

A report on
Crickhowell High School

New Road
Crickhowell
Powys
NP8 1AW

Date of inspection: February 2026

by

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

About Crickhowell High School

Name of provider	Crickhowell High School
Local authority	Powys County Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	N/A
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	N/A
Number of pupils on roll	942
Pupils of statutory school age	734
Number in sixth form	208
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 20.3%)	5.3%
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 9.0%)	15.8%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	2.7%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	2.3%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	Yes
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2025

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Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/04/2018
Start date of inspection	23/02/2026

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

Crickhowell High School is a caring and inclusive community where pupils show a strong sense of pride and belonging. Most pupils feel safe and know whom to approach if they have concerns. Leaders have established a well-embedded culture of safeguarding and respond promptly and appropriately to issues that arise. Attendance has improved over the last two years, reflecting leaders' focused efforts, but it remains below pre-pandemic levels and that of similar schools.

The headteacher provides clear direction for the school and has strengthened its culture while addressing important aspects of its work. He places a strong emphasis on securing high standards in behaviour and teaching and has refined senior leaders' roles to build greater strategic capacity. Leaders have introduced clearer quality assurance processes and suitable professional learning opportunities. However, self-evaluation and improvement planning do not focus sharply enough on the impact of provision on pupils' progress and well-being. Leaders and governors monitor the school's finances carefully and have implemented an agreed recovery plan. Despite prudent decision-making and careful oversight, the school's deficit budget continues to rise in the current financial climate.

Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and use subject-specific terminology confidently to support learning. Many plan suitably challenging lessons and give clear guidance that help pupils build on what they already know. Consequently, many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make at least suitable progress. In a few cases, high expectations and probing questions enable pupils to make strong progress. However, in a minority of cases, expectations are too low and activities lack sufficient challenge. In these instances, pupils' independence is not developed well enough, and a few make limited progress overall.

Many pupils develop their literacy and numeracy skills appropriately. Most listen attentively and read and write with suitable competence, although opportunities to develop advanced reading skills and to write at length across the curriculum are limited. Many apply numeracy skills suitably in mathematics, but these skills are not applied widely enough in other subjects. The majority of pupils make adequate progress in Welsh, although very few opportunities to speak the language limit their confidence.

The school has developed a broad curriculum and a comprehensive personal and social education programme that supports pupils' well-being effectively. Provision for equality and diversity is purposeful, and pupils benefit from a wide range of leadership opportunities. However, curriculum planning is too variable across areas of learning. Overall, planning does not support the progressive development of pupils' literacy,

numeracy and digital skills well enough, and pupils do not have enough meaningful opportunities to apply these skills across the curriculum. In addition, the introduction of the options process at the end of Year 8 narrows the curriculum in Year 9 and limits pupils' access to the full range of learning experiences at this stage.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Develop self-evaluation and improvement planning so that they focus more precisely on the impact of provision on pupils' progress and well-being.
- R2 Improve teaching to ensure that expectations are always sufficiently high and that all pupils receive appropriate challenge.
- R3 Improve attendance.
- R4 Strengthen the provision for developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills in relevant subjects across the curriculum.
- R5 Ensure that pupils have access to the full range of learning experiences until the end of Year 9.
- R6 Ensure robust management and monitoring of the budget.

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Nearly all pupils at Crickhowell High School engage positively with their peers and staff and extend a warm welcome to visitors. In most cases, teachers foster supportive working relationships with pupils and have helpful routines. Many pupils are enthusiastic learners who settle quickly at the beginning of lessons and engage well in their learning. As a result, many pupils, including those with additional learning needs, make suitable progress. However, a few pupils are too passive in their learning, relying too heavily on their teacher or losing focus during independent and whole-class activities.

Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and use subject specific terminology well to enhance pupils' learning. Many plan suitably challenging, well-sequenced lessons. They provide clear instructions and use questioning to check pupils' prior learning and basic understanding. This helps pupils to build on prior knowledge suitably. The majority of teachers explain new concepts clearly and model learning effectively to support pupils' understanding.

In a few cases, where pupils make strong progress, teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. These teachers demonstrate a strong understanding of pupils' needs and adapt resources and the pace of the lesson to meet their needs. They use questioning skilfully to challenge pupils' thinking, develop their understanding and deepen their learning.

In a minority of cases, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low. As a result, they ask questions and plan activities that are insufficiently challenging. These teachers either over-scaffold tasks, lead the learning for too long or let pupils spend too long practising basic skills. Consequently, the pace of learning is too slow, and they do not develop pupils' independence in learning well enough. In a few instances, teachers are too accepting of poor work and a lack of engagement from pupils. This leads to a few making limited progress overall in their knowledge, skills and understanding.

