

**A report on**  
**Abersychan Comprehensive School**

**Incline Road  
Abersychan  
Pontypool  
Torfaen  
NP4 7DF**

**Date of inspection: May 2025**

**by**

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education  
and Training in Wales**

## About Abersychan Comprehensive School

Name of provider	Abersychan Comprehensive School
Local authority	Torfaen County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	759
Pupils of statutory school age	759
Number in sixth form	
Percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average (The national percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals over a three-year average in Secondary is 21.1%)	29.1%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Secondary is 11.2%)	21.5%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	1.7%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.1%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/01/2024
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	17/10/2016
Start date of inspection	13/05/2025

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website:

[mylocalschool.gov.wales](https://mylocalschool.gov.wales)

- a. The term ‘additional learning needs’ is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

## Summary

Abersychan Comprehensive School has recently been through a period of transition, with the appointment of a new headteacher in January 2024 and a number of changes to leadership roles and responsibilities. Throughout this time of change, the new headteacher has demonstrated a clear vision for and a strong commitment to school improvement, focused on securing effective leadership, good quality teaching and improved outcomes for pupils. This vision is well understood by most stakeholders, and leaders are beginning to bring about some improvements in these important areas. However, there remains too much variation in the effectiveness of leadership, the impact of teaching and how well leaders self-evaluate and plan for improvement.

In lessons, the majority of pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN) and those in the Learning Resource Base (LRB), engage appropriately in their learning and make suitable progress in their knowledge and understanding. A few, when inspired by carefully planned teaching, make strong progress. In a minority of cases, however, pupils' progress is limited by shortcomings in teaching, in particular a lack of challenge. In addition, the strategic planning for the development of pupils' skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped. This means that pupils do not develop their literacy, numeracy, digital or Welsh language skills as well as they could.

The school has implemented a range of useful strategies to promote positive attitudes to learning and support pupils' well-being. In general, pupils behave well in lessons and around the school, and are respectful to their peers, teachers and visitors. The school provides beneficial provision to support those pupils most at risk of disengagement. However, a minority of pupils do not show sufficient independence and resilience in their learning. Strategies to improve pupils' attendance have not had enough impact, and the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals remains a particular concern.

Leaders at all levels are committed to securing the best possible outcomes for all pupils. They have developed a generally sound culture of safeguarding across the school, although a safeguarding issue was brought to the school's attention during the inspection.

Overall, leaders do not hold staff to account, evaluate their provision or plan for improvement well enough.

## Recommendations

We have made 5 recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1. Address the safeguarding issue identified during the inspection
- R2. Strengthen the impact of leadership, in particular by ensuring that processes for self-evaluation and improvement planning are consistently rigorous and robust
- R3. Improve the effectiveness of teaching so that pupils make consistently strong progress
- R4. Improve attendance, in particular that of pupils eligible for free school meals
- R5. Strengthen the provision for the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum

## What happens next

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school is in need of significant improvement. The school will draw up an action plan to show how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress about 12 months after the publication of this report.

## Main findings

### Teaching and learning

In most cases, teachers forge positive working relationships with their classes. They know their pupils well and have established well-understood classroom routines, which helps to create a safe, calm environment. As a result, most pupils behave well in lessons. Many listen appropriately to teachers and their peers, engage suitably in tasks and maintain their concentration appropriately.

In the majority of instances, pupils make at least suitable progress in the development of their knowledge and understanding. In these lessons, teachers:

- provide well-organised activities supported by engaging resources
- ensure that explanations and instructions are clear
- use questioning appropriately to check pupils' understanding
- monitor pupil progress suitably and provide helpful feedback and advice where necessary

In a few lessons, pupils make strong progress and apply their prior learning successfully to new contexts. In these instances, teachers plan carefully what they want pupils to learn and have high expectations of what they can achieve. In a very few lessons, teachers use questioning skilfully to challenge pupils to improve on their verbal responses and develop their thinking.

