



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

A report on

Ferndale Community School

**Excelsior Terrace
Ferndale
Rhondda Cynon Taf
CF43 4AR**

Date of inspection: October 2024

by

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

About Ferndale Community School

Name of provider	Ferndale Community School
Local authority	Rhondda Cynon Taf 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	646
Pupils of statutory school age	646
Number in sixth form	0
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 21.1%)	33.7%
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 11.2%)	8.7%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.3%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.4%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/01/2020
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/10/2017
Start date of inspection	07/10/2024

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

Ferndale Community School combines high quality care, support and guidance with effective teaching and learning experiences. As a result, most pupils engage positively with their teachers and peers, and many make secure progress in their learning. The school is highly inclusive and has a range of successful alternative provisions, such as the 'Gorsaf Wên' additional learning needs (ALN) class. Positive and trusting working relationships, between all members of the school community, are a notable feature of the school's success.

Leaders and teachers provide pupils with a carefully designed curriculum. In collaboration with its partner primary schools, the school has developed a clear vision for the development of its Curriculum for Wales. The importance of high-quality teaching is central to this vision. In general, teachers use their strong subject knowledge to encourage pupils to want to know more and give pupils useful feedback on how to improve their work. In the most effective lessons, teachers ask probing questions that deepen pupils' knowledge and understanding. While there are opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills during lessons, the strategic planning for this aspect of curriculum remains underdeveloped.

The school's focus on supporting pupils' well-being is a notable strength. Leaders have forged strong links across the local community and the school works effectively with a range of partners to enhance the support available to pupils. In recent years, leaders have focused their efforts appropriately on improving pupils' attendance through a range of positive strategies. While this has led to some improvements, the rate of attendance remains too low.

The headteacher, supported by governors and his newly appointed senior team, has created an environment of high expectations of what pupils can achieve. Leaders focus purposefully on addressing national priorities, such as reducing the impact of deprivation. Self-evaluation and improvement planning activities are well-embedded across the school. However, a few aspects of self-evaluation are not precise enough to support improvement fully. Leaders have developed a strong culture of safeguarding, which permeates all aspects of the school's work.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Improve attendance
- R2 Strengthen the strategic coordination for the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum
- R3 Refine self-evaluation and improvement planning processes so that they have a consistently sharp focus on the impact of provision on pupils' learning and well-being

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

The school's curriculum

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum. Leaders work effectively with local primary schools to ensure that the curriculum builds suitably on pupils' prior learning. The school adapts its curriculum successfully through a number of alternative provisions, such as the 'Tŷ Calon' nurture class and the 'Gorsaf Wên', which enables all pupils to engage in their learning and gain worthwhile qualifications. At Key Stage 4, pupils choose from a suitable range of courses, including vocational options such as construction, vehicle maintenance and engineering.

Leaders have worked with all members of the school community in developing a clear vision for its Curriculum for Wales. The school's approach is centred upon its core principles of 'Believe – Achieve – Succeed' and is underpinned by a strong focus on effective teaching and learning. Staff continue to evaluate and adapt their approaches sensibly, making purposeful refinements to improve learning experiences for pupils. In the 'Gorsaf Wên', the curriculum is delivered through authentic experiences that engage pupils well in their learning. For example, in expressive arts teachers have adapted a unit of work to make it more accessible by including comic heroes, and in science and technology pupils have designed and built a garden area for a local crèche.

The personal and social education (PSE) programme is well coordinated and provides pupils with valuable age-appropriate opportunities to learn about a broad range of relevant themes. These themes take account of the views of pupils and the needs of the local community. For example, the school works with the local health authority and the youth service to raise awareness of important aspects of health and well-being. The PSE programme is further enriched by activities during 'family form time' and assemblies, which help pupils develop their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding well.

There are beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop an appreciation of Welsh culture and heritage. For example, pupils enjoy celebrating Diwrnod Shwmae Su' mae and Dydd Santes Dwynwen and participate in an annual Eisteddfod.

The school provides a suitable range of extra-curricular activities including academic, sporting and cultural clubs, and many pupils value the opportunities on offer. The school works effectively to enhance this provision through its partnership with the local authority youth service.

Teaching and its impact on learning

Nearly all teachers develop positive and caring working relationships with their classes, built on mutual respect. They know their pupils well and, in most cases, have high expectations of their behaviour and engagement in learning. As a result, most pupils are courteous, warm and friendly as they interact with their teachers, visitors and other pupils. Many participate actively and enthusiastically in lessons and make secure progress in their learning. Most pupils with additional learning needs (ALN), including those who attend the 'Gorsaf Wên', make good progress from their starting points.

