



Guidance for Inspectors

What we inspect in independent specialist colleges

Providers registered on the Welsh Government list of independent special post-16 institutions from September 2024



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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Introduction to ‘What we inspect’	1
Evaluating each inspection area (IA)	1
About the college	1
Overview of main findings	2
Recommendations	2
What happens next	2
Inspection areas	2
Framework for the inspection of independent specialist colleges	3
1. Teaching and learning	3
2. Well-being, care, support and guidance	5
3. Leading and improving	7

Introduction to 'What we inspect'

This handbook sets out what inspectors need to consider when evaluating the three inspection areas in Independent Specialist Colleges (ISC). These are the providers registered as independent special post-16 institutions with Welsh Government. It explains 'What we inspect'. The guidance is essential reading for reporting inspectors and all other members of the inspection team, including the nominee. It may also be helpful for anyone who wants to better understand our approach to inspection. There is a separate handbook entitled '[How we inspect](#)' that explains the inspection process and methodology.

The three inspection areas are set out below:

IA1 – Teaching and learning

IA2 – Well-being, care, support and guidance

IA3 – Leading and improving

There is further information about inspections on our website www.estyn.gov.wales

Evaluating each inspection area (IA)

Inspection teams will not give overall grades for each inspection area. However, they will provide a robust and thorough evaluation of the college's provision and its impact on learning and well-being. Inspectors will always include clear evaluations in relation to the main foci in each inspection area. However, what inspectors report on within each inspection area may differ depending on the context and relative significance of what they find at each college. Inspectors may report 'by exception'. This means that they may report on some aspects only where there are particular strengths or areas for improvement. Where inspectors identify any interesting or innovative practice that is worthy of sharing more widely, they will include a short cameo within the report. Where inspectors identify serious shortcomings in one or more inspection areas, inspectors will follow this up at the next monitoring visit. There is further guidance about monitoring visits in 'How we inspect'.

About the college

This section of the report will be brief and contain only factual background information about the college and will not contain any evaluation of the provision. The reporting inspector will normally agree the content of this section with the college during the inspection and during the factual check of the draft report prior to publication. If there is disagreement about the content of this section, the reporting inspector will make the final decision about what to include in the report. This section will contain brief information on:

- the size, nature and locations of the college
- the number of learners enrolled at the time of the inspection
- the background and circumstances of learners
- the linguistic background of learners

- the number of learners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds
- the number of staff and breakdown of roles, including clinical staff
- any significant changes since the last inspection
- the proprietor status / ownership of the college, such as the administration group and /or charitable trust
- the date of appointment of the CEO/principal
- the month/year of the college's previous inspection

We may consider whether to present this information in an infographic format.

Summary

This will be a summary of the main findings in the report.

Recommendations

Recommendations should come directly from the content of the report, identify what needs to improve and be written in priority order.

Safeguarding arrangements

Statement to indicate whether the provider's arrangements for safeguarding young people and vulnerable adults give no cause for concern, or whether there are causes for concern.

What happens next

The 'What happens next' section will set out what the college needs to do following the inspection. In all cases, leaders will be expected to respond to the recommendations by putting in place appropriate actions to make the improvements identified by the inspection team.

This section will explain if the provision requires follow-up. The reasons for the type of follow up should be clear in the main body of the report

Inspection areas

The following section explains what each inspection area covers and what inspectors need to keep in mind when evaluating each one. The inspection areas are numbered 1 – 3, but they are all equally important.

1. Teaching and learning	2. Well-being, care, support and guidance	3. Leading and improving
<p>How effectively the college supports the learning of all learners in terms of:</p> <p>1.1 How well learners develop their knowledge, skills and understanding</p> <p>1.2 Learners' attitudes to learning</p> <p>1.3 The quality of learning experiences, teaching and assessment</p>	<p>How effectively the college supports the well-being of all learners in terms of:</p> <p>2.1 The impact on learners' well-being and personal development</p> <p>2.2 The effectiveness of learner support, advice and guidance to help learners develop as individuals</p> <p>2.3 The effectiveness of safeguarding practices and the safeguarding culture</p>	<p>How effective leadership and management is in terms of:</p> <p>3.1 Strategic direction and operational management</p> <p>3.2 Self-evaluation and improvement</p> <p>3.3 Provision planning and oversight</p> <p>3.4 Workforce development and professional learning</p>

There is a series of [supplementary guidance documents](#) available on our website. These provide further information about our approaches to inspecting various aspects of this framework.

