

Ysgol Hafod Lon visit

Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?

28 September 2023

The engagement visit to Ysgol Hafod Lon, Penrhyndeudareth took place on Thursday 28 September 2023.

The Headteacher, Chair of Governors and school learners took part in the engagement.

The visit was undertaken as part of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into education access for disabled children and young people.



Notes

1. The engagement is summarised in this document to outline the key themes discussed within the scope of the inquiry.

Headteacher and Chair of Governors

Inclusive education

2. Mainstream school would be the best option for some learners; it depends on the mainstream school and the needs of each individual learner.
3. The school has quite high percentage of shared placement, with the learner attending primary school for a couple of days and attending special school on the other days.

“Shared placement.....it works for some of them, they get to know their peers in their own community, and that’s good for them. But for others, most of their education while they’re in mainstream is either in the corridor or in a side room or in the hall...It’s a token gesture.”

4. Some learners can become overly-dependent on their teaching assistant whilst in the mainstream school. This can become a barrier to becoming independent learners.
5. The school has good working relationships with some of the local mainstream schools. In some cases, they set targets for the learner whilst in mainstream school and are able to support the mainstream school by sending work to be completed in school.
6. In some mainstream schools it can be challenging to give due attention to a whole class, of possibly 30 learners and individuals with special learning needs.
7. There is a need for something in between mainstream and special education. There are some learners whose needs are not suited for a special school but aren’t answered by mainstream either.
8. There are examples of intelligent learners, some of them on the autistic spectrum, who haven’t been able to achieve the qualifications they should have because they haven’t been in a suitable environment to be educated.

“They’ve spent their entire secondary school in a separate room, because they can’t cope with going to the mainstream classroom.....a lot more needs to be done regarding training with sensory processing needs.”

9. Accessing further education is a major issue for disabled young people. There is a lack of suitable opportunities and accessible career pathway options are needed.

Transport

10. The council is responsible for the travel arrangements but the school face many issues on a day to day basis, for example taxis arriving late.

11. Most of the learners travel to the school by taxi. There are issues when learners with different needs travel together.

12. Many learners travel long distance to the school – some up to an hour and a half, one way.

13. Issues with transport impacts out of school activities and the wrap-around care the school is able to offer. The take-up of such offer is very low, because the parents would be responsible for the transport. This means there is inequality of opportunity for disabled children and young people.

14. One possible solution would be to allow the teaching assistants to take responsibility for the wrap-around care. This would help with their salary too, if they became full time contact workers.

15. The teaching assistants could also take responsibility for direct transport to and from the school, if funding available.

16. The school is aware that the learners are very tired by the end of the school day. The additional hour every day would prove to be very challenging for some of the learners.

17. The school holds mindful sessions and use the rebound room (trampoline room) at the end of every school day.

"I have to admit that 99% of our pupils are ready to go home [at the end of the school day]. They're tired, they're over-stimulated.....some of them are in a taxi by 7.30am."

School estate and capacity

- 18.** The school opened in 2016, a new build school which received funding from the 21st Century Schools Programme.
- 19.** The school capacity is 100 learners. It was over-capacity within 18 months.
- 20.** The school currently has 120 learners and the figures are increasing all the time.
- 21.** The number of learners on the autistic spectrum is rising every year and their needs are becoming increasingly complex and severe.

Pupil behaviour

Technology

- 22.** Technology has a great impact on learner behaviour.

"Our young ones are i-pad babies.....they're not used to human interaction. It's literally [a matter of] hiding IT in the Foundation phase and trying to get them to interact with an adult or anything that is not an i-pad."

Out of school activities

- 23.** Taking part in activities outside school, for example sport clubs, is challenging for disabled children and young people and their families, especially in such a rural area.
- 24.** The school shares possible opportunities, clubs etc. outside school with parents and guardians, via social media every week.

“You’ve got to sympathise with the parents. When you have a child with additional learning needs and they find the environment challenging, taking them to a restaurant or go shopping or anywhere is an ordeal. It can be very difficult...people stare when they have meltdowns. Parents are embarrassed, so what do they do? They just stay in their four walls and then [the children] don’t have the opportunities.”

25. The school is prioritising outdoor learning this year, as many learners are not used to the outdoors.

26. Although the uptake for activities outside school for children and young people with special needs is low, the opposite is true for such activities for adults. Possibly because they have support workers to take them to the activities.

