HMIE | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Special school inspection findings for the academic year 2024/25

A summary of findings

Introduction

Number and type of inspections carried out

His Majesty's Inspectors carried out 12 inspections of special schools in 2024/25, of which:

- 6 were full model inspections
- 6 were short model inspections

None of the schools required further inspections as a result of the original inspection.

Inspectors also carried out 35 inspections of special units located within mainstream schools.

This report presents the main findings from these inspections of special schools and special units using quality indicators (QIs) from How good is our school? 4th Edition and associated inspection guidance. The report draws on evidence from inspection visits, professional dialogue and pre-inspection questionnaires.

HMIE has a statutory duty to inspect and report on the quality of education and outcomes for learners in Scotland under the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. This sector level summary provides an overview of strengths, areas for improvement and patterns identified through inspection activity during the year.

Inspection findings

Across special schools and units, leadership is strengthening and learning experiences are improving. Well-embedded ethos and cultures are supporting children and young people's wellbeing and schools are placing greater emphasis on raising attainment and achievement. Inclusive practice is strengthening across settings through nurturing relationships, supportive environments and more effective personalised planning. Staff know children and young people's needs well, particularly in relation to their wellbeing. Staff are strengthening their use of sensory environments, digital tools and bespoke learning pathways to motivate and engage learners. Overall, this is having a positive impact on children and young people's attainment and achievement, attendance and behaviour.

While many aspects of provision are improving, there is still too much variability in school performance across special schools and units. In many settings:

- stakeholders are not meaningfully involved in decision making and school improvement
- learning, teaching and assessment approaches are not always of a consistently high standard
- children and young people are not challenged sufficiently to attain and achieve to their full potential.

Leadership of change

Most schools and units benefit from positive leadership that engages staff and partners in shaping a shared direction. Most settings have vision, values and aims in place which promote wellbeing, equality and children's rights. In a minority of settings, senior leaders have not yet supported children and young people to understand better how the vision, values and aims relates to their learning and future aspirations.

The quality of improvement planning is improving across special schools and units. In the majority of settings, senior leaders are using observations, learner discussions and data analysis increasingly well to establish a clear view of progress. They are using data about children and young people's progress to inform priorities, identify gaps in learning and plan targeted interventions. However, in a minority of settings, the pace of change is too slow.

In most special schools and units, staff are increasingly leading change. They lead and contribute well to taking forward improvement priorities, often linked to their areas of particular interest. They engage enthusiastically in professional learning to help them meet the increasingly diverse needs of children and young people, with particular emphasis on wellbeing needs. However, senior leaders and staff do not measure rigorously enough the impact of changes to learning and teaching approaches on children and young people's outcomes.

Special schools and units are continuing to develop approaches to empower children and young people to lead change in aspects of school improvement through the use of pupil councils and surveys. Despite this, children and young people are not always given the opportunity to have a voice about whole-school improvements in the curriculum and learning and teaching.

Learning, teaching and assessment

Relationships and classroom culture are a significant strength across most special schools and units. In almost all special schools and units, staff develop strong, nurturing relationships with children and young people that underpin high levels of engagement with learning. The majority of schools and units offer personalisation and choice for learners, often supported by digital technology, outdoor spaces and sensory environments. Children and young people are motivated and increasingly able to lead aspects of their learning. In most schools and units, children and young people behave well. They feel valued and confident to seek support when required.

Tasks and activities do not always meet the needs of all children and young people. Too many lessons lack sufficient pace and challenge. Despite staff in almost all settings knowing the children and young people very well, their approaches to meeting their learning needs in lessons is inconsistent.

The planning of learning, teaching and assessment is not as effective as it could be for all children and young people. Some learners would benefit from strengthened approaches to differentiation and greater levels of challenge. Staff do not always have access to sufficient professional learning on learning and teaching approaches to help meet the increasingly varied and complex needs of children and young people in special settings.

Most schools and units use a mix of both formative and summative assessment strategies to monitor children and young people's progress. Teachers are becoming increasingly adept at capturing small steps in children and young people's learning. In most settings, assessment information is used to inform planning and next steps. However, there is variability in consistency, depth and use of data to support improvement. Overall, while moderation is strong in some settings, it is not consistent enough across the broad general education (BGE) to improve the reliability of professional judgements. Teachers do not always engage in moderation activities with colleagues from mainstream schools and other special settings to support their practice.

Special schools and units generally demonstrate strong planning, tracking and monitoring. Staff adapt plans based on progress data and individualised education plans (IEPs). Many have introduced clear tracking systems for literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, complemented by regular review meetings. However, practice is variable in both the depth of analysis and the consistency of approach. A minority of settings have overly complex arrangements in place.

Learning pathways

In the majority of special settings, curriculum pathways in the BGE are progressive and help children and young people to build on what they already know. In the best examples, curriculum pathways are personalised to each child or young person, based on their interests and ambitions. In a minority of settings, curriculum pathways are too narrow. This results in some children and young people not receiving their full entitlement to learning in areas such as physical education and languages.

In the majority of special schools and units, there is a strong focus on a skills-based curriculum. Children and young people develop a range of relevant skills for learning, life and work, for example developing their communication, teamworking and independent living skills. A minority of schools and units do not track skills or consider wider accreditation routes to recognise achievement.

