

A report on
The Hollies Special School

**Bryn Heulog
Pentwyn
CF23 7XG**

Date of inspection: September 2025

by

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education
and Training in Wales**

This report is also available in Welsh

About The Hollies Special School

Name of provider	The Hollies Special School
Local authority	Cardiff Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Maintained Special
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	132
Pupils of statutory school age	117
Number in nursery classes	0
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Maintained Special is 46.6%)	48.8%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Maintained Special is 100.0%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	47
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2017
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	22/10/2019

Start date of inspection	22/09/2025
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Further information

The Hollies is a day school, maintained by Cardiff City Council. At the time of the inspection there were 155 pupils aged from 4 to 11 years. This represents a 53% increase in pupil numbers since the last inspection in 2019. Nearly all pupils have a statutory individual develop plan (IDP) that is maintained by the school. A very few pupils have an IDP that is maintained by the local authority.

All pupils are autistic and/or have a speech communication and language difficulty. A very few pupils have additional learning needs relating to learning, sensory and/or emotional difficulties.

The school has 19 classes and pupils are taught in classes that are broadly determined by their needs, ability and age, with considerable variation in individual starting points.

All pupils live in the Cardiff area. Just under half of pupils are from ethnic backgrounds with around 18 different home languages. Currently, there are very few pupils with looked after status. A very few pupils speak Welsh as their first language at home.

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website: mylocalschool.gov.wales

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Summary

The Hollies provides a caring and supportive environment where pupils are happy and safe and enjoy their learning. Staff know pupils very well and place a strong focus on well-being. Nearly all pupils feel listened to and valued.

Teaching is carefully planned around individual needs. Staff use clear systems to track progress in small steps, which helps pupils to celebrate their achievements and build confidence. Over time, pupils develop strong skills in communication, social interaction and independence, supported by consistent routines and high expectations. They engage positively in learning, take increasing responsibility for themselves and make steady progress that enhances their future opportunities. Pupils benefit from a wide range of creative and cultural opportunities, including music, drama and art. These experiences enrich learning and allow pupils to develop new skills and interests. Care, support and guidance are strong. Transitions into The Hollies and when pupils moved on to secondary education are managed effectively, with home and school visits helping new pupils to settle well. Families are regularly involved in understanding the curriculum and contributing ideas. Pupils also gain from positive community links, such as visits from local services and opportunities to perform in care homes and day centres.

Leadership has established a positive culture where staff feel supported to share ideas, try new approaches and learn from one another. This teamwork contributes to continued improvements in teaching and learning.

The condition of the building is an area of concern. Roof leaks, water damage and unrepaired outdoor shelters have reduced the amount of valuable learning space available. This limits some opportunities for pupils to play, explore and regulate their emotions. Leaders continue to raise these concerns with the local authority.

Overall, the school provides a safe, inclusive and engaging education, with strong teaching and care, though improvements to the site are still needed.

Recommendations

We have made two recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of leaders across the school and ensure that these are well understood and not duplicated
- R2. Refine systems so leaders at all levels can monitor teaching, learning and well-being effectively

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Main evaluation

Confident, motivated pupils supported by a broad range of skills

Pupils make strong progress in their learning over time, particularly in communication, independence and functional life skills. Many join the school with significant barriers to learning, including limited or no speech and difficulties in managing their emotions. Staff establish consistent routines and expectations that help pupils to settle, feel secure and engage positively in lessons. This calm, nurturing environment enables pupils to grow in confidence, develop resilience and take increasing responsibility for their own learning, preparing them well for the next stage in their education and lives.

The development of pupils' skills across the curriculum is a strong feature of the school. A total communication approach, including symbols, pictures, signing and electronic devices, is embedded in all classes and provides pupils with a clear voice. Pupils use these tools confidently to express needs, make choices and interact with staff and peers. Real-life contexts, such as the school café or breakfast club, give purposeful opportunities to practise communication, social interaction and turn-taking. Early intervention and consistent modelling ensure that many pupils make steady progress in literacy, from recognising symbols to linking letters with sounds, while a few begin to verbalise words and short phrases after only a short time in school.

