

Pen-Y-Cwm Special School
Strand Annealing Lane
Ebbw Vale
Blaenau Gwent
NP23 6AN

16/06/2026

Dear leaders and staff

Interim visit: June 2026

A team of inspectors lead by Huw Davies HMI, recently visited Pen Y Cwm school to consider how the school has made progress in addressing two of the recommendations from its core inspection in May 2024.

During the visit we had the opportunity to:

- meet with a focus group of pupils and, staff
- meet with the chair of governors and, leadership team
- undertake learning walks and,
- scrutinise school documentation

Focus of visit

Improve arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning, including strengthening the role of governing body

Since the core inspection, the school has made worthwhile progress in strengthening leadership, governance and improvement planning. Leadership is now more stable, with a substantive senior leadership team working collaboratively to address the school's priorities. Leaders demonstrate a clear understanding of the school's context and the challenges associated with a growing population of pupils with increasingly complex needs. Despite significant ongoing pressures relating to accommodation, capacity and finance, leaders maintain a strong focus on improving outcomes and provision for pupils.

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The school development plan reflects the school's inclusive ethos appropriately and identifies relevant priorities linked to curriculum development, staff well-being and strengthening self-evaluation. Leaders use a suitable range of first-hand evidence to inform improvement planning, including learning walks, assessment information, staff and pupil voice, governor monitoring and engagement with external partners. As a result, leaders have an increasingly accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. The recent peer review process and supported self-evaluation activities have been valuable in validating the school's self-evaluation, providing constructive challenge and helping leaders refine their priorities for improvement.

Governance has improved since the inspection. Governors have developed a clearer understanding of their strategic role and now provide more effective support and challenge to leaders. Revised committee structures, phase-link governor arrangements and an increased range of monitoring activities provide governors with a broader understanding of the school's work. Governors engage thoughtfully with information about pupils' progress and school improvement priorities and demonstrate an increasing confidence in holding leaders to account.

Leaders have established a comprehensive programme of monitoring and evaluation activities and are beginning to develop a stronger culture of distributed leadership. Middle leaders benefit from regular opportunities to contribute to school improvement, and most have engaged in relevant leadership development programmes. However, self-evaluation processes are not yet consistently sharp enough in identifying the precise impact of actions on pupils' progress and outcomes. Evaluations are often descriptive and do not always draw sufficiently clear conclusions about the effectiveness of provision. Similarly, success criteria within improvement plans are not always measurable enough to enable leaders and governors to evaluate progress rigorously. Staff benefit from opportunities to contribute their views through surveys and meetings, although they do not yet consistently articulate how they influence self-evaluation and improvement planning or identify current school priorities with confidence.

Leaders demonstrate a proactive and strategic approach to financial planning. Through benchmarking activities and engagement with comparable special schools, they have developed a clearer understanding of the potential implications of current funding arrangements. They use this information effectively to support discussions with the local authority and advocate for resources that reflect the complexity of pupils' needs. However, the school faces significant financial pressures, including a projected budget deficit, and improvement planning is not yet supported by sufficiently detailed costing information to demonstrate affordability and long-term sustainability fully.

Overall, the school demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusion and continuous improvement. Leaders and governors have responded positively to previous recommendations and have strengthened many aspects of the school's work.

The school may wish to consider:

- Sharpening self-evaluation so that evaluations focus more clearly on impact and outcomes for pupils.
- Refining success criteria and milestones to support more rigorous monitoring of improvement.
- Strengthening staff understanding and ownership of school improvement priorities.
- Improving links between improvement planning, resource allocation and financial sustainability.
- Continuing to develop the evaluative capacity of governors and middle leaders.

Review and develop the curriculum to meet the needs, interests, and aspirations of pupils, including providing appropriate accredited learning experiences

Since the time of the core inspection, leaders have undertaken a beneficial review of curriculum design, resulting in a more coherent and streamlined approach which strengthens the alignment between curriculum planning, assessment, individual development plans (IDPs) and accreditation pathways.

The school has made strong progress in developing its curriculum and improving opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy skills. Leaders have strengthened curriculum planning and progression pathways, while maintaining a clear focus on communication, well-being and preparation for adulthood. The school's work to improve writing provision is a particular strength. Staff have developed a shared understanding of progression in writing and provide pupils with increasingly consistent opportunities to develop their skills across the curriculum. Leaders have also strengthened approaches to understanding and supporting behaviour, contributing to a positive and inclusive learning environment.

The curriculum is structured around clearly defined pathways that reflect pupils' developmental stages. For example, in lessons observed during this visit pupils move from developing gross and fine motor skills, to pre-writing skills and then mark making, with a minority of pupils able to move on to writing basic sentences and then writing for a range of purposes. For example, writing recipes and shopping lists as part of their preparation for future life.

Leaders have strengthened personalisation by ensuring that planning is tailored to individual pupils' needs and aspirations, while maintaining consistency through shared planning, moderation activities and curriculum oversight across phases and sites.

The reintroduction of the school's comprehensive skills framework further strengthens the school's ability to track progress in areas such as communication, independent living, physical development and self-care. These updated arrangements are in the early stages of implementation.

Overall, pupils access a broad range of meaningful and authentic learning experiences, including in class work as well as hydrotherapy, rebound therapy, community visits, gardening, work-related learning and enrichment activities shaped directly by pupil voice. These opportunities support pupils to develop important communication, independence, social and life skills while increasing engagement in learning.

Leaders have also extended appropriate accreditation opportunities across the curriculum, ensuring that qualifications increasingly support the development of skills that are relevant to learners' future destinations. The development of pathways for older pupils demonstrates a growing focus on preparation for adulthood, employability and community participation. For example, attending a local gym, completing work experience in a nursing home or practising key skills in a local authority life skills flat. These experiences are helping pupils develop confidence, independence and a stronger sense of belonging within their communities.

During a focus group meeting during this visit, pupils were confident, articulate and mature when discussing their learning. They describe a broad range of engaging experiences and demonstrate developing knowledge across different areas of the curriculum. Pupils value the opportunities available to them and suggest thoughtful improvements, including more educational visits. A few pupils express concern about the reduction in regulation spaces as rooms have been repurposed as classrooms, highlighting the importance they place on having suitable spaces to support their well-being and self-regulation.

Whilst leaders plan for pupils to be grouped with peers following similar curriculum pathways, this is not consistently the case, partly due to pressures from the increasing number of pupils on roll and pupils joining the school mid-year.

The school may wish to consider:

- How best to plan for the transitions of new pupils that arrive within the academic year
- Consistently grouping pupils in line with their learning needs and curriculum pathways.

The school's latest core inspection report and further information on the process and purpose of interim visits can be found on our website:

<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/provider/6777011>

Yours sincerely



Dyfrig Ellis

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