

Independent specialist colleges

8

No. of independent specialist colleges July 2025

Well-being letters issued last academic year: 0
Well-being letters issued this academic year: 0
Providers in follow up this academic year: 0

Inspection activity undertaken this year

Core inspections: **1**

Monitoring inspections: **2**

Other visits:

2 initial registration visits

1 changes to arrangements visit

Spotlights

Bevan college: Self-evaluation
Coleg Elidyr: Skills competitions
Coleg Elidyr: Total communication approach
Coleg Elidyr: Welsh provision
Coleg Elidyr: Professional learning

Summary

Independent specialist colleges educate a mixture of Welsh and English funded learners across Wales aged 16 years and over. This year they have educated just over 200 Welsh funded learners.

Due to additional learning needs (ALN) reforms, funding for these placements for Welsh learners is moving from the Welsh Government to local authorities. Nearly all placements at independent specialist colleges are funded by local authorities in Wales or England, with a very few still funded by the Welsh Government. During this period of change the total number of Welsh learners enrolled in specialist colleges has remained around the same.

None of these providers are currently in follow-up.

Teaching and learning

Providers inspected

Overall, across the three providers inspected, nearly all learners demonstrated highly positive attitudes to learning. They listened attentively, followed instructions and interacted positively with their peers. Overall, nearly all learners made secure progress towards their individual targets and developed a range of relevant skills, which prepared them suitably for their future lives. Notably, their social and independence skills progressed well.

At all three colleges, staff developed a secure understanding of their learners' needs and future aspirations. They used this information suitably to plan for progress. In one of the colleges, staff provided learners with significant opportunities to further develop their skills in real life settings and in the wider community.

Across the colleges inspected, the curriculum was strengthened with the addition of a range of engaging community-based activities to develop learners' independent living skills. For example, in one college the 'butties on the go' work experience enabled learners to sell a range of snacks across the business park where the college is based.

However, in one college, there was insufficient attention to how subject content is delivered. For example, too often learners completed low-level paper-based tasks, such as cutting and sticking, which did not support the progressive development of their independence, skills or understanding.

Providers visited

Curriculum plans at all six of the providers we visited had a suitable focus on developing independent living skills and staff generally linked this appropriately to each learner's planned destination.

Skills Competitions at Coleg Elidyr

Through their participation in local, national and UK-wide skills competitions, learners benefit from the experience of applying their skills in authentic contexts under pressure. These opportunities are across a range of sectors including hospitality, retail, performing arts, horticulture, health, carpentry and animal care. Learners develop confidence and resilience particularly well. The college has built strong relationships with local businesses, which allow learners to practise and learn specific skills that they use both in the workplace and in their everyday lives.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Providers inspected

In all of the colleges inspected, staff developed highly positive, mutually respectful relationships with learners based on a secure understanding of their needs. They were positive role models for learners, demonstrating patience and sensitivity in their work. Nearly all staff had consistently high expectations of learners' independence.

In one college inspected, communication systems, such as symbolised resources or signing, were used inconsistently.

Across the colleges inspected, there were robust arrangements to gather feedback on learners' experiences. As a result, learners felt listened to and trusted that staff took their voice into account.

Providers visited

At all the colleges visited, there was a clear overview of their additional learning provision (ALP), including oversight from therapists, and professional learning for staff on subjects including meeting sensory needs.

Across all the providers visited, leaders had a strong focus on safeguarding learners. For example, one provider carefully balanced safeguarding with positive risk-taking through a range of practical and engaging activities, such as learners making coat hooks in the forge and tending to farm livestock. However, in one provider we visited, despite recent improvements, safer recruitment processes lacked rigour.

Total communication approach at Coleg Elidyr

A total communication approach allows individuals with communication difficulties to communicate in the most accessible way to them. As a result, the college has developed a highly inclusive environment where learners can share their views, thoughts and feelings with confidence. For many learners this represents significant progress from their initial starting point.

Staff use a range of sign, symbols and speech in Welsh and English to support learners throughout the day. This approach is highly effective in supporting learners' understanding, development of skills and communication with others.

The college has placed a strong focus on professional learning to ensure a high-quality communication environment for learners. Further, staff consistently use high quality resources in college, and also within the wider community, to support learners.

Leadership and improvement

Providers inspected

Across the three providers inspected, all leaders had developed a clear vision and values for the college, with learners at their heart. They had developed committed staff teams who collaborated positively to meet the diverse needs of learners.

In two colleges, leaders had developed and implemented a self-evaluation framework covering all aspects of provision. As a result, leaders had a strong understanding of their strengths and areas for development and had determined meaningful improvement targets. However, in the other college, leaders did not consistently evaluate the impact of new initiatives on teaching and learning and adjust practice in a timely manner.

We noted a particularly strong professional learning offer in one college. However, at one college, professional learning opportunities for staff specifically relating to teaching had been limited.

Collaborative professional learning at Coleg Elidyr

The college provides an extensive range of highly relevant professional learning opportunities to upskill the staff team to meet the needs of learners. This includes a suitable focus on teaching and learning as well as meeting the additional needs of learners. Staff benefit from opportunities to observe good practice within the college and when visiting other settings.

Staff collaborate as part of 'professional learning communities' to focus on areas of practice that they want to improve. For example, staff recently focused on ways to meaningfully increase their confidence in planning and facilitating physical activities for learners. Staff work together to plan changes and then evaluate the impact. As a result, learners are now more active in their day-to-day lives.

Providers visited

All of the colleges visited had developed positive learning environments. Classroom spaces and outdoor environments were bright, well-resourced and generally well-matched to learners' needs. However, in two of the six colleges, aspects of the learning environments hindered learners' development of independence or posed risks.

All six of the providers we visited benefited from the support and challenge of a wider parent organisation. This provided practical guidance in areas such as policy development, human resources and self-evaluation. However, in two colleges, this support and guidance did not consistently reflect the Welsh context of the college and make suitable reference to Welsh legislation and guidance.

Self-evaluation at Bevan College

Leaders successfully make the specific needs and contexts of their learners the focus of improvement work and ensure that all aspects of the work reflect the unique nature and requirements of ALN specialist education.

Leaders' learning walks and lesson observations recognise the diverse needs of their learners. In evaluating provision, they value the wide range of outcomes and different ways in which their learners make progress. Processes for listening to learners' views ensure that all learners, including those who face difficulties with communication, are able to contribute to college improvement.

As a result, leaders have an accurate, detailed picture of the college's educational strengths and areas for development.

Overview of recommendations from inspections and monitoring visits

Within this sector we only leave recommendations for monitoring visits and core inspections. Across

all inspection activity in 2024-2025 we left a total of five recommendations. Two out of three providers we inspected were left with recommendations.

Both providers were given recommendations related to teaching and learning. These focused on the quality of learner targets and refining methods of lesson delivery.

We left one provider with a recommendation related to care, support and guidance. This was in relation to strengthening the use of communication methods, including signing across the college.

Two providers were left at least one recommendation relating to leading and improving. These were in relation to the quality of the learning environment and the use of self-evaluation outcomes to drive improvements.