

Context

In January 2021, there were 36 independent special schools in Wales. This figure is the same as in January 2020. Independent special schools educate pupils from 3 to 19 years of age who have a wide range of special educational needs (SEN), including autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). 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 live in children's homes not attached to the school. A minority of all independent special schools educate day pupils only. Independent special schools are the second largest group of providers for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS) after PRUs. Nearly all placements at independent special schools are funded by local authorities in Wales or England.

As part of our engagement work with this sector, we contacted all independent special schools at least twice and made a very few visits. The focus for each discussion with leaders was the wellbeing of pupils, staff and senior leaders, how schools were supporting teaching and promoting learning, implications for the schools in the future, and leadership throughout the pandemic.

Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

Compliance with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

In independent schools, we usually inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. This year, due to restrictions to on-site visits, we have not assessed compliance with the regulations. In 2019-2020, six of the independent special schools inspected or visited as part of the monitoring process failed to comply with at least one of the standards.

This year, the Welsh Government formally requested us to undertake one unannounced focused inspection under section 160 of the Education Act 2002 (Great Britain, 2002). The inspection had a particular focus on standard 3 and standard 1 of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, which relate to the welfare, health and safety of pupils and the quality of education provided (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).

At the time of the focused inspection, the school met the requirements for standard 3 but failed to meet the regulatory requirements for standard 1.

We will monitor all of these schools as part of the annual monitoring process to ensure that they make the necessary improvements to maintain registration.

Wellbeing

Most schools remained open throughout the pandemic. In schools that provide education for children living in children's homes attached to the school, nearly all continued to provide education on-site throughout the pandemic. In contrast, where schools provide education for day pupils, the proportion of these pupils attending daily varied significantly over the year, according to the space available on-site and the school's interpretation of Welsh Government guidance.

Leaders ensured that nearly all pupils continued to receive the therapeutic support they were entitled to over the past year. They reported that multi-agency working had continued remotely throughout the year, with many leaders describing how the use of online platforms had helped to improve the attendance of participants at review and progress meetings.

In schools that employ their own in-house therapists, face-to-face therapeutic support generally resumed on-site in the autumn. In schools that use external staff and consultants, this was generally provided online for much of the year, with face-to-face support resuming gradually during the spring term. A few leaders had reservations about the suitability of this model for all pupils, describing how a few pupils chose to opt out rather than participate in the session.

Many leaders of schools that provide for day pupils noted that the use of online platforms throughout the pandemic had helped to improve communication and relationships with parents.

Extended pastoral care

At Catch22, a day school for primary-aged pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, the headteacher described how the school had extended the pastoral care it provides since the start of the pandemic. She described how all parents have an out-of-hours contact number, to reach either her or the school's pastoral lead, so that they can raise any concerns when they have these, rather than waiting for the next day. The school has also introduced a home-school book for pupils who want one, so that staff are able to share with parents the 'extraordinary progress' she feels some pupils are making. In addition to the half-termly progress reports sent home to parents, the headteacher described how the school had also introduced half-termly parents' evenings online. These initiatives are enabling parents to provide more regular and timely feedback to the school.

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In general, where schools provided education on-site for their pupils throughout this period, pupils' wellbeing was good, and they remained calm and settled. The trend observed at the start of lockdown, of fewer cases of challenging behaviour, had continued.

The mental health of some pupils was a concern due to a loss of routine, changes made to their usual programme of learning, and restricted access to the community or to off-site providers. Similarly, a few pupils in residential schools struggled when having only virtual or restricted face-to-face contact with their family for extended periods, particularly at Christmas. In a few day-schools, where pupils had been learning at home for much of the spring term, pupils' anxieties contributed to a deterioration in their behaviour following the full return to school after Easter.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Nearly all leaders continued to adjust arrangements for teaching and learning to take account of changing circumstances throughout the year. In nearly all cases, leaders reviewed teaching space in the school to lessen the numbers in each class and reduce the movement of staff and pupils around the school. In residential schools attached to children's homes, face-to-face teaching continued for most of the year. Where schools cater for day pupils in addition to residential pupils, leaders made significant changes to prevent the risk of infection across groups. For example, they introduced new timetabling arrangements from January to reduce the overall number of pupils on-site at any one time, including implementing remote or blended learning to support pupils attending either part-time or learning at home.

