

A report on
Aran Hall School

**Rhydymain
Dolgellau
Gwynedd
LL40 2AR**

Date of inspection: November 2025

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh

About Aran Hall School

| | |
|---|------------------|
| Name of provider | Aran Hall School |
| Proprietor status | SENAD Group |
| Language of the provider | English |
| Type of school | Independent |
| Residential provision? | Yes |
| Number of pupils on roll | 11 |
| Pupils of statutory school age | 9 |
| Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable) | 12/06/2024 |
| Start date of inspection | 03/11/2025 |

School context:

Aran Hall is an independent school which occupies a rural site within the Eryri National Park, close to the town of Dolgellau in Gwynedd. It is one of six specialist schools operated across England and Wales by the SENAD Group. The school provides education, care and therapy for up to 20 pupils aged 11 to 18 years who have a range of learning disabilities, autistic spectrum conditions and associated challenging behaviours. It offers both day placements and 38–52 week residential placements.

At the time of the inspection, there were 11 pupils on roll. All pupils are boys, and nearly all live in the children's home located on the same site as the school. Most pupils have education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and are looked after by English local authorities. A few have individual development plans (IDPs) and are looked after by Welsh local authorities.

The principal has been in post since 2020 and is supported by a head of learning, who was appointed in 2019, along with three teachers and four teaching assistants.

The school's work is underpinned by the core values of 'Respect, Believe, Achieve', and it aims to re-engage young people in education, promote independence and self-care, and create purposeful opportunities for community participation.

The school's last monitoring visit was in June 2024.

Summary

Aran Hall School provides a calm, supportive environment where nearly all pupils feel safe, valued and respected. Strong, trusting relationships between staff and pupils underpin all aspects of school life and help pupils to re-engage with education after previous difficulties. Staff know each pupil well and use personalised approaches that build confidence, promote independence and encourage enjoyment in learning.

The curriculum is broad, relevant and designed around pupils' interests and future goals. It includes a range of accredited qualifications and practical, life-based learning such as budgeting, shopping and cooking. These experiences help pupils to apply knowledge authentically and develop the skills they need for adult life. Teachers and support staff plan learning together effectively, creating purposeful lessons that match individual needs well.

A distinctive feature of the school is its *Achieve!* programme, a well-established and inclusive framework that celebrates pupils' academic, social and personal progress effectively. It recognises effort, responsibility and success, helping pupils set goals, reflect on their achievements and take pride in their learning. The programme promotes self-discipline, motivation and teamwork and contributes strongly to the school's positive ethos and pupils' growing confidence.

Nearly all pupils make clear progress in developing their communication, literacy and numeracy skills. They become more confident in expressing their ideas, completing written work and applying numeracy in real-life contexts.

Safeguarding is a clear strength of the school. Staff share information promptly and act swiftly when concerns arise. Nearly all pupils say they feel listened to and well supported. Behaviour is managed fairly and consistently, and nearly all pupils show respect and kindness towards one another.

Leaders and governors provide strong strategic direction and ensure that education, care and therapy work together effectively. They know what the school does well and what still needs to improve. However, the school does not track pupils' progress in key skills such as literacy, numeracy and digital competence rigorously enough, making it difficult to measure progress over time. In addition, the personal and social education (PSE) curriculum is not yet planned and delivered consistently across year groups.

Overall, Aran Hall School is a caring, inclusive community where nearly all pupils thrive personally and socially and make meaningful progress in developing confidence, communication and independence.

Main evaluation

Aran Hall School provides a calm, nurturing environment where nearly all pupils feel safe, valued and ready to learn. Strong relationships between staff and pupils underpin all aspects of school life and contribute significantly to pupils' well-being and re-engagement with learning. Education, care and therapy teams work closely together to provide highly personalised experiences that reflect pupils' individual needs and aspirations. As a result, nearly all pupils make strong progress in developing their confidence, communication and social skills.

Curriculum and learning experiences

Leaders have developed a broad and relevant curriculum that combines practical, interest-based and vocational learning to promote pupils' independence and prepare them well for their next steps. Planning begins with pupils' intended destinations and provides flexible pathways leading to a range of accredited qualifications matched to individual needs.

