



Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

Pen-Y-Cwm Special School

**Strand Annealing Lane
Ebbw Vale
Blaenau Gwent
Ebbw Vale
NP23 6AN**

Date of inspection: May 2024

by

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

About Pen-Y-Cwm Special School

Name of provider	Pen-Y-Cwm Special School
Local authority	Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Maintained Special
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	160
Pupils of statutory school age	128
Number in nursery classes	*
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 46.8%)	46.8%
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	
Date of headteacher appointment	01/01/2023
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	30/04/2016
Start date of inspection	07/05/2024

Pen Y Cwm is a day special school maintained by Blaenau Gwent local authority. The school provides education for pupils aged 4-19 with a range of additional learning needs.

Many pupils have speech, communication, and language difficulties and/or a learning difficulty. The majority of pupils with a learning difficulty have a severe learning difficulty and around a fifth have a moderate learning difficulty. Very few have profound and multiple learning difficulties. Around half of pupils have autism.

A minority have social, emotional, and behavioural needs. Very few pupils have a sensory impairment.

There are 167 pupils on roll. Nearly all pupils have either a statement of special educational needs or a statutory individual development plan. A minority of pupils are eligible for free school meals. A very few pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Pupils join the school from Blaenau Gwent and other local authorities including, Monmouthshire, Caerphilly and Newport.

There are 31 teachers, 20 classes and 75 support staff. The school is organised into three phases: primary, secondary and post-16. Classes are group largely according to age. Within each class pupils are at one of two stages of learning. These are pre-formal, semi-formal or formal stages of learning.

The school was last inspected in 2016 and was judged to have good standards and good prospects for improvement. Since the last inspection the school has increased the number of pupils by 50%. The current headteacher was appointed in January 2023.

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.

Overview

Pen y Cwm is a highly inclusive school where staff make pupils feel welcome and valued, and where their successes and achievements are celebrated joyfully.

The headteacher has worked with staff to create a collective purpose, vision and values for the school. These are very securely pupil-centred and include for example developing pupils' aspirations, resilience, independence, respect and empathy.

The relationships between staff and pupils are a particular strength of the school. Most pupils engage positively with staff and develop trusting and caring relationships. Over time, they form respectful relationships and interact positively with their peers. Most pupils are happy in school.

Most pupils make suitable progress from their starting points and against their individual targets. They also make strong progress in the development of their social skills. Over time, they form respectful relationships and interact positively with their peers. Most pupils are happy in school. They develop a tolerance of other's behaviours, with increasing kindness and respect and, greet visitors politely and courteously. Pupils across the school engage enthusiastically in a range of worthwhile leadership roles. As a result, they are fully involved in the life of the school. These experiences positively impact on pupils' their self-esteem and sense of connection with the school and wider community. These experiences prepare pupils successfully for the future.

Over time, most pupils make strong progress in improving their communication skills. Many pupils develop and improve their reading skills appropriately relative to their ability. Many pupils develop their numeracy skills suitably across the school. Overall, throughout their time in school, most pupils make suitable use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support their learning. Most pupils make strong progress in developing their physical skills. However, due to a lack of opportunity, pupils' writing skills are generally less well developed and pupils' skills in applying their numeracy skills in meaningful real-life contexts are underdeveloped also.

Where appropriate, most pupils make strong progress in developing their independence skills during their time at the school.

In the majority of lessons where teaching is most effective teachers and teaching assistants plan fun, multi-sensory experiences that capture and maintain the interest of pupils. Overall, staff have a very good understanding of the needs of pupils in their class. Learning materials and support are well matched to the individual needs of pupils in the class and build incrementally on pupils' understanding.

The school provides a comprehensive range of strategies that support pupils' identified health needs well. It works effectively with a variety of external partners to support the wide range of therapeutic and developmental needs of pupils at the school.

The governing body are clearly committed to the school and passionate about the wellbeing of the pupils. However, they do not have a detailed enough first-hand understanding of the school, its strengths, or areas for improvement.

Since the last inspection the pupil population has increased by 50%. To accommodate the increase, the school lost several valuable spaces including a sixth form common room, life skills room, a science classroom and office/meeting space. The governors and leaders of the school are naturally concerned about the proposal to increase the number of pupils further and the negative impact that this may have on current learning spaces, curriculum offer and ability to provide, for example, essential life skills for pupils.

