



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

A report on

St Christopher's School

**Stockwell Grove
Wrexham
LL13 7BW**

Date of inspection: March 2023

by

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

About St Christopher's School

Name of provider	St Christopher's School
Local authority	Wrexham County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Special
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	269
Pupils of statutory school age	173
Number in nursery classes	
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Maintained Special is 46.2%)	48.4%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Maintained Special is 99.8%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2019
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/03/2014
Start date of inspection	06/03/2023
<p>St Christopher's is a day special school maintained by Wrexham local authority. The school provides education for pupils aged 6 to 19 years with profound and multiple learning difficulties, autistic spectrum conditions, moderate and severe learning difficulties and associated emotional and social difficulties. In addition to making provision for pupils from Wrexham, the school currently accepts pupils from Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Shropshire.</p>	

The additional learning needs of pupils has become more complex, particularly in the primary phase.

Nearly all pupils have statements of special educational needs. Around a half of all pupils are eligible for free school meals. A very few pupils are looked after by a local authority.

A very few pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds with pupils transferring directly from other countries such as Syria, Turkey and Poland.

There are 51 teachers, 30 classes and 126 support staff. The school is organised into four areas.

- Pebbles – for pupils aged 6-11
- Innovate – for pupils aged 11-14 with moderate to severe learning needs
- Discovery – for pupils aged 11-19 with complex and severe learning needs and
- Stepping Stones – for pupils aged 14-19

The school was last inspected in 2014 and was judged to have excellent standards and excellent prospects for improvement. The current headteacher was appointed in 2019.

Since 2019, many of the senior leaders are new to post, with 14 new teachers. The chair of governors was also appointed in the past three years.

The school was previously a pioneer school for health and well-being.

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website: mylocalschool.gov.wales

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

Overview

St Christopher's school continues to adapt its provision to meet the needs of its pupils.

Principles of respect, acceptance and tolerance are very strong features throughout the school, and this is evidently displayed in pupils' interactions with one another, staff and vice versa. Overall pupils are happy and enjoy school. The positive behaviour of nearly all pupils is a notable feature as are their exceptionally strong attitudes to learning, mutual respect and support for one another.

As a result of the strong and trusting working relationships between staff, families and pupils, many pupils make strong progress from their starting points during their time at school.

The curriculum is broad and balanced, and pupils benefit from real life opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills. Where appropriate, pupils contribute to influencing what they are taught, and this includes vocational options for older pupils. These align well to pupils' interests and next steps in learning.

The leadership capacity at the school has been strengthened in recent years and the school now organises provision by phase. These phases and the classes within them are generally well suited to the needs and abilities of pupils.

Leaders at the school clearly understand that for pupils to succeed the school needs highly effective relationships with parents and other professionals. The school has taken appropriate steps to further strengthen its own well-being team.

The school benefits from a governing body with an exceptional range of skills and knowledge and these are being used to very good effect in supporting leaders as they develop the school.

Leaders are capable and ambitious and have a very clear vision for the future of the school that is understood well.

Recommendations

R1 Improve the systematic planning for and tracking of pupils' digital skills

R2 Improve the consistency in the quality of teaching, including feedback

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to the process of change management and the rationale for and impact of the school's provision and support panel, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main evaluation

Learning

During their time at the school, many pupils make strong progress from their starting points. They develop a wide range of important skills that support their learning and well-being highly effectively. These skills prepare them successfully for progression to their next steps in life and learning. As a result of the progress they make at the school and the carefully considered support and guidance the school provides, most pupils move on to specialist colleges or the local further education college when they leave the school.

Many pupils make particularly strong progress in improving their communication skills. In lessons, most pupils listen attentively to their teachers and support staff and respond using their preferred method of communication. In whole-class discussions, they take turns appropriately and listen sensitively to the contributions of their peers. Older, abler pupils understand how to give well-researched presentations on areas of interest to them on topics such as artificial intelligence and whether gaming improves memory. In most cases, pupils who use signing and symbols to support their communication do so confidently. For example, they use signing to indicate their enjoyment when following a class song and to ask the teacher to repeat it, or make choices by using objects of reference.

