

Note of School Visit

04 December 2023

Attendees:

- Laura Jones MS
- Naomi Stocks, Clerk
- Sarah Bartlett, Deputy Clerk

Monmouth Comprehensive School is an English-medium 11-18 school maintained by Monmouthshire local authority. It serves the town of Monmouth and the rural areas of Cross Ash, Llandogo, Raglan, Trellech and Usk, with around 27% of students travelling from Gloucestershire and Herefordshire. Nearly all pupils speak English as their first language and come from a white, British background.

Monmouth Comprehensive School hosts an inclusive Specialist Resource Base (SRB) which is overseen by Monmouthshire Local Authority. A Specialist Resource Base enables learners with learning difficulties to succeed in a mainstream school environment. Generally, pupils in a SRB are taught in a small class by specialist staff and benefit from a specialist curriculum. They are also able to access the full range of education opportunities available to all pupils at the school.

1. Discussions with the Head teacher, SRB leads

1. The head teacher gave an overview of the SRB. It is located in the centre of the school, this reflects philosophical sense of inclusion which is at the heart of the base. Integration has been driven by the SRB leadership team.

2. The school building is five years old and already there is not enough space in the SRB. When the plans were first drawn up for the school the base wasn't originally part of the initial



design . When it was agreed to host the base they had to fit it into the space that was available. It isn't ideal but they make it work with the use of other areas in the mainstream school.

Inclusivity

3. The SRB is inclusive and there is an equity of offer of activities to all children in the school which is funded from the school budget. The school's senior management team work together to make sure that extracurricular activities including trips are offered to children in the SRB. A trip won't be offered unless accessible transport is secured. Additional staff costs also play a part but there is a level of goodwill from the staff who volunteer to support especially for trips that are overnight.

4. Engagement with families is very important – SRB staff have regular phone calls, respond to emails quickly and have an ongoing level of communication. It's important to understand what the family's needs are and to have a knowledge of the family and also appreciate the knowledge and understanding they have of their child. Families need to feel supported and included in the decision making process for their child.

5. Complexity of needs in mainstream has increased over the years, especially with the impact of the pandemic. In Monmouthshire there are no special schools so children with very complex needs go to the SRB . This is seen as a positive as children can attend mainstream school alongside their peers but get the specialised support they need. But this does put pressure on training needs and the school budget.

6. Some mainstream children struggle attending school because of issues such as anxiety. Some are supported by bespoke EOTAS provision, but for others the school try and get them out of the house by developing appropriate packages of support through school based learning within smaller groups and work placements but this again has an impact on budgets.

ALN staff training

7. Teachers who work in the SRB have specialised in areas of additional learning needs. There is a lot of training and gained experience that staff need to have undertaken to be able to work there. There are a multiplicity of routes for qualifications for teaching staff. Some routes just give initial understanding of ALN, and support in the classroom, but this can be complimented with additional training, which supports the development of ALN specialism and expertise.

8. The level of training and support provided is dependent on individual schools and staffing. The school are fortunate as have the structure and expertise to provide the additional support needed but it's not systematic across education.

9. It is useful for all teachers to have training for lower levels of ALN especially with the new ALN Act. Teachers can't have expertise in everything, but some basic level of training which helps them understand how best to meet ALN needs within the classroom is important.

2. Discussions with teaching staff

10. The teaching staff outlined the structure of the base. There are two classes of children with complex needs and mixed ages. These children are likely to remain in the base with inclusion opportunities in relation to accessing specialist areas rather than accessing wider school learning. There is a Year 7 class who have one teacher. Then Year 8 onwards move between four teachers. Classes are needs led, and flexible to be able to adapt to the needs. The children follow the school timetable, they can access the canteen and join in with activities e.g. swimming, cookery and schools productions.

11. The school are in the process of developing a curriculum for the SRB for those with more complex needs. This would be more in line with curricula seen in special schools.

12. Some staff said they felt SRB's are more inclusive than special schools. By having children with learning needs in mainstream school they are educating the whole school and for the children with needs they are getting used to a world that is loud and unpredictable while being in a safe environment. SRB's are part of the wider community, for example, the school offer post 16 work experience packages, which has in turn educated the community in additional learning needs and disabilities.

13. There should be a level of ALN training for all teachers especially at Initial Teacher Training level. It's important to understand that it's about looking at children as individuals and their individual needs.

14. It's important to teach children and young people enabling them to develop skills in independence – not always beneficial to have a Teaching Assistant with a child at all the time. Inclusivity in a mainstream setting helps teach these skills

15. What would be beneficial is an input from clinicians and allied health professionals and the ability to access therapeutic interventions on a regular basis. There needs to be more joined up co-ordination between education and health. The school would like to offer more therapeutic

interventions such as music therapy, and occupational therapy. They have been unable to secure OT support from the local health board, so have had to pay for an independent OT to come to the school. Referrals rarely meet the Health Board's criteria despite the level of complexity of need.

16. The budget is delegated in the school which allows flexibility to help develop strategies for children with additional needs to cope in mainstream school e.g. they have smaller groups for Maths, English and Science.

