

A report on

Heolddu Comprehensive School

**Mountain Road
Bargoed
CF81 8XL**

Date of inspection: March 2026

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

About Heolddu Comprehensive School

Name of provider	Heolddu Comprehensive School
Local authority	Caerphilly County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	724
Pupils of statutory school age	654
Number in sixth form	70
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%)	33.3%
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%)	20.3%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	0.8%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	Yes
Date of headteacher appointment	29/04/2019
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	22/05/2018

Start date of inspection	09/03/2026
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Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website:
mylocalschool.gov.wales

- a. The term 'additional learning needs' is being used to describe those pupils on the SEN/ALN register of the school.

Summary

Heolddu Comprehensive School is a caring and inclusive community where most pupils feel safe, valued and supported to succeed. Pupils benefit from a strong culture of care that is evident in the positive relationships they develop with staff and with one another. Nearly all pupils show respect towards teachers, visitors and their peers, and most behave well in lessons. Many pupils, including those with additional learning needs, approach their work with diligence, develop independence and make appropriate progress in their learning.

Staff at all levels have a secure understanding of pupils' individual needs and provide effective academic and pastoral support. This is particularly evident in the purposeful work of staff supporting pupils with additional learning needs (ALN), who help many pupils overcome barriers to learning and engage positively with school life.

Leaders place a strong emphasis on teaching and learning. This includes strong individual support through coaching and professional discussion. As a result, in many lessons, teachers plan tasks which build incrementally, use questioning to deepen pupils' understanding and adapt the pace to support learning. In a minority of cases, pupils make strong progress. In these instances, teachers inspire strong enthusiasm for subjects and create a culture where pupils are expected to participate fully and complete work to a high standard. While teachers provide suitable opportunities for pupils to apply their skills across the curriculum, they do not always ensure that these skills develop progressively as pupils move through the school.

The school promotes pupils' well-being through a strong safeguarding culture and a well-planned personal and social education programme that helps pupils understand healthy relationships and respect diversity. Staff monitor attendance carefully and work closely with pupils and families to address concerns. As a result, attendance for all groups of pupils is better than that in similar schools.

The Learning Pathways Centre provides high-quality support for pupils unable to engage fully in mainstream education. Effective care, support and partnership working help pupils improve attendance, build confidence and engage with learning. Its broad and purposeful curriculum enables pupils to make strong progress. Leadership uses resources well to meet pupils' diverse needs and drive improvement.

Strong and purposeful leadership underpins the work of the school. The headteacher provides a clear and ambitious vision for improving pupils' outcomes through 'The Heolddu Way'. This vision is shared effectively across the school community, contributing

to a cohesive and collaborative approach to evaluation. As a result, staff, governors and partners work together well to strengthen provision and support pupils' progress.

Although the school's reflective and collaborative evaluation processes help leaders to identify strengths and areas for improvement, improvement planning is not always sufficiently precise.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Refine improvement planning to address the few areas for development identified in this inspection.
- R2 Continue to refine provision to support the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum.

What happens next

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

Estyn will invite the school to prepare two case studies on its work in relation to securing improved attendance for all groups of pupils and a collaborative approach to developing leadership across the school for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Pupils' positive attitudes to learning are a notable strength of Heolddu Comprehensive School. Nearly all teachers establish strong working relationships with pupils and use helpful classroom routines to engage them in learning. Most pupils display high levels of respect for their teachers, visitors and peers. Many pupils work well independently and complete tasks with diligence, whilst demonstrating interest in their learning.

Leaders and staff place a strong emphasis on providing effective teaching and raising the aspirations of their pupils. In many lessons, pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), recall their prior learning well and make secure progress. In these lessons, teachers:

- plan appropriately to support pupils' learning and think carefully about how tasks build incrementally on each other
- provide clear explanations and instructions
- match the pace of the lesson to pupils' learning
- question pupils suitably to develop and improve their understanding.