Many pupils develop their reading and writing skills suitably at a level that is appropriate to their ability. For example, they consolidate their understanding of vowel sounds or the initial letters of words. A few pupils read aloud clearly to their peers and tackle unfamiliar words confidently. Older, abler pupils deduce and infer meaning successfully from texts, such as when reading an extract from the diary of Robert Scott.

Younger pupils practise and improve appropriately their letter formation and handwriting skills. They develop their understanding of grammar and punctuation by using capital letters and conjunctions to form more complex sentences, or to outline the steps in a recipe to make an apple pie. Older pupils use a powerful range of imagery to movingly evoke the trauma of the trenches during World War 1, describing "the stench of dead bodies and smelly arm pits".

Many pupils make worthwhile progress in developing their numeracy skills, particularly in areas that have relevance to their day-to-day lives. For example, they develop their understanding of time, by learning to tell the time using analogue and digital clock faces, and by using calendars and timetables. They consolidate their understanding of space and distance, for example, by reading maps or by calculating the area of the multi-use games area. They build their confidence to use money in real-life contexts, when using a menu to calculate the cost of a meal out, or when shopping in the community.

Many pupils make particularly strong progress in developing their independence skills during their time at the school. For example, they put on and zip up their jackets independently when going out to play and hang them up when they return to the classroom. They make good use of well-established classroom routines to take

responsibility for their own learning and move safely around the school building to go to the toilet. Where appropriate, pupils use their visual schedules to move independently from one task to the next. Many acquire valuable skills that will assist their independence when they leave school, in areas such as food hygiene, road safety or in work-related areas such as animal care, hair and beauty and horticulture.

Many pupils make strong progress in developing their physical skills. They improve their fine motor skills when making greetings cards, or when crushing biscuits, mixing and spooning mixtures into ramekins to make a simple banoffee pie. They build their stamina and resilience by taking part in a worthwhile range of sports awards, Duke of Edinburgh challenges and timetabled sessions for health and well-being, as well as making good use of the school's grounds during breaks throughout the school day.

Many pupils develop their creative skills successfully. For example, they create cards, collages and Jackson Pollack-inspired paintings to celebrate the Hindu festival of Holi. They discuss the work of Edvard Munch to explore their own emotions as a foundation for their own artwork.

Generally, pupils make appropriate use of information and communications technology (ICT) to support their learning. For example, they log onto their devices independently, in order to research a given topic or they reinforce their understanding of cause and effect using the interactive carpet. Where appropriate, pupils use eye-controlled assistive technology and tablets successfully to support their communication needs. Older pupils complete worthwhile accreditation in ICT and computing. However, the progressive development of pupils' digital skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped.

Many pupils make strong progress in developing their understanding and use of the Welsh language. They greet visitors to the school enthusiastically in Welsh and respond appropriately to the use of Welsh greetings and praise in the classroom and around the school.

By the time they leave school, all pupils gain purposeful accreditation and qualifications in a wide range of areas to support their transition to the next stage on their lives. This diverse offer includes awards and accreditation in areas such as essential skills, sporting awards, British Sign Language, drama and the safe use of grass trimmers, mowers and leaf blowers.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Pupils at St Christophers are happy to come to school and enter smiling and engaging positively with each other.

A notable feature at the school is the very positive behaviour of nearly all pupils and their exceptionally strong attitudes to learning, mutual respect and support for one another. They respond well to the reward strategies that motivate them. The pupils enjoy choosing their individual rewards.

Nearly all pupils feel safe in school and know who to go to if they have concerns or worries. During a session about online safety for example, a few pupils recognise

that some of their behaviour is unsafe and can talk about ways to protect themselves in future.

Nearly all pupils develop their physical skills well and have many opportunities to develop these skills at an appropriate level, for example by playing football, enjoying outdoor play and from physiotherapy. All pupils across the school have the same access to physical activities regardless of gender.

