

Section 10 – Leadership and Governance

Leadership and governance are transformational because leaders do not simply maintain highly effective specialist provision: they continually reshape it in response to changing pupil need and use what is learned at Cleaswell to improve SEND practice beyond the school. Strategic decisions around the three pathways, integrated therapy, assessment, Appleby, professional learning and increasingly authentic Preparation for Adulthood provision have translated into stronger curriculum achievement, reduced barriers, substantial reductions in incidents and restrictive intervention, strong outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and secure onward destinations. This improvement is sustained through exceptionally informed governance, distributed leadership and a culture of professional curiosity in which 95 practitioner-enquiry projects have directly informed classroom practice. The impact also reaches beyond Cleaswell: between March 2025 and May 2026 more than 2,200 practitioners and professionals accessed Fusion support, 1,524 completed NEN training and advisory work reached 13 external settings, while external learning is deliberately brought back into school to strengthen provision for Cleaswell pupils.

What is going well: Evidence to support this judgement

Strategic leadership

Leaders and governors have maintained a clear Five-Year direction while Cleaswell Hill has grown, developed its Post-16 offer across the main site and Appleby and responded to increasingly complex need. That direction has been shaped with pupils, families, staff and professionals and remains centred on safety, dignity, strong relationships, ambitious education, enriching experiences and preparation for adulthood. Decisions about pathways, staffing, therapy, premises and resources are tested against their effect on pupils' access, achievement, independence and quality of life.

Leaders understand how Cleaswell Hill's increasingly complex SEND cohort, deprivation and individual family circumstances interact by considering baseline assessment, EHCP/PLIM outcomes, achievement, attendance, behaviour, safeguarding and therapy evidence together. This has led to measurable improvement for pupils facing additional barriers: curriculum target achievement increased from 70.8% in Autumn 2024 to 77% in Spring 2026, whole-school PLIM achievement reached 80.7%, and the Pupil Premium PLIM gap moved from 74% compared with 79% for non-Pupil Premium pupils to 81% compared with 79%. Leaders test these trends through moderation, comparative judgement, case sampling and external challenge rather than assuming that positive whole-school data applies equally to every pupil. Summer 2026 case sampling traced a looked-after pupil's journey from baseline through attainment, progress, attendance and assessed need; independent scrutiny found clear evidence of significant progress from the pupil's starting point and showed how that pupil's provision had been adapted in response to intersecting barriers.

Cleaswell Hill's improvement cycle links self-evaluation directly to the Five-Year Strategy, annual Horizons and implementation plans. Across successive cycles since 2020/21, leaders have moved from identified need to named responsibility, implementation, review and refinement rather than adding disconnected initiatives. Current priorities — including longitudinal assessment and Earwig, careers governance and stakeholder voice, changing Core provision, premises and capacity, leadership succession and safeguarding transition — are already reflected in Year 5 and the relevant implementation plans. SIP, governor and external challenge are used to test whether leaders have identified the right priorities and to bring new concerns into the cycle when they emerge.

Leadership is deliberately distributed and increasingly sustainable. Phase, pathway, curriculum, safeguarding, therapy and Post-16 leaders, alongside staff across the school, make a strong positive contribution to strategic priorities, quality assurance, professional learning and pupil outcomes; coaching, professional dialogue, delegated responsibility and planned succession build the next generation of leaders, with SIP evaluation confirming increased middle-leader confidence, accountability and influence on classroom practice over time.

Leaders organise staff and resources strategically around assessed need, removing barriers and distractions from core learning and deploying integrated therapy, specialist staff, digital and assistive technologies, and adapted environments across the three pathways. Premises and resource decisions are treated as inclusion and safeguarding decisions, improving communication, regulation, safety, participation and independence; leaders evaluate impact through EHCP/PLIM and therapy evidence, learning walks, behaviour and attendance information, risk assessment and governor scrutiny.