Framework for the inspection of independent specialist colleges

Inspection Area 1 Teaching and learning

How effectively the college supports the learning of all learners in terms of:

- 1.1 How well learners develop their knowledge, skills and understanding
- 1.2 Learners' attitudes to learning
- 1.3 The quality of learning experiences, teaching and assessment

1.1 How well learners develop their knowledge, skills and understanding

Inspectors should consider how well learners, from their individual baselines:

- recall previous learning
- develop thinking skills
- acquire new knowledge, understanding and skills
- develop practical skills where appropriate including subject or work related skills and craft
- apply their knowledge, skills and experience to new contexts
- develop their fine and gross motor skills, their mobility and their independent living skills
- demonstrate creativity, including creative problem-solving
- speak and listen, read and write
- develop communication and social skills, including their ability to relate to other learners, staff and visitors to the college
- develop numeracy and digital skills
- develop the skills they need to prepare them for future life
- progress to positive destinations in education, training, employment, or independent living

1.2 Learners' attitudes to learning

Inspectors should consider the degree to which learners, where appropriate:

- develop confidence and are motivated to learn
- show interest in their work
- sustain concentration
- engage in tasks and bring them to completion
- persevere when they face difficulties or seek other solutions
- stretch and challenge themselves
- understand the ways that they as individuals learn most effectively, and make the most of this to further their progress
- demonstrate strong team working skills
- are able to work independently and collaboratively with others
- consider and build upon the contributions of others
- learn from their mistakes

- use feedback from staff and others to further progress their learning
- engage with new experiences and ideas
- develop their employability skills
- demonstrate good behaviour in sessions and around the college
- are considerate and relate well to peers, staff and other adults
- transition smoothly around the college and between activities
- participate and engage well in learning, including by attending college regularly

1.3 The quality of learning experiences, teaching and assessment

Inspectors should consider the extent to which teachers and other practitioners:

- ensure that teaching strategies and learning activities are aligned to the needs and abilities of learners
- challenge and have high expectations of all learners based on a secure understanding of their abilities
- meet the support needs of all learners based on a secure understanding of their abilities and aspirations and informed by their learning and skills plans, or equivalent, where relevant
- plan to meet the requirements of each learning programme
- have clear objectives for learning
- use a range of approaches and resources to engage and challenge
- use questioning to draw out and develop learners' responses and gauge their understanding
- give clear instructions and explanations
- motivate and direct learners
- make their sessions stimulating, engaging and productive
- ensure that learning experiences are appropriate to the age and stage of learners
- plan for a broad range of learning experiences to develop interests and skills across a range of subjects and areas of learning
- help learners develop and apply a wide range of skills and knowledge including transferable employability skills
- provide effective feedback to help learners to know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve
- help learners understand how to assess their own performance
- provide learners with opportunities to influence how and what they learn where appropriate
- track and keep records on the progress of each learner and report on these clearly
- ensure that assessments are valid, timely, accurate and reliable
- direct support staff to provide appropriate support for learners
- ensure that learners regularly review their own learning, understand their progress, and, where appropriate, are involved in setting their own learning targets; including the use of person-centred approaches
- work with therapists, healthcare practitioners, learning and other support staff members to support learners' progress

Sources of evidence for this inspection area include but are not limited to:

- direct observations of teaching, learning and assessment
- scrutiny of learners' work in sessions and over time via their files, portfolios and practical work (including digital)
- interviews with learners
- information on learners' progress, including via records of assessment
- schemes of learning where available
- feedback from learners (including surveys and discussions)

Inspection Area 2 Well-being, care, support and guidance

How effectively the college supports the wellbeing of all learners including those at risk of adverse outcomes, for example those learners affected by poverty, with ALN or other identified barriers to make progress in terms of:

2.1 The impact on learners' well-being and personal development

2.2 The effectiveness of safeguarding practices and the safeguarding culture

2.3 The effectiveness of learner support, advice and guidance to help learners develop as individuals

2.1 The impact on learners' well-being and personal development

Inspectors should consider the degree to which learners, where appropriate:

- feel safe, secure and free from abuse
- feel that the college listens and responds to them
- attend their planned learning activities and sessions
- manage their commitments and prioritise their time effectively
- demonstrate self-awareness
- take on leadership roles and responsibilities
- develop as ethical, informed citizens
- respect and value diversity
- contribute to different communities and play a full part in college life
- recognise and value healthy relationships
- recognise and respond appropriately to damaging or unhealthy behaviours
- make healthy choices relating to diet, physical activity and emotional well-being, including online safety
- are considerate and supportive of their peers, their teachers, and others
- conduct themselves responsibly and respectfully in all forums, including online
- present a professional, positive image to others
- demonstrate resilience in wider aspects of life as well as their learning
- are ambitious and confident