Many pupils enjoy taking part in the sports leader's programme. They willingly accept positions of responsibility such as mentoring younger pupils in sports. Sports leaders are proud of the role they play. This helps to develop their confidence and resilience, which are useful skills for pupils to develop and use both outside of school and when they progress to further education courses.

Many older pupils are actively involved in both influencing and determining curriculum options at the school. These align well to future pathways as pupils plan their education and training options when they leave the school.

Across the school, pupils are polite and respectful to each other and to those around them who offer them support. Many pupils display positive attitudes to learning and most pupils show pride in their work and are happy to celebrate their achievements with their peers and staff. In line with their individual needs, nearly all pupils engage well in learning and pay suitable and appropriate attention to activities and people around them. Around the school pupils are welcoming and engaging. They interact with visitors very well.

Teaching and learning experiences

The school is developing a purposeful and beneficial pupil-centred curriculum. It is broad and balanced and is being developed to meet the needs of pupils in all phases at the school very effectively. It prepares them well for the next stage of their lives. Strategic planning for the curriculum has involved valuable contributions from teaching staff and pupils at the school. The school's thematic approach is planned successfully across the areas of learning and experience of the Curriculum for Wales and in line with the needs of all pupils at the school.

The school's provision for the health and well-being area of learning and experience is strong. Teachers adopt a personalised approach to addressing sensitive subjects such as relationships, consent and personal safety and responsibility. A notable feature of this developing provision is the well-being intervention group, which supports pupils to recognise and to regulate their emotions. The group is run by older pupils at the school and is successful in encouraging pupils to interact positively with each other and to take responsibility for their actions.

The school curriculum provides very valuable opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of Cynefin. For example, pupils learn about the exciting development at Wrexham football club and visit the local library to register and choose books of personal interest.

The school offers a well-considered and wide range of valuable academic and vocational options for older pupils at the school. A minority of older pupils follow

bespoke vocational pathways through valuable partnership with further education colleges.

The school provides pupils with a range of valuable learning experiences to support the development of worthwhile skills. The curriculum provides beneficial opportunities for pupils to apply their knowledge and skills in practical and real-life situations. For example, pupils use money to buy items in the school tuck shop and, in areas such as hair and beauty, animal care and forest schools, pupils develop skills such as independence and perseverance, which prepare them well for the next stage in their lives.

There are valuable opportunities for pupils to take part in extra-curricular activities such as the school's football academy, cricket teams and signing groups. These activities successfully help pupils to develop their skills, self-esteem and confidence.

Nearly all teachers create welcoming and positive learning environments. They know the pupils well and have a robust understanding of their additional learning needs. They develop trusting and nurturing relationships with the pupils at the school. Teaching assistants are delegated sensitively within classes. They provide highly effective support within classes and both encourage and motivate pupils effectively. As a result, pupils are engaged in their learning and demonstrate positive behaviour.

Overall, teachers plan carefully to meet the wide range of pupils' additional needs at the school. Generally, teaching builds on pupils' prior learning well and focuses on developing pupils' small steps in progression.

Teachers plan engaging activities to develop a range of appropriate skills. This includes a focus on pupils' literacy, communication and numeracy skills. For example, pupils take measurements for a new football pitch. Many teaching staff make effective use of pupils' preferred communication approaches. This includes using signs and other communication devices. As a result, pupils develop their communication skills effectively. However, opportunities to develop pupils' digital skills progressively across the curriculum are underdeveloped.

Teaching staff establish beneficial routines and manage pupils' transitions skilfully using schedules and visual cues. This results in a calm environment across the school. As a result, pupils are confident and settled and ready to engage in their learning. In addition, teaching staff sensitively support pupils with sensory breaks during lessons to promote engagement.

In the most effective lessons, teaching staff use questioning particularly well to move pupils on in their learning and to help pupils become more independent learners. They deploy skilful questioning techniques to challenge pupils' thinking and deepen their understanding. In these lessons, teachers manage incorrect answers skilfully and are sensitive when explaining misunderstanding. In a few lessons, planning does not sufficiently develop pupils' independence skills well enough.

