

A report on

Cowbridge School

**Aberthin Road
Cowbridge
CF71 7EN**

Date of inspection: January 2026

by

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

About Cowbridge School

Name of provider	Cowbridge School
Local authority	Vale of Glamorgan Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	All age schools
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	1559
Pupils of statutory school age	1206
Number in nursery classes	28
Number in sixth form	307
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 All age schools is 18.9%)	6.0%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in All age schools is 8.1%)	4.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	4.3%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	0.5%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	Yes

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Date of headteacher appointment	02/04/2012
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	
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

Cowbridge School is a caring and ambitious learning community where staff and pupils work together positively. Staff place a strong emphasis on high-quality teaching and learning, and as a result, most pupils, including those with additional learning needs, make secure progress over time. Nearly all pupils behave respectfully and have positive attitudes to their learning. For example, in lessons, most listen attentively, follow instructions well and contribute enthusiastically to class discussions.

The headteacher offers thoughtful, energetic leadership that puts pupils' well-being and progress at the centre of the school's work. She is backed by a dedicated senior team and well-informed governors who share the school's high ambitions. Together, they champion the vision of 'Education, Inspiration and Opportunities for Life', which is evident in the school's calm and respectful atmosphere. The school currently only has pupils of primary school age from Nursery to Year 2. Whilst foundation learning is in its early stage of development, it lacks the strategic direction and expertise required for it to flourish.

Leaders focus strongly on high-quality teaching and learning. Most teachers use their subject knowledge well and establish supportive classroom environments where pupils feel confident to ask questions and take part. A minority of pupils write with flair, showing a mature awareness of audience and purpose, particularly in extended written tasks. Many pupils read with good understanding and analyse texts thoughtfully,

Leaders monitor pupils' well-being carefully and use data thoughtfully to support those in need. However, despite their efforts, attendance remains an area for improvement, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals. The curriculum is broad and engaging, especially in Years 7 and 8. Pupils benefit from rich experiences across subjects, including opportunities to be creative, such as designing textiles based on cultural patterns or composing music using digital tools. Despite this, curriculum arrangements in Year 9 do not fully meet the requirements for Curriculum for Wales. The school's extra-curricular provision is a notable strength, especially in music, sport and the performing arts. Pupils also lead and organise activities, which helps them develop teamwork and leadership skills.

Overall, strong leadership and a shared commitment to pupils' success help ensure that Cowbridge School provides a safe, inclusive and encouraging environment where pupils are supported to achieve and develop.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Strengthen strategic leadership to better support teaching and learning in foundation learning.
- R2 Improve attendance
- R3 Ensure that pupils have access to the full range of learning experiences until the end of Year 9 to conform to Welsh Government guidance

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Leaders at Cowbridge School place a strong focus on high quality teaching to ensure the best possible learning outcomes for pupils. This has ensured that most pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN) and those eligible for free school meals make secure progress over time. A minority of pupils make strong progress and apply their prior learning effectively to develop their knowledge and understanding in new contexts.

Most teachers demonstrate strong subject knowledge and use subject-specific terminology accurately and confidently to support pupils' understanding. They establish positive and respectful working relationships, creating calm and supportive learning environments where many pupils feel confident to ask questions or seek clarification. Most teachers provide clear instructions and explanations, and ensure pupils understand their expectations.

In foundation learning, early years principles are being developed. In the strongest practice, teachers use their knowledge to plan creative learning environments which engage pupils in their learning suitably whilst developing their early skills. However, there are inconsistencies in the foundation phase teaching that limit pupils' ability to develop their skills progressively over time.

Many teachers model vocabulary acquisition and learning strategies effectively to support pupils' language development. They use questioning appropriately to check pupils' understanding and maintain engagement. These teachers probe pupils' responses appropriately and provide valuable verbal feedback that improves pupils' work.

A majority of teachers monitor pupils' engagement and progress particularly well within lessons. Where relevant, they model practical work effectively so pupils can follow processes confidently. A minority of teachers provide purposeful written feedback that supports pupils to reflect, redraft and improve their work effectively.