Pupils make limited progress in a minority of lessons. This is because teachers do not have sufficiently high expectations of what pupils can achieve. In these lessons, teachers:

- plan for what they want pupils to do, rather than what they want them to learn
- provide too much scaffolding and do not allow pupils to develop independence in their learning
- plan activities that are insufficiently demanding
- do not secure a suitable pace of learning, so that progress is either too slow, or pupils do not have sufficient opportunity to consolidate their learning
- are too accepting of pupils' limited engagement

The impact of written feedback is too variable. In the best examples, teachers give pupils helpful advice that supports them to make beneficial improvements to their work, but this is not consistent enough.

Overall, the strategic planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills is underdeveloped. The school has identified where specific aspects of literacy, numeracy and digital skills are covered across the curriculum. However, leaders do not evaluate the impact of this provision robustly enough. Consequently, they often have an overgenerous view of this aspect of the school's work, which hampers their capacity to plan for improvement.

The majority of pupils express themselves verbally with suitable clarity, using an appropriate range of general vocabulary and subject terminology. However, a minority lack confidence in discussion work and offer only brief, underdeveloped responses.

Across the curriculum, many pupils generally identify relevant information from appropriately challenging texts competently. In English lessons, many pupils demonstrate sound reading skills. These pupils:

- summarise information from a suitable range of sources confidently
- annotate texts suitably and use quotations appropriately to support their views
- use inference and deduction suitably to, for example, examine how a character in a novel or poem is portrayed or to identify specific literary techniques

Across the curriculum, however, pupils do not develop their advanced reading skills sufficiently well because of a lack of suitably challenging and authentic opportunities. The school has implemented strategies to develop a culture of reading across the school, but they are at an early stage of development.

Many pupils write with generally consistent technical accuracy and clarity. In their English lessons, they structure extended writing appropriately and write for a range of purposes and audiences with confidence. A very few pupils write at length with maturity and sophistication. They use a variety of sentence structures, punctuation and a rich vocabulary to make their writing engaging. However, in subjects across the curriculum there is too much variation in how well pupils write at length because they are not provided with a suitable range of opportunities to develop their writing skills. A minority of pupils make frequent basic errors in their writing.

The majority of pupils work confidently with the four rules of number and apply this knowledge suitably, for example to find the  $n$ th term of sequences. They have a sound understanding of number and work competently when performing basic calculations. These pupils can calculate the area and volume of basic shapes. A minority, however, have difficulty recalling basic number facts.

Across the curriculum in a few relevant subjects, pupils construct and interpret a suitable range of graphs. In these subjects there are a few opportunities to develop other numeracy skills, such as working with equations. Overall, however, pupils do not develop their understanding of mathematics and numeracy concepts well enough as there are limited opportunities for them to apply and develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum.

When given the opportunity, pupils use their digital skills appropriately, for example by creating animations in information and communication technology (ICT) or when they sequence a recording in music. However, provision for the development of digital skills across the curriculum is in the very early stages of development.

The school has broadly appropriate processes to identify pupils with weaker literacy and numeracy skills and provide them with suitable interventions. However, the impact of these interventions is not evaluated rigorously enough.

In general, pupils lack confidence in speaking and writing Welsh. They rely too heavily on vocabulary lists and structured sentence patterns and lack the confidence to speak or write in Welsh without them. Opportunities for pupils to practise their Welsh language skills outside of Welsh lessons are limited.

Leaders are developing their vision for their Curriculum for Wales. Related subject areas work together meaningfully to design a range of learning experiences. In addition, the school works closely with its partner primary schools to plan its curriculum and has established beneficial transition arrangements to support the progress that pupils make in their subject knowledge and understanding as they move to secondary school.

At Key Stage 4, the school offers an appropriate range of general and vocational courses. It provides pupils with suitable information to help them make informed choices about their next steps. The 'Hwb@Noddfa' provision provides effective, tailored support for pupils at risk of disengagement.

Key Stage 3 pupils receive appropriate provision to support their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, for example through their health and well-being lessons. The school uses pupil surveys well to plan this provision so that it meets the current needs of pupils, for example by discussing substance abuse and managing stress. However, in Key Stage 4, the school does not currently meet its statutory responsibilities with regard to personal and social education or religion, values and ethics.



