



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

A report on

The Branas School

Date of inspection: June 2022

by

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

About The Branas School

Name of provider	The Branas School
Proprietor	The school is owned and managed by Caretech Ltd. Ownership has changed within the last year to include the Cambian group.
Local authority	Denbighshire County Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Independent special school
Residential provision?	No
Number of pupils on roll	17
Pupils of statutory school age	6
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	
Start date of inspection	28/06/2022
The Branas School provides specialised education and therapy for boys aged 11-18 who have complex social, emotional and behavioural needs and moderate learning difficulties. There are currently 17 pupils on the school roll. All pupils are looked-after by local authorities in England and live in the children's homes operated by Caretech. Nearly all have an education, health and care plan. The children's homes are registered with the Care Inspectorate Wales. All pupils speak English as their first language. The present headteacher has been in post since September 2021.	

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Overview

The Branas School is a welcoming community where pupils feel safe. It is situated in an attractive rural setting with extensive grounds. Pupils benefit from opportunities to engage in learning within and beyond the classroom, including within the local community.

Teachers know their pupils well, they build positive working relationships based on mutual respect. Within lessons staff give pupils skilful support to manage behaviours as well as clear praise and feedback to help them make improvements in their work. During this visit behaviour at the school was exemplary. Teachers regularly assess the progress pupils make within lessons, however, there are significant shortcomings in systems for overseeing pupil progress in all areas at a whole-school level.

There have been several significant changes at the school since the last inspection, including changes to leadership and oversight structures, as well as challenges due to the impact of the pandemic. Staff at the school demonstrated dedication throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and worked flexibly to continue to provide education to pupils.

The school works well with staff as well as partners to support pupil well-being and personal development. For example, they work with a clinical team, care team, health professionals and the police force. However, there are missed opportunities to use these links consistently due to underdeveloped information sharing systems.

The school is in the process of reviewing the curriculum offer to make it more relevant for pupils. However, the current offer is not sufficiently broad and important aspects, such as humanities and personal, social and health education (PSHE), are not delivered consistently or well enough. Important aspects of learning, accreditation and transition support for older pupils are missed. Further, classrooms at the school are not well maintained or resourced, and do not provide a positive learning environment for pupils.

On this visit, inspectors did not report on learning or well-being and attitudes to learning. This is because the number of pupils was too few to report on without identifying individuals.

The school does not comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Compliance with the regulations for registration

Independent school inspections are governed by the Education Act 2002 and related regulations: the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. These regulations require an independent school to meet an appropriate standard in the following areas:

The quality of education provided by the school

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets many of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003 the school should:

- Develop a curriculum policy set out in writing and supported by appropriate plans and schemes of work, and implement it effectively
- Ensure that the curriculum give pupils of compulsory school age experience in the following areas of learning: linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technological, human and social, physical, and aesthetic and creative
- Provide a programme of activities appropriate to the needs of pupils above statutory age
- Provide classroom resources of an adequate quality, quantity and range and use them effectively
- Introduce a framework by which pupil performance can be evaluated.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Welfare, health and safety of pupils

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The suitability of proprietors and staff

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Premises of and boarding accommodation at schools

The school does not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Although the school meets almost all of the regulatory requirements for this standard, in order to comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003 the school should:

- Ensure a satisfactory standard and adequate maintenance of decoration.

The provision of information

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

The manner in which complaints are to be handled

The school meets the regulatory requirements for this standard.

Recommendations

- R1 Comply fully with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003
- R2 Clarify and prioritise what the school needs to do to improve
- R3 Develop a clear vision, and implement, a school curriculum that is broad and balanced and meets the needs of pupils
- R4 Establish assessment arrangements at a whole school level to give a clear understanding of pupil progress

What happens next

Since the school does not meet the standards required for registration, the Welsh Government will require the proprietor to submit an action plan within a specified period of time. This plan will set out the steps that the school will take to meet the standards, and the timescale within which it will complete each step.

Estyn advises the proprietor to amend its current development plan to show what actions the school intends to take in response to the recommendations. It is also advisable to circulate this plan, or a summary of it, to all parents/carers at the school.

Main findings

Learning

There is no report on children's learning. This is because the number of pupils present at the time of the inspection was too few to report on without identifying individual pupils.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

There is no report on children's wellbeing and attitudes to learning. This is because the number of pupils present at the time of the inspection was too few to report on without identifying individual pupils.

