A report on

Ysgol Bryn Castell

Bryncethin Campus
Abergarw Road
Brynmeyn
Bridgend
CF32 9NZ

Date of inspection: January 2026

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

About Ysgol Bryn Castell

Name of provider	Ysgol Bryn Castell
Local authority	Bridgend County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Maintained Special
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	183
Pupils of statutory school age	159
Number in nursery classes	*
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 Maintained Special is 45.8%)	60.7%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Maintained Special is 100.0%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.55%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	0
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	01/05/2014
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	07/01/2019
Start date of inspection	27/01/2026

Further information

Ysgol Bryn Castell, Bridgend is a maintained special school for pupils aged 7-19 years who have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) and autistic spectrum condition (ASC) alongside a wide range of other additional learning needs (ALN). Pupils are admitted throughout the year by the local authority, which can cause fluctuations to the number of pupils on roll.

The majority of pupils at the school are eligible for free school meals. A very few pupils are looked after by a local authority. Nearly all pupils have a school or Local Authority maintained individual development plan (IDP).

Most pupils have experienced significant periods of disruption to their formal learning prior to their arrival at the school. Many join the school at times of personal crisis and many pupils receive multi-agency support outside of school. As a result, there is considerable variation in pupils' individual starting points, motivation and learning ability.

The school has been on the existing site on Bryncethin Campus since 2015. It is co-located with The Bridge Alternative Provision, a pupil referral unit.

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

Ysgol Bryn Castell is an inclusive and caring school where strong, trusting relationships underpin all aspects of its work. Staff establish secure, compassionate relationships with pupils, many of whom arrive with significant prior challenges in engagement in education. These relationships are central to improvements in pupils' well-being, confidence, engagement in learning and social development.

Most pupils we met report that they feel safe, well supported and able to share concerns with staff. Behaviour in lessons is generally calm and purposeful, with staff acting as positive role models and managing dysregulation effectively. However, the behaviour of a few pupils outside lessons disrupts learning. In addition, the limitations of the physical environment inhibit pupils' ability to consistently regulate their emotions effectively.

Leaders are developing a secure safeguarding culture which is reinforced through effective training and multi-agency partnerships. Attendance is monitored closely and supported by effective partnership working. However, overall attendance remains low and continues to be an area for improvement.

Teaching, learning and assessment are strong features of the school. Staff know pupils well and use robust assessment and tracking systems to plan effectively and support progress. Verbal feedback is used particularly well, enabling pupils to reflect on and improve their work.

The curriculum is broad, balanced, offering flexible and personalised pathways that prepare pupils successfully for future education, employment or training. Staff enhance pupils' learning through enrichment opportunities and external partnerships. Nearly all pupils make secure progress from their starting points in literacy, numeracy, digital, social and independence skills. However, in a few instances lessons are not consistently challenging for all pupils.

Leadership is clear and purposeful, with a committed staff team, effective governance and a strong culture of professional learning. Leaders are developing shared leadership across middle leaders, such as leaders of each area of the curriculum.

Recommendations

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

R1   Improve attendance.

R2   Strengthen teaching, building on best practice, to provide a consistent level of challenge for all pupils.

R3   Continue to work with the local authority to ensure that the school's learning environments are suitably adapted to meet the growing number of pupils and the increasingly complex range of need.

What happens next

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

Main evaluation

Relationships and pupil well-being

Ysgol Bryn Castell is an inclusive, caring school where pupils are valued. The work of the school is underpinned by strong, trusting relationships founded on compassion, acceptance and respect. The swift establishment of these secure relationships is a strength. As nearly all pupils join the school having previously experienced considerable challenges in education, these relationships form a vital foundation for improving pupils' well-being, confidence, engagement and social skills.

Most pupils we met report that they feel safe in school and value the support they receive from staff. They report that they can talk openly to any member of staff if they are worried or upset and have confidence that staff will support them effectively.

