



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

A report on
Talocher School

Date of inspection: May 2022

by

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

About Talocher School

Talocher School is an independent special school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and associated needs. The school is located on the outskirts of Monmouth, and is administered by Aspris Children's Services, which is part of the portfolio of the Waterland group, a private equity investment company. The school was formerly known as Priory Talocher School.

The school is registered for up to 60 pupils aged 7 to 19 years. There are currently 50 pupils on roll, each of whom has a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan. The majority of pupils are placed by Welsh local authorities; a minority are placed by English local authorities. Fewer than one-fifth of pupils are looked after by their local authority.

The headteacher has been in post since September 2018.

The school's last core inspection was in February 2020. Since the core inspection, there have been many changes to the leadership, staffing and therapeutic teams. Following a request from the Welsh Government, inspectors visited the school unannounced in July 2021 with a particular focus on the ability of the school to manage pupil behaviour and the impact of this on the school's provision of an appropriate curriculum for pupils.

Main findings

Strengths

Staff are caring and patient in their work with pupils. They take an interest in their pupils and are committed to improving outcomes for them. These qualities help the majority of pupils to build positive working relationships with staff and improve their resilience and self-esteem.

Teachers and learning support assistants (LSAs) work well together as a team. They are resilient in the face of daily challenges and support each other well.

The school has begun to make progress against the recommendations from the core inspection in February 2020. However, the pace of this progress has been too slow. Persistent challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of staff limit the pace of progress.

Areas for development

The school does not fully comply with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. In addition, the school has failed to address successfully two areas of non-compliance with the regulations identified at time of the core inspection. It has made limited progress against areas for development from that visit and the unannounced visit of July 2021. Overall, the quality of leadership and management has been unable to drive sufficient improvement at the school.

The school does not have a defined or co-ordinated approach to the provision of therapeutic support to meet the needs of pupils. This includes where pupils have specific interventions identified in their statements of special educational need or education, health and care plans, as well as the provision for relational and nurture-based approaches to meet the needs of all pupils at the school. This means that many pupils are not receiving the therapeutic support they require or are entitled to.

There are limited opportunities for staff to access relevant professional learning to strengthen their skills and understanding of the complex needs of pupils across the school. Many staff lack previous experience of supporting education for pupils who face these barriers to their learning. Online training modules provided by the company often have little direct relevance to the roles of teaching and learning support staff. This means that staff at the school rely on their own understanding of how best to meet individual pupils' needs, based on their personal reading, interest or experiences. As a result, practice across the school, particularly in the area of behaviour management, is inconsistent and not matched well enough to the individual needs of pupils. In turn, too many incidents of low level disruptive behaviour continue to impact negatively on the learning and well-being of others.

The school has faced significant challenges around the recruitment and retention of suitably qualified and experienced staff. This has hindered the school's rate of progress in meeting recommendations from previous inspections and addressing its own priorities for improvement. Further, these difficulties mean that pupils do not receive the level of appropriately skilled learning support they require to make

consistent progress in their learning. Finally, these challenges increase the pressure on staff working at the school, and reduce their capacity to relax and reflect on their own practice during the school day.

Following the recent transfer of ownership of the school to its current proprietors, previous policies that guided practice at the school have been replaced with new policies that comply with the new proprietors' requirements. However, in nearly all cases, these policies are too generic, do not reflect practice at the school and do not meet Welsh Government requirements. As a result, they do not comply with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003 in important aspects of the school's provision, including the quality of the curriculum and policies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at the school.

These shortcomings mean that pupils' progress in learning, as well as the safety and well-being of pupils and staff, is inadequate and a cause for concern. Given the slow progress against the recommendations from the core inspection and the increase in the areas of non-compliance with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, the Welsh Government may wish to recommend formally to the school that it should not accept new pupils at the school until these matters have been addressed.

Recommendations

The school should:

- R1 Comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003
- R2 Strengthen the quality of leadership and management at all levels
- R3 Strengthen the recruitment and retention of staff to ensure a stable and supportive learning environment for pupils at the school
- R4 Extend the provision of a co-ordinated therapeutic approach to include all pupils at the school, not just to those whose statement sets out the entitlement to specific therapeutic interventions
- R5 Implement a professional learning programme that enables teaching staff and learning support assistants to develop consistent approaches to supporting pupils and managing behaviour across the school
- R6 Ensure that school policies refer appropriately to Welsh Government guidance and guide practice at the school

Progress in addressing recommendations from previous visit or inspection report

R1: Comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

The school has made variable progress against this recommendation.

At the time of the core inspection, the school did not comply with three regulations to do with Standard 1: the quality of education provided by the school. Since then, the school has taken a number of steps to address these shortcomings. For example, it has reviewed its curriculum policy and its arrangements for leadership of teaching and learning across the school. In addition, teachers have implemented new schemes of work in many areas of learning, for example in information and communication technology (ICT), literacy and personal, social and health education (PSHE). In PSHE, for example, the school has introduced a commercial scheme of work, which enables pupils to access information on a wide range of relevant topics.

However, many of these changes remain at an early stage of implementation and the school has not yet evaluated their impact. Further, there remains too much variability in lesson planning and teaching. As a result, inspectors judged that the school does not fully comply with two of the regulations identified as non-compliant on the previous inspection in addition to the new areas of non-compliance identified on this visit.

