



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on
Cowbridge Comprehensive School
Aberthin Road
Cowbridge
CF71 7EN

Date of inspection: April 2019

by

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

About Cowbridge Comprehensive School

Cowbridge Comprehensive School is an English-medium 11 to 18 school in the Vale of Glamorgan. There are 1,521 pupils on roll including 335 pupils in the sixth form, compared with 1,448 at the time of the last inspection. The school is situated on the outskirts of Cowbridge town where, along with the surrounding villages, most pupils come from.

Around 4% of pupils are eligible for free school meals which is considerably lower than the national average of 16.4% for secondary schools in Wales. Around 4% of pupils live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales.

Around 1% of pupils have statements of special educational needs compared with 2.5% for Wales as a whole. Close to 8% of pupils have a special educational need, which is lower than the national average of 19.2%.

Most pupils are from a white British background. Around 2% of pupils speak English as an additional language. A very few pupils speak Welsh at home.

The headteacher has been in post since April 2012. The current leadership team is made up of the headteacher, a deputy headteacher, three assistant headteachers, three associate assistant headteachers and the business manager.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website at the link below.
<http://mylocalschool.wales.gov.uk/Schools/SchoolSearch?lang=en>

Summary

Strong, assured leadership, careful curriculum planning and consistently effective teaching to educate and inspire young people have been successful in securing exceptionally high levels of pupil attainment and wellbeing at Cowbridge Comprehensive School.

Nearly all pupils display highly positive attitudes to their learning. They are enthusiastic, resourceful and independent learners. Most show resilience in their learning and remain purposeful when faced with new challenges. Nearly all behave maturely and respectfully in lessons and around the school. They are polite towards their teachers, peers and visitors and possess a strong sense of responsibility and citizenship. The proactive school council has an outstanding impact on school life playing a key role in helping pupils to develop as confident, mature citizens.

Leadership arrangements are characterised by high levels of accountability and support, particularly through the carefully planned and highly effective programme of professional learning. A strong culture of evaluation and improvement is central to the school's work.

Inspection area	Judgement
Standards	Excellent
Wellbeing and attitudes to learning	Excellent
Teaching and learning experiences	Excellent
Care, support and guidance	Excellent
Leadership and management	Excellent

Recommendations

There are no recommendations following this inspection.

What happens next

The school will draw up an action plan that shows how it is going to maintain high standards and quality of provision.

Estyn will invite the school to prepare a case study on its work in relation to sustaining excellence, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

Main findings

Standards: Excellent

Most pupils are enthusiastic learners. They take obvious pride in their work and make strong progress in lessons. They recall previous learning well and apply this knowledge and understanding confidently in different, challenging situations. This includes using knowledge of 19th Century medicine to evaluate the impact of the National Health Service on public health, and drawing effectively upon the 'parable of the prodigal son' to discuss how Christians approach the theme of forgiveness.

Nearly all pupils listen to their teachers, and peers, with attention and respect. Many pupils, of all abilities, make thoughtful and highly articulate contributions to peer discussion. They use subject language confidently whether it be to discuss the importance of historical figures such as Aneurin Bevan and Lloyd George, or to explain the intensity of exercise. Most pupils demonstrate strong pronunciation skills in foreign languages. A few pupils ask their teacher probing questions to improve their understanding or to elicit information required to help them solve complex problems with, for example, the volume and capacity of octagonal tanks.

Many pupils use a wide range of reading strategies to support their learning. They read with good understanding of authorial intent such as Collins' creation of tension in 'The Hunger Games' and news articles comparing music of today and yesteryear. Many are able to summarise information confidently and highlight text effectively to construct independently notes on the role of technology in twentieth century medicine and to analyse perceptively historical sources such as political cartoons about prohibition.

A majority of pupils produce sophisticated, carefully crafted and engaging writing including perceptive and thoughtful analyses of literary texts and the different causes of poverty in Wales. Many write with very good control, technical accuracy and sense of audience in different forms including a blog on The Glastonbury Festival, a consideration of how effectively malaria is being tackled in sub-Saharan Africa and exposition pieces discussing the merits, or otherwise, of the internet.