Leaders, governors and staff work together effectively to promote a strong, positive safeguarding culture. Leaders plan regular, relevant safeguarding training and updates to ensure that staff and governors remain up to date with current requirements, understand local procedures and are confident in fulfilling their responsibilities. Training is supported by clear policies, accessible guidance and regular reminders; helping staff to act promptly and consistently when concerns arise. This is strengthened by positive partnerships with external agencies, including timely advice and appropriate challenge to further support pupils' safety and well-being. Leaders maintain effective systems to record, monitor and review concerns, enabling patterns to be identified and actions to be followed up.

Leaders are developing a shared understanding across the staff team that safeguarding underpins all aspects of the school's work and they are increasingly embedding this through everyday practice and regular professional discussion.

Pupils' behaviour, engagement and attendance

Nearly all staff develop positive relationships with pupils and are effective role models. As a result, most classrooms are calm, purposeful learning environments where pupils settle quickly to their work. Staff manage most instances of dysregulation swiftly and effectively.

When in lessons, most pupils behave well, show pride in their work and are confident to share their ideas. However, the disengaged behaviour of a few pupils outside lessons disrupts learning. Further, limitations of the physical environment inhibit pupils' ability to regulate their emotions effectively.

Attendance is monitored robustly by leaders through regular meetings with external agencies. For example, home school liaison officers work effectively with partners to support pupils and strengthen relationships with families. Leaders and governors have an

accurate oversight of attendance and evaluate the progress pupils make at an individual level. However, despite targeted interventions, overall attendance remains low and continues to be an area for improvement.

For a very few pupils, leaders plan appropriately for education to take place away from the school site through 'bespoke packages'. These pupils access individualised curricula in individual, or small group sessions in community-based buildings, such as bike maintenance accreditation in addition to literacy, numeracy and life skills. These arrangements support pupils' social, emotional and behavioural needs effectively and, with support from the mobile behaviour manager, help improve engagement and attendance from individual starting points.

Teaching, learning and assessment

Staff throughout the school know their pupils extremely well. They use collaborative practice and targeted professional learning effectively to ensure a strong understanding of pupils' needs and contexts and adapt their practice appropriately.

Teaching is purposefully planned and informed by effective assessment and tracking systems. The school's assessment processes are a strength. Leaders continually review these processes to ensure that they remain beneficial and relevant. As a result, assessment approaches are becoming embedded and provide accurate and detailed information on pupils' progress across all areas of learning and well-being.

Staff use verbal feedback highly effectively, and nearly all pupils make strong progress in receiving and acting on this feedback. Staff use written feedback suitably where appropriate to direct pupil effort and support progress. Learning journey books are used effectively to document progress and celebrate achievement, contributing positively to pupils' confidence and self-belief.

Nearly all staff provide appropriate levels of challenge around pupils' engagement, ambition and self-image, resulting in rapid progress in these areas. However, in a few instances, learning activities do not consistently provide a sufficient level of challenge for all pupils. As a result, in these lessons pupils are not consistently engaged and do not make the progress of which they are capable.

Curriculum design and learning experiences

The school provides a rich, balanced and broad curriculum that meets pupils' learning needs well. The curriculum prepares pupils effectively for their next steps, and as a result nearly all leavers progress to positive destinations such as further education, employment or training.

Curriculum planning is a strength of the school. Staff at all levels have contributed meaningfully to the school's curriculum development, while also incorporating pupil voice. This ensures statutory entitlement while maintaining flexibility to meet pupils' diverse needs and starting points.

Staff plan effectively for the progressive development of pupils' skills. Nearly all pupils have purposeful opportunities to apply and develop their skills in authentic, real-life contexts. For example, they develop life and work skills through the school coffee shop, 'Y Cwpan Bach', or improve their physical skills through gymnastics sessions at a local gym.

Where appropriate, pupils complete GCSEs alongside additional accreditations linked to personal interests, such as bike maintenance.

The school makes highly effective use of external partners to enrich learning experiences. Leaders select providers strategically, considering pupils' needs and contexts carefully to maximise impact. For example, external role models, whose life experiences reflect those of many pupils, contribute positively to pupils' understanding of positive life choices.

The school environment

Staff work to develop an environment which is welcoming, calm and underpinned by a strong ethos of care and respect. For example, displays, learning areas and shared spaces celebrate pupils' achievements and contribute positively to pupils' self-belief and sense of belonging.