In a minority of these lessons, teaching is particularly strong and enables pupils to make secure progress. In these lessons, teachers plan closely for pupils' specific knowledge and skills. They communicate clear enthusiasm for their subjects, which motivates pupils. These teachers set very high expectations of pupils' engagement, creating a culture where every pupil is expected to participate and challenge themselves. They plan carefully for pupils' learning and use modelling effectively to exemplify high-quality outcomes and plan deliberately to expose and address pupils' misconceptions. They assess pupils' understanding skilfully and adapt teaching promptly to deepen pupils' understanding and move pupils on. As a result, pupils develop confidence, secure knowledge and make strong progress.

In a few lessons, pupils make only limited progress. In these cases, teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve and often overdirect learning. These teachers allow pupils to remain passive in lessons and miss opportunities to help them develop their skills.

The school has established a clear approach to providing helpful feedback for pupils. Most teachers actively circulate classrooms and provide helpful verbal prompts to maintain pupils' engagement in learning. In many cases, teachers also provide precise verbal feedback that has a notable impact on pupils' learning. In a majority of instances, teachers

provide helpful written feedback. Pupils respond positively to this, making helpful improvements to their work.

Most sixth form pupils engage well with their learning and interact positively with their peers, sharing their ideas confidently. They speak about their work using subject specific vocabulary purposefully and talk knowledgeably about how their work may support their future career choices. They are keen to make progress and embrace feedback. They act maturely, demonstrating positive attitudes to learning and show genuine respect for one another and staff. Sixth form pupils demonstrate an enthusiasm and determination to improve and collectively help to create an effective learning environment where everyone feels encouraged to succeed.

Skills

The school has a strong focus on improving provision for the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills. This includes a 'coaching' approach for the teaching of skills. Here targeted departments and whole school professional learning focuses on the development of specific aspects of skills teaching such as reading and data handling. Whilst this approach has helped to ensure that pupils have suitable opportunities to apply these skills across the curriculum, it has not enabled pupils to progressively develop their skills over time well enough.

Most pupils listen attentively and show respect for both teachers and their peers. Many respond effectively to teachers' questions and provide extended verbal answers, explaining their views clearly and supporting their points logically. A few pupils are particularly confident and articulate speakers, offering sophisticated and detailed responses. For example, when they define and explain complex terms or phrases used by the poet Owen Sheers. A few pupils give brief or underdeveloped answers and do not always participate fully in discussions.

Many pupils locate and select information efficiently and summarise key points from texts accurately. They often use inference and deduction successfully to interpret basic meaning from various texts, images and infographics. Many pupils compare and contrast information effectively to identify similarities and differences in themes and viewpoints. For example, in history pupils compare how coal-mining communities have developed and changed over time. In English, many pupils analyse literary texts appropriately. They support their ideas with relevant quotations and explore the writer's use of language in detail. In subjects across the curriculum, a few advanced reading skills, such as analysis and evaluation, are less well developed.

When given the opportunity, many pupils structure their written work effectively and demonstrate a secure understanding of purpose and audience. They adapt tone and

format appropriately and use subject-specific terminology accurately. These pupils can present well-reasoned arguments for and against a topic, such as when they discuss the importance of equality in religion, values and ethics lessons. A few pupils produce writing that is particularly engaging and use sophisticated language to capture the reader's interest. A minority of pupils make repeated spelling and grammatical errors in their writing.

Many pupils have sound number skills and work with the four rules of number competently. For example, when they consider the order of operations when performing calculations related to the speed of objects. These pupils round numbers to the nearest decimal place accurately. The majority of pupils work confidently with algebra, for example when rearranging and solving equations, expanding brackets and collecting like terms. Most pupils calculate the area and perimeter of basic shapes well. Around half work effectively with more challenging aspects, such as calculating the area and volume of complex shapes and finding angles in parallel lines. Many pupils accurately construct a range of graphs. For example, when they investigate light dependent resistors. However, only in a few cases do they analyse graphs sufficiently.

