

# Maintained Special

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## Schools

**39**

No. of schools 2024

**39**

No. of schools 2023

**40**

No. of schools 2022

## Pupils

**6,025**

All pupils

**303**

No. of pupils under 5

**4,772**

No. of pupils 5 to 15

**950**

No. of pupils aged 16 and over

**45.7%**

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

**44.1%**

eFSM (All pupils)

## Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 1 SI: 0 ER: 2

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 0 SI: 0 ER: 2

No. went into FU after core inspection 2023-2024

SM: 0 SI: 1 ER: 1

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 1 SI: 1 ER: 1

## Core inspections

No. of inspections: 10

Welsh-medium: 1

Bilingual:

English-medium: 9

## Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 4

Published on website: 6

## Engagement visits

No. of visits/calls: 0

## Summary

Overall, maintained special schools continued to provide very effective education for pupils with a wide range of additional learning needs. The care, support and guidance provided by the sector continued to be a particular strength and was underpinned by strong relationships between staff and pupils based on mutual trust and respect. Over time, with sensitive and skilled support from staff, nearly all pupils learnt to embrace diversity and show tolerance towards one another. Most pupils made at least appropriate progress in developing a range of skills and older pupils received robust support to access a broader curriculum, including vocational and work-related experiences that lead to recognised accreditations. Overall leadership continued to be a strength and was exceptionally strong in a minority of schools.

## Teaching and learning

Most special schools had high expectations for all pupils, with staff possessing exceptional understanding of their needs. This fostered strong, respectful relationships between staff and pupils, positively impacting their progress, attitudes to learning, and overall, well-being.

Most pupils made appropriate progress relative to their starting points. Many special schools ensured that their communication systems matched pupils' needs well, boosting their confidence and improving their communication skills. However, a few schools did not plan well enough for pupils to develop writing skills.

Many pupils developed numeracy skills well, using mathematical operations with increasing confidence. They handled data and presented information in graphs and tables. Over time, they used numeracy skills beneficially in real-life contexts such as calculating travel times, budgeting, and calculating change.

Many pupils developed their digital skills suitably. Pupils with complex needs used tablets and other devices to communicate with increasing confidence. They learnt about left and right and made marks with a pen on the screen to indicate the direction of travel. More able pupils logged onto devices, composed emails, researched online, and presented data in graphs and tables. Additionally, pupils created videos and QR codes, and a few even prepared scripts and presented on local radio.

Many pupils developed their Welsh language skills appropriately, recognising common words, days of the week, and colours, and confidently greeting people and following instructions in the language. A few schools did not provide enough worthwhile opportunities to develop pupils' knowledge and understanding of Welsh culture and heritage.

A very few special schools had notable strengths in pupils' creative, physical, and digital skills. We noted that the creative skills of pupils at [Ysgol Maes Y Coed](#), for example, were a particular strength.

Pupils developed valuable independence skills, from managing schoolwork to practical life tasks like budgeting, cooking, and using public transport. Schools increasingly collaborated with local further

education colleges, with about a third establishing satellite bases at these colleges. These partnerships allowed pupils to access tailored vocational sessions, supporting their transition to further education that matched their needs and abilities. For those with more complex needs, links with independent specialist colleges were also strengthened.

By the time pupils left school, many had completed both academic and vocational courses, which prepared them well for the next stage of learning. As a result of the guidance from their schools, a significant number progressed to further education. In a few schools, pupils made extremely strong progress in developing these skills, which was clearly linked to a well-planned curriculum and high-quality teaching. At [Maes Ebbw School](#) and Pen-Y-Cwm Special School, teaching was a notable strength.

In the most effective special schools, there was a clear rationale to the curriculum offer that included, for example, parents and pupils. These schools provide a broad curriculum that is enjoyed by pupils. Staff create relevant opportunities for pupils to influence their day-to-day experiences. At [Heronsbridge School](#), for example, the broad, stimulating pupil-centred curriculum was robustly planned and involved the whole staff team, pupils and parents.

A few special schools needed to collaborate better with local authorities to improve the learning environment. We noted inconsistent access to hydrotherapy. Rising pupil numbers were also leading to the loss of specialist rooms and independent learning areas and we issued a safeguarding letter to one school for inadequate adapted space.