Recommendations

- R1 Improve arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning, including strengthening the role of governing body
- R2 Review and develop the curriculum to meet the needs, interests, and aspirations of pupils, including providing appropriate accredited learning experiences
- R3 Improve opportunities for pupils, across the school, to develop their writing skills

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Learning

Most pupils settle well into the caring and nurturing environment at Pen y Cwm School and make suitable progress from their starting points and against their individual targets. Most pupils develop a range of worthwhile skills that help them to make progress during their time at the school and this prepares them successfully for the future.

Over time, most pupils make strong progress in improving their communication skills. They use objects of reference and assistive technology purposefully to make choices and communicate their needs effectively. Where appropriate, pupils engage willingly in extended and meaningful conversations. A few pupils begin to respond to Welsh greetings and develop their understanding of simple vocabulary and language patterns.

Many pupils develop and improve their reading skills at a level that is appropriate to their ability. For example, they consolidate their understanding of initial letter sounds by identifying letters to build simple words. They develop their recognition and understanding of commonly used words. Over time and where appropriate, older pupils begin to read more structured texts, for example graphic novels about superheroes or non-fiction books on animals.

Younger pupils practise and improve their letter formation and handwriting skills appropriately. These skills include prewriting skills such as sensory mark making. With sensitive support from staff, pupils make progress in developing fine motor skills and a few pupils progress to independent writing. A few older pupils, with support, write in sentences. For example, they record their observations of water freezing and melting in science. However, due to a lack of opportunity, pupils' writing skills are generally less well developed.

Many pupils develop their numeracy skills suitably across the school. Younger pupils, for example, enjoy identifying single numbers using a range of multi-sensory approaches. Over time, pupils differentiate between concepts such as 'big and small' and 'heavy and light'. Many pupils make good progress in understanding shape and space. For example, with support, they use two-dimensional shapes to make a rocket and make three-dimensional cones to create paper hats. A few older pupils use mathematical operations with increasing confidence. However, pupils' skills in applying their numeracy skills in meaningful real-life contexts are underdeveloped.

Overall, throughout their time in school, most pupils make suitable use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support their learning. Many pupils use these skills effectively across different areas of the curriculum. For example, younger pupils use tablet devices to develop their fine motor skills when writing 'tricky words' and locate music to play in the 'Hobbit House'. Many older pupils, where appropriate, log onto their devices independently and send emails. With support, they use applications to create presentations and communicate their preferences.

Most pupils make strong progress in developing their physical skills. Younger pupils improve their fine motor skills by using sand and plasticine to form letters and shapes. With support, they use scissors to cut string and tissue paper to create collages of clowns. Older pupils develop their physical skills when using the extensive outdoor gym equipment, dancing to favourite songs, playing football and basketball and using busy boards.

Where appropriate, most pupils make strong progress in developing their independence skills during their time at the school. They make effective use of well-established classroom routines and visual schedules to settle well when they arrive at school. Younger pupils locate their pegs and hang up their coats. As they develop, they collect the resources needed for their learning and move safely around the school building, for example, to go to the toilet.

Pupils acquire and develop valuable skills that will assist their independence when they leave school, in areas such as travel training and food preparation. For example, in the school community cafe, pupils take orders for food from their peers and staff, and with support, manage payments. A few pupils benefit from work experience provision in areas that relate well to their interests.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

The relationships between staff and pupils are a particular strength of the school. Most pupils engage positively with staff and develop appropriate trusting and caring relationships. They trust that staff will listen carefully to their concerns and support their social and emotional needs sensitively. As a result of these warm relationships, most pupils work well for staff during lessons and activities.

Most pupils make strong progress in the development of their social skills during their time at the school. Over time, they form respectful relationships and interact positively with their peers during lessons and break times. They develop a tolerance of other's behaviours, with increasing kindness and respect, and greet visitors politely and courteously. Most pupils are happy in school.

Over time, most pupils learn to understand and regulate their emotions. As a result, overall, pupils behave well at school.

Most pupils settle to tasks quickly. They engage in work independently, or with support when required, and respond well to positive praise and feedback. Most pupils are proud of their work and their achievements, and develop a positive attitude to learning.

