

Ysgol Bryn Derw – note of visit

29 June 2023

Attendees:

- Jayne Bryant MS
- Laura Anne Jones MS
- Naomi Stocks, Clerk.

1. The School and discussions with staff

1. The school opened in 2017 with 32 pupils in 4 classes. It is the only dedicated ASD Special School in Gwent. It currently has 112 pupils. Capacity is 96 students and they are in discussions with the local authority about capacity and expansion options. They have the potential to expand to 150 places. The school is over-subscribed. For example, they were able to make offers for nursery to reception places to 7 learners, but around 20 learners could have benefitted from joining the school.

2. The age range of pupils is 4-19. 30% of pupils have English as an additional language. This is higher than average. The school has learners with around 14 different languages, which include Russian, Urdu, Bengali, Czech and Polish. There is a range of English proficiency amongst families.

3. For formal review meetings, the local authority will pay for interpretation. For more informal engagement with a family, there are a range of options available including utilising staff language skills; and the school paying directly for interpretation. For day to day communication, the SeeSaw app is used to relay messages in different languages. The headteacher noted that during the lockdowns some learners with English as an additional language fell further behind.



- 4.** 42% are eligible for free school meals. This is higher than the average. This can partly be attributed to the challenges of balancing supporting a child with complex needs and paid employment. The headteacher noted that the introduction of FSM for younger pupils was helpful, saying this meant that parents could still be providing packed lunches with food they know their child[ren] will eat, but alongside that the school can provide a school meal without parents paying for food that may not be eaten. Exposing the children to school meals over time may help encourage them to try the food, building up from small steps such as touching the food and building up to tasting elements of the meal, before potentially building to them eating the full meal. This can help widen a child's diet, improving nutrition which has a wider impact on the child's physical and mental wellbeing.
- 5.** 72% of pupils are non-verbal. As a result the school uses lots of different communication systems. 89% of pupils are working below school age levels.
- 6.** The school is split across two sites. 84 learners are on the Melfort Road site (which was the one visited) which covers key stages 2-5. 28 learners are on Blaen-y-Plant Crescent site which covers foundation phase. This site is smaller and calmer, helping learners as they start on their school journey.
- 7.** The entry provision does enable them to take learners from outside Newport. Some families have moved to Newport specifically because of the complex needs of their child(ren).
- 8.** There are over 90 staff. In a typical class there will be approximately 8 children and 5 adults, but this will vary depending on specific needs. The school also buys in support from other providers such as the health board and third sector. The school has a Family Liaison Officer who works closely with learners and their families.
- 9.** The school does have some Welsh speaking staff, and a number of learners are keen to learn Welsh. The school has audited its Welsh provision with the headteacher describing the school as "on a journey..." For younger pupils there will be exposure to Welsh songs, bilingual instructions and then building up to some older pupils having some Welsh lessons.
- 10.** The school does not run a breakfast or after school club. However, they do have funding to provide breakfast at the start of the school day
- 11.** There is a strong focus on independent living skills, with spaces for learners to develop these skills, including use of household appliances. The school also has soft play rooms; sensory rooms; and therapy rooms. It has outdoor play areas, including a Forest School area.

Transport

12. While the school is well-situated, as learners are coming from across Newport, there can be some long journeys for some pupils. Around 80-90% of pupils come in on transport. Those learners who are brought in by their parents are those who are nearest the site. Some parents may feel less confident about their child[ren] traveling independently, however, independent travel can be positive and help support routine and independence.

13. A lot of families have to use learner transport, as they may have other children who are in different schools. This does mean that parents miss out on informal contact with the school that are more common when they are doing school pick up and drop offs. This can include informal face to face contact with teachers, and the development of parent community. As a result the school has to be more proactive in developing the broader parental community. This type of peer support is even more important to this group of parents, as they face additional challenges and barriers. The support from others who have experienced similar issues can be “transformative”.

14. Transport is funded for all pupils, but it does limit the other activities the school can offer such as breakfast or after school clubs.

15. There is not always the right type of transport, and the quality of provision can be poor. Taxi drivers or escorts may have limited knowledge on how to deal with ASD children and young people. The employment market is competitive, and the working opportunities are limited (people need to be available for around an hour at 9am and 3pm.) Taxis and driver numbers have decreased since the pandemic. The contracts are also not as attractive as similar transport contracts to mainstream education.

