint working promotes a highly consistent approach to helping pupils manage their complex needs and improve their attitudes to learning. Over time, this approach helps significantly to equip pupils with the skills and knowledge they need to make healthy lifestyle choices in adult life.

Where aspects of the provision for care, support and guidance require improvement, this is because baseline assessments of pupils' skills are not robust enough, and arrangements for staff to track and monitor pupils' progress across the curriculum are underdeveloped. In addition, teachers do not plan well enough for pupils' personal and social education. As a result, pupils are not prepared well enough for the responsibilities and challenges of life in the community when they leave school.

Leadership

Leadership and management are at least good in five of the seven schools inspected and are a strong feature in around half of the schools visited as part of the monitoring this year. In these schools, leaders provide strong and purposeful leadership, which focuses well on improving provision and on outcomes for pupils. They communicate a clear vision for the school that promotes effective teamwork between education, residential and specialist staff teams. As a result, they create a positive and nurturing ethos that supports pupils' needs effectively. In these schools, leaders have a clear understanding of the school's overall strengths and areas for development and have suitable processes to track and monitor individual pupils' progress and wellbeing.

Headlands School

Headlands School created a new approach to how they support pupils who have experienced early trauma and adverse childhood experiences. They wanted to provide trusting relationships and a trauma-sensitive service for their pupils and families.

For more information, please read our [case study](#)



Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

Where aspects of leadership and management require improvement, this is generally because self-evaluation and improvement planning activities are not rigorous enough. In particular, the information that leaders collect on pupils' progress does not focus clearly on the standards of pupils' skills and is not used well enough to identify whole school areas for development. Priorities for improvement do not specify clearly enough precise actions to be taken, or identify clearly the resources or time needed to make successful changes.

In three of the schools visited as part of the monitoring process, instability in the senior leadership of the school creates uncertainty about the future direction of the school and does not help the school to plan confidently for improvement.

Woodlands School

Woodlands School wanted to improve their teaching and learning and establish a culture where pupils could achieve their academic potential. Daily assemblies and a new school council were used to share information with pupils and engage them in decisions.

For more information, please read our **case study**