Admissions and capacity are managed strategically as demand and complexity increase, protecting the entitlement of both existing and prospective pupils to high-quality, safe provision. Teaching and therapy expertise, EHCP evidence, environmental capacity, risk and available resources inform admissions decisions and dialogue with families and the Local Authority, with leaders monitoring referral patterns and the impact of admissions on provision.

Leaders make a sustained positive contribution to the wider education system through Fusion Learning Hub, NEN, university research, ITT, local-authority collaboration and reciprocal quality assurance with partner schools. Between March 2025 and May 2026, more than 2,200 practitioners and professionals accessed Fusion support; 1,524 completed CPD-accredited NEN training and advisory work reached 13 external settings. External evaluation demonstrates impact beyond participation: Three Rivers reports that Cleaswell Hill's ITT contribution has increased trainee teachers' capacity and confidence beyond programme expectations and is influencing practice in other schools. In 2026, Jo Golden contributed a case study to the revised edition of Dr Sarah Martin-Denham's The SENCO Handbook, with Cleaswell Hill acknowledged within the publication. The case study shares specialist practice showing how adaptations, therapy goals, healthcare planning and risk assessment can work together to maximise the independence, learning and participation of a pupil with physical disabilities within a mainstream setting. This extends Cleaswell Hill's influence from professional development and advisory work into published professional guidance that can inform inclusive practice beyond the school. Northumbria University's evaluation of Cleaswell Hill's practitioner-enquiry model is also progressing towards wider academic publication and dissemination. External learning is deliberately brought back into Cleaswell Hill while evaluated practice is shared to support system-wide improvement, with partner feedback, SIP validation, published contributions, repeat engagement and growing demand for the school's expertise demonstrating sustained regional and growing wider influence.

Governance

Governance is exceptionally well informed and strategically influential. Governors understand Cleaswell Hill's complex SEND context, statutory duties and Five-Year strategic direction and use their knowledge and expertise to provide sustained support and robust challenge across safeguarding, curriculum, achievement, attendance, inclusion, staffing, finance, therapy, premises and Post-16, keeping decisions focused on pupils' safety, achievement, independence and quality of life.

Governors rigorously test the accuracy of leaders' self-evaluation and the impact of provision rather than relying solely on information presented to them. During the summer term 2026, seven

governor link visits took place, including two focused on safeguarding alongside visits scrutinising inclusion and specific curriculum pathways. These visits triangulated evidence from leaders, staff, pupils and documentation; resulting reports were evaluative, identified explicit next steps and fed actions directly into school-improvement priorities. FGB and committee scrutiny, pupil and cohort evidence, SIP reports and external quality assurance provide further fair, valid and constructive assurance, with findings, questions and follow-up actions tracked into Horizon and implementation-plan review. This includes curriculum and phase/pathway monitoring that tests whether leadership restructuring, curriculum and assessment changes improve continuity and provision for pupils.

Governors hold leaders closely to account for pupils facing the greatest barriers and for whether investment in professional learning changes practice and outcomes. Dedicated Pupil Premium, attendance/CME, safeguarding, achievement and personal-development monitoring tests whether barriers are being reduced, while scrutiny of coaching, ECT development, practitioner enquiry and PL&D tests workforce impact; Pupil Premium PLIM outcomes reaching 81% compared with 79% for non-Pupil Premium pupils provide one measure within this wider assurance.

As the responsible body, governors maintain strategic oversight of leadership capacity, workload, wellbeing and organisational sustainability alongside finance and resources. Workforce information, staff voice, absence/retention evidence, Headteacher reporting and SIP scrutiny are used to identify pressure, challenge leaders' response and ensure ambitious change and succession remain sustainable.

Staff Wellbeing and Workload

Leaders sustain a highly relational and professionally trusting culture in which staff feel valued, listened to and supported to perform demanding specialist roles to a high standard. Staff surveys, working groups, professional conversations, appraisal and consultation shape decisions and change, strengthening professional agency, shared ownership and consistency of provision for pupils over successive improvement cycles.