Nearly all pupils feel safe whilst attending school and enjoy the wide range of engaging learning experiences that the school offers. They speak enthusiastically about walks in the local area and workshops conducted by a visiting Welsh artist.

Pupils have suitable opportunities to take risks in their activities where appropriate. These allow pupils to develop the skills of perseverance and resilience appropriately. This has a positive effect on their confidence and ability to sustain their progress with tasks.

Pupils across the school engage enthusiastically in a range of worthwhile leadership roles. As a result, they are fully involved in the life of the school. The wide range of pupil voice groups allow pupils the ability to contribute towards making a positive change to the school environment, local area and wider global issues. Older pupils, for example, collect recyclable waste and deliver milk to pupils across the school. These experiences positively impact on pupils' self-esteem and sense of connection with the school and wider community.

Most pupils understand how to be healthy and live a healthy lifestyle. They enjoy participating in physical activities during PE lessons and develop their coordination, core strength and agility through playing on the playground equipment at lunch and break times. Pupils with physical difficulties respond positively to the physical programmes delivered at the school which help them gain an understanding of how their body moves and gain a sense of spatial awareness.

Most pupils are aware of the school rules regarding snacks and healthy lunch boxes. However, a minority of pupils do not adhere to these rules consistently.

Teaching and learning experiences

The school is beginning to develop a broad and balanced curriculum, which broadly aligns to the principles of Curriculum for Wales. However, leaders have not yet implemented a clear vision for the curriculum that enables effective planning and delivery of the curriculum to meet the needs and interests of all pupils.

There is significant focus on supporting pupils' well-being and independent skills. However, opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of Cynefin and real-life authentic learning experiences are variable. The school has not yet evaluated the appropriateness of the curriculum and its impact on pupil progress, in particular on the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills.

The curriculum for pupils in the post-16 provision is linked to opportunities for the completion of accredited courses and work-related experiences, for example the development of independent living skills and completion of the Duke of Edinburgh and The Prince's Trust Awards. However, opportunities for pupils to gain qualifications in literacy and numeracy are not yet developed.

The school has effective arrangements for developing pupils' personal and social education (PSE). They work effectively with a range of beneficial partners. The Police, for example, run weekly sessions for cadets and deliver sessions to all pupils on staying safe. Additionally, the school has used Barnardo's to deliver sessions on gender identity. As a result, pupils develop an appropriate understanding of the importance of positive relationships and keeping themselves safe. During lessons about online safety, pupils recognise how to keep their information secure online and how to send emails appropriately.

Teaching staff have established beneficial routines and transitions. This results in a calm and purposeful learning environment across the school. As a result, most pupils settle quickly and engage in their learning.

In the majority of lessons where teaching is most effective, teachers and teaching assistants plan fun, multi-sensory experiences that capture and maintain the interest of pupils. During a registration session, for example, staff play picture cards games with pupils. Pupils learn to visually discriminate between the same object of different size and colour to match cards with their classmates. This skilfully chosen task helps with pupils processing of information and working memory. To support pupils developing understanding of numbers, a fishing game is used where pupils recognise a given number and, using a rod, catch the fish with the number on its back. Staff support pupils, where necessary, in saying the number and using this to prompt pupils recall of number order.

Overall, staff have a very good understanding of the needs of pupils in their class. There are high expectations of pupils and an appropriate emphasis on encouraging pupils to problem solve and, where appropriate, complete tasks independently.

Learning materials and support are well matched to the individual needs of pupils and build incrementally on pupils' understanding. Staff provide short, clear instructions. They model instructions for pupils to follow and use objects of reference to both stimulate the recall of prior learning and aid thinking and understanding. They

provide sufficient time for pupils to settle in lessons and sufficient thinking time when working on tasks. The pace of lessons is purposeful, and the level of challenge meets the needs and interests of most pupils. Staff observe pupils progress in lessons and check-in with pupils appropriately.

Staff use questioning well to both celebrate what pupils know and can do, and to sensitively check on pupils' understanding of concepts, tasks and instructions.

Teachers celebrate pupils' progress throughout the day with high levels of verbal praise. Teachers and support staff give feedback to pupils based upon their need and ability. As a result, many pupils have positive self-esteem and pride in their achievements.