Numeracy and digital competence are promoted well through meaningful routines and activities. Early number concepts are reinforced naturally in daily lessons, such as counting snacks or bilingual number songs, while cooking, outdoor learning and sorting tasks embed mathematical skills in everyday life. Pupils use digital tools effectively to match sounds and symbols, type simple sentences or explore coding, which enhances independence, problem-solving and motivation.

Creativity and problem-solving are integrated across the curriculum. Pupils explore emotions, culture and history through sensory art, drama and digital media, while whole-school projects and visits to cultural venues enrich learning and strengthen understanding of Wales. Practical challenges, such as negotiating resources or navigating equipment safely, encourage pupils to think flexibly, collaborate with others and build resilience.

Pupils demonstrate pride in their school and confidently share their learning environments with visitors. Outdoor areas, such as the forest and garden, are a strong feature of provision and provide valuable opportunities for exploration and practical learning. Specialist spaces, including the sensory integration room and ball pool, are used highly effectively to enhance pupils' communication, numeracy, physical and social skills. Many of these facilities have been shaped by pupils' ideas, which enhances motivation and engagement.

Strong relationships between staff and pupils underpin the school's child-centred ethos, fostering independence and active participation. The development of independence, social and physical skills is embedded in daily routines, with pupils gradually taking greater responsibility for managing schedules, collecting resources and transitioning between activities.

They acquire essential life skills, such as dressing, tooth brushing and recognising belongings, alongside practising cooperation through assemblies, group work and clubs. Physical activities, including yoga and trampolining, support balance, coordination and regulation, preparing pupils well for learning.

Welsh language development is embedded consistently across teaching and learning. Pupils respond enthusiastically to praise, songs and instructions delivered in Welsh, and a few are beginning to use simple phrases with increasing confidence. Assemblies and classroom routines reinforce this learning further, helping to ensure that pupils develop bilingual skills in meaningful contexts.

Pupils' attitudes to learning and behaviour are consistently positive. Nearly all engage calmly and purposefully in lessons, supported by familiar structures and expectations. Staff manage challenging behaviours swiftly and effectively, using well-established strategies that minimise disruption. Token systems, visual prompts and motivators help sustain attention and focus, while consistent routines foster a strong sense of security. Over time, pupils develop resilience, motivation and a willingness to persevere in their learning.

Strong teaching and support foster confident, motivated pupils

Teaching, including the learning support provided by teaching assistants, is a notable strength of the school. Lessons are carefully planned and individualised to build on pupils' starting points, with clear routines that promote independence, support emotional regulation and create a calm, purposeful atmosphere for learning. Staff demonstrate high expectations and know their pupils exceptionally well, using this knowledge to adapt activities flexibly and provide meaningful, engaging experiences.

A wide range of strategies, including multi-sensory resources, structured play, music, movement breaks and the purposeful use of breakout spaces, are embedded across teaching and are used consistently to sustain attention, stimulate curiosity and support regulation. Teachers incorporate digital competence, numeracy, creativity and life skills in contextually relevant ways, ensuring that pupils experience success and make connections across their learning. The curriculum is delivered through a needs-led approach, with autism strategies firmly embedded to ensure that pupils feel safe, secure and ready to learn.

Relationships between staff and pupils are exceptionally warm, respectful and underpinned by trust. Staff act as positive role models who celebrate achievement, provide sensitive support and use consistent expectations to foster independence. Staff genuinely care for their pupils. Assessment processes, including the TiME ('This is me') approach, are used effectively to monitor progress and inform planning, ensuring that pupils' skills are developed systematically. Teachers and support staff demonstrate a genuine enthusiasm and joy for teaching, and their thoughtful, flexible practice underpins the school's inclusive ethos and pupils' positive attitudes to learning.

