

Independent specialist colleges

7

No. of independent specialist colleges July 2023

8

No. of independent specialist colleges July 2024

2

Well-being letters issued 2022-2023 academic year

0

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Inspection activity undertaken this year:

- 1 core inspection
- 5 monitoring visits
- 4 initial registration visits
- 2 changes to arrangements visits

Spotlights:

- Aspris South – coffee shop
- Aspris South – partnership working for transitions

Initial registration visits

Where a provider is seeking to receive local authority funded placements it needs to make an application to the Welsh Government to be included on the list of approved independent special post-16 institutions. In considering an application for inclusion on the list, the Welsh Government requests that Estyn review the additional learning needs (ALN) provision and provide a report with a recommendation.

During 2023-2024 we provided four reports to the Welsh Government on the quality of additional learning provision proposed by applicants.

Strengths:

- In nearly all of the applications, leaders had a suitable vision for the purpose of the provision,

guided by clear values and experience supporting learners with additional learning needs.

- Nearly all applicants demonstrated a secure understanding of the importance of a learner-centred approach.
- In one setting, curriculum and assessment plans focused on learners developing beneficial skills and accrediting learning where this is appropriate.
- In one setting, leaders planned an individualised approach to meeting the needs of learners and made arrangements for learners to benefit from access to wide range of high-quality resources.
- In one setting, leaders established a therapeutic team to support the needs of learners.

Areas for improvement:

- In three providers, there was a limited curriculum offer or planned approach to assessing the progress made by learners.
- In three providers, policies did not consistently refer to current Welsh legislation and guidance.
- In three settings, there were concerns about the suitability of planned use of the learning environment.
- Two settings had no clear additional learning provision offer or clear identification of the category of need the provider aimed to support.

Summary

During 2023-2024, independent specialist colleges (otherwise known as independent specialist post-16 institutions) continued to provide education and well-being support for learners with a wide range of additional learning needs.

Independent specialist colleges educated around 170 Welsh-funded learners across Wales aged 16 years and over. The colleges provided for a diverse range of learners' needs, including autistic spectrum condition; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; and profound and multiple learning difficulties. In five of the colleges, learners lived in residential homes attached to the college.

Nearly all placements at independent specialist colleges are currently funded by the Welsh Government or local authorities for learners from England. Due to additional learning needs reforms, funding for these placements is moving from the Welsh Government to local authorities, with new learners now being funded through local authorities.

In addition to full inspections, we carry out regular monitoring visits of independent specialist colleges. These visits consider the progress made by the colleges against specific recommendations from core inspections and previous monitoring visits.

This year, we carried out one core inspection, five monitoring visits, four initial registration visits and two changes to arrangements visits. The findings from all these visits have informed this report.

Overall, colleges provide a flexible curriculum to meet the needs of learners, but in a minority of

colleges learning activities are not consistently well matched to learner needs. Overall, staff in these colleges develop positive relationships with learners based on a strong understanding of their needs and interests. The stability of leadership is improving but self-evaluation remains an area for improvement in around half of colleges.

Teaching and learning

Most learners in independent specialist colleges made secure progress towards their individual targets.

Overall, support staff developed highly positive relationships with learners and acted as positive role models. In around half of colleges visited, the sensitive and skilled support from learning support workers was a notable strength and they allowed learners to work independently where possible. In a minority of colleges, the quality of learning support was too variable. Around half of colleges we visited had recently improved processes for tracking learners' progress and were beginning to use this information to inform planning.

Coleg Elidyr – Celebrating Welsh language and culture

Learners participating in 'Clwb Clonc' show positive attitudes towards the Welsh language and culture. They engage well with activities the college has developed to improve their Welsh language skills. Where possible, most fluent Welsh speakers naturally converse with their tutors and peers in one-to-one conversations using Welsh.

Independent specialist colleges provided a flexible curriculum, informed by learner interests and future needs. In around half of colleges visited, this offer was strengthened through links with mainstream colleges.