Despite teaching strengths, we made recommendations in the majority of schools. These related to the need for better planning for skill development, improving curriculum and teaching methods, and reducing variability in teaching quality.

## **Care, support and guidance and its impact on pupil well-being**

Special schools generally maintained exceptionally secure arrangements, providing highly effective care, support and guidance. This created an environment where most pupils enjoyed school and felt safe. Nearly all schools had a strong safeguarding culture and educated pupils on personal safety.

Strong relationships between special schools and other professionals and agencies ensured tailored support for individual needs. Visits by health professionals mean that pupils do not have to leave school to attend appointments. Additionally, many schools developed their own arrangements to support families over time. [Ysgol Hen Felin's Wellbeing Centre](#), for example, has enhanced community engagement through a variety of initiatives.

Most schools effectively tracked and supported pupils' emotional needs and attendance through dedicated staff teams who worked closely with parents, partner agencies and school staff. We commented very favourably on the behaviour and attitudes of nearly all pupils in special schools, noting their curiosity, friendliness and pride in their achievements and community.

Although attendance improved post-pandemic, historical comparisons were challenging due to a lack of current national data for maintained special schools. Pupils in leadership roles thrived and talked enthusiastically about taking on responsibilities, participating in school events, and contributing to local and national charities. At [Ysgol Penmaes](#), for example, pupil voice is a strength of the school.

Nearly all schools provided valuable opportunities for pupils to learn about diverse cultures and religions. Staff in special schools created inclusive environments where pupils embraced differences, recognised strengths in classmates, and developed compassion and empathy.

Despite these strengths, half of the inspected schools received recommendations for improvements in care, support, guidance, and pupil well-being. In a minority of schools, we noted the need for schools to work with their local authority to improve the condition and suitability of school accommodation. A few schools did not provide adequate access to hydrotherapy provision and there was lack of understanding of the role of the school nursing service. This limited the benefit of the service to pupils and their families. In one school we noted that staff have an insufficient understanding of the reasons for challenging behaviour and this, in part, contributed to poor attendance.

## **Leading and improving**

Overall, the leadership in maintained special schools was a strong feature in nearly all schools and an exceptionally strong feature in a minority of them. We highlighted the caring, thoughtful, compassionate and exceptional leadership in this sector.

Where leadership was particularly strong, leaders established a clear, shared vision focused on improving outcomes for all pupils. These leaders were highly visible and passionate, valuing parents as partners in their children's education. Roles and responsibilities were well understood, with staff feeling trusted and supported in their development as leaders. Effective leaders listened to their staff, fostering loyalty, building trust, and enhancing pupils' learning experiences. The most successful special schools developed a strong community identity, where pupils and staff felt a sense of belonging and thrived within a supportive culture.

Overall, leaders and governors had a deep understanding of their schools and maintained systems to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Governors effectively acted as critical friends to headteachers. Self-evaluation and improvement planning were robust in the most effective schools, focusing on enhancing teaching, learning, and pupil outcomes.

Leaders created opportunities for staff innovation and provided valuable professional learning, which staff appreciated, with [Heronbridge School](#) being notably strong in this area.

Leaders made effective use of pupil development grants, positively impacting attendance and well-being. However, recommendations in the majority of schools primarily concerned improvements in self-evaluation and planning. Concerns included insecure evidence gathering or insufficient analysis of information, and in a few schools governing bodies not effectively supporting and holding headteachers accountable.

## **Follow-up**

Two schools inspected in this academic year were placed in a follow-up category.

Three schools are currently in follow-up. One school remains in special measures and has been in this category since its core inspection in 2022. It has been monitored every term and progress has been found to be insufficient to remove it from special measures. Of the remaining schools, one is in need of significant improvement and the other is in Estyn review.

Two schools, placed in Estyn review in 2023, were found to have made sufficient progress to be removed from follow-up.

## **Overview of recommendations**

In the 2023 - 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 10 maintained special schools.

5 schools were given a recommendation about improving or strengthening their self-evaluation and improvement planning.

3 schools were given a recommendation about providing opportunities for pupils to develop skills, such as writing, independent living, and literacy skills.

Two schools were given a recommendation to improve attendance.

Two of the weaker schools were recommended to strengthen or improve teaching.

Two schools were given a recommendation about leadership.

Other recommendations included working with partners, addressing safeguarding concerns, strengthening the role of the governing body, and strengthening assessment processes.