Most pupils make strong progress in developing their numeracy skills across the curriculum in a wide range of worthwhile contexts. They work confidently with number and handle data and angles effectively when, for example, using bearings in geography to describe directions. Most pupils demonstrate very effective problem-solving skills and approach a wide range of real life problems with confidence such as calculating the best buys when planning a party.

Pupils use their information and communication technology (ICT) skills effectively across the curriculum, for example when calculating cost and income profit using spreadsheets. They show strong levels of creativity and originality in many aspects of their work such as using filters in photography to create pieces of work which are transparent or obscured in their appearance. Pupils in drama develop their thinking skills well to respond to questions posed by peers and devising their own questions to explore characters in 'Sweeney Todd'.

Many pupils make sound progress in their ability to communicate in Welsh, especially in writing. In 2018, many pupils achieved a level 2 qualification in the full course Welsh GCSE.

Over the last few years, performance at key stage 4 has improved steadily and been particularly strong in each of the last two. In 2018, it compares very favourably to that in similar schools and is significantly above expectations in all indicators. The proportion of pupils gaining five GCSE or equivalent grades at A*-A has increased substantially over the last three years and is a particular strength. The performance of boys and girls compares very well to that of their counterparts in similar schools and all groups of pupils make strong progress from previous key stages. At the end of Year 11, most pupils remain in full time education either in the school or a further education college.

In the sixth form most pupils make very good progress. The proportion achieving three A* or A grades and three grades at A*-C is consistently above that in similar schools. Pupils' average wider points score has been below the average for similar schools in recent years but improved in 2018 and is now slightly above.

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning: Excellent

Nearly all pupils behave maturely and respectfully in lessons and around the school. They are polite towards their teachers, peers and visitors, and possess a strong sense of responsibility and citizenship.

The proactive school council has an outstanding impact on school life. It communicates clearly with all pupils through the use of year councils and Cowbridge Comprehensive Television (CCTV). In addition, it helps to organise an extensive range of activities to raise awareness of, for example, autism and human rights. Substantial sums of money are raised for a wide range of charities including Children in Need, Jack Griffiths Memorial Garden and Red for Velindre Day. Pupils involved take pride in their role and take their responsibilities seriously.

Sixth form pupils play a significant role in leading many of the school council's activities, for example the Medics Debating group, Proactive School Community Project and the Leavers Committee. The school council is highly successful in engaging a wide range of pupils in its activities. This plays a key role in helping pupils to develop as confident, mature citizens.

Most pupils feel safe in school, know who to turn to if they have an issue and believe that the school deals effectively with any incidents of bullying that arise. They have a sound understanding of healthy eating, a positive attitude to healthy lifestyles and there are high levels of participation in sporting and other extra-curricular activities.

Nearly all pupils display highly positive attitudes to their learning. They are enthusiastic, resourceful and independent learners. Most show resilience in their learning, remaining purposeful when faced with new challenges.

Teaching and learning experiences: Excellent

Consistently effective teaching, careful curriculum planning and strong provision for the development of pupils' skills have a substantial impact on pupils' personal development, wellbeing and the standards that they achieve.

In nearly all cases, teachers' passion for their subject stimulates pupils' engagement and interest successfully. Teachers have high expectations, forge productive working relationships and establish clearly understood classroom routines that have a positive impact on pupils' wellbeing and progress. They plan carefully a wide variety of engaging activities that are matched well to pupils' abilities. These activities build successfully on pupils' prior learning and teachers ensure that pupils are able to apply their understanding well to new and challenging contexts.

In nearly all lessons, teachers strike a careful balance between developing both pupils' skills and their subject knowledge and understanding. In ethics and philosophy, for example, they reinforce successfully pupils' understanding of techniques such as similes, rhetorical questions and repetition while they write about the crucifixion.

In many cases, teaching is exceptionally effective in securing strong progress for pupils. In these lessons, teachers provide clear, imaginative explanations that make complex concepts easily comprehensible. They use an extensive range of approaches to help pupils become resilient, independent learners. In particular, they deploy highly skilful questioning techniques to challenge pupils' thinking and deepen their understanding.