As a result of these approaches, pupils develop as confident, motivated learners who are well prepared for the next stage of their education and life. Many achieve small but significant steps in communication, independence and functional skills, while a minority make accelerated progress in verbal communication and literacy. Pupils leave the school with stronger foundations in self-regulation, problem-solving and life skills, which enable them to access further learning with greater independence.

Strong relationships and high expectations enable pupils to thrive

The Hollies provides a purposeful and nurturing learning environment where pupils feel safe, valued and happy. Leaders and staff have an in-depth knowledge of pupils' needs and interests, which underpins strong relationships based on respect and trust. This child-centred ethos creates a supportive community where pupils thrive.

Parents and carers highlight the strong, positive relationships they have with the school. Person-centred practice is well embedded and underpins these partnerships, helping

families feel well supported and informed. In addition to regular coffee mornings, workshops and family forums, the school organises clinics with external organisations, such as the Department for Work and Pensions and healthcare professionals that provide targeted support on issues like sleep and toileting and medical needs. These opportunities give parents practical strategies to support their child and demonstrate the school's strong commitment to pupil well-being. Despite these strengths, a few parents of non-verbal children feel that daily communication could be more detailed.

Early, individualised support ensures pupils overcome barriers to change

School leaders have established robust and worthwhile transition arrangements for pupils and families. Strong and early relationships are developed with families and pupils before arriving at The Hollies. Staff meet with parents, arrange visits to the school, undertake observations at previous schools and visit the family home. As a result, families feel supported, and pupils are familiar with the school environment and key staff prior to starting. This allows for a successful transition into The Hollies and facilitates early progress for pupils.

Support for pupils and parents transitioning to secondary education is also well planned and highly effective. The school works closely with the local authority and secondary providers to share information and ensure bespoke arrangements are in place. Pupils benefit from tailored support, including flexible visits, photographs and social stories, which reduce anxiety and prepare them well for the next stage of their education. Further, within the school day, effective arrangements are in place to support pupil transition from one activity to another. This is a particular strength given that many autistic pupils who attend the school have faced difficulties in coping with change, have often experienced disrupted education before joining The Hollies, and can find new or unfamiliar situations especially challenging.

All pupils have additional learning needs and an individual development plan (IDP). Leaders have established a clear rationale for provision and monitor carefully the quality of IDPs and their impact on pupil progress. Outcomes are appropriately ambitious, and staff provide meaningful opportunities for pupils to work towards their individual targets. As a result, many pupils engage successfully in their learning and make strong progress.

Staff use a wide range of resources to meet pupils' individual needs effectively. These include well-equipped outdoor areas and specialist spaces such as the sensory integration room. Such resources are used thoughtfully to promote engagement and support progress across learning, communication, and social interaction.

The school's consistent approach to emotional health and well-being is central to its provision. Pupils benefit from predictable routines that support self-regulation and

smooth transitions throughout the day. Staff respond effectively to episodes of dysregulation, using detailed behaviour analysis to adapt provision. For example, the sensory integration space provides pupils with calm opportunities to regulate.

These approaches help most pupils to develop positive attitudes to learning and respond with enthusiasm in lessons and when meeting visitors.

Systems such as tokens and class charters promote responsibility and celebrate achievement, while the Change Makers forum ensures that pupil voice influences school life. Playtimes and lunchtimes are managed skilfully, creating a calm and inclusive atmosphere where pupils interact positively.

Safeguarding arrangements are sound and prioritised effectively, ensuring that pupils are safe. Overall, The Hollies balances nurture with high expectations, resulting in a supportive and inclusive ethos where pupils make strong progress and flourish both personally and academically.

Balancing growth with curriculum and well-being

Between 2021 and 2025, the local authority led plans to expand classroom provision in response to rising pupil numbers. In line with this, school leaders created at least five new teaching spaces and developed shared areas such as the dining hall, breakout rooms and outdoor learning environments. These improvements have supported growth and enhanced pupils' well-being, independence and sensory development. However, delays in the local authority's planned renovation work have limited the school's ability to make full use of its accommodation.