Where teaching is most effective, teachers model adeptly the type of responses expected to help pupils structure their answers clearly. They skilfully support, challenge and encourage pupils to explore their ideas in pairs or small groups, developing their independent learning well. They adapt their teaching in real time to meet the needs of pupils successfully.

In a few lessons across the school, activities are too repetitive or overly scaffolded, which limits pupils' independence and sometimes reduces their engagement in learning. In a few cases, teachers move learning on too quickly and do not allow sufficient time for pupils to think for themselves.

Nearly all pupils behave respectfully towards staff and peers, and demonstrate excellent behaviour in lessons and around the school. Their attitudes to learning are very positive and most pupils listen attentively to their teacher, follow instructions appropriately and talk enthusiastically about their work. In foundation learning, many pupils engage purposefully, for example when creating story mats.

Nearly all sixth form pupils demonstrate positive attitudes and a strong interest in their work. They engage positively in lessons and work productively both independently and in collaboration, to discuss ideas and refine their understanding. Many pupils use subject-specific vocabulary confidently and discuss their work eloquently.

Literacy

Pupils up to Year 2 engage confidently in paired talk and whole-class activities, use a wide range of vocabulary, listen attentively to others and explain their ideas clearly in a range of situations. Pupils in foundation learning develop sound reading skills. They use strategies to work out unfamiliar words, understand what they read and are keen to discuss texts. Many start to enjoy reading, and more able pupils read a wider range of longer and more challenging texts, such as novels by Roald Dahl. In general, pupils in foundation learning develop their writing skills appropriately. They form letters with increasing confidence and spell simple words using their knowledge of phonics accurately. By Year 2, most pupils write in wide range of genres. However, pupils' writing is too often over-directed, and they do not receive sufficient opportunities to apply their writing skills for different purposes independently. Pupils do not always form letters consistently well, nor apply a range of punctuation consistently in their writing. Overall, the planning for the progressive development of pupils' literacy skills in foundation learning is underdeveloped.

Leaders plan effectively for the development of secondary age pupils' literacy skills. There is a strong focus on developing pupils' speaking and listening skills, including encouraging them to use and understand more adventurous and subject-specific vocabulary. As a result, many pupils speak confidently, clearly and fluently when expressing their ideas. Many explain their work maturely and accurately when speaking to visitors and articulate how their learning builds on prior knowledge. Many pupils engage effectively in paired, small-group and whole-class discussions. They listen respectfully and often build upon or challenge peers' views, for example when discussing Norse mythology and the benefits of an orderly world compared with a chaotic world. Most pupils demonstrate secure

pronunciation and a sound understanding of language patterns when speaking in French or German.

Most pupils apply their basic reading skills well, locating information confidently in a range of texts. Many infer meaning confidently from texts and images, for example when analysing characters or interpreting propaganda posters. A similar proportion, summarise information appropriately, selecting key points from texts. They analyse literary techniques effectively and explain how characters and themes are presented. A minority of pupils demonstrate more advanced reading skills. These pupils analyse texts in a sophisticated manner, such as when studying war poetry and film in English lessons. A few, synthesise information particularly well from multiple sources, for example when exploring the five Pillars of Islam in ethics and philosophy lessons.

Spotlight: Developing pupils' reading skills

This year the school is participating in the National Literacy Trust's 'National Year of Reading' which is helping to raise the profile of reading across the school. Events such as 'The Great Cowbridge Book Swap' and a reading buddy scheme, where older pupils support younger readers, are helping pupils develop a love for reading. A series of assemblies and parental engagement evenings ensure that pupils and parents understand the importance of reading and how reading for pleasure has a positive impact on well-being. The school also supports pupils who are eligible for free school meals to develop their appreciation of reading by providing funding to purchase books they want to read. As a result of this greater focus on strengthening the culture of reading, pupils and staff now talk regularly about what they are reading. This is contributing towards high standards in reading.

Many pupils of secondary age write accurately, producing clear sentences and short paragraphs that communicate meaning effectively. They produce well-structured extended pieces of writing in which they develop arguments clearly and coherently using subject specific vocabulary well, for example when discussing the political, economic and social reasons for the abolition of slavery. A minority write with flair, showing a mature awareness of audience and purpose and using sophisticated and ambitious vocabulary.

