

A report on

Afon Taf High School

**Yew Street
Troedyrhiw
CF48 4ED**

Date of inspection: September 2025

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

About Afon Taf High School

Name of provider	Afon Taf High School
Local authority	Merthyr Tydfil 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	798
Pupils of statutory school age	797
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%)	20.5%
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%)	16.9%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.0%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2017
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	

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Start date of inspection	29/09/2025
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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

The care and support for pupils is a particularly strong feature of the school. Allied to the excellent behaviour and positive attitudes to their learning of many of these pupils, this creates a very respectful climate where pupils and staff flourish. Afon Taf High School is a very happy school.

The school focuses strongly on providing all pupils with the best start in life. This includes ensuring highly effective support for those with additional learning needs or those from low-income households.

In many lessons, pupils of all abilities make at least the progress expected and in a few they make significantly more. In the best lessons, teachers have particularly ambitious expectations for their pupils, who respond accordingly. The school has taken positive steps to support those pupils who arrive with weaker skills and although this is supporting pupils' writing well, there is still work to do regarding their reading, digital and numeracy skills.

The school has worked closely with partners and the local community to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of nearly all pupils well. This is enhanced by a broad range of enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities in which many pupils participate.

The learning resource base (LRB) for pupils with a range of communication difficulties provides a calm and welcoming environment that supports pupils' wellbeing and purposeful learning. Nearly all pupils make strong progress as they benefit from individualised support in understanding and managing their emotions.

The headteacher and his senior team provide thoughtful and supportive leadership to the school community. This is reflected in the work of staff which contributes significantly to pupils' attendance, well-being and attainment. Leaders have established an appropriate range of self-evaluation processes which provide them with a broad knowledge of the school, though the precision of these processes is too variable.

Recommendations

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

- R1. Continue to develop a coherent approach to the progressive development of pupils' skills, particularly their reading and numeracy skills
- R2. Increase the precision of self-evaluation and improvement processes

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Staff at Afon Tâf High School foster purposeful relationships with pupils, creating a climate of mutual respect and trust. The behaviour of many pupils is excellent and contributes significantly to a supportive and positive learning environment. This is a particular strength of the school, as are the strong well-established classroom routines that promote pupils' engagement and generally extremely positive attitudes to learning, effectively.

In the many lessons where pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), and those in the LRB make at least expected progress, teachers make effective use of starter activities that link suitably to prior learning and plan sequences of tasks that build learning appropriately. They provide helpful instructions and clear explanations, and they model learning suitably. These teachers circulate the room to ask appropriate questions to check pupils' understanding. Many provide worthwhile verbal feedback that supports pupils' progress well.

In the few lessons where pupils make particularly strong progress, teachers have high ambitions for pupils' progress and plan meticulously for learning. This ensures they meet the needs of all pupils well. These teachers provide precise explanations and model tasks skilfully to support pupils' understanding. They use incisive questioning to probe pupils' thinking, ensuring that understanding is deepened, and monitor learning closely so that progress is sustained.

In the few lessons where pupils make limited progress, shortcomings in teaching hinder pupils' learning. In these cases, the shortcomings include teachers:

- having low expectations of what pupils can achieve
- not making enough use of probing questions that deepen pupils' understanding and challenge them to extend their verbal responses
- not monitoring learning closely enough to identify or address effectively pupils' misconceptions or gaps in their learning.

In the most effective cases teachers link written feedback closely to learning objectives and offer precise guidance on how to improve. Overall, written feedback is often superficial and too generic to support meaningful improvement.

The school continues to work towards implementing a coherent approach to the progressive development of pupils' skills. There is an increasing number of opportunities for pupils to improve their skills in meaningful contexts. This is starting to address effectively the weaknesses in their skills with which many pupils enter the school.

Nevertheless, the co-ordination of the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills remains underdeveloped.

Many pupils listen well and respond suitably to their teachers and peers. A few often build upon or challenge what has been said. The majority of pupils speak clearly, with around half using specialist and technical vocabulary accurately when appropriate. When encouraged to elaborate by incisive questioning from teachers, these pupils often develop their responses suitably. The work done by the English department in particular on vocabulary and the structuring of language is beginning to improve pupils' confidence and their ability to express themselves effectively. A minority of pupils continue to use a limited vocabulary and provide only brief, underdeveloped verbal responses.

The majority of pupils use various retrieval strategies effectively to locate and then interpret key information from a variety of texts, including infographics. A similar proportion are adept in their use of other basic reading strategies such as inference and deduction to enhance their understanding of authorial intent by literary luminaries such as Charles Dickens and Wilfred Owen. A few pupils demonstrate a high level of maturity and sophistication in their analysis of challenging texts such as soliloquies by Lady Macbeth and Brutus. A minority of Key Stage 3 pupils do not develop their advanced reading skills well enough because of shortcomings in the provision and planning across the curriculum. A few pupils with weak reading skills are unable to decode words to understand subject-specific vocabulary such as 'biodiversity' and soil 'rotation' in science.