The school has effective arrangements to assess and to review pupils' progress. Staff collect a range of valuable information to track learners' progress, including data on the achievement of personal "small steps in learning" targets and interventions.

These targets are used successfully to promote learning and progress in skill areas that are important for all pupils.

Assessment and feedback methods are used appropriately across the school to bring about improvements in pupils' work and behaviour. In most lessons, verbal feedback is positive and moves learning forward. This cultivates an environment where pupils are confident to learn from their mistakes and take pride in their achievements and work. However written feedback does not consistently identify what pupils need to do to improve their learning.

Care, support and guidance

Principles of respect, acceptance, tolerance and inclusion are very strong features throughout the school and evidently displayed in pupils' interactions with one another and staff, and vice versa.

The school continues to adapt and introduce new arrangements that support the changing needs of pupils well. The school understands very clearly that for pupils to succeed in school it needs highly effective relationships with parents, an investment in the professional learning of its staff and support from other professional disciplines.

The school's enthusiastic and passionate well-being team provide a range of services that are valuable to pupils, their parents and the school. As a result, the school knows its families well and responds to their needs effectively. Following a period of reflection, the school has recently appointed a speech and language therapist and a behavioural analyst. These roles complement the existing well-being and school team well. They provide a level of expertise and insight into pupils' needs that adds value to the school community in meeting the needs of its pupils.

The school provides highly effective support for attendance and transition. There are secure arrangements to monitor the attendance of pupils and the school works very effectively with a range of professionals to both maintain engagement with parents and to support the attendance of pupils.

The school's provision and support panel enables staff at school to discuss the individual needs of pupils with other colleagues to ensure that as a school they best meet the needs of each individual. It appropriately uses information from a range of sources to adapt provision and support for pupils. In addition, and where appropriate, the school seeks further guidance from outside agencies. For example, the school has worked with colleagues in health to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of younger pupils with complex needs.

The school has appropriate systems and arrangements that meet the emotional needs of pupils well. Carefully considered and executed individual plans ensure that pupils are very well supported by staff. This has had a positive impact on pupils' well-being. For example, pupils who have struggled with relationships in the community have been mentored by staff and, over time, there has been a turnaround in their attitudes and engagement with school, their learning and relationships in the wider community. In addition, and where appropriate, individuals or small groups of pupils access well-being sessions. These focus on developing pupils' understanding and

skills in a number of important areas such as what it means to be a friend and understanding our emotions, including anxiety and anger.

The school very successfully celebrates the cultures of members of the school and the wider community. During Chinese New Year, for example, pupils make dragons, sample Chinese food and try the Chinese martial art, tai chi. In celebrating Diwali, pupils dress in traditional Indian costume, learn bhangra moves and make 'Happy Diwali' cards for their classmates.

Overall, there are appropriate plans for the delivery of relationships and sex education across the phases. Pupils develop an understanding that is broadly in line with their age and ability. However, on a very few occasions provision is not matched well enough to pupils' stage of development.

The school has begun the process of transferring pupils to individual development plans (IDPs), within the timescales set by the Welsh Government. The school receives its IDPs from the local authority. However, it is not always clear how the provision identified in pupils' most recent reviews is being captured in the IDPs that are written by the local authority.

Pupil voice is a particular strength at the school. Many pupils are confident in their ability to articulate their views and opinions and are aware that their choices are valued and acted upon. Pupils who are members of the Junior Leadership Team represent the views of their fellow pupils well and have brought about changes in the school. For example, the school menu across each phase of the school has changed and this encourages most pupils to make healthy choices. Many pupils understand that not all suggestions taken forward by the Junior Leadership team can be actioned and handle this with maturity.

Annual reports to parents provide a detailed overview of progress in all areas of learning as well as providing next steps in learning for learners. The class teacher's summary shows a clear understanding of pupils' needs and abilities. Reports for younger pupils include valuable photographs of pupils making progress in their skills.

