How a Plymouth special school used evidence to challenge its own thinking

Read how Intelligent Evidence helped Headteacher Andrea Hemmens turn evidence work into a genuine SLT discussion, across four curriculums and six key stages, for children aged 2 to 19.

About the school

Woodlands School, based in Plymouth, is a specialist school serving children from Plymouth, Devon and Cornwall who have physical and sensory impairments and complex medical needs.

Unlike many special schools, it has no fixed learning-level cohort: it takes children across the full spread of learning ability, from ages 2 to 19.

The school recently launched a new Nursery, taking children pre-EHCP to carry out early assessment and get them the earlier boost that children with physical disabilities often need.

To meet such a wide range of need across childhood, the school runs four different curriculums side by side, led by Headteacher Andrea Hemmens.

The challenge

With provision spanning six key stages and every level of ability, the sheer volume of evidence Andrea's school needed to produce set it apart from schools with more homogeneous cohorts.

When the new Ofsted framework arrived, asking schools to evidence every statement across both the expected and strong standards, that complexity became a real source of pressure.

> "I felt really concerned on behalf of the school that we were able to evidence something against each of the statements in, both strong and secure, expected categories.
>
> To me, that's really, really important that we do that and that there's clear evidence that I can show inspectors."



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

Before Intelligent Evidence, building that evidence base fell entirely on Andrea: writing the SEF herself, sitting with her SLT to check it, asking her School Improvement Partner and governors to review it.

The result, she says, wasn't good enough – not because the evidence didn't exist, but because pulling it together properly took more time than a small special school had to give.

"In the end we did a very, very basic SEF because the time taken to do it wasn't effective. It wasn't a good use of our time. We didn't have something that I could quickly and easily pull off and pass to Ofsted and feel confident about."



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

The solution

Turning reports she'd already written into inspection-ready evidence

Andrea's termly headteacher's report to governors runs to around 25 pages – what she calls "a tour de force of where the school is at today."

Rewriting that into a SEF by hand was something she simply didn't have time for. Instead, she feeds her existing reports – headteacher's reports, SIP reports, school development plan evaluations – straight into Intelligent Evidence and runs a fresh export every term.

"What's more important for me personally is that I have a tool that can extract the relevant elements, link it together, and give that to me in one file.

That's really, really, really supportive."



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

A tool that surfaces impact the team had forgotten about

Andrea's SLT decide together which documents to upload, then sit down as a team to review what comes back – agreeing what to keep, what to tweak, and what to leave out. In a school doing this much, at this level of individual precision, for every child, it's easy to lose sight of impact that's already been achieved.

"Sometimes it picks up things you hadn't actually thought about the impact of, and then all of a sudden it's staring you in the face that you have done this, you have put that in place."



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

Whole-school evidence, without individual children in the mix

Given the bespoke nature of provision for children with complex medical needs – ten children in a class can mean ten completely different individualised plans – confidentiality mattered from the start.

Andrea keeps the evidence base at whole-school level: developmental learning levels, qualifications, provision overview.

Anything about an individual child stays with her teachers, ready for inspectors' own case-sampling conversations.

Finding – and closing – the gaps herself

The first pass through the platform showed Andrea exactly where her evidence was thin, including her post-16 provision – a key stage many special schools find hardest to evidence well.

"Intelligent Evidence quickly identified my gaps where I didn't have any data for it.

I've been able to go back and think, 'Well, what is it that I need from my post-16 lead in order to make it stronger in future?' So it just helps you to think slightly differently about what you're providing, and why."



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

The results

The conversation, not the typing

As a small special school, Andrea doesn't have spare capacity to farm evidence-gathering out to a large team – which is exactly why she's protective of what the process is actually for.

It isn't admin for its own sake; it's the discussion it makes room for.

"Being able to sit down and have the discussions around evidence with my team is the most powerful bit that comes out of it.

You can really challenge, 'Well, where did we get that from? Do we agree? And if we don't agree, how are we going to get the evidence to secure that statement?'"



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

Live evidence for a fast-moving, reactive environment

Special school provision changes quickly, and last year a new cohort of children with degenerative conditions, transitioning in from mainstream, needed an urgent new plan to keep them safe. Andrea's point is that the evidence of what the school did next, and whether it worked, is what actually matters to an inspector – and it's exactly what the live, regularly-refreshed evidence base is built to capture.

Reassurance, without the evenings and weekends

For Andrea, the biggest shift has been not having to carry it all in her head, and not having to build it all outside the school day.

"I have a folder where I upload and save everything downloaded from Intelligent Evidence. I know that it's all there and I haven't got to worry about it. I don't like uncertainty. I like to know that I'm prepared for whatever's coming."



Andrea Hemmens
Headteacher,
Woodlands School

Find out where your evidence stands

Book a demo

Book a demo and see how Intelligent Evidence maps your existing documentation against the framework - so you can see exactly where you're strong and where the gaps are.