Behaviour

27. The behaviour of learners is becoming more and more of an issue in school and has a major impact on mental health and wellbeing.

28. The school employs two assistant applied behaviour analysis therapists and two board-certified behaviour analyst therapists to develop positive behaviour plans for some of the learners.

Bullying

29. Online bullying is an issue that is very difficult for schools to manage. The school can share facts and give advice, for example, how to block people on devices but the advice they can give is limited due to the ability of many of the learners.

Relationships with parents

30. The school has a very positive relationship with parents. The school liaises well with the parents, and uses the seesaw app to keep the parents updated about their child on a daily basis.

31. The school hasn’t received any parental complaints for many years.

Workforce issues

Impact of staffing levels

- 32.** Staffing is one of the biggest issues facing the school at present. For example, out of 60 members of staff, an average of 14 are absent on a daily basis. This is partly due to a rise in Covid-19 cases.
- 33.** Due to the support needed for individual learners, low staffing levels is a health and safety risk in a special school, different to a mainstream school, possibly.
- 34.** Supply teaching staff are in demand and in very short supply; the school is often having to rely on NQTs (newly qualified teachers) and TS's (teaching assistants). This can be challenging for both teaching staff and learners.
- 35.** As a result of staffing levels, the school has to partially close classrooms or stagger attendance, for example, half the class attending first part of the week and the other half the second part of the week.
- 36.** Online learning is also an option, but can be very challenging for some of the complex learners.
- 37.** Guidance for vulnerable members of staff is vague and staff are no longer routinely offered the Covid-19 vaccine.
- 38.** The headteacher is having to prioritise daily staffing issues rather than strategic issues.

Teaching assistants

- 39.** It is very difficult to recruit teaching assistants of the required calibre, for example, currently the school has three teaching assistant vacancies that they haven't been able to recruit due to the quality of the applicants.
- 40.** One of the main barriers to recruiting teaching assistants is the salary offered. Some teaching assistants are leaving the profession to work, for example in call centres or with the local council where they earn a higher salary with better working conditions, for example, flexi hours and being able to work from home.
- 41.** Teaching assistants in special schools receive the same salary as teaching assistants in mainstream schools, but the nature and the intensity of the work is very different and arguably far more challenging. For this reason the teaching

assistants are required to be highly trained for the post. This is seen as a barrier to attract applicants.

42. The same can be said for other special schools across Wales too. Recent statistics showed that there are 140 teaching assistant vacancies in special schools throughout Wales.

“£1,200 is the take home pay for a TA.....who is exposed to spitting, biting, pulling hairs, kicking, on a daily basis. They have to look after health needs....feeding through feeding tubes, having to administer medication, as well as personal care, toileting, hoisting.....all of this responsibility and the Government expects them to get a second job.”

43. The headteacher has attended evening and weekend career fairs to try and recruit teaching assistants.

“In the care sector, in general, it’s either the women or people from overseas who take an interest.”

44. Many of the people from overseas are very willing to learn Welsh.

45. Recruiting male teaching assistants is even more of a challenge. There are 2 male teaching assistants in the school, out of 52 teaching assistants

Support from outside bodies

46. The school receives very little support from outside bodies. For example, there is no speech therapist in the school and occupational therapists seldom come to the school. Physiotherapists come to the school on a regular basis.

47. The issue quite often is recruitment of both Welsh speaking and non-Welsh speaking specialists.

48. There are no trained sensory processing disorder specialists in the county although there is an increasing number of learners with sensory processing difficulties and disorders.

49. The school had to buy-in a sensory processing disorder specialist from England to advise and train school staff on sensory diets for children.

50. There are a number of education psychologist vacancies in the county.

School learners

What do you enjoy most about coming to school?

- Trampoline room
- Hydro pool
- Good food
- Great friends
- Friendly staff
- School work
- Work experience at Hafan Sêr (respite centre onsite) – for example, learning to cook

How do you get to school every day?

- Taxi – 45 minutes journey

Do you think that all the pupils are treated in the same way?

- Yes, we are all friends here
- This is a no bullying zone
- None of us are allowed to use our mobile phones in school

If you could change one thing about school, what would it be?

- Gym
- Astro turf on football pitch

What else would you like to have locally?

- Wheelchair basketball facilities within reach
- Drama club
- Art club