However, in the least effective lessons, teaching does not always engage pupils well enough to support them to make the progress of which they are capable.

Generally, support staff are highly effective in supporting pupils in their learning during lessons and as they move around the school. They know and understand the needs and interests of pupils extremely well. They provide valuable and positive support to pupils, often using their professional skills to proactively manage potentially challenging situations. They have very strong, nurturing working relationships with pupils.

The school has recently introduced new systems to collect assessment data. This is in the early stages of implementation and too early to comment upon its effectiveness. Nearly all teachers track assessment data to monitor pupil progress against pupils' outcome development plans which, inform short term planning. They use this information to ensure that teaching builds securely on pupils' previous learning. This includes gathering valuable information across a range of skills relevant to the needs of the pupils.

The school provides an extensive range of enrichment opportunities that reinforce aspects of the curriculum and supplement pupils' wider experiences. For example, pupils participate in football at lunchtime which develops their physical skills or are members of the 'digital wizards' club where they create a virtual version of the school.

The school has effective partnerships with a wide range of local organisations. These links provide pupils with valuable opportunities to apply and practise important skills outside the classroom. For example, older pupils participate in work experience ranging from local shops, the school's onsite community cafe, a residential home for the elderly, an owl sanctuary, and a local minibus company. In addition, pupils prepare for and present a programme on a local radio station. These experiences help to develop pupils' independence, confidence and resilience and are beginning to prepare them for the world of work.

The school's indoor learning environment is well cared for and provides suitable resources to support teaching and learning. However, aspects of the outdoor learning environment, in particular for younger pupils, does not always support appropriate opportunities for learning through play. For example, the use of ride on toys for the

youngest pupils does not always aid in the development of pupils' physical skills due to the toys being too small.

Parents are kept well informed about their child's progress and achievements through the online digital communication platforms the school uses. Annual school reports to parents are informative, providing information on next steps.

Care, support and guidance

Pen y Cwm is a highly inclusive school where staff make pupils feel welcome and valued, and where their successes and achievements are celebrated joyfully. There is an ethos of mutual respect and togetherness that permeates the school. In nearly all instances, staff use their good knowledge of individual pupils' needs and personalities to tailor their support and approaches accordingly. Nearly all staff develop positive relationships with pupils, which help pupils to feel safe, happy and proud whilst in school.

Support for pupils' well-being is a strength of the school. Skilled and passionate well-being support staff provide invaluable and timely support to pupils. As a result, pupils talk positively about their experiences and about how they feel better equipped to manage their feelings and emotions. Staff successfully teach pupils useful techniques to help them if they become dysregulated and they listen carefully to, and act thoughtfully on, pupils' concerns.

There is a strong safeguarding culture that meets requirements and gives no cause for concern. The school's safeguarding guidelines and procedures are comprehensive, and all staff know their responsibilities for keeping pupils safe whilst at school. Clear and consistent processes for managing handover periods at the start and end of the day are effective. All staff, including those who provide transport, understand and demonstrate the school's high expectations for maintaining high levels of safety and security. Systems to monitor and manage pupils' attendance are robust and are successful in increasing overall rates of attendance in each of the past three years.

The school provides a comprehensive range of strategies that support pupils' identified health needs well. It works effectively with a variety of external partners to support the wide range of therapeutic and developmental needs of pupils at the school. For example, through its valuable provision for physical therapy and strong links with physiotherapists and paediatricians, the school meets the needs of targeted pupils well.

The on-site school nurse works efficiently to ensure that pupils and families receive the necessary support through administering prescribed medication, liaison with other health care professionals, providing signposting and supporting referrals to external agencies when appropriate.

The school makes impressive use of a child-centred framework that enables pupils with significant physical difficulties to successfully gain independent movement. However, the school's hydrotherapy pool is not consistently available to those pupils whose physical needs mean that they require it.

The school benefits from a team of committed and skilled support staff who carry out their roles with pride and enthusiasm. Their work with pupils is valuable in helping them to develop important social skills, independence, and confidence. The work of the school's family liaison officers is beginning to ensure that communication with parents is regular and useful and is starting to increase opportunities for parents to work alongside the school in meaningful ways.