In general, pupils responded well to health and safety measures on-site. However, many found online and remote learning challenging because of the nature of their educational needs, their social vulnerability and previous disengagement from learning. A few leaders of residential schools described the difficulties in providing online teaching for pupils because of protocols around internet access in the care homes.

Teaching staff focused on promoting pupil wellbeing when planning activities and assessing progress. For example, they strengthened the provision for personal and social education, as well as physical exercise and mindfulness. Lessons routinely addressed issues associated with pupils' social and emotional wellbeing, through activities such as circle time or social skills sessions.

In the spring term, pupils' access to the local community and off-site providers for exercise, vocational activities and therapeutic provision was reduced considerably. To limit the impact of this, many staff developed the use of the immediate outdoor environment to provide pupils with opportunities to exercise and relax. Staff also strived to re-create opportunities for vocational learning and work experience on-site. Overall, however, these restrictions had a negative impact on the development of pupils' social, communication and independence skills, and on opportunities to prepare pupils for transition to their next steps in learning.

Ensuring secure online learning

At The Branas School, a residential school for pupils with complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, the school found it particularly challenging to ensure that pupils accessed their learning safely from the children's homes via a secure internet connection. During previous lockdowns, the school had not been able to provide online learning because the homes lacked internet access. To address this issue, the school provided the pupils with devices and purchased mobile hubs for each home. The school set up online learning accounts for the pupils and topped up the pay-as-you-go hubs during the period of blended learning. Once all pupils returned on a full-time basis, the homes met this cost, allowing the pupils to have monitored internet access to complete their homework in the homes. The school continues to monitor pupils' internet use.

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Independent special schools

In a few cases, there was a disruptive impact on pupils' wellbeing and progress in learning when care homes had to close following guidance from Public Health Wales. In these instances, the length of time pupils had to self-isolate in the homes proved a challenge for teachers and leaders to maintain continuity of teaching and learning.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders shared the personal pressures they faced over the last year in seeking to ensure the safety and wellbeing of pupils and staff. Many were concerned for the welfare of their staff, citing anxiety and high rates of absence due to staff having to self-isolate during the autumn and spring terms. In the summer term, staff confidence and attendance improved, due largely to the vaccination programme and the availability of regular testing.

A few leaders of residential schools found the burden placed on them by authorities requesting additional information and updates about the progress and wellbeing of pupils difficult. Despite these challenges, many leaders' experience of the pandemic enabled them to review and make positive changes to their provision. In the summer term in particular, leaders identified a range of additional or planned innovations which demonstrated how the school had moved beyond reacting to the operational challenges presented by the pandemic and was moving forward with its longer-term improvement priorities. In nearly all cases, their experiences during the pandemic helped staff to re-evaluate what is important. As a result, they made changes to the nature of the curriculum, for example, or the therapeutic model deployed by the school.

The majority of leaders continued to provide staff with professional learning opportunities linked to the school's improvement priorities and the needs of pupils. This included training around trauma-informed practice, applied behaviour analysis, autism awareness, attachment disorder, and dyslexia awareness. The development of online training had been particularly beneficial in enabling the majority of schools to develop more personalised programmes of professional learning.

Although it is not a requirement for independent schools, leaders in around half of schools described how they were reviewing their curriculum to align this more closely with the Curriculum for Wales in maintained schools. Many leaders also confirmed that they are at the early stages of understanding and implementing ALN reform. They described the difficulties they have experienced in accessing additional support from local authority and regional officers, because of confusion around their independent status.

Many leaders were challenged by the volume of guidance that they were expected to process at short notice with no clear highlighting of what might have changed between different versions. In addition, in residential schools in particular, there were difficulties caused by differences in guidance between England and Wales, particularly in terms of how this affected communication with parents who live in England.

Professional learning to support pupil needs

Gwenllian Education Centre is a school for complex needs that include communication difficulties associated with ASC. Over the last 12 months, leaders have reviewed its performance management and professional learning provision so that these two processes relate better to the school's expectations, objectives and requirements. All school staff now access a registered behavioural technician (RBT) training course. On completion of the training, staff receive ongoing supervision from the school's behaviour analyst. This involves direct training and support for staff in relation to specific pupils that the staff are directly engaged with and ongoing monitoring of their performance. The monitoring is undertaken against an assessment tool that is specific to the RBT role, and direct feedback and support are linked to this. Additional personalised targets are set to support the wider professional development of staff, which address improvement priorities highlighted through the school's self-evaluation.