Workload, capacity and wellbeing are considered systematically before improvement activity is introduced or refined; unnecessary burdens are removed and time for purposeful collaboration is protected. When unprecedented staff-absence pressures emerged in 2025/26, leaders strengthened systems, undertook detailed analysis of underlying causes and maintained a highly relational response. External SIP review records that staff absence subsequently improved significantly and that staff reported feeling well supported; professional conversations across leaders and therapists also contributed to improved morale, professional agency and succession planning. Leaders continue to track absence, retention, workload and staff feedback to test sustainability.

Clear systems, policies and reporting routes protect staff from bullying, unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and enable concerns to be raised safely and acted upon. Leaders and governors test the effectiveness of this professional culture through staff voice, HR/equality information and professional dialogue.

Professional Learning and Expertise

Leaders model, prioritise and participate in an exceptionally coherent culture of professional learning in which developing staff knowledge, skill and professional judgement is a central driver of school improvement. A research-informed PL&D curriculum aligns whole-school priorities with pathway, phase, team and individual need, and leaders evaluate its impact through appraisal,

quality assurance, staff voice, SIP review and pupil outcomes rather than participation in training alone.

Professional learning is sustained and embedded rather than delivered through isolated events. Leaders protect time and deploy coaching, modelling, team-teaching, Steplab, mentoring, supervision, collaborative planning and targeted Bitesize sessions so teachers, teaching assistants and therapists can practise, receive feedback and apply learning directly to curriculum, assessment, behaviour, attendance, pastoral and SEND priorities; learning walks and observations show increasingly consistent specialist practice across pathways.

Professional dialogue and staff agency are exceptionally well developed, with appraisal used to identify expertise, professional interests and development needs rather than operate as a compliance process. Staff increasingly lead projects, support colleagues and contribute to strategic improvement, strengthening distributed leadership and succession; SIP evaluation confirms that professional conversations and delegated responsibility have increased phase and pathway leaders' confidence, expertise and influence on classroom practice.

Professional curiosity is a distinctive and sustained feature of Cleaswell Hill's culture. Since 2021, teachers have completed 95 class-based practitioner-enquiry projects, using research and classroom evidence to refine teaching, communication, regulation, metacognition and independence; Northumbria University's independent involvement provides external scrutiny and has developed this work towards wider academic publication and dissemination.

Specialist professional learning is precisely matched to the barriers experienced by Cleaswell Hill pupils rather than relying on generic SEND training. NEN, integrated SaLT/OT expertise, communication, sensory regulation, relational and trauma-informed practice, NAPPI/PBS, curriculum and pathway development equip staff to adapt provision with increasing precision, improving pupils' communication, regulation, participation, independence and access to ambitious learning; leaders test impact through learning walks, therapy evidence, behaviour data, case sampling and SIP scrutiny.

ECT and trainee development is exemplary and deliberately contextualised to complex SEND. External Appropriate Body QA in May 2026 identified high expectations, a 'people-first' culture, highly trained mentors and high-impact instructional coaching through modelling, co-planning and team-teaching; all ECTs were making good progress, including one whose bespoke additional support successfully improved practice after earlier concerns, demonstrating that leaders identify need early and adapt professional development effectively.

Parental, Professional and Community Engagement

Leaders and governors sustain exceptionally positive and trusting relationships with families, ensuring parental insight influences provision rather than simply informing parents about it. Families contribute to personalised planning, EHCP/PfA outcomes, attendance, behaviour, safeguarding and transition decisions, while the developing Family Partner role extends support for families facing the greatest barriers; March 2026 Parent View recorded 33 overwhelmingly positive responses, with 100% of respondents saying they would recommend Cleaswell Hill, and SIP discussions independently confirm very high parental confidence.

Leaders maintain highly effective working relationships with health, social care, Early Help, EWO, the Local Authority, FE/adult services and other specialists so pupils experience coordinated rather than fragmented support. This professional collaboration improves assessment of need, attendance, safeguarding, transition and preparation for adulthood, particularly for highly



vulnerable pupils; impact is tested through case sampling, annual review, multi-agency records, SIP scrutiny and destination evidence rather than partnership activity alone.

