

# Special and residential special schools

---

Overall, inspectors found that special schools and residential special schools generally performed well. In both residential and non-residential special schools the high-quality relationships among children, young people and staff, and the commitment of staff to improving children's and young people's care and welfare were found to be particular strengths.

We saw evidence that schools had improved their curriculum and we found that children and young people are now experiencing more challenging and relevant opportunities to develop their skills for learning, life and work. Inspectors saw a range of examples of highly-effective practice in the use of technology to support communication for learners with more complex needs.

In a number of cases, however, inspectors found that schools needed to raise attainment further and increase expectations of what children and young people can achieve. To support this, staff need to monitor and track the attainment and achievement of children and young people more rigorously and then take appropriate action to ensure they make appropriate progress.

## How well do children and young people learn and achieve?

---

In both the residential and non-residential schools inspected, we generally saw children and young people learning in a positive and stimulating environment. There were examples of staff using creative approaches to engage children and young people with complex learning needs through using real and relevant contexts for learning. To improve learning experiences further, children and young people need to be more involved in making choices regarding their learning and planning their next steps. This would support children and young people in leading their own learning.

Inspectors observed staff using an appropriate range of tasks and styles of learning to engage learners who were finding it difficult to concentrate for too long. In the most effective special schools, learners had a clear understanding of the purposes of lessons and what they were expected to learn. However, this was not consistent across the sector and, as a result, inspectors noted occasions when some children and young people were not motivated and were often disengaged.

In most residential special schools inspected, the learning of children and young people was well supported by care staff. In schools where this worked best, we found that care staff knew the areas where children and young people needed more support to help them achieve in their learning through practical guidance. Examples included helping children and young people gain confidence in working with money when shopping or going for a meal.

A particular strength of the sector was found to be the way staff used visual prompts such as pictures and symbols to support learners' understanding. This approach was used effectively to support children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders or complex learning needs who were not always able to follow verbal communication. Inspectors also saw impressive examples of staff making effective use of sophisticated technology to support communication for learners with more complex needs, including signifiers, voice output communication aids and eye-gaze technology.

Inspectors found that almost all special and residential special schools had a clear and appropriate focus on health and wellbeing. As a result, most children and young people were developing skills in expressing and communicating their feelings. In these schools, most children and young people were making good progress in developing their mental health and wellbeing, particularly in relation to personal relationships and growing independence and confidence.

Across the sector, more young people are now achieving National Qualifications, particularly at SCQF levels 1 and 2. Young people with additional support needs also achieve well at SCQF levels 3 and 4. There is room to improve how well young people achieve at levels 5, 6 and 7.

Evidence from inspection shows that children and young people experienced success through a wider range of community initiatives. In particular, they are now participating more in work placements and sporting activities. Their achievements were recognised through a range of accreditation, including The Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Dynamic Youth Awards and John Muir Trust Awards.

Although it is an improving picture overall, there continues to be scope to further raise attainment and increase expectations for some children and young people who face additional challenges, for example those who are young carers or are living with financial hardship. Schools should also take more proactive steps to minimise barriers to learning of at risk children and young people such as looked after children and those with social and emotional needs.

## How well do special schools support children and young people to develop and learn?

---

During the period covered by this report, we found that all special schools had reviewed and developed their curriculum to a substantial extent. We observed schools that have a fully integrated and highly-effective approach to planning children's and young people's learning. This is having a positive impact on attainment and achievement. In these schools, children and young people experienced a coherent approach to learning across the curriculum and have increased choice and personalisation which was helping to meet their needs more effectively.

In almost all special schools inspectors noted improvements in the curriculum at the senior phase. Young people were increasingly being offered more challenging and relevant opportunities to develop skills for learning, life and work, in ways which took account of prior learning and ensured progress at an appropriate pace.

Inspectors also found, however, that in some schools the pace of curriculum development had been too slow. In these schools, staff were not yet skilled enough in planning learning which takes account of the four contexts of learning. As a result, children and young people were not experiencing an appropriate balance of learning relevant to their learning needs. There were examples of children's and young people's learning experiences and opportunities for achievement being diminished by a limited curriculum. This included children and young people not having the opportunity to learn a modern language in a significant number of special schools.

In most special schools, inspectors observed children and young people benefiting from a positive, nurturing and communication-rich environment. Staff were making good use of the outdoor environment and the local community to enhance learners' experiences. As a result of curriculum improvements, most young people were being given better opportunities to choose subjects which would help them achieve a wider range of National Qualifications and personal awards.

The majority of schools inspected had a good range of community links, business partners and training providers who provided meaningful work placements. In residential special schools, these included placements which were local to the school and, on some occasions, appropriately local to the young person's home area. We found that children and young people were benefiting from increased personalised planning which was helping them engage more fully with their learning and increase their motivation.