The school's cross-curricular approach supports the development of social and independence skills effectively. Schemes of work and individual education plans guide staff in delivering personalised learning experiences that reflect each pupil's needs and preferences. This consistent focus on relevance and personalisation enables pupils to engage successfully and make purposeful progress.

The school's programme for personal and social education (PSE) offers a wide range of valuable experiences that promote pupils' social, moral and cultural development. However, there is no cohesive plan to ensure that PSE is delivered progressively and consistently across year groups.

Teaching across the school is purposeful and engaging, underpinned by warm, trusting relationships that promote positive behaviour and consistent participation. Lessons are well planned and adapted successfully to meet pupils' individual needs, building effectively on their interests and developmental stages.

Teachers use practical, sequential activities such as budgeting, shopping and cooking well to help pupils apply knowledge in meaningful contexts. Support staff provide timely guidance that effectively promotes confidence and self-reliance. In addition, interactive activities strengthen pupils' communication, collaboration and well-being.

Staff provide regular feedback that reinforces success and helps pupils understand how to improve. This consistency promotes self-esteem and positive attitudes to learning. However, although feedback practices are strong, the school lacks a systematic approach

to tracking progress from initial assessment points, making it difficult for leaders to evaluate fully the impact of teaching and curriculum adaptations.

Development of skills

Nearly all pupils make steady progress in developing literacy, numeracy and communication. They use writing for practical purposes such as emails and diary entries and are increasingly confident in speaking and listening. However, opportunities for extended and creative writing are restricted by the structured demands of accreditation and the limited availability of specialist teaching.

Numeracy skills are reinforced through practical tasks that develop understanding of budgeting, measuring and data handling. While pupils develop secure functional numeracy through practical tasks, there are fewer planned opportunities for them to apply numerical reasoning across the wider curriculum.

Pupils use information technology appropriately for research and communication, but opportunities to develop broader digital competence are limited.

Structured programmes in life skills, outdoor learning and creative arts promote independence, cooperation and confidence. Pupils' attitudes to learning are consistently positive, and they take pride in their achievements.

However, planning for progression in literacy, numeracy and wider skills is not coherent enough to support a clear understanding of how pupils develop these skills over time. As a result, leaders do not have a secure view of the progress pupils make, the overall effectiveness of the provision or whether pupils receive the level of challenge needed to support ambitious progress.

Keeping Safe

Safeguarding arrangements at Aran Hall School are robust and well understood by staff. Designated leads from education, care and therapy provide clear oversight, ensuring consistent practice. Recruitment and training procedures are secure, and staff have a strong understanding of their responsibilities for keeping pupils safe.

A culture of vigilance is sustained through regular training, daily briefings and open discussion of emerging concerns. Staff act swiftly and appropriately, including when responding to non-verbal or behavioural indicators of concern. Incidents of challenging behaviour are managed effectively and proportionately, with reflective practice used well to refine pupils' support and safety plans.

Regular cross-team meetings support careful monitoring of incidents and trends, leading to targeted training and policy review. Pupils have accessible routes to share concerns

through advocacy visits, keyworker sessions and open dialogue with staff. As a result, nearly all pupils are confident that adults will listen and respond appropriately.

As a result of consistent support and high expectations, most pupils make substantial progress in managing their emotions and demonstrate a marked reduction in challenging behaviour over time.

The school's inclusive culture promotes equality and respect effectively, ensuring that all pupils feel valued and supported.

Spotlight: The Achieve! Programme

The school's Achieve! programme effectively strengthens its culture of care and consistency. This inclusive framework celebrates pupils' academic, social and personal progress and provides a clear pathway that recognises effort, responsibility and achievement. Staff apply it consistently to promote positive attitudes and behaviour, encouraging pupils to set goals, reflect on progress and take pride in their successes.

The adaptable framework enables all pupils, including those with complex needs, to achieve meaningfully. Parents value the programme, noting that it helps children understand expectations, develop self-discipline and share achievements at home.

By recognising perseverance, teamwork, empathy and leadership, the programme builds pupils' independence and social awareness. It strengthens communication, cooperation and problem-solving, supporting learning across the curriculum. Pupils gain confidence in managing challenges, taking initiative and celebrating others' success.

Overall, the Achieve! programme makes a significant contribution to pupils' motivation, self-esteem and readiness for life beyond school.