Across the curriculum, pupils have suitable opportunities to learn about and celebrate their heritage and local community. For example, in science, they learn about the work of a local engineering company when studying how the national grid works. Pupils learn about the importance of equality and diversity, such as when they consider the challenges of being a refugee in English and drama lessons. Pupils benefit from a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities such as darts, craft and STEM clubs. A beneficial range of trips and visits help to enrich the curriculum.

Pupils in the LRB are provided with a suitable curriculum and make sound progress from their individual starting points.

### **Well-being, care, support and guidance**

Pupils at Abersychan School are generally mature, polite, and welcoming to visitors. Most behave well in lessons and around the school. The school's 'Behaviour for Learning' policy outlines clear expectations for pupils' conduct in lessons and around the school. This, as well as a range of internal provision such as 'Ready to Learn', has a positive impact on pupil behaviour and attitudes. However, processes for monitoring and analysing pupil behaviour are not always rigorous enough. As a result, leaders do not have a sufficient strategic overview of the behaviour and attitudes to learning of groups of pupils.

There is a generally sound culture of safeguarding at the school. Staff are committed to promoting the welfare of all pupils, and the school complies appropriately with safer recruitment requirements. There are appropriately trained safeguarding leads in the school, including the designated safeguarding person (DSP), who is well supported by an extensive safeguarding and child protection team. All staff receive useful training on an annual basis to help them develop an understanding of their role in keeping pupils safe. The system for recording concerns is generally used effectively to report and track issues relating to individual pupils. Although in general arrangements to keep pupils safe are appropriate, during the inspection a specific safeguarding matter was raised with the school.

The school's anti-bullying policy outlines the process for dealing with bullying-related issues and approaches for reporting incidents. However, the school does not analyse trends or incidences of bullying thoroughly enough. Many pupils feel that they are treated fairly and say that they do not feel bullied, although a minority think that the school does not always deal with bullying well enough. Many pupils feel safe in school, although some pupils highlight concerns regarding behaviour in the toilets.

The school promotes positive attendance through parental engagement events and collaboration with the family engagement officer. It works closely with educational welfare services to address persistent absenteeism. There has been some early success in re-engaging poor attenders in Year 11 through work experience opportunities provided by Careers Wales. However, the overall impact on attendance remains limited.

Although pupils' rates of attendance increased between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, they remain below pre-pandemic levels and are lower than those in similar schools. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals declined in 2023-2024 and is a significant concern. Persistent absence decreased last year, but remains higher than the average for similar schools and nationally. Unverified school data for this academic year indicates a decline in the rates of attendance for pupils in Year 10, Year 11 and those eligible for free school meals.

The school has developed appropriate opportunities for pupils to contribute meaningfully to school life, although many of these approaches are at an early stage. The school council has improved the school environment, for example by helping to reduce litter, and have also influenced changes to the school uniform and canteen food choices. However, the work of the school council is not widely understood by all pupils. The school has developed a few leadership opportunities for pupils beyond the work of the school council, for example the 'Buddy Reading' system.

Pupils contribute to the development of a range of extra-curricular activities, including sports, drama, art, Welsh, and ukulele clubs. Additionally, they benefit from participating in overseas trips, such as the annual skiing trip. When planning their next steps, pupils receive suitable guidance on option choices and career pathways, for example through events where local businesses offer informative talks.

The school has close links with partner primary schools and helpful transition arrangements support pupils, including those with ALN, to familiarise themselves with their secondary school. For example, it has developed a pupil council for Years 5,6,7 and 8 pupils to enhance the transition process.

Pupils with ALN benefit from a range of appropriate support to meet their individual needs. The school has developed beneficial provision to support pupils with a range of needs, including social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, through dedicated support hubs such as 'Hwb@Noddfa' and 'Hwb Hedd'. These pupils benefit from tailored curriculum interventions that engage them positively in learning while also supporting their wider social, emotional and well-being needs.

