

A report on
Willowtown Primary School

**Brynheulog Street
Willowtown
Ebbw Vale
Blaenau Gwent
NP23 6NJ**

Date of inspection: June 2025

by

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

About Willowtown Primary School

Name of provider	Willowtown Primary School
Local authority	Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Primary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	493
Pupils of statutory school age	359
Number in nursery classes	74
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 Primary is 22.9%)	30.7%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Primary is 11.1%)	10.6%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	8.4%
Date of headteacher appointment	20/04/2020

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Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	10/01/2017
Start date of inspection	16/06/2025

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

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

Summary

Willoughton Primary is a happy, caring school. The school's vision focuses well on pupils achieving success. Teachers effectively translate this into practice. All leaders and staff act as positive role models. They foster respectful working relationships with pupils and each other. This encourages pupils to develop highly positive attitudes towards their learning, especially when working collaboratively. All staff have high expectations for pupils' behaviour. As a result, nearly all pupils behave well, are polite and supportive of each other and most feel safe in school.

Governors are an integral part of the school community and offer effective support. They and leaders have developed effective self-evaluation processes which lead to improvements in the school's curriculum, provision and pupil progress. Teachers create effective learning environments, especially for the youngest pupils. They plan a range of real-life learning experiences that engages pupils and provides them with a variety of opportunities to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills across the curriculum. Many pupils, including those eligible for free school meals and those from low-income households, make suitable progress in their learning. Teaching assistants meet the individual needs of pupils well. This includes pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and those in the specialist resource base, who make beneficial progress towards their specific targets. The school is working to improve the effectiveness of teachers' feedback to pupils. Currently, there is not a consistent approach across the school. Overall, too often teachers over-direct learning and do not challenge pupils sufficiently to achieve at the level of which they are capable.

The headteacher works well with staff to develop the school as a focal point in the community. Teachers utilise the locality well to enhance lessons and activities and involve local businesses in pupils' learning. This supports pupils' understanding of the purpose for their education. Many parents appreciate the nurturing ethos and the engaging methods the school adopts. Leaders, staff and governors work hard to encourage good attendance and their efforts are beginning to impact positively. All staff promote a strong culture of safeguarding.

Recommendations

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

- R1. Ensure that all learners are challenged appropriately
- R2. Consistently provide feedback to enable pupils to improve their learning

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan to address the recommendations from the inspection.

Main evaluation

Leaders, governors and staff at Willowtown Primary share a clear and inclusive vision for the school, based on respect, trust and the desire for all pupils to be given the opportunity to thrive. This is underpinned by values that stakeholders agree are important to the school. This is a central part of the school's life and staff successfully translate this vision into the curriculum. This develops pupils' citizenship and ambition to succeed.

The school has developed effective links with parents, encouraging good support for pupils. They appreciate the way the school engages with them, its caring and nurturing ethos, and most pupils feel safe and succeed as a result. Leaders, staff and governors promote a strong culture of safeguarding, they work hard to encourage good attendance, and their efforts are beginning to have a positive impact.

The headteacher leads well on developing the school as a focal point in the community, inviting parents and local business employees into school to enhance pupils' learning and aspirations. This includes visits from local engineers to talk about their work with green energy, providing pupils with an understanding of real-life applications of mathematics and science as well as an appreciation of the world of work.

Governors are an integral part of the school community and provide effective support. They have a deep understanding of the needs of the school through thorough monitoring to gather first-hand information about the school's progress. They analyse information from monitoring activities purposefully and carefully work with leaders to consider the school's next steps for improvement. However, leaders do not always identify areas of overspend within the school budget, causing the school to carry a large financial deficit.

The headteacher and staff act as positive role models and create an effective and nurturing learning environment. They foster respectful working relationships with pupils and each other. As a result, nearly all pupils are polite, caring, courteous and supportive of each other. Staff have high expectations for pupils' behaviour. This encourages pupils to develop positive attitudes towards their learning and to try their best. Overall, pupils behave well, and the school patiently supports a very few pupils who find managing their emotions more challenging.