R2 Strengthen the quality of leadership and management at all levels

Since the core inspection, the school has reviewed the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders to strengthen the capacity of the senior leadership team. These changes have helped to ensure that leaders have clear lines of responsibility for areas of provision across the school, for example safeguarding, teaching and learning, and health and safety. This team meets regularly, and receives valuable assistance from the school's engagement manager to monitor pupils' attendance, progress and behaviour. Despite this, the school has made only slow progress against the recommendations from the core inspection and focused visit of July 2021.

The school has procedures to quality assure its work. Members of the school's governance team, who work for the wider organisation, visit regularly and provide assistance to the headteacher. However, in general, these processes are too compliance based, and as a result, the school's evaluation of its work is too generous and does not identify clearly enough areas for improvement. Where it does, these do not link closely enough to priorities in its improvement plan. In addition, the school's proprietors do not show enough awareness of the context in Wales in which the school operates. Policies are generic to the organisation as a whole, do not guide practice at the school well enough and do not consistently meet Welsh Government requirements. This contributes to the failure of the school to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) regulations 2003 in important areas.

A very few members of the teaching and learning support team have areas of responsibility across the school, for example, the engagement manager and lead for

numeracy. Overall, however, opportunities to distribute leadership and to enable teachers and LSAs to lead on whole-school areas of responsibility, for example, by leading on training professional learning relevant to their areas of specialism, are underdeveloped.

R3 Improve pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning

The school has made limited progress against this recommendation.

The headteacher, senior leaders and engagement manager analyse pupil behaviour data regularly. This provides them with a clear understanding of individual pupils' attendance and behaviour across the school. However, the strategic use of this data to track patterns and trends over time, and to identify where improvements and additional support are needed, is at an early stage of development.

Staff develop valuable working relationships with pupils. However the lack of stability of the staff team impacts on the ability of pupils to develop productive relationships with them over time. The school does not have a coherent approach to the provision of therapeutic support to meet the complex emotional and behavioural needs of pupils. Therapists build constructive relationships with pupils but leaders lack strategic oversight of this work and the provision for relational and nurture-based approaches to meet the needs of all pupils is inadequate. This means that many pupils are not receiving the support they require or are entitled to.

The school does not have a planned professional learning programme to enable staff to develop a robust understanding of the specific needs of pupils. As a result, this restricts their ability to manage behaviour and support pupils consistently, confidently and effectively.

These issues contribute to the fact that on this visit, as at the time of the core inspection, there remain too many incidents of disruptive behaviours from a minority of pupils which impact on their own and other pupils' progress and learning.

R4 Improve the planning for the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills

Since the core inspection, leaders at the school have reviewed processes to support the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. The school has appointed key staff to lead on the development of each of these areas, and staff at the school are developing schemes of work to plan appropriate opportunities for pupils to develop these skills.

In literacy, for example, leaders have introduced new assessments for pupil reading in order to evaluate pupils' starting points and progress over time. The school has also introduced a weekly numeracy challenge. Pupils enjoy these opportunities to practise their skills. There are regular timetabled opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. However, arrangements for the assessment and moderation of pupils' progress in these areas are underdeveloped.

Progress in the planning for the development of pupils' ICT skills has been slower. The company has recently appointed an ICT teacher and has invested in new ICT equipment. However, it is too soon to assess the impact of these developments.

Compliance with the standards for registration

Standard 1: The quality of education provided by the school

The school does not fully meet the regulatory requirements for this standard. In order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, the school should:

- ensure it has a curriculum policy set out in writing and supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, and implement it effectively [1(2)]
- ensure there is full-time supervised education for pupils of compulsory school age [1(2)(a)(i)]
- ensure that where pupils have a statement, the education provided fulfils its requirements [1(2)(e)]
- ensure that lessons are well planned, teaching methods effective, suitable activities used and class time is managed wisely [1(3)(c)]

Standard 2: The spiritual, moral, and cultural development of pupils

On this visit, Estyn did not inspect Standard 2.

Standard 3: Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school does not fully meet the regulatory requirements for this standard. In order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, the school should:

- prepare and implement written policies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children at the school which complies with Welsh Government Guidance [3(2)(b)]
- prepare and implement a written policy to promote good behaviour amongst pupils which sets out the sanctions to be adopted in the event of pupils misbehaving [3(2)(d)]
- have and implement a satisfactory written policy on First Aid [3(6)]
- deploy school staff in such a way as to ensure the proper supervision of pupils [3(8)]

Standard 4: The suitability of proprietors and staff

On the basis of this visit, there is no evidence to indicate that the school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Standard 5: Premises and boarding accommodation at schools

On this visit, Estyn did not inspect Standard 5.

Standard 6: The provision of information

On this visit, Estyn did not inspect Standard 6.

Standard 7: The manner in which complaints are to be handled

On this visit, Estyn did not inspect Standard 7.

Recommendation regarding continued registration

When considering this school's registration the Welsh Government may wish to have regard to the following recommendation:

The school does not currently meet the requirements of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. To comply fully with these requirements, the school should address the issues identified above for each standard.

Inspectors' judgements on this limited inspection should not prejudice the findings of a future full Section 163 inspection.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales>)

The report was produced in accordance with section 163 of the Education Act 2002. The main purpose of inspection under this section is to report on compliance with the Independent Schools Standards Regulations 2003. In schools that provide non-maintained nursery education, this report also satisfies the requirements of Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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