2.2 The effectiveness of learner support, advice and guidance to help learners develop as individuals and overcome any disadvantage they may face

Inspectors should consider how well the college:

- provides support for learners' physical and mental health and well-being
- supports all learners' emotional and social needs so that they can enjoy their learning and benefit from the opportunities that it offers
- ensures the attendance of learners for planned learning activities and sessions
- tracks and monitors indicators of learners' progress and well-being, including attendance, engagement and behaviour
- identifies relevant issues and responds appropriately to the outcomes of tracking and monitoring
- works in partnerships with other organisations to provide effective support for learners, including securing the services of specialist agencies where appropriate
- makes provision for learners' ALN in relation to their individual needs and abilities
- supports learners with a history of behavioural and engagement issues to develop appropriate behaviours and attitudes to learning
- helps learners to understand issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion, and develop values of tolerance and respect
- develops learners' knowledge and understanding of harassment, discrimination and extremism
- challenges stereotypes in attitudes, choices and expectations
- promotes learners' understanding of healthy relationships and the impacts of sexual harassment
- helps learners to develop an understanding of their culture, the local community and the wider world
- helps learners to take on responsibilities and play a part in the wider community
- promotes healthy lifestyle choices including healthy eating and drinking, issues of substance misuse, online safety, mental health and workload management
- guides them as they prepare to transition to the next phase of learning, employment, and independent living where relevant

2.3 The effectiveness of safeguarding practices and the safeguarding culture

Inspectors should consider how effectively the college's safeguarding arrangements:

- promote safe practices and a culture of safety
- ensure that all learners are protected on-site, off-site and online
- ensure safe recruitment practices
- check and record the suitability of staff and others who are in contact with learners
- facilitate appropriate safeguarding referrals
- incorporate policies and procedures that comply with Welsh Government statutory requirements and guidance
- prevent and address discrimination, bullying, harassment and sexual harassment
- develop learners' knowledge and understanding of emotionally damaging or unsafe behaviours, for example grooming, sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying and extremism

- ensure that learners are kept safe from the dangers of radicalisation
- ensure that all staff know how to respond to safeguarding issues
- ensure relevant safeguarding training for the designated safeguarding lead officer and lead governor, and other staff where appropriate
- use intelligence about safeguarding matters, both within the college's own provision and that of any delivery partners or sub-contractors
- involve senior leaders and governors to oversee and quality assure safeguarding
- develop learners' knowledge and understanding of harassment, discrimination and extremism
- promote healthy lifestyle choices including healthy eating and drinking, issues of substance misuse, online safety, mental health and workload management

Inspectors should ensure that:

- arrangements for safeguarding learners meet requirements and give no cause for concern
- the college has appropriate policies, procedures and reporting arrangements in relation to physical interventions and withdrawal
- there is a suitable level of security of the college buildings and site
- where arrangements are a serious cause for concern, inspectors include a recommendation in the report and that Estyn send a well-being letter to the college asking them to outline how they will address the shortcoming(s)

Sources of evidence for this inspection area include but are not limited to:

- learner surveys including pre-inspection questionnaires
- observations of learners interacting with their peers, teachers and other staff members
- discussions with individuals and groups of learners, staff members, employers and others
- scrutiny of relevant documentation, for example, relevant policies, behaviour and bullying records, physical intervention records, staff training records, safeguarding records, transition documentation, staff files and safer recruitment information

Inspection Area 3 Leading and improving

How effective leadership and management is in terms of:

- 3.1 Strategic direction and operational management
- 3.2 Self-evaluation and improvement
- 3.3 Provision planning and oversight
- 3.4 Workforce development and professional learning

Inspectors should consider the aspects below in light of the difference they make to learners' progress, well-being and development.