However, the continued increase in the number of pupils on roll has placed pressure on the physical environment. At times, limitations in space restrict pupils' access to suitable areas for emotional regulation and calm. Further, the school has limited access to key spaces, such as the school hall, as these spaces are shared with the co-located PRU. This can hinder pupils' ability to regulate their emotions effectively, particularly during unstructured times or transitions.

Spotlight - Developing a committed staff team

Leaders have worked effectively with the staff team to develop leadership capacity across the school whilst also ensuring an improvement in staff well-being.

Leaders have used a range of purposeful professional learning as well as targeted coaching and mentoring sessions to strengthen leadership capacity. As a result, they have developed a team of enthusiastic middle leaders who support with evaluating and improving practice at the school.

Further, leaders have planned activities and provision to ensure the well-being of the staff team. They have developed both internal and external mechanisms to support staff well-being, with access to services such as physiotherapy, counselling and healthcare. Other beneficial activities include visits from well-being providers such as reflexology.

As a result, most staff feel well supported by leaders and feel that they take their well-being and workload into account.

Learning and progress in skills development

Over time, nearly all pupils make suitable progress in literacy, numeracy and digital skills from their starting points.

In reading, many younger pupils read enthusiastically and volunteer to read aloud, while many older pupils read with fluency and confidence. A few pupils read expressively, using tone and emphasis effectively. In class, nearly all pupils listen attentively and respectfully when others read, although only a minority read regularly for pleasure.

Nearly all pupils develop their writing skills suitably from diverse starting points. A few older pupils produce extended writing for a range of purposes and apply these skills effectively in examined qualifications. Many pupils write fluently using digital technology, with a few demonstrating strong independent editing skills.

Many pupils use their oracy skills confidently when contributing to discussions and debates. Secure relationships support rapid progress in communication skills, particularly for pupils who find communication challenging. Most pupils make strong progress in their listening skills over time.

In numeracy, nearly all pupils make suitable progress and apply their skills confidently in authentic contexts such as cooking and financial activities. Older pupils make particularly strong progress in financial literacy and functional numeracy.

Planning for digital skills is becoming increasingly embedded, and nearly all pupils use technology confidently for research, presentation, data handling and creative work. A few pupils use coding skills highly effectively.

The school's strong focus on relationship building leads to the secure development of pupils' social skills, which is a significant strength. In lessons, most pupils engage confidently with visitors, show warmth and respect to peers, and celebrate each other's achievements.

Nearly all pupils make meaningful progress in independence skills over time. Pupils also make suitable progress in developing their Welsh language skills, using incidental Welsh around the school and gradually extending their knowledge and understanding.

Nearly all pupils develop their physical skills through a range of engaging activities, including hockey, football and games, supporting their physical well-being effectively.

Leading and developing a committed staff team

The headteacher provides clear, purposeful leadership and sets a strong strategic direction that is well understood by staff. Leaders have developed a clear and inclusive vision and values collaboratively, which successfully underpin the work of the school.

Leaders have built a committed and enthusiastic staff team who place pupils at the centre of all they do. Distributed leadership is developing securely, with clear roles and responsibilities across senior and middle leadership. Leaders have appropriately prioritised the development of newly appointed middle leaders, strengthening the consistency of self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. They have provided coaching and targeted support, which is strengthening leadership capacity across the school.

Monitoring, evaluation and self-evaluation processes are purposeful and well planned, supported effectively by the school improvement partner. Leaders use a wide range of first-hand evidence to identify strengths and inform improvement planning, including a sustained focus on improving attendance.

Leaders plan for pupils to provide meaningful input in to school self-evaluation and improvement planning processes, through a democratically elected school parliament and positive informal opportunities to influence practice at the school. For example, when developing the school curriculum. However, opportunities for all pupils to contribute formally to these processes are underdeveloped.

The school promotes a strong culture of professional learning and collaboration. Staff engage actively in regional and national networks and value the investment in their

development. Performance management arrangements are secure and linked well to professional standards and school priorities. Leaders place a strong emphasis on staff well-being, resulting in a resilient and committed workforce.

Governors are highly effective, bringing relevant expertise and providing appropriate support and challenge. Financial arrangements are suitable and aligned well with improvement priorities.

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 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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