16. There is a good relationship with the local authority, but the challenge is that the team who procure transport are not ALN specialists. There is the need to balance administrative need with the need for bespoke provision for learners.

Wider support for families

17. Only 18% of families have a social worker. This means they can miss out on additional support. The complexities of managing direct payments and being able to “unlock” the support this can offer was highlighted. In particular the fact that a parent becomes an employer and all the additional administrative burden this causes.

- 18.** Providing after-school provision is challenging because transport is not available. Families would have to pick up children. Some schools provide different models of holiday support, but as this often based on grant funding, it can be difficult to recruit and retain staff.
- 19.** Transitions between the unstructured holiday period to the structure of school can be challenging, in particular the longer summer holidays. It can take 2-3 weeks to reestablish routines after the break. Physical interventions are always at the highest at the start of the new school year. Some families dread holidays, but the school has supported families to establish routines at home that work for them. Establishing these routines at home can only really work once they've been established in the classroom.
- 20.** The school has chosen to spend a portion of it's budget on a Family Liaison Officer who can provide sophisticated and intensive support to families. Previously this role had been part of a Deputy Head's role, but interventions were only being made when families were at crisis. As the school has grown, they identified a real gap for pro-active support. This provision removes some pressures from teachers and other school staff, it also reduces pressure on social services. It is a good model which other schools should look to learn from.

Teacher training

- 21.** Newly qualified teachers usually need additional training as teaching training does not have any mandatory requirements around teaching in a non-mainstream setting. The school has a number of teaching assistants who would make excellent teachers, but they would have to give up their current work to do teaching training, which would not necessarily cover teaching in special setting. One teacher that said that nothing in their PGCE got them to their current role. There was agreement that the PGCE should cover teaching in specialised settings. Special needs and inclusive education should be part of the "bread and butter" of teaching training.
- 22.** Concerns were raised about the recent publication about the [Criteria for the accreditation of initial teaching education programmes in Wales](#), which stated that ""School experience placements may take place in a special school or ALN unit. In these cases, Partnerships should ensure that no more than 30% of school experience is undertaken outside a mainstream learning environment to ensure that student teachers are prepared to teach both in mainstream and ALN environments." This report frustrated staff in specialised settings as it seemed to imply that those with training only in a specialised setting would not be equipped to teach in a mainstream setting.

23. Higher Level Teaching Assistants from this school are regularly going into mainstream settings to support them in adjusting and changing their teaching to accommodate special needs.

Support staff

24. All special schools struggle to recruit and retain staff. The pay is very low when compared to the demands of the job. In current economic situation this is a particular issue. Working part time in a supermarket can pay more than being a teaching assistant. Yet these are highly skilled people. The differences between what was expected of a teaching assistant in a special school and one in a mainstream setting were highlighted.

25. The broader package which once made working in a school more attractive is shrinking, as more employers offer greater flexibility such as term time working / school hours.

Transitions from school

26. There is a tripartite funding structure for post school education. They have cases where some learners don't know where they will be going in September. Yet these are learners who need support being put in place to help with the transition to a new setting. It was highlighted that if this happened within the UCAS system it would not be considered acceptable.

2. Discussions with the School Council

27. Issues raised during discussions with the School Council included:

- Lack of opportunities to access sporting clubs
- Lack of work experience opportunities
- Lack of breakfast and after school clubs.
- Lack of information about options after school.

3. Discussions with parents

Childcare

28. There is a lack of holiday club provision. One of the parents started childcare provision to plug the gap in holiday clubs for autistic children and young people. However, because they

were unable to recruit staff, the provision will not be running this summer. The provision is for 3-19 years old, with most being between 6 and 14.

29. Feedback from parents indicated:

- 70% of parents saw behaviour improve;
- 58% would use the service to enable them to go to work;
- 100% felt the provision was safe and that their child was adequately supported; and
- 86% of those who went participated in new activities.

30. The scheme has a waiting list, but can't expand due to the challenges of recruiting staff. It is a much needed service, but is expensive to run. The parent felt this should be run by the local authority. They currently support 55 individual children.