Many pupils benefit from opportunities to write for a range of purposes and audiences on topics as diverse as the role dogs play in our lives, the dangers of extreme sports and the hunting of whales. A minority use a suitably broad and interesting vocabulary successfully in their writing while a very few produce sophisticated writing that engages the readers' interest well. A minority of pupils continue to make basic errors, which result in a lack of control and coherence in their writing. This shortcoming is not addressed due to the inconsistent application of the school's marking for literacy strategies.

The majority of pupils use suitable basic number skills well. However, they are not consistently taught to understand mathematical and numerical concepts well enough. As a result, they sometimes have difficulty in recalling prior learning and a few struggle when performing basic calculations. Many pupils round numbers confidently and calculate the perimeter and area of basic shapes suitably. More able pupils work well with more complex problems, including when working with irrational numbers. When given the opportunity, pupils plot a suitable range of graphs and, when encouraged to, the majority are able to make basic interpretations of them. The school has strengthened its focus on improving the provision for pupils' numeracy skills, including removing contrived tasks that do not support pupils' learning. Despite this, opportunities for pupils to apply and develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum are not always challenging enough.

In Welsh lessons, most students make adequate progress. They listen attentively, understand basic questions well and participate enthusiastically in language games. The majority of pupils pronounce words correctly when speaking in basic sentences or short conversations. When reading, many recall basic vocabulary appropriately, enabling them to identify key details in extracts. A few read aloud confidently. The majority of pupils demonstrate a good standard of accuracy when writing short paragraphs. However, with extended pieces, pupils rely too heavily on teacher-provided structures, vocabulary lists, and sentence builders. A very few extend their writing confidently by using idioms, verbs, and tenses effectively. Although there are occasional activities to promote the language outside of Welsh lessons, pupils generally lack confidence to communicate effectively or respond spontaneously in Welsh.

The school has a clear and well understood vision for its curriculum. It has been designed collaboratively with partner primaries, the local community and wider school partners to reflect the context of the school. In addition, staff plan meaningful cross-curricular learning experiences.

At Key Stage 4, there is an appropriate range of general and vocational courses. The school works in partnership with the local college to offer further, more specialised vocational options such as motor vehicle maintenance public services and hair and beauty. The options process is thorough, well understood and valued by pupils. The broad, relevant curriculum is supported well by an extensive and valuable enrichment programme and by extra-curricular activities which underpin the supportive and positive learning ethos in the school. The school's careers programme provides useful independent information and advice for pupils when they consider their next steps. The programme includes careers fairs, mock interviews and further education and university visits.

The history and experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities are explored through relevant curriculum experiences. For example, in art lessons pupils explore the topic of migrants and asylum seekers through the support of a Welsh artist.

The school offers a suitable, bespoke programme of personal and social education that supports pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development well. This is informed by the School Health Research Network data and is supported by inclusive events such as the Pride March.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

The care, support and guidance at Afon Tâf High School is particularly strong. Identifying and supporting pupils at risk of harm or disengagement, and removing barriers, is a notable strength that has a positive impact on attendance, well-being, and outcomes.

There is a strong safeguarding culture at the school. The arrangements for keeping pupils safe are understood well and staff recognize their role in contributing to this. Afon Tâf High School adopts a collaborative team approach to well-being, ensuring that pupils and their families receive the support they need. This approach brings together leaders, well-being and attendance officers, as well as support staff, who work collectively to address individual needs.

Spotlight: The role of the form tutor

Form tutors support pupils' well-being effectively through regular attendance and behaviour checks. They use their knowledge and observations of pupils, alongside attendance, behaviour and well-being data highly effectively, to identify issues and deliver successful interventions. By coordinating their efforts, these teams provide timely and appropriate assistance, further strengthening the school's capacity to identify and remove barriers to learning and well-being. As a result, most pupils feel safe, have a strong sense of belonging and know who to turn to for support.

Pupils benefit from an extensive range of interventions for social and emotional needs, and, where needed, families receive help for everyday essentials through the school's charity. Staff secure a comprehensive range of support for pupils through strong multi-agency work with wider services. Trends are addressed responsively through curricular and extra-curricular provision including the 'Comets and Rockets' programme which helps pupils develop healthy relationships.

The school has effective procedures for promoting positive behaviour. As a result of clear expectations, regular reinforcement and motivating rewards, pupils behave well. When incidents occur, they are dealt with robustly. In these cases, staff provide targeted support and use restorative approaches effectively to rebuild relationships. Provisions such as the 'Gubb Hub' for art therapy and the 'Blue Room' help vulnerable pupils to improve their well-being and engage successfully in school life.

Pupils are courteous, kind and respectful to each other, to staff and to visitors. The Afon Tâf High School ethos of 'ask for help, take responsibility, have a go, show respect' and regular 'kindness weeks' help pupils build resilience and independence, and understand the importance of kindness and respecting others.

A wide range of extra-curricular trips and activities supports learning and broadens pupils' skills. Staff and pupils have opportunities to engage in activities together such as yoga and tennis which support pupils to form productive relationships in school. Some trips are subsidised through grant funding to secure equal access for all pupils. Pupils benefit particularly from widening access programmes that promote their ambitions and raise their aspirations.