3.1 Strategic direction and operational management

Inspectors should consider how effectively leaders:

- have communicated a clear vision, appropriate aims, strategic objectives, plans and policies that focus on meeting learner needs
- work collaboratively to drive forward strategic priorities and improvement
- develop an effective, engaged team of staff
- set high expectations for staff, learners and themselves
- model and promote professional values and behaviours that contribute positively to the college
- ensure that they and staff at all levels understand and discharge their roles and responsibilities effectively
- ensure that they and all staff understand and promote the college's safeguarding culture
- prevent problems from occurring or quickly implement remedial actions when problems do occur
- ensure the progress of all learners, leading to strong outcomes and positive progression
- ensure that spending decisions and wider financial planning link to strategic priorities and improvement planning
- ensure the quality and level of staffing and learning resources to deliver the planned provision effectively
- ensure that appropriate accommodation and facilities are available and used effectively and efficiently to support teaching, learning, assessment and well-being
- leaders have established a clear, strategic rationale for the curriculum in terms of its benefits for learners in preparing them to learn throughout their lives and to play a full part in society
- consider the costs of existing learning programmes and activities and keep them under review
- know the scale of any surplus or deficit relative to the college's budget
- ensure that additional funding received for specific purposes, such as to support learners with specific needs including disability or ALN, are used effectively and as intended
- act in accordance with the principle of sustainable development and how well they make decisions and set priorities for improvement that balance immediate, short-term needs with the long-term needs of learners, the local community and Wales
- ensure an appropriate level of staffing and learning resources to deliver the planned provision effectively
- promote the welfare and well-being of staff
- share positive features of provision with staff and collaborate with other education providers and partners within the sector to achieve improvements locally, regionally and nationally
- use strategic partnerships and collaboration with other agencies to help to build its capacity for continuous improvement
- plan how to use new and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to improve the college's work

and how well governors :

- understand and discharge their roles and responsibilities
- know the college's strengths and areas for improvement
- influence and understand the college's strategic priorities
- support and challenge senior leaders as they work to improve the college or maintain high standards

3.2 Self-evaluation and improvement

Inspectors should consider how well leaders and managers:

- gather and analyse first-hand evidence to inform evaluation of the college's work
- know the college's strengths and areas for improvement
- collaborate with appropriate partners and stakeholders, as well as with learners themselves, to evaluate and secure improvements
- ensure that identified priorities for improvement link to the outcomes of self-assessment
- define relevant and measurable actions for improvement with suitable timescales and allocate responsibility for their delivery
- ensure that improvement priorities are supported by the suitable allocation of resources
- have a strong track-record in making improvements that have a positive impact on learners' well-being, learning, outcomes and progression
- secure improvements based on the recommendations from previous Estyn inspections or from strategic partners
- work to meet national, regional and local priorities

3.3 Provision planning and oversight

Inspectors should consider how effectively leaders and managers ensure that provision:

- supports the vocational, academic and personal development, as appropriate, of the full range of learners
- is reviewed and planned strategically in collaboration with relevant providers, stakeholders and partnerships to ensure that a coherent provision offer is in place
- includes a wide range of engaging and challenging programmes of learning aligned to learners' abilities and aspirations, with clear progression routes to education, employment or training or the next stage of their lives
- includes work related experience to develop vocational and employability skills
- caters for specific groups e.g. those with advanced or little knowledge and skills, and those with ALN or who are EAL/ESOL
- caters for learners with complex needs so that they develop independence, communication skills and decision making to help them prepare for their next steps
- is in place for literacy, numeracy and digital skills development, including integration into vocational, academic or wider experiences

- where appropriate, supports the development of Welsh language skills and promotes the use of Welsh including the advantages of being bi/multi-lingual
- includes learning activities that reflect the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of Wales
- includes additional learning opportunities e.g. visits, skills competitions, additional qualifications and charitable work
- is not constrained by the requirements of accreditation or qualification

3.4 Workforce development and professional learning

Inspectors should consider how effectively the college ensures that:

- management of staff performance helps them improve their practice
- good practice is identified and that others benefit
- issues of underperformance are addressed robustly but supportively
- it has a culture and ethos of supporting professional learning of all staff
- staff participate in valuable professional learning and performance management activities
- professional learning activities support staff to develop their professional knowledge, understanding and skills
- it considers the impact of professional learning on learners' progress and well-being
- staff share professional development outcomes with other staff
- staff work with other organisations to improve their practice
- the well-being of staff is considered and supported, including workload considerations and the extent to which leaders consider the impact of any new or revised requirements on the workload of their staff

Sources of evidence for this inspection area include but are not limited to:

- interviews with staff
- minutes of recent meetings
- improvement action plans
- progress reports
- recent self-evaluations
- staff training records
- appraisal documentation
- analysis of a range of evidence including learner outcomes, learner voice, well-being and safeguarding reports
- sustainable development plans