The school's arrangements to keep pupils safe meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has worked collaboratively and exceptionally well to establish a clear, pupil-centred vision for the school. This vision is supported by five pertinent strategic aims and these permeate all aspects of the school's work. As a result, it supports pupils with an extremely diverse range of needs to make consistently good progress in their learning and well-being very well.

Following a period of significant and skilfully managed change, the school is now very well organised into innovative 'phases' to achieve its vision for improvement. The governing body has appointed new members to the senior leadership team who complement each other well and lead their phases exceptionally well.

The headteacher and members of the governing body provide highly effective mentoring and coaching for the newly appointed members of the leadership team. As

a result, these senior leaders demonstrate the capacity to implement and manage change effectively. They ensure that the team have a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities and expectations.

School governors have an exceptional range of skills and knowledge, which allows them to offer suitable support and challenge to leaders within the school. Through a well-established committee structure, they draw on their expertise from their other roles, for example within education, banking and construction to support the school well. As a result, they contribute effectively to the school's evaluation and improvement processes, for example through their careful evaluation of the school's budget and advocating on behalf of the school with the local authority in relation to the funding formula.

Leaders have replaced the former secondary school model where pupils move from class to class with a highly effective 'phase' model to ensure that the school is better placed to meet the changing and diverse needs of pupils. They have reviewed and developed the curriculum offer in collaboration with external providers. These arrangements are highly appropriate and contribute to generally high levels of pupil engagement in lessons and enjoyment in school.

Systems to analyse pupil progress and well-being information are sophisticated and highly effective. These arrangements further support the school to identify and meet the wide range of pupils' needs successfully. This cycle is underpinned by regular monitoring and reviewing of activities throughout the year. This work provides rich and varied sources of evidence, such as an evaluation of the impact of the well-being team on the quality of teaching and learning.

Self-evaluation processes and reports across each 'phase' are robust and moderated effectively by the heads of 'phase'. They draw on a good range of first-hand evidence and are tailored to their phases well. They contribute well to whole-school evaluation processes and reports, which are systematically shared with an appropriate number of stakeholders. In a few cases, whole-school reports fulfil the same evaluative function and do not always specifically align with the five overarching strategic objectives.

The school's improvement planning is highly effective and involves nearly all staff successfully. Consequently, the school has improved many important aspects of its work over a relatively short period of time. These include arrangements to support pupils' communication and helping them manage their behaviour effectively. Improvement plans contain appropriate timescales for completion and identify those with key responsibilities. Leaders support the achievement of improvement goals by allocating resources effectively.

The school implements a robust performance management system, which encourages self-reflection and identifies individual staff development and whole-school targets well. There is a strong emphasis on improving standards of teaching and learning to meet the changing needs of pupils. The school has worked hard to restructure the working patterns of teaching assistants. As a result, most are now able to engage in purposeful and high-quality whole-school professional learning opportunities.

The school has developed an innovative partnership with a local college that enables teaching assistants to undertake nationally recognised qualifications at levels 2 and 3 in supporting children in a school setting. This partnership has helped the school to address the growing challenge faced by schools nationally of recruiting suitably qualified and experienced support staff.

Leaders recognise the changing needs of pupils at the school and are responding to these changes well through a detailed and purposeful professional learning offer. For example, recent training on the primary curriculum, positive behaviour support, functions of behaviour, sensory processing and a whole-school approach to developing pupils' communication skills are beginning to have a positive impact throughout the school. The impact of this training needs further time to become fully embedded. In addition, the role of professional enquiry in professional learning is under-developed.

The school uses its resources effectively to meet the additional needs of most pupils. Leaders have adapted spaces creatively within the school to meet the increasingly complex needs of pupils. In a few cases, classes are overcrowded and the building limits learning opportunities.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body 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, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work, to listen to them read 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 a broad sample of classes, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- 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 has 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, 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 (www.estyn.gov.wales)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

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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