

Supplementary guidance:

Social, emotional and
mental health (SEMH)
difficulties

Autumn 2022

This guidance is also available in Welsh.

The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- ▲ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- ▲ primary schools
- ▲ secondary schools
- ▲ all-age schools
- ▲ special schools
- ▲ pupil referral units
- ▲ independent schools
- ▲ further education
- ▲ independent specialist colleges
- ▲ adult community learning
- ▲ local authority education services for children and young people
- ▲ teacher education and training
- ▲ Welsh for adults
- ▲ work-based learning
- ▲ learning in the justice sector

We also:

- ▲ reports to Senedd Cymru and provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the Welsh Government and others
- ▲ make public good practice based on inspection evidence

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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What is the purpose?

To provide guidance to inspectors on the considerations to be given in respect of learners with social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH).

This guidance refers to the terminology social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH). Emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) and social, emotional and emotional difficulties (SEBD) are terms which are also used to identify these additional learning needs.

For whom is it intended?

All inspectors of maintained and independent schools and post-16 education.

From when should the guidance be used?

From August 2022.

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Supplementary guidance

Our key documents that guide inspection activity are the inspection guidance handbooks for each sector. However, we also produce supplementary guidance to help inspectors to consider specific aspects of education and training further.

The supplementary guidance documents set out some key principles, considerations and resources for inspectors. They relate to all sectors that we inspect, unless they state that they are for a specific sector. They expand on certain aspects of education/training (e.g. the inspection of literacy) or on ways of conducting inspections (e.g. the use of learning walks) or specific inspection arrangements (e.g. guidance on inspecting church schools).

The supplementary guidance documents do not aim to be comprehensive. Inspectors are not required to work through them exhaustively when covering any specific aspect on an inspection. However, inspectors may find them useful when responding to specific emerging questions that arise during inspections or when they wish to reflect or investigate further.

The supplementary guidance documents may help providers gain an understanding of our inspection arrangements. They may also be helpful to providers in evaluating specific aspects of their own provision.

Our inspection work is based on the following principles:

- Inspectors will approach inspection with a positive mindset to ensure it is the best possible professional learning experience for the staff in each provider
- Inspectors will take a learner-focused approach to inspection
- Inspectors will always focus strongly on the quality of teaching and learning
- Inspectors will seek out well-considered innovative practice
- Inspectors will tailor the inspection activities according to the circumstances in each provider as far as possible
- Inspectors will be agile and responsive to emerging findings and will use the increased range of inspection tools and approaches available
- Inspectors will consider everything in the inspection framework, but will only report on the key strengths and weaknesses within each provider

1 Introduction

The reporting inspector will be aware of the ALN profile within a school and will make suitable provision during the inspection for the following enquiries to be made. All members of the inspection team need to be aware of the general considerations for effective classroom practice and should judge the effectiveness of learners' standards and teaching in relation to learners' individual education plans (IEPs), personal education plans (PEPs), individual development plans (IDPs) or equivalent.

2 Definitions

It is important to acknowledge the language when describing the particular set of needs which this guidance discusses. Although the PLASC category for this need is BESD, we have taken the decision to use the term SEMH. Inspectors may visit provisions which use one of the other terms such as emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). It is important that we focus on the quality of provision to meet the needs of these learners, rather than the specific language used.

[Welsh guidance](#) in this area acknowledges that the definition of BESD will include many children who experience, or who are at risk of experiencing, mental health problems or disorders. However, the only references to mental health in the [ALN Code for Wales](#) refer to the transition from child and adolescent to adult mental health services. The nature of these specific needs is defined below:

The [ALN Act 2018 \(Wales\)](#) defines BESD as:

“Some children and young people will demonstrate features of emotional and behavioural difficulties. They may be withdrawn or isolated, disruptive and disturbing, hyperactive or lacking concentration; they may have under-developed social skills; or present challenging behaviours.”

The definition of SEMH in the [English SEND code of practice](#) is:

“Children and young people may experience a wide range of social and emotional difficulties which manifest themselves in many ways. These may include becoming withdrawn or isolated, as well as displaying challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour. These behaviours may reflect underlying mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression, self-harming, substance misuse, eating disorders or physical symptoms that are medically unexplained. Other children and young people may have disorders such as attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactive disorder or attachment disorder.”

Recent [Welsh Government figures](#) suggest that around 25,000 pupils in mainstream schools have significant SEMH. This reflects 24% of the ALN population and 5.3% of all pupil cohort. In the primary sector, SEMH is the third most reported type of ALN

(behind general learning difficulties and speech, language and communication difficulties). In secondary schools, SEMH is generally the second most reported type of ALN. Pupils with SEMH are at particular risk of being excluded. The exclusion rates for SEMH pupils are dramatically higher than those for the general pupil population. A SEMH pupil is nearly 6 times more likely to be permanently excluded than other pupils.