31. There is a play scheme in Newport, but it's not well known. People are usually referred by social services, so parents who don't have social service support aren't aware of it. Parents agreed that securing childcare was more of a pressing issue than education for their families.

Capacity in special schools

32. There is insufficient special school capacity for the level of need. Special schools in Newport are over-subscribed. They felt that there are children in Learning Resource Units who would benefit at being in Ysgol Bryn Derw. This also has an impact on other children in mainstream provision.

Post 16 provision

33. There is a lack of appropriate post 16 provision. The nearest is in Pontypool, but there is no suitable transport.

Transport

34. Parents felt that their children have very limited choices partly because of a lack of appropriate transport. They do not have the same choices as their peers, for example they can't go to after school clubs.

35. Some indicated that there are "massive safeguarding issues" with transport. They cited examples where background checks had not been made, and that escorts did not have sufficient English language skills. It was highlighted that these children and young people are

more vulnerable than their peers in mainstream education. There was concern that the procurement process allows sub-contracting which dilutes the quality of provision.

36. It was also highlighted that some provision is good, with drivers /escorts who build effective and positive relationships with learners. However, there can often be issues at the start of the new year, when there may be new drivers and the children have to build up new relationships. Consistency in terms of drivers / escorts / firms makes a big difference. The impact of having a bad experience on transport into school can be significant on the rest of the school day.

Family support

37. They all agreed that having a Family Liaison Officer in post should be replicated across other schools. Individual examples were given of the difference the FLO's support had made in helping to introduce systems and routines at home. This input was intensive and took a "whole family approach." The FLO had also provided support when there were other changes and events within the family that had an impact on the learner.

38. There was wider discussion about the support all school staff provide to learners and their families. The school approach is centred in looking at the whole family, and ensuring there is sufficient support. One parent described how her blood pressure went down as soon as her child started at the school.

39. There was discussion about how you are often "lurching from one battle to another battle". There is a "constant battle for every service". This goes much wider than education and childcare, and includes issues such as the DLA. Some spoke of how they had to go through complaints processes to try and get access to the right services for their child.

40. One family talked about the support they have received through the IBPS Programme. This is a Welsh Government funded project in Gwent, which provides intensive support to 3 families. It provides support to stabilise families to avoid children having to go into care. It was described as "excellent" and provided space for counselling.

41. The impact of having a child with complex needs on the wider family was highlighted, in particular on the parents and siblings. Parents talked about their other children being "missed out" because their behaviour is not as disruptive or challenging. They also have to take on a caring role. One parent described the importance of summer childcare provision, as this meant they could spend some time with their other children. One parent cited a statistic that 4 out of 5 marriages with a disabled child fail.

42. There was discussion about the impact of supporting a child with complex needs on employment opportunities. Parents talked about how they had to stop working as they have to be available at all times. As well as the financial impact on the household, it also has a negative impact on emotional and mental wellbeing. Not being able to work also limits future opportunities “it changes your future.”

Other education settings

43. Parents spoke of how much “restorative work” has to be done when previous placements had not worked out. One said their child had to have therapy to “undo” what had happened previously.

44. Some felt that the staff in the Learning Resource Units did not have the right level of training. In comparison, the staff at Ysgol Bryn Derw centre the child and their needs. In other settings, it was felt that it was about what’s best for the school and not the child. These children cannot conform to what a school wants them to be. They can be nurtured if you have the right staff. One described the LRU being a “constant battle”.

45. While Learning Resource Units were “not bad in themselves” it was felt they were not child centred. It was felt some LRU staff were not right for the setting. Getting the right staff with the right attitude was felt to be most important, with training then provided for any specialised skills.

Ysgol Bryn Derw provision

46. Parents said that since their child had joined Ysgol Bryn Derw they didn’t worry about the education they are receiving. They are being taught how to develop into adulthood. They are being taught to grow into a world that believes in them. Parents wanted to see this provision available for everybody.

47. Equity not equality is needed, as these children need more support.

48. Non verbal children still have a voice and have something to communicate. They want to communicate but are not always listened to.

Respite provision

49. There was discussion about access to Oaklands Residential Short Break Home. This is the only residential unit in the area, and has been under threat. One parent described of how they were only able to access Oaklands because their child’s behaviour was so challenging.