Teachers monitor the progress of pupils' learning well in many lessons. In these lessons, teachers circulate the room with purpose and provide helpful verbal feedback to support pupils' learning. However, there is too much variation in how well written feedback helps pupils to make progress. In the most effective instances, teachers provide clear guidance that helps pupils to improve their work. However, too often written feedback is either overly generous or insufficiently focused on how pupils can improve. In addition, teachers do not always ensure that pupils engage well enough with written feedback to ensure it has a positive impact on their learning.

In the sixth form, nearly all pupils are respectful, punctual and support each other's learning. Most engage well in lessons, including online learning, and demonstrate positive attitudes. Many show strong recall of prior learning and make at least suitable progress, applying their knowledge effectively.

Skills

Literacy and numeracy coordinators have started working purposefully with a few subject leaders to adapt tasks and introduce meaningful opportunities for pupils to practise their skills in different contexts. Leaders have provided suitable professional learning to all staff regarding how to teach numeracy and reading skills. However, there remains inconsistency in the quality of the activities planned for pupils. Tasks do not always provide a suitable level of challenge or focus well enough on developing pupils' subject knowledge alongside their skills, particularly in relation to numeracy-focused activities outside of mathematics lessons. Overall, the school's planning across the curriculum does not consistently support the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills.

Many pupils make at least secure progress in their literacy skills and a few make strong progress. Most listen attentively to each other and their teachers, and many respond well when building on previous comments. Many provide appropriate responses to teachers' questions, although these tend to be brief and underdeveloped. The majority of pupils speak clearly and explain their thinking coherently, while a minority speak articulately, using ambitious subject-specific vocabulary and engaging phrasing. Many collaborate purposefully in pairs and groups, although a few are reluctant to do so or to offer their opinions in class discussions.

Most pupils locate information appropriately from suitably challenging texts or when undertaking independent research. Many successfully highlight and annotate complex texts independently to identify important words and ideas. In their English lessons, many develop their advanced reading skills, such as inference and analysis, appropriately. They demonstrate a good understanding of persuasive techniques, for example when discussing the sermon made by Bishop Budde at President Trump's inauguration. A few pupils analyse literary texts perceptively, showing appreciation of the writer's style and purpose, incorporating quotations skilfully to support their assertions. The school is developing a suitable culture of reading, for example through the introduction of the 'Crick book nook', a quiet reading area within the school, a peer mentoring scheme and fortnightly library visits. However, overall, there are too few opportunities for pupils to develop their advanced reading skills outside of English lessons. Activities in which pupils demonstrate their understanding of texts in other subjects rarely require them to go beyond the location and retrieval of information.

Many pupils develop their ideas with suitable independence when writing at length. They use connectives appropriately to link ideas, helping them explain their thinking clearly and coherently. The majority of pupils demonstrate a good understanding of audience and purpose and use a suitably varied vocabulary. The majority of pupils display sound technical accuracy, although a minority make regular basic errors in punctuation, spelling and grammar. A few pupils write with particular flair, using a wide vocabulary and a range of effective stylistic features. However, a few pupils struggle to write independently. They are over-reliant on the support of teachers or their peers and consequently their writing is simplistic and formulaic. In addition, there are too few opportunities for pupils to practise writing at length or redraft their work.

Many pupils make suitable progress in developing their numeracy skills and apply them appropriately in a range of contexts in their mathematics lessons. Many use the four rules of number fluently, for example converting numbers in standard form, multiplying decimals accurately and calculating probabilities. Many pupils show a sound understanding of shape and measurement, recalling angle facts to calculate unknown angles, applying Pythagoras' theorem and using the sine rule appropriately. Many pupils use their data handling skills suitably, constructing graphs accurately and drawing appropriate lines of best fit. A few more able pupils demonstrate strong numeracy skills in algebra, for example factorising quadratic expressions and rationalising surds confidently. However, a minority of pupils have weak numeracy skills, particularly in their understanding and application of the four rules, which limits their progress. A few struggle when working with negative numbers or dividing fractions by whole numbers. In a minority of cases, pupils do not organise their work carefully enough or lay out their calculations logically, which affects the accuracy and clarity of their responses. Overall, pupils do not have enough meaningful opportunities to apply their numeracy skills across the curriculum.

The majority of pupils make adequate progress in their Welsh lessons. They demonstrate a good understanding when listening and respond appropriately using basic sentence structures and pronouncing words correctly. Overall, however, due to very few opportunities for pupils to respond or speak in Welsh, most lack confidence to communicate in the language. The majority of pupils read short and basic Welsh texts suitably and are successful in gathering information from them. A majority of pupils write accurately. They structure their sentences correctly and paragraph appropriately. In general, however, pupils are over-reliant on vocabulary lists and sentence builders given to them by their teachers when writing. A very few pupils communicate naturally and confidently using an extended vocabulary when speaking Welsh. They interpret a range of reading material well. When they write, they write with accuracy and enrich their work with idioms and style features to make it more interesting.