Many pupils develop their digital skills suitably within their information and communication technology lessons (ICT) and across the curriculum. For example, they work well independently with databases and create their own spreadsheets to meet a specific purpose, such as evidencing profit and loss in a business. Pupils also use their coding skills appropriately to design online games for a range of audiences.

Cymraeg

In general, pupils display a positive attitude towards the Welsh language. When given the opportunity, the majority of pupils pronounce Welsh words clearly and accurately. They use the engaging displays and purposeful learning walls to help them structure their answers and express their opinions in Welsh. A few pupils use verbs and tenses accurately when they converse independently. However, pupils often over-rely on sentence builders and lack exposure to the spoken language. The school provides pupils with suitable opportunities to develop their appreciation of their Welsh heritage and culture. For example, through workshops held by the Welsh National Opera company. The 'Cryw Cymraeg' encourages peers and staff to speak Welsh and support language initiatives and celebrations such as 'Diwrnod Shwmae, Su'mae' and 'Dydd Santes Dwynwen'.

Curriculum

The school has a clear and well-considered vision for the curriculum, based on the three pillars of 'learning, community and knowledge'. The school maintains a strong focus on subject knowledge while encouraging authentic connections between departments to

support and enhance learning. This includes collaboration between design technology and science which helps pupils understand and apply concepts such as velocity and aerodynamics in real life situations.

The school works closely with partner primary schools to develop its curriculum, including through joint work scrutiny and collaborative professional learning on curriculum design. This is helping to secure continuity in learning for pupils as they transition to the school.

In Years 10 and 11, pupils access a broad range of subject choices, including a strong vocational offer. Effective work with a neighbouring school provides pupils with a broad range of options in the sixth form. Pupils generally receive timely and valuable information to support them in making informed decisions about their future choices, including through joint open evenings for sixth form pupils at a local venue.

The school has a strong approach to providing opportunities for more able and talented pupils. These pupils benefit from a wide range of enrichment experiences, including links to employers, advice on post-16 choices and a programme of events to inspire and enthuse them about their future. This programme is used flexibly to raise the aspirations of pupils who are showing the potential to achieve highly but might require some additional support and motivation.

Pupils benefit from an extensive programme of extra-curricular activities to broaden their horizons and enrich their curriculum. These include sporting, cultural and educational activities. For example, a group visit to the Etihad Stadium to find out about a building project led by a local company.

The school has a strong and well-planned programme to support pupils' personal and social development. It supports their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development well, making them aware of matters such as social responsibility, moral choice and personal reflection. The importance of having a healthy lifestyle is promoted well across the curriculum. In addition, pupils benefit from rich opportunities to develop their understanding of their heritage, community and culture and to broaden their understanding of diversity and identity. This includes the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

The school is a caring, warm and inclusive community that provides effective guidance and support for its pupils. Staff know their pupils well and work effectively together to provide high quality support for pupils' well-being, in line with the values of the school. As a result, most pupils behave well and are friendly and polite to each other and visitors. When necessary, the pastoral team provides personalised support, including working with

outside agencies and communicating effectively with families. This helps vulnerable pupils to successfully engage with their learning.

The school has clear processes to deal promptly with any instances of bullying. As a result, most pupils do not feel bullied in school. In addition, there is a strong approach to supporting pupils' behaviour, which has helped to ensure that most pupils behave well in lessons and around the school site. There is a wide range of extra-curricular clubs and trips in which nearly all pupils participate. Staff work well to ensure that groups of pupils, particularly those eligible for free school meals, receive equitable opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities.