Inspection area 1: Learning

- In lessons and over time, does learning attainment data for SEMH learners demonstrate that progress is being made from their initial starting points?
- In lessons and over time, does behaviour attainment data for SEMH learners demonstrate improvement from their initial starting points?
- By the time they leave school do SEMH learners gain a suitable range of qualifications that are well matched to their needs, interests and abilities?

How well are these learners...?

- able to achieve the agreed targets contained in their individual plans?
- making progress in developing social skills, self-esteem and self-confidence from their initial starting points?
- able to work with increasing independence?
- increasingly applying the knowledge and skills they develop in support sessions to the whole class situation and wider school life?

Considerations for COVID recovery

It is important to consider that the impact of the pandemic on the well-being and learning of these learners may be more severe than for other learners. We should consider this on a case-by-case basis, being sensitive to the particular context and needs of each learner.

As noted in our [summary of engagement](#) calls, a few learners have struggled to reintegrate and conform successfully to new expectations and routines, such as staggered start and end times of the day. There have also been reflections from schools on the increasing social, emotional, behavioural and mental health needs amongst learners since the pandemic.

Furthermore, for those learners who are looked after, the pandemic may have been a period of limited access to family contact. This is particularly relevant for those children in residential care settings. This has the potential to be of significant detriment to these learners' emotional and mental health, as well as their ability to engage positively in education.

Inspection area 2: Well-being and attitudes to learning

- In lessons and over time, does the number and severity of incidences of challenging behaviour reduce?
- Is learner attendance appropriate, or showing improvement over time?

Are these learners increasingly...?

- making progress in developing strategies to manage their behaviour in and outside of lessons, from their initial starting points?
- using strategies to safely manage their own emotions?
- taking responsibility for their actions and their work?
- showing consideration to each other and to staff?
- following the instructions from staff?
- able to work effectively with their peers? For example, when undertaking group work or in a sporting context.
- listening to others and engaging in meaningful and appropriate dialogue with staff and peers?
- making progress in the development of their social skills?
- involved in making decisions about themselves and their learning?
- confident and resourceful when working independently?

Reintegration

When inspecting settings where learners have moved to PRUs, inspectors may wish to consider the following:

- How effective the transition arrangements are between schools and PRUs?
- How well learners reintegrate back into school after attending the PRU?
- Are learners remaining in PRU provision for too long?
- Is the school working with the PRU to share expertise?
- Is the school sharing and receiving appropriate information with the PRU?
- Do learners remain on roll at the school whilst attending the PRU?
- Are schools ensuring that they are working with PRUs to ensure requirements in IDPs (or similar) are met?
- Are leaders monitoring the progress of learners on roll who are attending PRUs?

Inspection area 3: Teaching and learning experiences

Do teachers...?

- know their learners well and have a secure understanding of their needs and abilities?
- model appropriate behaviour which reflects classroom expectations? Does this continue when faced with challenge?
- build trusting, empathetic working relationships?
- provide security and stability?
- recognise strengths and show that learners are valuable and valued?
- work effectively with support and specialist staff to create a positive and supportive learning environment?
- deploy support staff effectively to maximise learning?
- ensure clear and consistent values and expectations for all learners?
- ensure that expectations of good behaviour are clearly translated into learning and teaching opportunities?
- ensure their planning takes into account the needs and interests of the learners?
- provide a flexible and personalised approach to teaching and learning to meet the individual needs and interests of the learners?
- maintain motivation and reward positive behaviour consistently?
- develop learners' independence skills and resilience appropriately?
- ensure that specific needs of the learner do not act as a barrier to accessing a wide range of learning experiences?
- **Does the school** ensure that individual learning pathways are flexible with a broad and meaningful range of stimulating experiences appropriate to the learners' needs and interests?
- **Does the school** ensure sufficient opportunities for learners to practise life skills in real life situations?

Exclusion

When considering the effectiveness of the school at managing these learners and the use of exclusion, inspectors may wish to consider:

- Are schools using exclusion in line with legislation, guidance and their own policies?
- Has the school considered alternatives to exclusion? Such as pastoral support, restorative justice, internal exclusion or a managed move.
- Are exclusions for the shortest time necessary? Is the school continuing to provide education throughout periods of exclusion? Is work being marked?
- Do records for exclusion show a repetition of similar behaviours and consequences? Is the school adapting their approach for the pupil to this?
- Is the school successfully reintegrating learners following periods of exclusion?
- Is the school reviewing its use of exclusion? What have these reviews shown? For example, do they reveal patterns in exclusion rates of those with protected characteristics or use of exclusion over time.
- Have learners with ALN been subject to exclusion? Why? What was the impact?
- Have looked after learners been subject to exclusion? Why? What was the impact?
- Are exclusion practices at the school effective at keeping learners safe and improving behaviour?