Nearly all teachers monitor pupils' progress carefully in lessons. They give pupils valuable verbal feedback and address any misconceptions swiftly. The school has established clear and well-understood processes for providing pupils with written feedback and guidance. As a result, in most cases, pupils make substantial improvements to their work in light of their teachers' comments.

The school plans its curriculum carefully to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities. It offers a wide range of courses at key stage 4 and in the sixth form. The school provides Year 9 pupils with beneficial opportunities to experience a range of option choices before they select their final key stage 4 pathways.

The school adapts its curriculum well to meet the needs of individual pupils. Partnerships with other providers, for example, are used effectively to support vulnerable pupils. The school provides an extensive range of opportunities for pupils that enhance their learning experiences. It uses partnerships such as those with universities and local employers to raise the aspirations of targeted pupils. A wide range of trips and visits are also used successfully to enrich pupils' learning. For example, pupils studying construction regularly visit a local building site.

There is a suitable range of opportunities for pupils to develop their ICT skills across the curriculum. The school also provides pupils with appropriate opportunities to learn about the heritage and culture of Wales, for example by studying the work of Karl Jenkins in music.

The school has highly effective provision to support the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Across the curriculum, it provides an extensive range of challenging activities that helps pupils to apply and develop their skills in authentic contexts. The school monitors pupils' progress in skills closely. This enables it to identify pupils with weaker skills and put in place effective interventions to support their specific needs. The school's provision for supporting the development of pupils' writing skills is a notable strength and this has a significant impact on the standards that they achieve.

Care, support and guidance: Excellent

The school is a very friendly and inclusive community, where pupils and staff value and respect each other, and share high expectations. The staff are committed to meeting the individual needs of pupils and this is reflected in the high quality care and support that the school provides. As a result, pupils make strong progress in their learning and in their personal and social development.

The “Cowbridge Code” for behaviour is applied consistently across the school. This contributes to very high standards of behaviour and attitudes to learning.

The school is highly successful in encouraging a climate where pupils take an active role in decision-making. The extremely proactive school council and schemes such as the Rotary Committee and the Print Magazine offer pupils worthwhile opportunities to develop their leadership skills, community awareness and social responsibility. This is an outstanding feature of the school’s work.

Assemblies on gender equalities, registration periods which focus on current affairs and ethics and philosophy lessons around relationships and religious festivals, contribute well to pupils’ spiritual, moral and social development. The school makes suitable use of outside speakers such as Llamau and Teenage Cancer Trust to enhance the personal, social education programme. There are appropriate arrangements to promote healthy eating and drinking.

The school makes beneficial use of opportunities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and the Prince William Award to develop pupils’ aspirations, resilience and self-esteem. Pupils benefit from an extensive range of extra-curricular sporting and cultural experiences. There are numerous residential trips including to Austria and Iceland, and charity work in a township in South Africa. In addition, there are extensive musical opportunities such as the jazz band, quartets and vocal groups. Annual theatrical productions and concerts involving large numbers of pupils help them to develop their creative skills.

Staff at all levels track and monitor pupils’ progress rigorously. Teachers provide timely and helpful updates on how well pupils are progressing and on their attitudes to learning. The school’s achievement team uses this information very well to plan high quality support and suitable interventions for targeted pupils. Leaders listen carefully to the views of pupils and parents to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the reasons for actions and the expected outcomes.

The school has an effective, personalised approach to meeting pupils’ additional learning needs. In recent years, the school has refined its approach by using support staff in lessons in a focused way and by improving the quality of individual and group interventions that take place outside of lessons. Staff have easy access to useful profiles of pupils with additional learning needs and action plans that provide clear advice and guidance on how to support them effectively. The school works well with pupils, parents and external agencies in developing and reviewing individual plans to meet additional learning needs.

There are strong transition arrangements in place with local primary schools. The school reviews the current provision for pupils with additional learning needs in Year 5 to ensure that staff are ready to continue to meet the pupils' needs on arrival at secondary school, for example by training staff where necessary and working closely with families and external agencies.

The school provides useful advice and guidance for pupils at key transition points to help them make informed choices about their learning and career pathways. For example, mock interviews for pupils in Year 10 and specialist advice for vulnerable learners, in partnership with Careers Wales, enhance further the careers programme.