Reciprocal quality assurance with partner SEND schools is an established strength, creating a culture of mutual challenge, reflection and support rather than one-way outreach. External scrutiny tests Cleaswell Hill's own evaluation while specialist practice is shared with partners. Significant findings are followed through from external challenge, to leadership response, to change in practice and, where measurable, improved pupil experience or outcome; subsequent review, partner feedback and SIP validation test whether improvement has been sustained. This ensures reciprocal work strengthens Cleaswell Hill as well as contributing to improvement elsewhere.

Community partnership is deliberately used to remove barriers and give pupils authentic opportunities to apply learning beyond school. Appleby, community-based learning, volunteering, cultural partnerships, enterprise and developing vocational/off-site provision extend independence, communication, employability and community participation; sustained impact is evident in PfA outcomes and destinations, including school tracking that records 100% of 2024/25 leavers entering positive onward destinations.

Supporting Documentation	Quality Assurance Activities
- Five-Year Strategic Plan; Year 4 Horizon Evaluation; Year 5 Horizon; Leadership & Governance Implementation Plan; Alignment of School Improvement Documentation. - SIP Report 2025–26; Headteacher reports; FGB/committee minutes; governor link-monitoring reports; finance, staffing, premises and safeguarding reports. - Achievement/PLIM and curriculum trend data; vulnerable-pupil tracking and case sampling; attendance, behaviour, admissions/referral, therapy and destination evidence. - PL&D programme/Theory of Change; appraisal and professional-conversation records; practitioner-enquiry evidence; ECT/mentor records; NEN/Fusion and university partnership/research evidence; publication in the revised SENCO Handbook (autumn 2026), including Cleaswell Hill's contributed case study and acknowledgement. - Staff, pupil and parent voice; Parent View; Family Partner evidence; multi-agency records; partner-school QA evaluations and external engagement feedback.	- Termly SIP scrutiny, including Summer 2026 joint external review involving an experienced education professional with wide-ranging cross-school quality-assurance experience. - Governor link visits, FGB/committee challenge and tracked follow-up against Horizon and implementation-plan priorities. - SLT strategic reviews, data analysis, learning walks, curriculum conversations, case sampling, moderation and comparative judgement. - Reciprocal QA with partner SEND schools/challenge partners and external safeguarding assurance. - Three Rivers Appropriate Body ECT QA; university evaluation/research partnerships, including Northumbria University. - Fusion/NEN, Local Authority and wider partner feedback used to test external impact and bring learning back into school.

Next Steps (Including targets taken from 5-year plan)

Deepen and evidence Cleaswell Hill's civic and system leadership in SEND. Build on the established reach of Fusion and NEN, university partnerships, reciprocal work with partner schools and the school's growing contribution to published professional guidance, including the revised

SENCO Handbook. Strengthen evaluation of how this shared expertise changes practice in other settings and how external learning continues to improve provision at Cleaswell Hill, advancing the Year 5 ambition for the school to influence SEND provision regionally and beyond.

Further embed evidence-informed leadership and professional learning as a single improvement model. Use the Theory of Change, professional enquiry, stakeholder feedback and quality-assurance evidence to demonstrate more explicitly how leadership decisions and staff development translate into improved teaching, specialist practice and pupil outcomes over time.

Strengthen succession, distributed leadership and long-term organisational capacity. Continue developing phase, pathway and senior leaders through coaching, appraisal, strategic responsibility and system-lead opportunities so that exceptional standards are sustainable through leadership transition and are not dependent on a small number of individuals.

Maintain strategic agility and robust governance within the changing SEND landscape. Continue horizon-scanning Ofsted expectations, national SEND reform, proposed national standards, EHCP changes and wider policy developments, with governors using strategic data, stakeholder voice, SIP challenge and external assurance to ensure priorities remain ethical, proportionate and sharply focused on pupil need.