The ALN team are passionate about providing the best experiences for pupils with ALN and empowering them to thrive. The team uses a wealth of information to monitor closely how much progress these pupils are making from their individual starting points. One-page profiles and individual development plans (IDPs) are comprehensive and informative, and the ALN coordinator provides strategies to support staff in taking a bespoke approach to meeting individuals' needs. This, alongside meaningful partnerships with a range of outside agencies, ensures highly effective additional learning provision. Pupils with ALN make secure progress and perform well against their targets.

There are robust transition arrangements to ensure that ALN pupils receive the care they need, including the creation of the transition class in Year 7. Additionally, there is enhanced support for Year 11 ALN pupils moving on to the next steps in their learning and development.

There is a strong culture of improving attendance where all staff have high expectations. These are communicated clearly throughout the whole school community. The school has a well-developed range of systems to track and monitor attendance and implement bespoke interventions. As a result, attendance has improved, including for those pupils who are eligible for free school meals. Whole-school attendance is above that of similar schools and the national average and the rate of persistent absence has reduced well over the last year. While overall attendance has improved, it remains below pre-pandemic levels.

The school makes good use of Year 11 prefects who take on roles of responsibility across the school including duties and supporting parents' evenings. The school council is keen to have an impact on school life, however their opportunities to lead are underdeveloped and lack coherent planning.

As part of an effective and cohesive transition plan spanning Year 5 to Year 7 across the cluster, the transition lead works with primary teachers to coordinate a comprehensive programme of academic, sporting and well-being activities. One such activity is '#Wednesday', whereby Year 5 pupils make regular visits to the school to engage in meaningful enrichment activities alongside Year 7 pupils.

College taster days take place for older pupils and those at risk of not engaging in education, employment or training are identified early, tracked and supported. The school uses its strong links with the college to ensure a smooth continuation of learning for pupils. As a result, nearly all pupils progress successfully on to suitable post-16 pathways.

Learning resource base

Staff in the learning resource base make effective use of baseline assessments to identify pupils' needs and to provide targeted interventions that support progress in literacy, numeracy and life skills. Teachers plan practical and engaging sessions, with supported sensory approaches helping pupils to apply their communication, problem-solving and numeracy skills in real-life contexts. Pupils respond well to structured routines, and the broad and balanced curriculum supports their access to suitable GCSEs and vocational pathways.

Pupils feel safe, supported and included in the wider school community. They value the role of staff in helping them manage their emotions and improve their relationships. IDPs are used effectively to guide progress and support teachers to plan for pupils' learning in mainstream lessons. Well-being provision, including life skills and vocational opportunities, prepares pupils effectively for their next steps.

Leaders oversee this provision well and foster a supportive and inclusive culture where staff and pupils feel valued. There are strong systems to capture progress and inform improvement. The curriculum is purposeful and complemented by bespoke support, leading to positive outcomes including appropriate post-16 destinations.

Leading and improving

The headteacher provides measured, reflective and compassionate leadership. He and his senior team share a well understood vision of a caring community where staff and pupils thrive and achieve. Senior leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to providing pupils with the best start in life. As a result, leadership has secured strong improvements in many aspects of the school's work including pupils' attendance, well-being and the outcomes of qualifications at the end of Key Stage 4.

The senior team has established a strong culture of collaboration to make considered and informed decisions about how best to achieve school improvement. Senior leadership roles are linked closely to whole school priorities. The headteacher considers carefully the allocation of responsibilities to make the best use of individual skills and to build capacity for future leadership. Opportunities for middle leaders to volunteer to take on whole school leadership responsibilities provide helpful professional learning which has supported the school with succession planning.

The school has strengthened evaluation and improvement processes, which has supported leaders to know their school well. They carry out a beneficial range of quality assurance activities to gather first-hand evidence. In general, leaders make effective use of performance data alongside other evidence to help them prioritise and plan for improvement. Line management processes have been used effectively to develop

leadership skills. As a result, many middle leaders have a secure understanding of their role, gather helpful first-hand evidence and have a suitably broad understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in the areas they lead. Despite this, leaders at all levels do not always identify areas for development in teaching or plan for improvement precisely enough.

The school has been successful in addressing national priorities, such as improving attendance and the provision for pupils with ALN. Leaders have a strong focus on supporting the attainment of those pupils from low-income households and have been successful in improving the outcomes for many of these pupils. During the academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the performance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals in their Key Stage 4 qualifications is broadly in line with that of their counterparts in similar schools.

The school provides a range of helpful professional learning opportunities for all staff, which is aligned suitably to whole school improvement priorities. This has helped the school to secure improvements in the provision for pupils' writing and in improving the quality of middle leadership.

Governors fulfil their roles diligently. They are strong supporters of the school and are proud to be part of the school community, contributing appropriately to the strong safeguarding culture within the school, including the LRB. The headteacher and governors monitor the school budget closely and generally ensure that funding is targeted suitably to whole school priorities, though currently, this is not the case with the pupil development grant.

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.

The school's finances are mostly monitored well by the headteacher and governors although the monitoring and evaluation of the pupil development grant (PDG) is not robust enough.

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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