Teaching and learning experiences

Teachers at the school display caring and committed attitudes and they build effective and purposeful working relationships with pupils. This enables pupils to develop resilience, gain in confidence and improve their readiness for learning. Teachers promote a positive learning environment and have high expectations of pupil behaviour. They have a strong understanding of the needs and interests of their pupils. Nearly all are excellent role models and encourage the development of empathy, politeness and kindness. This is an area of strength in the school.

Overall, lesson planning is well organised and meets the individual needs and interests of pupils well. The small class sizes mean that teachers provide a high degree of support for individual pupils. The majority of lessons include meaningful activities that engage pupils effectively, allowing them to make progress both in and out of the classroom. For example, in outdoor education pupils learn how to work together as a team to solve problems, and in English they develop their confidence and understanding of Macbeth through interactive role play activities. As a result, pupils focus well in lessons and work well with their peers. However, in a minority of lessons an over-reliance on worksheets inhibits pupil progress.

In many lessons, teachers provide clear instructions to introduce learning and ensure pupils remain on task. They use questioning effectively to support pupils to recall prior learning, determine pupils' understanding of the task and apply this to wider contexts.

Nearly all staff use praise purposefully to reward pupils and to celebrate their achievements. This feedback helps pupils develop a sense of pride in their learning. Where practice is best, teachers provide skilful feedback for pupils which corrects misconceptions and helps them improve their practice in lessons. For example, in PE feedback helps pupils to improve their performance in athletics. However, the quality of feedback and expectation of pupil response is not consistent across the curriculum.

Teachers assess pupils regularly and use this to inform future planning. However whole school systems for assessing pupils' starting points, setting realistic targets and tracking progress robustly are inadequate.

Care staff working in the school provide attentive support for pupils that helps them effectively manage their behaviour. In the most effective lessons, teachers and care staff collaborate effectively to further pupils' learning. However at times the number of staff in the class restricts the development of pupils' independence.

Leaders at the school have begun to review the curriculum to better reflect the learning needs and goals of all pupils. These changes are in the early stages of development and a shared vision for curriculum and teaching is not well established across the school.

Where schemes of work are most effective, they consider the specific needs, interests and planned learning of all pupils well. However, the quality of schemes of work across the curriculum is currently too variable and a few subject areas are not well considered. Generally curriculum plans are not currently well sequenced to build systematically and coherently on pupils' knowledge and skills as they progress through the school.

The current curriculum provides pupils with beneficial opportunities to engage in meaningful learning experiences which stimulate pupils, for example, kayaking, gorge walking and visits to places of local interest. This includes relevant opportunities to develop their learning outside the classroom, both within the school's extensive grounds and the local community.

The curriculum allows pupils to achieve qualifications and accreditations in core subjects and a narrow range of additional subjects. However, there are missed opportunities to accredit learning across the full curriculum. The school has supplemented the curriculum with additional interventions to improve outcomes for pupils in core subject areas. This initiative is at an early stage of development.

The PHSE at the school is beginning to support pupils to develop skills, knowledge and experience to make healthy lifestyle choices. However, the coverage of important areas of study is currently inconsistent.

As a result, the current curriculum arrangements do not meet requirements of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Care, support and guidance

The Branas School is a welcoming community where pupils feel safe and cared for. There are well established trusting and respectful relationships between pupils and staff. Staff know their pupils well and have a comprehensive understanding of how to meet their well-being and emotional needs. During the visit, pupil behaviour in lessons and around the school was exemplary and engagement in learning was good.

The school has a suitable focus on meeting the emotional, health and social needs of all pupils. It provides opportunities for pupils to access engaging activities to support their wellbeing. For example, through outdoor activities, such as developing the onsite fishing pond. However, the school does not monitor and evaluate the impact of these activities on pupils' well-being well enough.

Pupils value opportunities to make changes to the school. In lessons, pupils make decisions about their learning and plan engaging activities with their teachers. Opportunities for pupils to make changes to the school and what they learn are underdeveloped at a whole school level.

The school benefits from the support of a clinical team comprising of a range of clinicians including psychologists and psychotherapists. This support provides the school with beneficial opportunities to share information from a range of helpful assessments of pupils' wider needs. However, these approaches are not co-ordinated well enough to enable teachers to make effective use of this information in their work with pupils.

The school benefits from valuable partnership working with agencies such as the police, the looked-after child (LAC) nurse and the school clinical team to support pupils to develop knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe. However, work to deepen pupil understanding of these important areas of personal development within the curriculum is in the early stages of development.