The school promotes the Welsh language and culture suitably. Partnerships with organisations such as the Urdd and Menter Iaith enrich pupils' experiences beyond the classroom, for example through residential visits to Glan Llyn. The 'Cryw Cymraeg' also plays an active role in promoting the language by organising events such as 'Diwrnod Santes Dwynwen' and 'Dydd Miwsig Cymru'.

In computer science lessons, pupils have suitable opportunities to develop their digital competency skills and many develop these skills appropriately. For example, pupils use coding skills to design their own computer game, and in Year 7 they use formulae in spreadsheets and create charts and graphs to analyse the sales in a fictional business, 'Cocoa Haven Confections'. Pupils also develop their digital skills in a few other subjects, for example in drama where they use technology to film and edit trailers for films.

When given opportunities, pupils develop their creative skills well. For example, they experiment with materials to create contrast and visual effect in art and design outdoor areas in design technology. They also develop fine motor skills effectively when producing practical outcomes, such as mobile phone holders, and demonstrate good spatial awareness during invasion games in physical education.

Curriculum

The school has developed its vision for its curriculum through purposeful consultation with pupils and staff. Pupils benefit from opportunities to explore and understand their local area, Wales and the wider world. This work is supported well by a wide range of enrichment activities and clubs, including language, cultural and creative opportunities, which celebrate the language, culture and heritage of the school community and beyond.

In the core subjects, leaders have collaborated with partner primary schools to support progression and continuity in pupils' learning. In a few Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs), planning takes suitable account of pupils' prior learning and identifies desired progression in subject knowledge, understanding and skills clearly.

The school offers a broad range of options for pupils in Years 10 and 11 and the sixth form, including a suitable range of vocational courses. In some cases, these opportunities are enhanced through partnerships with other providers and E-Sgol. However, the curriculum for Year 9 pupils is currently too narrow due to the introduction of the options process at the end of Year 8.

Provision for personal and social education is comprehensive and responsive to emerging needs and current societal issues. Leaders use survey data effectively to inform planning and targeted actions, for example in response to pupils' concerns about vaping and body image.

The curriculum covers a broad and well-considered range of themes linked to equality and diversity, including respect, rights, equity and challenging prejudice. It is well resourced and enriched through valuable activities and contributions from third sector organisations. Staff benefit from purposeful professional learning that equips them well to address issues such as healthy relationships with confidence. Teachers create a safe and supportive environment where pupils can discuss sensitive issues openly. They work with pupils to establish clear ground rules and help pupils identify appropriate sources of support, reinforcing the importance of confidentiality and respectful discussion.

Pupils have regular opportunities to explore social, emotional and mental health issues and learn about healthy lifestyles across the curriculum. This includes, for example, weekly food and nutrition lessons in Years 7 and 8 and targeted mental health projects in other subjects.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Crickhowell High School is a caring, supportive, and inclusive community, where pupils show a strong sense of pride and belonging. The recently updated behaviour policy promotes positive behaviour and is underpinned by the '3Rs' - Ready for Learning, Respectful to All, Responsible and Safe. The regular tracking of behaviour results in timely interventions, and staff use pupil support plans well. Although restorative approaches are effective and repeat referrals are reducing, implementation of the behaviour policy is not consistent across all staff.

The school has well-established transition arrangements to help pupils settle quickly. Partnerships with other schools allow the smooth transfer of pastoral and academic data across all key transition points. Generally, parents feel that their children are well supported through this process. Pupils benefit from a range of appropriate activities to inform their future choices including impartial advice, seminars and university links. Year 10 pupils value the opportunity to undertake work experience which allows them to gain real life experience and develop their wider skills.

The school provides a wide range of useful pupil leadership opportunities which develop pupils' confidence, communication and leadership skills while enabling them to influence the life of the school. For example, the student council introduced the positive points reward shop and the eco committee secured grant funding for their greenhouse project. Leaders use pupil views effectively to inform improvement. When pupils raise concerns about their well-being, leaders respond promptly with targeted mentoring and support. As a result, peer mentoring is highly valued across the school community.

Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is purposeful and well established. Leaders promote equality and diversity well through staff training and by

establishing a pupil-led 'Equality Steering Group'. Inclusive initiatives include support during Ramadan, a multi-faith room and an active LGBTQ+ group, which contribute meaningfully to pupils' sense of belonging.