Inspection area 4: Care, support and guidance

- To what extent is the school successful in identifying, understanding and supporting the emotional, behavioural and mental health issues of learners?
- Does the school monitor and record all incidences of students' challenging behaviour to carefully identify particular patterns and trends?
- Does the school use effective links with families and other support services to support learner well-being?
- How effective is the intervention and support programme for SEMH students?
- Does additional support target the development of life skills and building independence?
- Does the school make effective use of meaningful targets in IDPs to maximise support and progress?
- Does the school engage effectively with partners, including parents, carers, previous schools and specialists, to identify the needs of learners and make appropriate provision?
- Does the school make learners and families aware of professional support and specialist services available? For example, counselling or mental health services.

- Does the school recognise and reward achievement? Is this done consistently and fairly?
- Are sanctions used fairly and consistently? Are they appropriate?
- Does the school give SEMH students worthwhile opportunities to develop their understanding of making good lifestyle choices?
- To what extent does the school allow and encourage learners with SEMH to make decisions that affect them? Are their views listened to and acted upon?
- Are these learners represented across the school? For example, in school council, clubs and school plays.
- Do the school's safeguarding policies and procedures take account of the increased vulnerability of learners with SEMH and ensure that arrangements for these learners are appropriate?
- Does the school have a clear policy around the use of restrictive physical intervention? Does the school have appropriate systems to record incidents? Do staff follow these procedures robustly?

Restraint

When is restraint allowed?

In England and Wales, school staff have the power to use 'reasonable force' to prevent a learner from:

- committing any offence
- causing personal injury to, or damage to the property of, any person (including themselves)
- prejudicing the maintenance of good order and discipline at the school or among any learners receiving education at the school. (UK Government, 2006a)

Staff may also use reasonable force when exercising the statutory power to search learners for weapons, without their consent, where they have reasonable grounds for suspicion.

Furthermore, staff may also seclude or isolate a learner in an area away from other learners if they are disruptive. This approach can be used as a disciplinary penalty. Schools have discretion about how long to isolate a learner and in what circumstances, leading to a variety of practices. Schools must have a behaviour policy that should set out what these practices are. (EHRC, 2021)

More information can be found in [Welsh Government Guidance](#) document: Safe and effective intervention – use of reasonable force and searching for weapons.

Inspection area 5: Leadership and management

Do leaders in the school...?

- communicate a clear vision and ethos of inclusion and diversity?
- place an appropriate strategic focus on outcomes and provision for learners with SEMH?
- provide clear whole school teaching and learning and behaviour policies that are understood and followed by staff?
- ensure that **all** staff are skilled and supported and have regular opportunities for professional learning in classroom strategies and methodology for SEMH learners?
- facilitate staff training in relevant areas? For example, trauma and attachment.
- ensure that mentoring / induction of new or newly qualified teachers includes SEMH teaching approaches? Or training on the specific need of learners at the school?
- ensure effective liaison with other agencies to ensure that additional support meets learners' needs?
- allocate sufficient resources, including staffing, to meet the needs of learners with SEMH?
- show commitment to the local authority's "managed move" arrangements where appropriate?

Managed moves

A [managed move](#) is a carefully planned transfer of a learner from one school into another.

It enables a child or young person to move on to a new placement or programme in a way which is acceptable to all appropriate parties, especially the learner. The process is designed to help the learner move forward and make a fresh start.

Evidence suggests that for a managed move to be successful, the full engagement of the learner, parents/carers and the schools need to be fully considered and transport issues need to be addressed.

When considering the use of managed moves in a school, inspectors may wish to consider the following:

- How effectively do schools support learners and their families prior, during and after a managed move?
- Does the school use managed moves as a means of reducing exclusions?
- Are all managed moves in the best interests of the learner?

- Is the school deploying effective support to reduce the need for managed moves?
- Is the school ensuring that learners and their families have access to impartial information, advice and guidance?
- Is the school sharing appropriate information with other schools throughout the managed move process?

Appendix: Further reading

Other relevant reading:

[Developing pupils' social and emotional skills | Estyn \(gov.wales\)](#)

[School behaviour and discipline | Sub-topic | GOV.WALES](#)

[Practical Approaches to Behaviour Management in the Classroom](#)

[Supporting learners in pupil referral units to return to mainstream school | Estyn \(gov.wales\)](#)

[Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units \(gov.wales\)](#)

[Managed moves thematic survey report \(gov.wales\)](#)