There are currently limited opportunities for pupils to develop important skills needed in preparation for adulthood. The school's contribution to transition planning to pupils' future destinations is underdeveloped.

Leaders are developing a suitable safeguarding culture at the school, underpinned by the wider culture of ensuring pupil safety and wellbeing. Nearly all staff have a good understanding of safeguarding processes and procedures and demonstrate a strong understanding of their role in keeping pupils safe.

The school has comprehensive procedures for safeguarding. Where there have been changes within the safeguarding team, leaders have ensured that staff are provided with relevant training to equip them to carry out their role well. The school's evaluations of its safeguarding arrangements are accurate and have supported leaders to make improvements to safeguarding at the school.

Leadership and management

Since his appointment in September 2021, the school's headteacher has begun the process of reviewing the school's previous approaches and processes and has started to instigate change on a wide number of fronts. Many of these changes are at an early stage of implementation, and it is too soon to evaluate their impact. Overall, the school lacks a shared vision for its work that co-ordinates its approach to teaching and learning with the contribution of the therapeutic team, and the roles and systems to support this.

The headteacher is supported well by the regional lead and since January 2022, the executive headteacher, each of whom has responsibility for other schools within the company. These leaders provide a strong framework of governance and scrutiny for the school. They provide valuable support for the headteacher as he settles into his new role, and a high degree of challenge and quality assurance around key areas of the school's work. Together, this wider leadership team have a clear sense of the strengths and areas for development of the school and give clear direction for the school. This understanding is a strength of the school.

Senior leaders promote a culture of safeguarding very successfully. The headteacher, together with support from the executive headteacher and regional lead ensure that all staff understand their roles and responsibilities in this regard.

The school has appropriate arrangements to evaluate its work. Self-evaluation reports are honest and identify challenging areas for development across most areas of the school's work. These processes are supported by a range of quality assurance activities that are suitably critical and focus equally well on identifying what is working well and what needs to improve. Generally, self-evaluation and improvement planning processes do not take sufficient account of the views of pupils, teachers and other stakeholders.

In turn, areas for development identified through these activities link well to improvement priorities set out in the school's development plan and address important areas central to the school's work. In a few cases, this focus has helped the school to make beneficial improvements to its provision in a relatively short space of time, for example in relation to improving ICT resources and reviewing areas of the curriculum. However overall, the school's improvement plan does not identify clearly enough which of these many priorities needs to be completed by when and in what order.

These shortcomings have restricted the pace of change and mean that the school has struggled to make sufficient progress against its own priorities for improvement, and against recommendations left from the previous Estyn monitoring visit.

The headteacher and teaching team hold regular meetings, which provide valuable opportunities for staff to discuss operational matters and share practice in areas such as safeguarding, planning, and assessment. However, the records and outcomes from these meetings are not shared well enough. This hinders communication within the school and limits the impact of these meetings.

The school has implemented a beneficial range of professional learning to support teachers' professional development that links well to the priorities for development identified in the school development plan. However, leaders do not routinely evaluate these sessions or use staff feedback and input to inform the planning of future learning well enough.

In addition, the company provides online training in relevant areas such as safeguarding, child protection, fire awareness, and the Prevent duty. In a few areas, however, these units are not sufficiently relevant to teachers' roles in education and do not represent a good use of teachers' time. In addition, the school does not provide sufficient training for care staff who support pupils in lessons. This reduces the impact they have and means the quality of support they provide is variable.

The school is situated in an attractive rural setting that provides beneficial opportunities for outdoor learning and enrichment activities. Despite recent investment by the company to improve ICT resources, many areas of the school building are tired and the school does not provide a stimulating or well-resourced learning environment. The school has begun to address some of these issues, however, this work is at an early stage.

Throughout most of the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching staff worked closely with their colleagues in the residential homes to continue to provide teaching and learning. Their flexibility and commitment helped to ensure pupils were able to make a safe return to face-to-face learning with minimal disruption to their progress and well-being as soon as possible. Since the pandemic, staff have faced the additional challenges of changes to the leadership and oversight of the school. However, overall, the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning priorities do not take sufficient account of issues to do with staff well-being.

The school meets most of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from parent/carers and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and support staff 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/proprietor(s), leaders and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work 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 lessons and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning
- 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 had 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 (where appropriate), 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 ([Estyn Website](#))

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 publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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