Spotlight 1: Effective transition to meet the changing needs of pupils

A significant strength of the school's provision is its well-established 'onboarding' process for Year 6-7 transition. This support ensures pupils quickly understand and feel part of the ethos and culture of Heolddu. Through early immersion via a summer induction programme, pupils develop a strong sense of belonging and confidence, enabling them to settle rapidly and engage positively with learning. This transition programme is carefully planned and reviewed through a clear roadmap of activities that is adapted to meet pupils' changing academic, social and emotional needs. A helpful transition guide, developed with pupils, supports them to understand and manage their feelings about change and reflects the school's strong well-being ethos. Parents value this approach, with feedback on transition arrangements being very positive. Support for transition for older pupils is equally effective. The Year 9 options process is thorough and inclusive, offering a broad range of academic and vocational pathways. Helpful parents' evenings, alongside subject guidance and vocational visits, enable pupils and families to make informed and appropriate choices. This focus on developing effective transition contributes to good attendance by pupils across the school.

Pupils benefit from a wide range of opportunities to develop their leadership skills, such as through the school Senedd, sports leaders and ambassador programmes. The school promotes equity and inclusion by encouraging pupils from all groups to take on leadership responsibilities. Pupil leaders gather information from a wide range of sources and represent their peers confidently. They work successfully with senior leaders to secure improvements, such as supporting period dignity and broadening the school's extra-curricular offer. Pupils have recently extended their leadership roles to influence the wider community. For example, by promoting the roles of young carers and addressing issues facing young people through the 'Caerphilly Youth Forum'.

The provision for pupils with ALN is a notable strength. The ALN team promotes a strong inclusive ethos and focuses on the removal of barriers to learning. They have a clear understanding of pupils' individual starting points and track their progress in literacy,

numeracy, well-being and social communication closely. ALN provision is centred around the 'HUB', which provides a supportive and purposeful space for pupils.

Spotlight 2: The 'HUB' centralised support for pupils' well-being, progress and engagement

The 'HUB' is a highly effective, centralised provision that plays a pivotal role in supporting pupils' well-being, engagement and progress. By bringing a wide range of targeted support together in one carefully managed space, leaders ensure that pupils receive swift, coordinated and personalised intervention that is closely aligned to their individual needs. Provision includes a breakfast club, sensory support and bespoke arrangements for vulnerable pupils, all delivered within a nurturing and purposeful environment.

Staff working in the 'HUB' know pupils exceptionally well and use detailed tracking systems to monitor attendance, frequency of use, subjects affected and reasons for referral. This enables leaders and staff to evaluate impact well, revisit individual pupil plans where necessary and target follow-up support effectively. Clear systems, such as time-out cards and provision mapping, ensure that pupils are supported promptly while maintaining a strong focus on keeping them in lessons wherever possible. Practical adaptations, such as supported access for pupils who find busy environments challenging, further remove barriers to learning.

A broad and purposeful range of targeted interventions enables pupils to make good progress from their starting points. One-page profiles, provision maps and class profiles are used well to ensure that staff understand pupils' needs and plan appropriately for them. Pupils with ALN benefit from a wide, bespoke curriculum offer, including opportunities such as Phoenix Fire Safety, Crucial Crew and life-skills pathways, which prepare them well for their next steps. Effective communication with parents through coffee mornings, show-and-tell events and transparent information-sharing fosters positive relationships.

Leaders have made improving attendance a strong priority, and staff at all levels embrace this shared mission. They share the importance of regular attendance effectively, including through rewards and incentives. The school has a strong culture of support, collaboration and early intervention, and leaders track and monitor pupil attendance rates forensically. The school has implemented a comprehensive range of strategies to improve pupils' attendance and as a result for the last three years more pupils have regularly attended school. Between 2022-2023 and 2024-2025, attendance rates of the school improved well, including those of pupils eligible for free school meals, being above the national average and above that of similar schools. Persistent absence is notably lower than in similar schools particularly for the last two years.