Parental engagement

In most schools and units, relationships between staff and parents are strong. Communication between staff and parents about children and young people's progress, attainment and achievement is effective.

Parent Councils are in place in only a minority of special schools. Parental engagement in self-evaluation and improvement planning does not yet ensure that parents' voices influence school priorities more systematically. Parents are not sufficiently involved in determining how pupil equity funding (PEF) is used to support school improvement.

Improving wellbeing, equality and inclusion

Staff in most special schools and units have a very strong understanding of the wellbeing needs of individual children and young people and develop and maintain positive relationships with them. They have responded well to the increase in social, emotional and mental health concerns among children and young people, using a range of well-considered strategies. They use bespoke plans and targeted interventions effectively to support children and young people to improve their wellbeing. This helps children and young people to feel respected, cared for and safe. Most learners are developing their confidence and improving or maintaining high levels of attendance.

Senior leaders and staff in most special schools and units adhere to their statutory duties well. They work well with partners to ensure that children and young people's learning experiences are relevant and support them to make

progress. In most special schools and units, any risks to children and young people are assessed and planned for properly, including emergency evacuation plans. A few schools have not yet updated statutory policies in line with national guidance or strengthened staff understanding of duties.

A minority of schools face increasing challenges in accessing specialist support from partners such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists.

Overall, the quality of individualised planning is too variable. Too many plans lack clarity, measurable targets or an evaluation of these targets to demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of plans.

Special schools and units typically demonstrate strong inclusive cultures, providing rich learning experiences within the school and local community. In most settings, children and young people benefit from high-quality life skills development, outdoor learning and engagement in community activities. A few settings do not offer sufficiently broad out-of-school opportunities to ensure that all children and young people, particularly those on part-time programmes, receive a full educational experience.

For learners in units, purposeful inclusion in mainstream classes and participation in assemblies, performances, clubs and pupil leadership groups is a strong feature.

Raising attainment and achievement

Taking account of their additional support needs, the majority of children and young people in special schools and units are making good progress or better in their literacy, communication and numeracy. In the senior phase, this includes young people attaining a range of qualifications. A minority of children and young people are capable of making better progress and attaining more.

In the majority of special schools and units, most children and young people make good or better progress against their individual targets over time. Teachers are using IEPs increasingly effectively to help measure children and young people's progress, including small, incremental successes. At the senior phase, most young people gain a wide range of appropriate qualifications and awards. A few young people are not challenged sufficiently to attain more and at a higher level.

In most special schools and units, children and young people benefit from developing skills for life, learning and work. They are able to participate in a wide range of activities in the school and the local community, including work placements and outdoor education programmes. Children and young people are developing their confidence to try new things, work with others and be independent. Many settings develop community partnerships that enhance the breadth and range of activities for children and young people. In many cases, children and young people gain accreditation for their achievements. Schools and units do not always track children and young people's achievements well enough or explore further opportunities for accreditation across all stages.

In almost all settings, staff understand children and young people's social and economic contexts and use this understanding to guide support, but evaluation of targeted interventions and use of PEF is inconsistent.

Special school evaluations for 2024/25

Quality indicator	Unsatisfactory	Weak	Satisfactory	Good	Very good	Excellent
1.3 – Leadership of change	0%	0%	17%	83%	0%	0%
2.3 – Learning, teaching and assessment	0%	0%	33%	59%	8%	0%
3.1 – Wellbeing, inclusion and equality	0%	0%	0%	67%	33%	0%
3.2 – Raising attainment and achievement	0%	0%	33%	42%	25%	0%

Special units are inspected at the same time as the mainstream school in which they are placed and are not evaluated separately using the six-point scale. Instead, inspection evidence from special units contributes to the overall evaluation for the mainstream school.

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Five essential points

Leadership is improving, but children, young people and parents need a stronger role in improvement

Leadership and self-evaluation are improving across many special schools and units. Most settings have clear values that promote wellbeing, equality and children's rights. Senior leaders and staff are using data better to identify priorities, but they need to improve their evaluation of impact further. Children, young people and parents should be able to play a greater part in self-evaluation and change.

Learning, teaching and assessment are improving, but learners need more challenge

In almost all special schools and units, strong, nurturing relationships support high engagement. Staff are making better use of learning environments, digital technology and outdoor learning. Assessment, tracking and monitoring are improving in most settings, but many schools still need stronger differentiation and more pace and challenge for all learners.

Curriculum pathways are improving, but learners' entitlements must be fully met

Curriculum pathways are becoming more progressive and better aligned to learners' interests and ambitions. Most settings have a strong focus on skills development, but schools and units must ensure that all learners, especially those on part-time programmes, receive a broad and balanced curriculum.

Inclusive practice and wellbeing support are strong, but individual planning needs to be more consistent

Special schools and units are highly inclusive and strongly focused on wellbeing. Staff respond well to learners' increasingly diverse social, emotional and mental health needs, and children and young people feel respected, cared for and safe. Personalised planning is improving, but targets and evaluation of impact need to be stronger.

Attainment and achievement are improving, but could be higher

Most children and young people are attaining and achieving well, developing skills that support their needs and aspirations. Young people in the senior phase are gaining a wider range of qualifications and awards, and staff are tracking progress more effectively. However, many learners could achieve more with greater challenge.

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