The school is successful in helping parents to support their child's learning and wellbeing. For example, it has hosted useful evening workshops for parents on promoting literacy and numeracy and in supporting internet safety. The school provides parents with beneficial reports on pupils' progress and wellbeing.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

Leadership and management: Excellent

The headteacher provides strong, assured leadership. She is supported well by her senior leadership team. Together, they have developed a clear vision to educate and inspire young people, and to provide them with the best possible preparation for their future lives. Staff, pupils and the governing body embrace fully the school's aims and expectations. Leadership throughout the school has contributed significantly to notable improvements in the quality of teaching, to the progress pupils make in lessons and to the examination outcomes they achieve.

Following a re-structuring of the senior leadership team, roles and responsibilities are distributed thoughtfully to make best use of individual skills and to ensure the most effective address of school and national priorities. The headteacher leads a culture of reflection and collaboration, which encourages staff to evaluate their practice and identify how they can make improvements. This has contributed well to very successful teaching and to a high level of pupil care.

Line management arrangements at all levels focus well upon the quality of teaching, pupils' progress, and the support available to ensure their wellbeing. This provides a high level of accountability and the school addresses robustly any instances of underperformance. Systems to manage the performance of staff are applied consistently and inform a well-considered programme of professional learning. Consequently, staff are challenged to improve and supported well in their work. This contributes significantly to staff feeling valued and to high staff morale.

The headteacher and senior leaders have developed a strong culture of evaluation and improvement. Leaders evaluate the school's work continuously and view every challenge or activity as an opportunity for development. Their work is supported efficiently by an established cycle of self-evaluation that draws upon an extensive range of first-hand evidence. As a result, leaders have a precise understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development.

Leaders at all levels use data strategically to identify improvement priorities. They also use data highly effectively to plan for and review interventions to address individual underperformance. Joint lesson observations and reviews of pupils' work between senior and middle leaders focus closely on the impact of teaching and assessment on pupils' progress and skills. These activities are used highly successfully to develop a strong professional dialogue around how to achieve high quality provision. Steps to address shortcomings are agreed collaboratively and this ensures staff commitment at all levels.

Pupils have extensive opportunities to share their opinions on the quality of the school's work through a wide range of pupil surveys and weekly meetings between the headteacher, the head boy and head girl to consider issues raised by the school council. Leadership, including the governing body, responds robustly to these and other findings.

Leaders reflect thoughtfully on the findings of all self-evaluation activities. They monitor closely the impact of actions taken to address shortcomings and make relevant adjustments.

The school has developed a carefully planned and highly effective programme of professional learning. Activities align closely to individual, departmental, school and national priorities. In particular, an extensive 'menu' of development opportunities provides staff with valuable support for specific training needs. Feedback from staff is used well to both plan and evaluate professional learning activities. The school ensures that staff have a wide range of opportunities to share good practice both within and across subject areas. Professional learning activities contribute successfully to improvements in the effectiveness of teaching.

Senior leaders manage the school budget very well, and the school uses its resources very efficiently. The school generates successfully additional income and uses this to meet its main priorities, and enhance its provision, particularly by delivering its 'dream big, dream bigger' list of capital projects. For example, the school recently used self-generated funds to build a new reception area which has improved the welcome that visitors receive, together with the security and safety of the site and provided valuable spaces for staff to meet with parents and visitors. The school has recently improved the social experience for pupils by building an outside cafeteria patio for the sixth form and provide shelter over an existing outdoor dining area.

The school manages carefully the financial risks associated with its income generation. Senior leaders and governors monitor the budget tightly and take appropriate action where necessary. The school has a clear financial plan for the medium and long term to ensure that actions are affordable and sustainable.

When setting budgets and making spending decisions, leaders are focused sharply on the impact on vulnerable pupils. Leaders use the pupil development grant and the schools' own funds to maximise opportunities for these pupils to make good progress in their learning and to participate fully in the life of the school. For example, they are supported to learn musical instruments and take part in school trips. This helps this group of pupils to progress successfully into further education, employment or training.

Governors play an important role in setting the school's strategic vision. They have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and improvement priorities, and offer valuable support and challenge to leaders.

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

Estyn evaluates a provider's effectiveness using a four-point judgement scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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 going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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