The school is making suitable progress in addressing the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. Individual Development Plans and One Page Profiles contain helpful information about individual pupils. However, they do not always include sufficient detail. The ALN team uses a range of information appropriately to monitor and track the well-being of pupils with ALN. However, leaders do not monitor their academic progress closely enough.

The school provides suitable support for pupils who need help to manage their well-being and regulate their emotions. It works effectively with external agencies such as 'Outreach' and 'Families First' to ensure that pupils receive sensitive and tailored support.

Nearly all pupils within the LRB feel safe and are happy in school. Many have developed close friendships with their peers. LRB staff nurture positive and caring relationships with pupils and have a strong understanding of individual needs. Generally, pupil behaviour within the resource base is good, and any incidents of negative behaviour are dealt with suitably.

### **Leading and improving**

The recently appointed headteacher is striving to bring about sustainable change across the school. The newly established senior leadership team support the headteacher's vision and has worked with him to establish the cultural values for leading the school. This has helped to foster collaboration and is cultivating a sense of community. The headteacher has recently restructured leadership across the school to align responsibilities to the school's priorities. Although the roles and responsibilities of the senior team are now equitable, it is too early to measure the impact of these changes.

The headteacher has established clear systems and processes for many aspects of the school's work, built capacity in senior leadership and promoted clear expectations for behaviour. This has created an environment where pupils generally feel safe. However, despite building a foundation for change, over time leaders have not had sufficient impact on securing improvements in some important aspects of the school's work, including a number of recommendations from the last core inspection, for example the quality of teaching and the rigour of self-evaluation.

Leaders have recently refined their processes for evaluation and improvement, which has helped to establish a suitable understanding of the broad strengths and areas for development. However, leaders do not always evaluate their provision precisely enough. They focus too heavily on compliance with school policies rather than the impact that provision has on improving pupil progress and well-being. This limits their ability to plan specifically enough for improvement and to have a sufficiently clear understanding of how they will strengthen teaching.

The headteacher has strengthened processes for line management, including tackling underperformance. Staff value the support they receive from their line managers. However, there is too much variation in how robustly leaders hold staff to account for the impact of their work. This limits the school's capacity to bring about important improvements. Although middle leaders are enthusiastic and committed to their roles, there is too much variation in how effectively they carry them out. The school is beginning to provide a suitable range of professional learning opportunities for staff based on broad findings from evaluation, although this has had a limited impact. Professional learning to improve leadership is underdeveloped.

The school has taken some suitable steps to address national priorities such as the planning for Curriculum for Wales and ALN reform. However, overall, strategic planning does not prioritise well enough important aspects such as improving attendance and developing pupils' Welsh language skills.

Over time, the school has built sound relationships with the local community and a good understanding of its needs. A committed team of staff has led this work to support equity and has established a wide range of useful approaches to tackle the impact of poverty, such as providing financial support for families. However, currently there is no overarching strategy or oversight of this work, particularly in relation to its impact on the attainment and attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals. In addition, the evaluation of the pupil development grant is not rigorous enough and does not focus sufficiently well on the difference it has made to this group of pupils.

Governors are strong supporters of the school and are committed to working with the headteacher to secure improvement. Although governors have a developing awareness of national priorities, their oversight of important aspects such as tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment is less well developed.

The headteacher works closely with the governors' finance committee and the business manager to carefully monitor the school's budget. This has brought a more robust approach to managing finance. In order to address the deficit budget, leaders and the governing body have worked closely with the local authority to develop a clear recovery plan to secure important savings. However, the school remains in a deficit budget position.

### **Additional information**

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils give cause for concern.

The school's arrangements for site management do not give any cause for concern.

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking.

In general, leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately. However, the school is currently in a deficit position. In addition, its use of the pupil development grant has not had sufficient impact on outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals.

## **Evidence base of the report**

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee, where appropriate
- visit a broad sample of lessons, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

## Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. '*most pupils...*' or '*very few pupils...*'. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

## Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website  
(<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/>)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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