

A report on

Willowbrook Primary School

**Sandbrook Road
St Mellons
CF3 0ST**

Date of inspection: January 2026

by

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

About Willowbrook Primary School

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| Name of provider | Willowbrook Primary School |
| Local authority | Cardiff Council |
| Language of the provider | English |
| School category according to Welsh-medium provision | |
| Type of school | Primary |
| Religious character | |
| Number of pupils on roll | 422 |
| Pupils of statutory school age | 318 |
| Number in nursery classes | 55 |
| 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 21.7%) | 33.5% |
| 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 9.2%) | 4.1% |
| Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home | * |
| Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language | 19.5% |
| Lead partner in Initial teacher education | No |
| Date of headteacher appointment | September 2025 |

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| Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable) | 11/11/2019 |
| Start date of inspection | 26/01/2026 |

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

Willowbrook Primary School is a friendly and inclusive school where pupils feel safe, and ready to learn each day. Staff work in close partnership with pupils and families to create a positive learning environment. The 'Willowbrook Way' promotes shared expectations for behaviour and helps pupils develop respect, fairness and responsibility. This supports pupils' positive attitudes and behaviour effectively across the school.

The recently appointed headteacher provides strong and assured leadership. Leaders are highly visible and approachable and promote purposeful communication with pupils and families.

Many pupils begin school with skills below those expected for their age. Over time, pupils grow in confidence, communicate well with others and engage positively in their learning. Pupils benefit from worthwhile opportunities to share their views and contribute to school life.

The school provides a broad range of purposeful learning experiences that support pupils' progress. As they move through the school, pupils become confident readers, their writing improves and most make good progress in mathematics. Pupils use digital technology to support their learning in meaningful contexts.

The quality of teaching supports pupils' learning well. Teachers set expectations for learning that help pupils understand their work and how to improve it. At times, learning is too directed by adults. This limits pupils' opportunities to develop independence, particularly when writing at length. In the youngest classes, opportunities for play and exploration are not always matched closely enough to pupils' developmental needs.

Staff work closely with families to support pupils and help remove barriers to learning. Attendance is given a high priority across the school, and clear expectations and close work with families have led to sustained improvements over time. The school's governors provide an effective balance of support and challenge and contribute to self-evaluation.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Provide increased opportunities for pupils to develop as independent learners.
- R2 Improve provision for the youngest pupils.

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Nurturing positive relationships is central to Willowbrook Primary School's ethos. Leaders are highly visible and approachable. They model the school's values consistently using an open-door approach that promotes purposeful communication. Staff establish trusting relationships with pupils, and parents engage confidently with the school. This effective home and school partnership ensures that pupils feel safe and ready to engage positively with school life.

The school provides effective support for pupils' well-being, including those pupils' impacted by poverty. Leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to equity and use targeted interventions, alongside close work with families, to support pupils' welfare and access to learning. This work helps to remove barriers to learning effectively.

Across the school, pupils display friendly, positive behaviour that helps create a calm and purposeful learning environment. The 'Willowbrook Way' is the school's agreed approach that sets clear expectations aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This helps pupils develop strong values and positive attitudes to learning. They feel confident that their views are heard. For example, pupil leadership teams contribute appropriately to policy development about well-being.

Many pupils start school with communication, personal and physical skills below those expected for their age. As they move through the school, most pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), those who speak English as an additional language (EAL) and those affected by poverty, make suitable progress.

The recently appointed headteacher provides strong and assured strategic leadership. He sets high expectations and establishes a coherent plan for strengthening the school's work. In close partnership with senior leaders, he has identified the school's strengths and areas for development quickly. Leaders draw on a broad range of evidence to support accurate self-evaluation and inform priorities for school improvement. These reflect national priorities appropriately through their improvement planning and day-to-day work.

Leaders distribute roles and responsibilities sensibly to meet pupils' needs and support improvement. Senior and middle leaders contribute directly to improvement priorities. This strengthens leadership capacity across the school. Leaders manage staff performance well, with targets linked clearly to whole-school priorities. As part of these arrangements, teaching assistants are fully included in the school's professional learning and development, which supports a more inclusive professional culture.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum that offers pupils worthwhile learning opportunities across all areas of learning and experience. Teachers plan learning through termly themes that build well on pupils' prior knowledge, skills and understanding. Generally, teachers provide pupils with opportunities to identify what they already know and what they would like to find out at the start of topics. This enables pupils to influence aspects of their learning. For example, in Year 6, pupils decide how to present their learning when planning a 'Grand Canyon' short animated video. In the youngest classes, teachers do not take sufficient account of pupils' developmental needs when planning opportunities for play and exploration. This means that pupils do not have enough time to make choices about their play or develop their independent skills consistently well.

The school's curriculum supports pupils' social, moral, cultural and spiritual development effectively. This helps pupils to develop a secure understanding of a diverse range of faiths, cultures and traditions that reflect the backgrounds of families within the school.

Overall, most pupils make secure progress in their literacy skills. Well-planned opportunities for talk, alongside clear modelling by staff, support pupils to communicate confidently with staff and their peers about their learning. Over time, pupils develop a sound range of reading skills, underpinned by a structured approach to the teaching of letter sounds. This enables pupils to read with increasing fluency, expression and understanding, and use a range of strategies to decode unfamiliar words.

Across the school, pupils develop their writing skills well over time. In the most effective lessons, teachers plan learning that builds progressively across a range of writing for different purposes and audiences. This supports pupils to refine their writing and apply these skills appropriately across the curriculum. Regular sessions to learn and recall Welsh language patterns help pupils to develop a positive attitude to learning Welsh and build sound Welsh language skills over time.

Overall, most pupils make strong progress in developing their mathematical skills. Targeted professional learning supports teachers effectively to improve their teaching skills such as their ability to provide opportunities to improve pupils' reasoning skills. Pupils now explain their thinking more clearly and use their skills with increasing confidence. The school provides a range of opportunities for pupils to apply their skills in mathematics across the curriculum. Through the a range of curriculum activities, most pupils develop appropriate digital skills and use technology purposefully to research information, and communicate ideas. This supports them to apply their learning confidently across a range of contexts.

In most classes, teachers manage the pace of lessons well and provide helpful explanations that help pupils learn. They revisit prior learning and use questioning

effectively, adapting their questions well to meet the needs of different learners. Teachers know their pupils well and set well-understood expectations for learning. Feedback and classroom resources, such as working walls in the older classes, help pupils to improve their work. Leaders work collaboratively with staff to develop and refine an agreed approach to teaching that sets clear expectations. This helps teachers reflect more carefully on their practice and identify areas for improvement.

Across the school, teachers too often over-direct and scaffold learning. An over-reliance on worksheets and templates restricts pupils' opportunities to expand their ideas and write at length and can affect how they present their work. This approach limits pupils' opportunities to develop as independent learners.

Staff monitor attendance closely and emphasise its importance through shared expectations and consistent messages. Combined with targeted initiatives to engage families, this approach has contributed to sustained improvements in overall attendance over the past three years. The school's effective transition arrangements ensure that pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Leaders, working closely with staff, ensure that pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) are identified accurately and receive appropriate support. Robust procedures to monitor pupils' progress enable most pupils with ALN to make good progress from their starting points.

The headteacher works with governors to manage the school's resources suitably, including the pupil development grant. Funding is allocated sensibly to support agreed priorities and to help reduce barriers to learning. Governors use their individual skills and professional expertise well to support and challenge the school's work. They demonstrate a sound understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. This enables them to act as effective critical friends and to contribute constructively to the school's evaluation processes.

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 manage the school's finances appropriately, including the use of the pupil development grant.

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:

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