Teachers establish classrooms that are attractive spaces that are well organised and planned to support learning.

Spotlight: The provision for pupils in the youngest year groups

In the classes for the youngest pupils, teachers create highly effective learning environments. Adults enable learning and establish inspiring spaces that develop pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding through purposeful and thoughtfully planned experiences. These activities foster collaborative working between pupils, encouraging discussion, physical engagement, shared thinking and problem solving. For example, pupils work hard collaboratively to build a tower taller than themselves. The provision in these classes is exceptional in supporting pupils' early developmental skills.

Teachers and support staff have a clear understanding of pupils' well-being needs and a suitable grasp of the progress that pupils make. During their time in the school, many pupils, including those eligible for free school meals and from low-income households, make good progress in their learning. Teaching assistants meet the individual needs of pupils well, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), who make beneficial progress towards their specific targets. Staff in the specialist resource base work skilfully to provide for pupils' sensory and emotional needs. This helps to ensure that most pupils make steady progress.

Teachers plan a range of real-life learning experiences in the classroom and outdoors that provide good breadth across most areas of learning and experience. This provides pupils with a variety of interesting opportunities to build their knowledge, understanding and skills across the curriculum and encourages them to be enthusiastic learners. These experiences ensure that pupils develop a wide range of skills including their creative talents.

Teachers and teaching assistants intervene and question pupils effectively to clarify and extend their understanding and move learning on. Teachers and pupils review learning against an established criteria and set targets for improvement as part of the writing process. In a minority of instances, teachers use succinct and specific feedback immediately to provide pupils with worthwhile opportunities to improve their work. This good practice is beginning to impact positively in a minority of instances. However, overall, pupils do not receive sufficient feedback or enough opportunities to improve their work. In many instances teachers over-direct learning and do not challenge all pupils sufficiently.

Most pupils develop confident speaking and listening skills. They listen and respond to their teachers and peers. By the time pupils are in Year 6, nearly all develop the ability to extend each other's ideas thoughtfully. The school places a high priority on the development of reading and many pupils cultivate a love of reading. Through a structured approach to the teaching of sound symbol relationships, younger pupils learn to build words effectively. Older pupils read fluently and for pleasure. Teachers provide a range of

purposes for pupils to develop their writing, and many pupils develop a firm grasp of the features of different forms of writing and apply these successfully in their own. However, as pupils progress, teachers' expectations for pupils' writing are not high enough.

Many pupils make sound progress in developing their numeracy skills. Most of the youngest pupils learn numbers in authentic, purposeful contexts. As they progress through the school, many pupils acquire a good understanding of place value and apply this knowledge appropriately to solve word problems. Many older pupils become competent across many aspects of mathematics. However, teachers do not always adapt their teaching to stretch the more able pupils or challenge pupils' reasoning skills. Teachers do not always gain a clear understanding of the prior attainment of individual pupils at the start of sessions. As a consequence, the progress of some more able pupils slows.

Following a recent focus on the development of the Welsh language, most of the youngest pupils make rapid progress in beginning to learn Welsh vocabulary. By the time they reach Year 2, many ask and respond to an appropriate range of questions. While the school is working hard to improve pupils' use of the Welsh language, older pupils' confidence and skills have not embedded beyond those of the younger pupils.

The curriculum supports pupils' spiritual awareness appropriately. The school develops pupils' social and moral understanding well. It highlights the rights of children effectively and considers important social issues, such as sustainability. The school provides every pupil with the opportunity to assume a leadership role through their involvement in the various pupil voice groups. These groups, such as The Senedd, meet regularly and develop important life skills, establishing social responsibility as part of school life.

Additional information

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any 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.

Leaders and governors do not manage the school's finances appropriately. The school's use of the pupil development grant is appropriate.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer 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/carers 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, to listen to them read 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
- visit a broad sample of classes, 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 (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:

Publications Section

Estyn

Anchor Court, Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

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