The ALN co-ordinator provides staff with thoughtful and understated leadership. She communicates a determined vision for ALN provision across the school with a clear emphasis on meeting all pupils' individual needs. Where possible, pupils are starting to influence the content of their individual development plans. The school's outcome development plans are generally successful in developing pupils' independence. However, the extent to which pupils' personal plans support the development of their literacy and numeracy skills is not currently consistent or robust enough.

Across the school, staff of all designations manage pupils' emotional needs and behaviour sensitively and skilfully. Recently introduced approaches to behaviour management and de-escalation have been successful in reducing the need for physical intervention.

The school's curriculum provides pupils with suitable opportunities to develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through an appropriate range of contexts. Sound arrangements for collective worship enable pupils to hear about and discuss topics such as trust through a range of stories, for instance Noah's Ark. These sessions support pupils to begin to reflect quietly on their own moral and religious views, as well as those of others.

The school, in collaboration with local businesses, social services and the health board, provides detailed information and careers event for those pupils in the secondary school and post-16. This event helps pupils and their families to have a clearer understanding of available services and opportunities across the local authority area.

The school provides a few pupils with valuable opportunities to take part in sporting activities and performing arts events at external venues. These activities are highly productive in developing those pupils' confidence and self-esteem.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has worked with staff to create a collective purpose, vision and values for the school. These are securely pupil-centred and include for example developing pupils' aspirations, resilience, independence, respect, and empathy.

Leaders across the school are in the early stages of implementing a curriculum that aspires to meet the vision for all pupils. The role and responsibilities of leaders are clear and phase leads for primary, secondary and post-16 have recently benefited from detailed and relevant job descriptions that outline their roles well.

The headteacher is managing historical and challenging staffing situations calmly and compassionately. Recently the experienced deputy headteacher has returned

from a secondment to a neighbouring school. The head and deputy headteacher are beginning to work collaboratively in the formation of the new senior leadership team.

One of the priorities of the headteacher is to develop and secure meaningful relationships with staff, families, and other partners. Parents, for example, speak very positively about the contact and support they receive from the headteacher and school staff. The headteacher and other leaders are a visible presence in the school. The headteacher is developing a strong and collegiate workforce with relationships that are based on mutual respect, trust and a clear understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.

Leaders, as part of self-evaluation arrangements, are beginning to gather evidence to help inform them about the school's strengths and areas for development. Leaders have identified broadly suitable improvement priorities. However, this is at a very early stage of development. Interim evaluations of the progress in implementing these priorities focus too heavily on processes, as opposed to learning outcomes for pupils. For example, the school identifies the need to refine the curriculum offer to meet the needs of all pupils. This priority rightly focuses on implementing appropriate qualifications for older learners. However, it does not give due consideration to the appropriateness of the whole school curriculum offer and whether it provides authentic learning experiences for all pupils.

The governing body are clearly committed to the school and passionate about the wellbeing of the pupils. Governors appreciate the timely information that they receive from school leaders. They are keen to provide the role of critical friend to the headteacher. However, they do not have a detailed enough first-hand understanding of the school, its strengths, or areas for improvement including the school's arrangements for healthy eating and drinking. The extent to which they can support and drive improvements at the school is therefore limited.

Since the last inspection the pupil population has increased by 50%. To accommodate the increase the school lost several valuable spaces including a sixth form common room, life skills room, a science classroom and office/meeting space. The governors and leaders of the school are naturally concerned about the proposal to increase the number of pupils further and the negative impact that this may have on current learning spaces, curriculum offer and ability to provide, for example, essential life skills for pupils.

The school makes effective use of grants to support national priorities. The pupil development grant, for example, is being used to support the pastoral and well-being needs of pupils. This is having a positive impact on both pupils and their families.

The school has appropriate arrangements in place to over-see and manage its finances. The headteacher has recently costed additional learning provision and this has resulted in an uplift to the budget. However, the school does not receive the full funding for pupils from other local authorities.

Overall, staff value the professional learning opportunities they have and most staff believe that there are appropriate opportunities to support their professional learning. A recent professional enquiry project for example, conducted at the school, revealed that providing an environment with minimal disruption, with small groups and learners

being supported with visual prompts and choice boards, impacts positively on pupils' engagement in positive play sessions. However, the overall impact that professional learning has on teaching and learning is underdeveloped.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer 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

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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