When given the opportunity, pupils develop their thinking skills well. For example, in ethics and philosophy lessons pupils complete 'deep-thinking' tasks where they consider the opinions of others to form their own views on a range of themes. There are a wide range of opportunities for pupils to demonstrate their creativity. In textiles lessons pupils explore rangoli patterns as they design juggling balls, and younger pupils work successfully in teams to create puppets where they decide which materials to use. Pupils develop their physical skills well in a range of curriculum areas. In physical education lessons pupils demonstrate endurance and stamina when taking part in team sports and

individual fitness sessions. Pupils in foundation learning develop their gross motor skills well through play, for example when moving large items to create a balance obstacle course.

Numeracy

Overall, pupils develop their numeracy skills suitably in foundation learning, for example, they create block graphs accurately and can sort objects according to size confidently. However, the coordination of the provision to progressively develop pupils' numeracy skills in foundation learning is at an early stage of development.

As pupils progress through the school, many develop their numeracy skills well. They develop a secure understanding of the four rules of number and use these confidently. Many pupils are developing their understanding of financial mathematics suitably, for example, when calculating compound interest or interpreting utility bills. They demonstrate a sound understanding of geometry and measure and use suitable methods to calculate the area of two-dimensional compound shapes. The strongest mathematicians demonstrate a deep understanding of more advanced mathematical concepts. These pupils develop their knowledge and understanding well across most aspects of the mathematics curriculum. A few pupils have weaker number skills. These pupils struggle to recall and apply prior learning independently. As such, this hinders their progress.

Across the curriculum leaders have identified a few purposeful opportunities to develop pupils' numeracy skills in authentic contexts. For example, in science, many pupils develop their statistical knowledge and skills well. They display sound graphing skills by plotting and interpreting data from scientific investigations. A few more able pupils rearrange and solve equations and identify anomalies in data.

Digital Skills

Foundation learning pupils are beginning to use devices when, for example, creating videos confidently and developing their image editing skills appropriately. Overall, there are very few opportunities for pupils to develop their digital skills in foundation learning.

During their digital technology lessons, many secondary aged pupils develop their data and computational thinking skills suitably. For example, they use a range of spreadsheet functions competently. Across the curriculum, there are a few beneficial opportunities for them to develop more advanced skills. For example, pupils develop their production skills adeptly when using digital audio software to create their compositions in music lessons. Overall, the opportunities across the curriculum to progressively develop a broad range of digital skills in authentic contexts are not coordinated well enough.

Welsh

In Welsh language lessons, many pupils develop new vocabulary, translate successfully from English to Welsh and produce cohesive paragraphs. In general, they pronounce Welsh words and phrases confidently. A majority of pupils produce accurate extended pieces of writing in Welsh, for example when writing blogs on current issues. In general, pupils do not apply their Welsh speaking skills outside the Welsh lessons often or well enough and lack confidence to use the language in informal situations.

Curriculum

Leaders articulate a clear and coherent curriculum vision, placing high-quality teaching, pupil well-being and progression at the centre of its design. The curriculum is broad and engaging, particularly in Years 7 and 8. Although the school has adapted its approach in Year 9 to ensure that pupils engage with a range of subjects, these pupils do not have access to the full range of learning experiences required by Curriculum for Wales. The school offers a wide range of subjects that lead to general and vocational qualifications at the end of Year 11 and the sixth form.

Extra-curricular provision is a notable strength of the school, particularly in music, sport and the performing arts. High participation supports many pupils' confidence, skills development and well-being. Pupils take a leading role in activities such as sports clubs, peer mentoring and performing arts. Pupil led activities such as the Senior Jazz Band and Junior Choir are particular strengths. Pupils take responsibility for rehearsals, peer support and performance preparation, developing leadership, teamwork and high levels of self-discipline. This contributes positively to pupils' personal development and overall engagement with school life.

The curriculum is enriched particularly effectively through strong community, cultural and local links, which support pupils' sense of identity and belonging. For example, events such as the Rotary Young Musician competition, Noson Lawen, and contributions from local artists support pupils' cultural development and sense of belonging.