Overall, learners benefited from opportunities to develop practical skills in real world settings. For example, learners worked in the college coffee shop serving paying customers from the local community, cared for animals on the college farm, grew vegetables in the polytunnel and cooked meals in the college kitchen. However, in a minority of colleges, learners completed poorly designed worksheets, which did not further their skills development or learning. Around half of the colleges visited this year had made recent improvements to their learning environments.

The Aspris Hwb – coffee shop

Learners develop a range of important skills for their future lives within the college coffee shop. This is open every lunchtime to members of the public, selling meals, snacks and hot drinks. Leaders have planned this provision as a vehicle to develop a range of skills, for example social skills, basic food hygiene, cooking and money skills.

Learners complete an application to be considered for the role and then sign a contract with the college on appointment. In preparation for placements, they complete accredited qualifications in food hygiene and barista training, which could be transferred to future employment.

Care, support and guidance, and their impact on learners' well-being

All colleges visited this year had established bright and welcoming learning environments where learners felt happy and safe. There were no significant concerns about safeguarding practices in any of the colleges visited this year. Where required, all colleges responded suitably to issues raised in their well-being letters from the previous academic year.

In all of the colleges visited, staff developed a strong understanding of learners' needs and interests. They built positive and nurturing relationships with them. In a few colleges, learner attendance remained an area for improvement. Further, in a few colleges, processes to record and follow up on learner absence lacked clarity and rigour.

In all of the colleges visited, learners benefited from the support of a therapy team. Where this was most effective, learners used this support to develop important skills, such as self-regulation, social and communication skills.

Aspris College – Partnership working for positive transitions

All learners have individual transition pathways upon entry into the college, which are reviewed regularly and ensure that they are being supported to achieve their long-term goals. There is valuable information captured about learners during their assessment, which includes their personal interests, education objectives and support needed. This enables the college to develop appropriate pathway trackers for every learner.

There is a strong partnership between Aspris College and Coleg Gwent. Regular meetings take place between college leaders where important information is shared regarding all current and potential learners. Staff at the college benefit from observing sessions at Coleg Gwent to enhance and develop their own teaching practice as well as enabling them to provide accurate information about courses to their learners. As a result, many learners successfully transition from Aspris College to Coleg Gwent to continue their education.

Leadership and improvement

Leadership across the sector was more consistent this academic year than last. We noted that the majority of colleges had a stable leadership team with a clear, learner-centred vision. In a few colleges, oversight and monitoring processes lacked clarity.

In the majority of colleges visited this year, leaders had established a committed staff team. In the most effective cases, staff benefit from professional learning, which has improved important aspects of their practice, for example delivering personal and social education.

Many of the colleges visited this year benefited from the support of staff in their parent organisation. In around half of these colleges, links with the senior leadership team of the parent organisation had been strengthened. As a result, leaders benefited from appropriate support and challenge.

Around half of colleges had strengthened improvement planning processes. In around half of colleges, self-evaluation processes did not consistently focus on the impact of teaching on learning.

During the inspection cycle 2016-2024, there was no follow-up category used in this sector as we visited all colleges regularly for monitoring visits. However, from September 2024, follow-up will be introduced in this sector for those providers causing concern.

Coleg Elidyr – Enriching the curriculum

The college uses a range of high-quality additional activities to enrich the curriculum. For example, the college encourages learners to participate in local and national vocational skill-building competitions. Learners are successful in demonstrating their skills with a few learners winning gold and silver medals at national level.

Additionally, a few learners achieve gold for the Duke of Edinburgh Award and the Young Leader Award, having demonstrated leadership abilities and successfully completing a four-day expedition.

Nearly all learners participate in relevant work experience placements, and around half support learners to integrate in the local community. For example, learners have placements in National Trust estates, museums, horse stables and local businesses.

Overview of recommendations from inspections and monitoring visits

Over the six visits we completed this year that have published reports, we left a total of 11 recommendations. Nearly all colleges received recommendations following a visit or inspection.

Recommendations left in relation to teaching and learning focused on the quality of learning support and ensuring that the quality of teaching experiences was well matched to the needs of learners.

The majority of recommendations were in relation to leading and improving, in particular, focusing on improving quality assurance processes.