The school promotes the importance of good attendance well, for example, through the regular attendance bulletins shared with families. Leaders take a strategic approach to improving attendance and have clarified roles and responsibilities. They analyse attendance data carefully, including for vulnerable groups, and have introduced a structured response to persistent absence. Despite this work, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent increased in 2024-2025. Over the last two years, overall attendance has improved. However, the rate of improvement has been slower than that seen in similar schools and across Wales, and attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Leaders have created a strong culture of safeguarding. Most pupils feel safe and understand the procedures in place and which staff they can approach for support. The reporting system on the 'Speak up app', which enables pupils to raise concerns with staff at any time, is accessible and well understood by pupils. Leaders respond swiftly and appropriately to incidents of bullying if they occur and the safeguarding team act promptly on concerns, making necessary referrals to outside agencies. Staff understand their responsibilities regarding safeguarding, and all staff and governors receive appropriate training.

The ALN team support pupils effectively and have a secure understanding of their needs. They build strong relationships that help address pupils' emotional, social and behavioural needs and ensure that they are ready to learn. The team coordinate interventions effectively and provide helpful programmes for individual pupils and small groups to develop their social, literacy and numeracy skills. However, leaders do not evaluate the impact of these interventions well enough.

The school has well established procedures to get to know pupils' needs early through the transition process. The enhanced transition programme offers additional opportunities for pupils with ALN to visit the school after hours and during holidays, helping to reduce anxiety and build confidence. Centrally accessible one-page profiles provide staff with valuable information to support pupils effectively. Leaders also provide helpful training to staff, such as the current focus on adaptive teaching for all learners. However, this approach is not used consistently well by all staff.

Leading and improving

The headteacher has made a positive impact on the school in the six months since he took up the position. He is open, reflective and pragmatic, and his approach has galvanised the school community to improve. He has begun to change the school's culture through his

insistence that staff should 'do the basics and do them well'. The headteacher communicates well with parents through regular newsletters. He has refined the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders to make them clear, equitable and focused on individuals' strengths. As a result, senior leaders are beginning to take a more strategic approach and are developing their capacity to support improvement. Together they have brought about important improvements in the school's culture of safeguarding, pupil behaviour and aspects of teaching. However, they have not had enough impact on national priorities, such as attendance and mitigating the impact of poverty on pupils' attainment or on reducing the school's deficit budget.

Senior leaders have focused on a small number of key priorities, including developing leadership at all levels and improving specific aspects of teaching. These are well understood by staff and provide a suitable framework for improvement planning. Leaders pay due attention to staff well-being when considering and implementing change. Senior leaders have put systems in place to bring greater consistency and rigour to processes like quality assurance and professional development. As a result, some aspects of practice have improved, such as how well the majority of middle leaders work with their teams. The headteacher has strengthened accountability across the school and deals robustly with underperformance. However, there continues to be too much variability in the way that senior and middle leaders hold staff to account and line management meetings are too focused on operational matters.

Leaders have reviewed and refined their calendar of quality assurance processes appropriately. This includes beneficial activities which provide useful first-hand evidence about the school's work. Directors of Learning are beginning to contribute positively to these processes and identify broad strengths and areas for improvement. Progress leaders are starting to gather first-hand evidence within their areas of responsibility, although this work is at an early stage.

Leaders' self-evaluation processes do not always draw sharply enough on the evidence gathered through quality assurance activities. As a result, evaluations do not identify strengths or areas for improvement with sufficient clarity or precision to support strategic planning. Generally, Directors of Learning identify appropriate subject specific priorities, although there is variation in how precisely they plan for identified areas for improvement. Leaders rely too much on examination outcomes but do not analyse the performance of different groups of learners closely enough. In addition, there is insufficient focus on pupils' progress and the impact of teaching on standards, skills and well-being.

Leaders have established a suitable culture of professional learning that aligns broadly with the school's development priorities. Many staff report that they have access to worthwhile professional learning and appropriate opportunities to collaborate and share

practice. However, opportunities to develop middle leaders' leadership skills are inconsistent, and leaders do not evaluate the impact of professional learning well enough.

Crickhowell High School is a lead school for Initial Teacher Education and, as a result, staff in the school benefit from their links to higher education and research strategies.

The school is beginning to develop its provision for pupils eligible for free school meals and those from low-income households by raising staff awareness and through appropriate support. However, the school's use of the pupil development grant is not planned or evaluated with sufficient precision and, as a result, its impact is limited.

Governors are enthusiastic and committed supporters of the school. They are beginning to use the detailed information they receive to question senior leaders robustly about a few aspects of the school's work, such as the management of change process. They are beginning to gather more first-hand evidence about teaching and learning through the link governor and faculty review processes.

The school has a large deficit budget. Despite careful monitoring and difficult decision-making by the headteacher, business manager and governors, the school's agreed deficit recovery plan does not provide a secure route to balancing the budget.

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 is in a significant budget deficit. The headteacher and the business manager is working with the governing body and the local authority to work on reducing the increase in the deficit budget.

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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