The school provides effective careers guidance, including for those pupils in the sixth form, enabling pupils to make informed choices about GCSE, post-16 and higher education pathways. Information and guidance around options is clear and accessible, with subject teachers contributing meaningfully to the decision-making process.

In Years 7 and 8 the Personal and Social Education (PSE) programme supports pupils well in developing their understanding of healthy lifestyles, with pupils reporting positive learning experiences, particularly through Health and Well-being lessons. From Year 9 onwards, the school provides appropriate opportunities for pupils' personal and social development through assemblies, external speakers and a few curriculum areas. The

school ensures pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural skills are developed through a variety of approaches, such as assemblies and other important events, including whole school remembrance services. Subjects across the curriculum provide beneficial opportunities for pupils to consider equality and diversity.

Relationship and sexuality education themes are delivered across the curriculum, including in ethics and philosophy lessons, helping pupils to revisit key messages in different contexts. The school works with a range of external speakers and organisations to enrich the curriculum, particularly in relation to well-being, health, careers and cultural awareness.

The school is beginning to develop the provision for Welsh across the curriculum and promoting the Welsh language and culture. For example, they have reintroduced the whole-school Eisteddfod to coincide with Dydd Gŵyl Dewi, celebrate Dydd Santes Dwynwen and Welsh popular culture. However, Welsh language development across the curriculum is inconsistent.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

The school successfully fosters a strong culture of respect and collaboration within its community. Staff promote the 'Cowbridge Pupil Profile' which outlines the values pupils of the school should embody, through assemblies and form time to help pupils understand key values such as kindness, curiosity and responsibility. Pastoral staff work closely together as the 'Achievement team' to identify and support pupils' emotional and social development effectively. Leaders use data gathered from well-being surveys and internal assessments to monitor pupils' well-being and behaviour, and identify pupils who may require more support. Staff plan provision for these pupils carefully, adapting the pastoral support and curriculum offer to appeal to their interests.

The school has suitable arrangements to keep pupils safe. Staff and governors receive appropriate training to ensure they have a good understanding of their role and actively promote a culture of safeguarding. As a result, most pupils feel safe in school.

Pupils benefit from meaningful opportunities to influence whole school decisions due to the school's strong, well-structured and inclusive range of pupil leadership groups. Pupils suggest and establish their own groups such as the disability awareness group and the eco-committee. Generally, pupils outside of these groups do not always understand how decisions are made or whether their suggestions lead to change. Opportunities for secondary age pupils to mentor younger pupils are particularly valuable.

The 'Achievement team' considers carefully the barriers to good attendance and works closely with pupils and families to discuss what is working well and what needs to improve. Staff monitor pupils' attendance appropriately and execute a targeted,

graduated response to pupil absence. Leaders are beginning to analyse attendance data to identify patterns and trends. However, they do not always do this precisely enough to help them plan for improvement. Although rates of attendance improved between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, attendance fell slightly during 2024-2025. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was below those of their counterparts in similar schools in 2023-2024 and 2024-2025.

The school has clear and coherent leadership of ALN. There are robust procedures to help address pupils' needs at an early stage through targeted universal provision. This enables the effective gathering of a wide range of relevant information. The ALN team use this information, as well as data and individual perspectives, to plan suitable and purposeful provision. Leaders work with a wider team to analyse information about pupils' well-being, literacy and numeracy skills. This work enables the development of a clear picture of individual needs. Staff work with pupils, parents and outside agencies to identify suitable targets for progress. This enables leaders to create bespoke support plans and adaptations to the curriculum. For example, older pupils have support to develop their life skills and enable them to engage in meaningful work experience in shops in Cowbridge. The school places a high priority on transition for pupils with ALN. Pupils entering the school have additional opportunities to engage with school life ahead of arrival. Older pupils have opportunities to think about their future careers to plan their next steps carefully.