Personal development

The school's ethos promotes nearly all pupils' personal and social development effectively. Pupils understand and demonstrate values such as respect, responsibility and tolerance through daily interactions and participation in school life. Most take part in school council discussions and contribute to wider activities, including community duties, charity projects and decision-making forums, which strengthen their confidence and sense of responsibility.

Through these experiences, most pupils develop leadership, cooperation and empathy, preparing them well for active participation in society. Nearly all pupils access age-appropriate information about future study and work opportunities. Work-related learning, both on and off site, helps pupils build practical skills and understand the expectations of adult life.

Communication and partnerships

Communication between staff and other professionals is purposeful and consistent. Daily briefings and regular education meetings ensure information about pupils' needs, well-being and progress is shared effectively between education, care and therapy teams. This joined-up approach supports continuity and helps staff respond promptly to emerging issues.

Leaders manage transitions sensitively and work closely with parents, carers and professionals to ensure pupils settle quickly and engage positively after previous difficulties in education. Early contact with families and previous placements contributes strongly to pupils' smooth induction.

Most parents express confidence in the quality of education and care their children receive and value the progress pupils make in confidence, behaviour and engagement. However, formal reporting does not always provide sufficient detail on pupils' starting points, progress or key areas for development, and opportunities for families to be more involved in school life are limited.

Leadership and improvement

Leaders provide clear strategic direction rooted in the school's strong values and person-centred ethos. They know pupils well and have established an integrated approach in which education, care and therapy work cohesively to meet individual needs. This consistency helps pupils re-engage with learning and make meaningful progress. Staff benefit from strong teamwork and approachable leadership, with regular supervision and daily briefings that support well-being, promote consistent practice and enable effective information sharing.

Mandatory training in safeguarding, health and safety and first aid is well established and contributes positively to pupils' welfare. Nearly all staff demonstrate a secure understanding of trauma-informed approaches, which supports a calm and predictable learning environment. However, professional learning in curriculum design and assessment is less well developed. Gaps in subject and assessment expertise limit the consistency of planning and evaluation, although leaders have begun to strengthen training and clarify expectations. It is too early to judge the impact of these changes.

Improvement processes are systematic and increasingly effective. Leaders have responded well to previous inspection recommendations by strengthening assessment practice and refining the use of individual education plans. Staff understanding of assessment expectations is improving and the use of review data is becoming more consistent. Despite this, leaders have not yet established a sufficiently robust system for

tracking progress in key skills, which limits their ability to evaluate fully the impact of the curriculum over time.

Governance provides strong strategic oversight and constructive challenge. Regular monitoring visits and responsive action planning support alignment with organisational priorities and sustained improvement. Governors have also highlighted the need to improve skills tracking and strengthen the coherence of the PSE curriculum, demonstrating a clear understanding of priorities for further development.

As a result of effective leadership and robust governance, the school continues to develop as a reflective, collaborative community that secures meaningful outcomes for its pupils. Leaders' commitment to nurturing relationships, promoting equality and maintaining high expectations helps pupils to make steady academic progress and to develop well socially and emotionally.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

Independent school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2002 and related regulations: the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. These regulations require an independent school to meet an appropriate standard in the following areas:

The quality of education provided by the school

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

The suitability of proprietors and staff

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

Premises of and boarding accommodation at schools

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

The provision of information

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

The manner in which complaints are to be handled

On the basis of this inspection, there is no evidence that the school does not comply with this standard.

Safeguarding

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

Recommendations

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

- R1. Establish robust systems to track and monitor pupils' progress in key skills, including literacy, numeracy and digital competence
- R2. Strengthen the coherence and progression of personal and social education (PSE) to ensure it meets pupils' needs and is planned and delivered consistently across the school

What happens next

Estyn advises the proprietor to amend its current development plan to show what actions the school intends to take in response to the recommendations. It is also advisable to circulate this plan, or a summary of it, to all parents/carers at the school.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from parent/carers and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and support staff 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/proprietor(s), leaders and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work 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 lessons and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning
- 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 had 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 (where appropriate), 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 (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/>)

The report was produced in accordance with section 163 of the Education Act 2002. The main purpose of inspection under this section is to report on compliance with the Independent Schools Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024. In schools that provide non-maintained nursery education, this report also satisfies the requirements of Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework

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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