17. In term of learning through the medium of Welsh there are several members of the SRB that can speak Welsh and they can access support from other Welsh speakers in the school. This is high on the school's agenda and a wider review in Monmouthshire looking into this.

18. The base would benefit from more safe all-year round outdoor space, this wasn't considered in the original design.

19. The SRB needs more resources for the classrooms. While the PTA are great, there is a limit to what they can provide. They can also help in accessing different grants. However, more resources would be great.

20.

3. Sharing of best practice across the cluster is highly effective and a clear quality assurance process is in place which allows for supported self-evaluation. Sharing of practice across the region has declined since the pandemic. Monmouthshire County Council has since appointed an ALN Transformation Lead practitioner to help share and disseminate good practice across the clusters and

more widely. Discussion with pupils – what do you like about the school?

- 21.** All the pupils said that liked the school; they enjoyed going to the canteen and that the food was nice. Most of them said that their favourite subject was PE and that they also enjoyed doing experiments in science.
- 22.** They said they have enjoyed going on school trips e.g. they have been to the cinema, they have been into town and raised money for charity and have been to the park to feed the ducks.
- 23.** They also said that they take part in after school activities such as football and school musical productions.
- 24.** Most of the children get a taxi to school while some use the bus.

4. Discussion with parents

Transition

- 25.** Transition from primary to secondary school was seamless. Parents looked at various options but liked the school because the base provided the specialist support but with access to mainstream provision. The transition process was a very positive experience and they felt that the children were well nurtured and fully supported throughout the transition.
- 26.** Monmouth early years psychology service are very good at picking up children with ALN in early years settings and managing their transition into primary school. This doesn't happen everywhere and sometimes the only person who knows what's going on is the parent. This can lead to difficulties in getting support in place before transitions to primary can be very difficult.
- 27.** Some parents felt that the struggles were in the primary school settings. It was felt that the teachers didn't have an understanding of the child's needs or not enough of an understanding of children with ALN. Parents were sometimes made to feel like they were a burden and demanding.
- 28.** There were very positive experiences of the base and mainstream from Year 7 up to sixth form. Issues were faced transitioning out of school, parents felt their child and the school weren't listened too sufficiently. Parents felt that wider Post 16 options were more disjointed.

29. The school offers the opportunity for children to gain qualifications which isn't always the case in special schools. However its important to get the right balance of what the children are doing. Focus should be on learning life skills – communication, problem solving etc. There can be different expectation of what a life skill is and expectations of the children can be low and sometimes patronising.

30. Full integration is so important within the school. This is important for all the pupils in the school.

Extra-curricular activities

31. Some of the parents said that their children have been on school trips and one went abroad on a sports trip. This was when the base was smaller so it was easier to accommodate. The needs of some of the children in the base have become more complex so its more difficult to offer trips now especially abroad.

Transport

32. One parent said that they had to give up free school transport to come to the school. (They travelled from England.)

33. Generally, transport isn't an issue, most children come to school on the school bus or in a taxi. There have been a few occasions of bullying on the bus but this has been dealt with.

Implementation of new ALN system

34. Generally parents had very negative experiences of the new system, one parent said 'I would like to take a match to the new ALN Act'. It's a postcode lottery and often down to the parents to try and navigate the system. There should be more liaison with parents especially in primary schools to help guide them through the system.

35. Different local authorities are interpreting the Act differently, this are even inconsistencies between schools within the same local authority. There is no consistency in writing IDP's, if they are vague with what is included then the school have less that they need to be accountable for. There are some children with complex learning needs who don't even have an IDP.

36. IDP paperwork feels very 'cut and paste' – a lot of teachers especially in mainstream schools don't even read them. They aren't being used how they should be.

37. There is little or no 1-2-1 support for children especially at reception age. Even if 1-2-1 support is in place they are often over stretched and asked to look after other children with

ALN. Often the teachers have little or no training in ALN and it is left to teaching assistants to provide the support and to educate the children. Teachers sometimes think that children with ALN in the class are the responsibility of the teaching assistants. This is not the case and it should be teacher's responsibility to teach the whole class. This includes understanding and planning for every child in that class not just the ones that are neurotypical.

38. Training in ALN should be a compulsory part of teacher training

Support and information

39. Information can be quite inaccessible. There is a service called the 'Portage' early years intervention service which is great but its has become very patchy and non-longer exists in many areas. They would come out to new parents and give you information and signpost support and help.

40. One parent had a special needs health visitor which was incredible as they knew which markers their child should be achieving and were able to support then on their journey but this service non longer exists.

41. The Autism Education Trust is putting together a programme to be rolled out in 2024 which will help create awareness and understanding of what parents can access but its making sure that that the programme is implemented by schools.

42. Local authorities fund programmes, projects and secondments but data and information is collated and it never goes anywhere or gets follow-up

43. There needs to be a better co-ordination between health and education services, currently the lines seem very burred – in some cases parents have to pay for specialists services e.g. Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy and its often the case that its difficult to find health care professionals with specialism in specific areas such as sensory processing disorder