While the expansion has increased capacity, it has also reduced specialist and communal spaces, including staff, therapy and cookery areas. Consequently, flexibility in curriculum design has narrowed, and opportunities for targeted therapeutic and vocational learning have diminished. Leaders have managed capacity pressures effectively, but the balance between accommodation and curriculum breadth remains at risk, with potential implications for pupils' well-being and the school's ability to meet complex individual needs.

Committed Leadership and Governance with Scope to Strengthen Strategic Focus

The headteacher has established a clear and ambitious vision for the school, which is supported by staff and governors. Leaders prioritise communication, family engagement and preparation for pupils' next steps.

They are ambitious for pupils and committed to providing a safe, inclusive environment. Leadership capacity has been strengthened recently through the development of middle leadership roles to support curriculum design and assessment.

Curriculum planning and assessment are personalised and aligned to pupils' needs. Leaders use a broad range of evidence to inform school improvement priorities, and recent changes to timetabling reflect a proactive and evidence-informed approach. These changes have supported pupils' readiness to learn and their emotional regulation. Roles and responsibilities are generally well described, though the headteacher continues to be overly involved in the daily management of the school, reducing her capacity to lead strategically.

The governing body is committed and provides both support and challenge. Governors demonstrate a generally clear understanding of the school's strategic priorities and contribute well to safeguarding, operational management and improvement. They fulfil statutory responsibilities and show awareness of national policy developments. Governors play an active role in financial monitoring, staff development and succession planning. However, their understanding of curriculum reform, additional learning needs and the impact of grant funding on pupils' learning and wellbeing is less well developed. The headteacher's reports give a structure for accountability, but they vary in how well they evaluate the school's work, and governors do not understand well enough or challenge pupil outcomes and teaching consistently.

Resilience in managing ongoing accommodation challenges

Leaders, staff and pupils have shown considerable resilience and adaptability in the face of ongoing challenges regarding, for example, various leaks in the roof. This has resulted in many calls to the local authority and significant repair costs borne by the school. A very few learning areas have been decommissioned due to water ingress and mould. At short notice, pupils have been relocated to other areas in the school. Although the move was unsettling, with the sensitive and reassuring support of staff, pupils demonstrated resilience and adapted positively to the sudden change in environment. In addition, shelters to outdoor learning areas remain unrepaired. This also results in a lack of valuable learning space for pupils to explore, play and regulate their emotions.

Focusing on strengths and areas for development

The school has taken appropriate steps to address the recommendations of the last inspection. The very recently completed installation of electronic gates and a redesigned driveway, provided by the local authority, has strengthened safeguarding and improved pupil safety.

Improvement planning is coherent and demonstrates clear continuity across a three-year cycle. Leaders identify consistent priorities in progression, wellbeing and pedagogy, and sequence them appropriately. Plans are costed, allocate responsibility clearly and are aligned with national frameworks. However, improvement objectives do not always place sufficient emphasis on measurable outcomes for pupils. Success criteria are often expressed in terms of processes or activities rather than impact. Evaluations provide some quantitative measures but are stronger in describing systems than evidencing effect on pupil progress.

Leaders have developed a range of procedures to track pupils' wellbeing and safeguarding, but these systems are overly complicated and time-consuming to use. Information is stored across multiple locations, and systematic reporting of pupil progress remains at an early stage of development.

The school makes purposeful use of grant funding and aligns spending with identified priorities. Funded interventions support communication, wellbeing and engagement in learning. Staff development and family engagement are strengths, with initiatives such as targeted communication support, transition planning and workshops leading to reduced dysregulation, improved communication skills and greater parental confidence. However, evaluation of this work is mainly descriptive, with limited quantitative evidence of sustained impact over time.

Additional information

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any cause for concern

A site management concern was raised during the inspection, and the local authority has been notified

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking

Leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately, including the use of the pupil development grant.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carers and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents/carers to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work, to listen to them read and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee
- visit a broad sample of classes, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. '*most pupils...*' or '*very few pupils...*'. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

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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Publication date: 24/11/2025