The school has a strong culture of safeguarding, which means that most pupils feel safe in school. Staff record and respond to any safeguarding concerns robustly. Leaders ensure that staff receive regular and comprehensive safeguarding training, including specialist training for designated staff and governors. The safeguarding team works effectively with families and external agencies when required. Leaders have worked effectively to build their safeguarding culture through well-planned curriculum provision for bullying, discrimination and healthy relationships.

The Learning Pathways Centre (LPC)

The LPC provides high quality provision for pupils who have not been able to successfully attend or engage with mainstream education. The centre provides helpful support for pupils to engage with learning. It provides a broad and purposeful curriculum and enables older pupils to gain meaningful qualifications that help with their next steps. This centre provides high quality teaching and support that enables most pupils to make strong progress from their starting points. Most pupils behave well and are highly engaged in their learning.

Robust systems and processes ensure pupils have effective care, support and guidance. Staff work well with outside agencies to support pupils to transition smoothly into this provision. The LPC has a notable impact on improving pupils' attendance rates. The provision also helps pupils to build their confidence and gain a strong awareness of the contributions they can make to their community.

Leadership of the LPC is effective. Leaders know the strengths and areas for improvement in this provision well and regularly consider how they can secure further improvements. They deploy their resources effectively to support pupils' broad range of needs.

Leading and improving

The headteacher provides calm, considered and decisive leadership. She sets high expectations and maintains a relentless focus on securing her vision of driving 'The Heolddu way' to raise aspirations and outcomes for all. This vision is well understood by staff and underpins all decision making, so that it is in the best interests of pupils. The headteacher considers carefully the well-being of pupils and staff, alongside the needs of the local community. She has established a cohesive and effective senior leadership team and works closely with them, understanding their individual strengths and professional priorities, whilst supporting and challenging them effectively. Leaders have established a strong collaborative culture of improvement, which is a notable strength.

The roles and responsibilities of senior leaders are clear, distributed equitably and matched closely to individual strengths. Senior leaders work well together and have established strong working relationships with all staff. They generally support and

challenge middle leaders effectively. As a result, most middle leaders understand their roles well, and many have secured important improvements in aspects of their work, such as teaching, behaviour and pupil outcomes.

Leaders at all levels carry out a wide range of self-evaluation activities, including precise evaluations of external data, to establish a clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Senior leaders provide middle leaders with helpful support and guidance regarding this aspect of their role. Leaders generally identify the strengths and areas most in need of improvement in their work robustly. However, improvement planning is not always precise enough, in particular in relation to improving the provision for the progressive development of pupils' skills.

Leaders have secured strong improvements in a number of national priorities and many aspects of the school's work, including the quality of teaching, behaviour, attendance and outcomes for pupils, particularly those eligible for free school meals. The school supports the well-being and attainment of pupils from low-income households effectively through a wide range of strategies, including practical support with the cost of school life, and mentoring and tuition for pupils and their families. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals has been above that of their counterparts in similar schools over the last three years, and the attendance of this group of pupils has improved notably in the same time period.

Governors are keen supporters of the school and have reflected well on how they can improve aspects of their work. They are highly engaged in school life and maintain strong links with leaders at all levels. They are developing a broad understanding of many aspects of the school's work and offer suitable levels of challenge around aspects such as finance and attendance. Their role in challenging aspects, such as the quality of teaching, is in the earlier stages of development.

Performance development and review processes are clear and well understood by staff. Staff value the broad range of professional learning the school provides. In particular, they benefit greatly from the bespoke support provided through the school's coaching programme. The school is a lead school for Initial Teacher Education and has used this to support the professional development of staff.

The school works productively with parents and the community and communicates with them effectively. There are valuable opportunities for families to visit the school and meet with staff and senior leaders. This includes, for example, the senior leader drop-in sessions, where parents and carers can informally raise any pertinent issues.

The head teacher, business manager and governors monitor the school's budget carefully. They make effective use of their available resources and prioritise providing pupils with a

positive learning environment. The school makes diligent use of grant funding, including the pupil development grant, and evaluates this spending appropriately.

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 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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