Inspectors identified examples of outstanding practice in both special and residential special schools where staff used nurturing approaches skilfully to help children feel secure, cared for, and to enable them to maximise their potential. Staff had a sound understanding of their individual responsibilities to support children. In such schools, learners settled well when coming into class through well-considered activities that were carefully matched to individual needs and interests.

While personal support for young people moving on from the service was appropriate in most schools, we identified occasions when young people did not always have adequate access to advice. In the best examples, schools worked in partnership with key agencies, including Skills Development Scotland, adult services, community facilities and colleges to provide a range of pathways to meet young people's needs and help them progress.

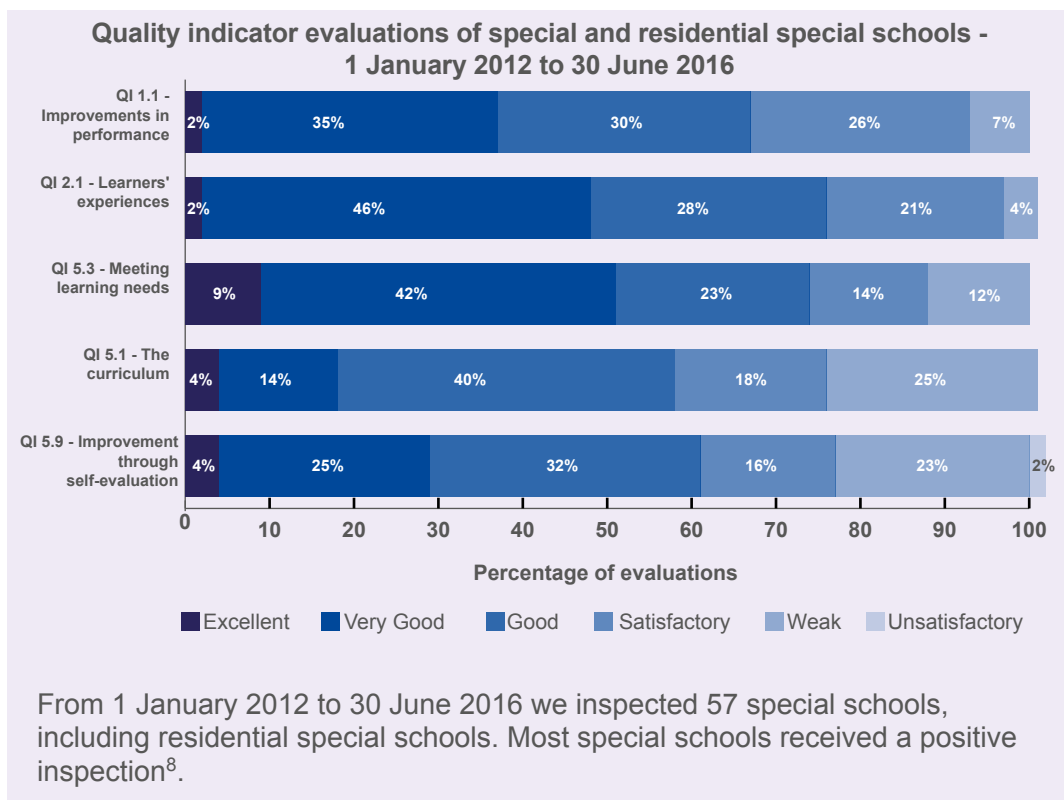
## How well do special schools improve the quality of their work?

---

Inspectors found that the leadership and management of most special schools and residential special schools was effective. In the best examples, we noted that the high-quality leadership empowered and developed the capacity for leadership across the senior management team and staff. Senior leaders encouraged creative and innovative approaches to meeting the needs of learners with complex needs and developed strong and effective working relationships with a wide range of partners in the local community.

In residential special schools and secure care services, most senior leaders promoted a culture that was consultative and collegiate. They established a culture of continuous improvement which focused on improving the outcomes for children and young people across care and education. However, inspectors found a few instances where senior leadership teams did not provide clear enough direction for education staff or monitor and evaluate the quality of learning and teaching effectively.

Across the sector, inspectors judged the impact of self-evaluation on children's and young people's progress as being variable. Many special schools and residential special schools remain at an early stage in implementing effective approaches to tracking learners' progress through the broad general education. They have not yet developed robust approaches to moderating standards of attainment.



<sup>8</sup> Satisfactory or better in each of the following quality indicators: improvements in performance, learner's experiences and meeting learning needs in special schools, including residential special schools inspected between January 2012 and June 2016.