Leading and improving

The headteacher is a highly committed, ambitious and reflective leader who places pupils' well-being and progress at the heart of the school's work. She is well supported by a committed team of senior leaders whose roles and responsibilities are allocated equitably to reflect their individual strengths. Together, leaders work effectively to promote Cowbridge School's motto, 'Education, Inspiration and Opportunities for Life'. This vision is shared successfully with stakeholders.

At the time of the inspection, the lower school included classes from the Nursery to Year 2, as well as Year 7 pupils. Leaders are beginning to develop useful links between pupils of different age groups. For example, pupils studying health and social care regularly visit the youngest pupils' classes to deepen their understanding of child development and sixth formers read with younger pupils. Staff have started to share expertise across the age range, for example when geography specialists accompany Reception-aged pupils on a field trip.

Strong leadership and high levels of accountability have a positive impact on many key areas of the school's work, such as self-evaluation and improvement planning. Middle leaders have a secure understanding of their roles and there are robust line management

arrangements in place. Senior leaders meet regularly with middle leaders to discuss their areas of responsibility. There is a common agenda which ensures that discussions in these meetings focus closely on pupils' progress, their well-being and the school's strategic priorities. These meetings include a good balance between support and challenge.

The school has a comprehensive quality assurance calendar which has a suitable range of self-evaluation activities. This includes lesson observations, learning walks, work scrutiny and valuable opportunities for pupils to influence the work of the school. Staff at all levels are involved in self-evaluation processes. Leaders make effective use of outcomes data and triangulate this suitably with findings from first-hand evidence. Generally, leaders at all levels evaluate standards and provision accurately. However, in a few instances, middle leaders do not identify precisely enough the specific aspects of teaching, learning and skills' development that need to be improved. In addition, leaders' impact on teaching and learning in foundation learning is underdeveloped.

Leaders plan for improvement effectively. Whole school and departmental priorities are understood well by staff. The school has effective systems for managing staff performance and development. Teachers' targets align closely with school priorities, professional learning and individual professional development aspirations. Leaders ensure that the well-being of staff is a high priority. These approaches have contributed to a strong team ethos and a collaborative approach amongst the staff.

Spotlight: a collaborative culture of professional learning

Leaders have established a collaborative culture of professional learning that supports staff at all levels. This element of the school's work has several aspects.

Leaders provide opportunities for all teachers to take part in research projects to enhance their classroom practice. This encourages professional dialogue and teamwork within and across departments. In addition, leaders respond proactively to meet individual professional learning needs. For example, aspiring leaders have access to specific programmes to support their development. The school's close links with an initial teacher education provider has provided opportunities for teachers to complete relevant postgraduate qualifications to develop aspects of teaching, learning and leadership.

Senior leaders place emphasis on their own continued professional development, for example when completing professional qualifications that assist them to support in coaching colleagues. Governors are invited to attend whole-school training sessions to improve their understanding of the school and national priorities.

The school's comprehensive professional learning offer is having a positive impact on teaching and pupils' standards.

Governors share the school's vision and are very supportive of the school and its role within the local community. They are knowledgeable and have high aspirations for the school. They collaborate well with leaders, provide suitable challenge and support to bring about improvements, and take part in a few activities that provide them with first-hand evidence of pupils' experiences. Governors are aware of their role in promoting healthy eating and drinking, however the school does not comply fully with statutory guidance. The headteacher and governors monitor finances robustly, aligning spending appropriately with school priorities.

Leaders focus well on addressing national priorities. The school's work to promote a culture of reading and to help alleviate the impact of poverty on pupils' attainment are having a positive impact. However, leaders have not had enough impact on improving pupils' attendance. There are a range of beneficial approaches to support pupils from low-income households including a mentoring programme, timely interventions, access to additional educational experiences and resources that support their education. Leaders evaluate the use of the pupil development grant and its impact on pupil standards thoroughly. As a result, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals at the end of Year 11 is better than their counterparts in similar schools and is well above the Wales average. However, the attendance of these pupils has been below that of their counterparts in similar schools for the last two years.

The school is a lead school for initial teacher education. Leaders work purposefully with a range of schools to share effective practice.

Additional information

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

A site management concern was raised during the inspection, and the local authority has been notified.

The school does not have 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 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.

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