Nearly all teachers have strong subject knowledge, and most help pupils develop their use of key terms and vocabulary purposefully. These teachers are enthusiastic about their subjects and plan their lessons carefully, so that they have opportunities to evaluate the progress pupils make throughout the lesson. Most teachers ask suitable questions to check pupils' recall and understanding.

A minority of teaching is highly effective. Where this is the case, teachers use questioning skilfully to probe pupils' understanding and develop their thinking more deeply. They identify misconceptions swiftly, and they encourage pupils to develop as independent learners. In these lessons, pupils make particularly strong progress in their learning and benefit from the significant support and challenge they receive from their teachers.

Many teachers plan engaging activities which build well upon pupils' prior knowledge. They provide pupils with clear explanations and model work effectively to support pupils' learning. In the 'Gorsaf Wên' staff plan experiences and resources to meet the individual learning needs and interests of pupils well, and in mainstream lessons pupils with ALN benefit from worthwhile targeted support from teaching assistants.

Many pupils recall prior learning suitably and a minority apply this knowledge successfully in new contexts. A majority of pupils work well independently, and a few are particularly curious and eager to explore new concepts and ideas. A few pupils make limited progress and struggle to remain focused in lessons. Often, these pupils lack resilience and rely too heavily on their teachers.

In a few instances, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low. These teachers plan undemanding activities or provide scaffolds and worksheets that limit challenge and the opportunity for pupils to learn independently. In particular, they do not provide sufficient stretch for more able pupils.

Most teachers monitor the progress pupils make in lessons closely and provide helpful verbal feedback. In general, written feedback offers pupils useful advice on how to improve their work and teachers provide worthwhile 'flourish' tasks, which require pupils to respond to feedback. However, how well pupils respond to these tasks varies. A few teachers do not focus closely enough on improving progress in learning in their written feedback. In a few instances, teachers do not use self and peer assessment judiciously and these activities lack impact.

The development of pupils' skills

There are some beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop their reading, writing and oracy skills across the curriculum, although these activities are not always challenging or relevant enough. The school has recognised the importance of improving pupils' reading skills and has introduced opportunities in English lessons and during 'family form time' for pupils to read age-appropriate books for pleasure. A few teachers use these sessions purposefully to support pupils with weaker reading skills. There are suitable opportunities for pupils to practise their numeracy and digital skills in a few relevant subjects. Overall, the provision to progressively develop pupils' skills lacks sufficient planning and co-ordination.

Most pupils listen attentively to each other and their teachers and provide brief, relevant responses to teachers' questions confidently. A minority adapt their answers sensibly after listening to the views of others. These pupils explain their thinking clearly and use a suitable range of vocabulary. A few pupils are notably articulate, using a wide vocabulary and accurate subject terminology. These pupils speak with particular fluency and confidence. Many pupils collaborate well, for example when they plan a group presentation. In a few lessons, pupils do not always listen well enough, and teachers do not challenge and encourage pupils sufficiently to give detailed responses to questions.

Many pupils locate information accurately from a variety of appropriately challenging texts. They summarise key information well and consider a range of sources to reach sensible conclusions, such as when reading texts about the impact social media can have on health and well-being. More able pupils develop their advanced reading skills appropriately. For example, they demonstrate a secure understanding of ambiguity and consider different interpretations in their analysis of poetry. In a few subjects, pupils are not offered enough opportunities to read challenging texts and develop their reading skills appropriately.

When writing, many pupils summarise their main ideas logically. They produce coherent, short paragraphs, such as when presenting points for and against a particular topic. The majority of pupils write with suitable technical accuracy and control. A few more able pupils write convincingly, with considerable perception and skill. For example, they write thoughtfully and engagingly about characterisation in speeches from 'Romeo and Juliet'. However, in general, pupils' writing skills are noticeably weaker than their oracy and reading skills and a few have especially weak writing skills.

In general, pupils use mathematical terms consistently and appropriately, and many demonstrate sound numeracy skills. These pupils have a firm grasp of number. They use the four rules successfully to carry out a wide range of calculations at an appropriate level, and they perform mental calculations with confidence. A few pupils lack confidence in their numeracy skills and rely too heavily on calculators.

Many pupils develop their understanding of shapes and measures well. They calculate the area, perimeter and volume of a range of different shapes confidently and they use their understanding of shapes to calculate angles. Many pupils develop appropriate data handling skills, for example when calculating the mean, median and mode and interpreting a variety of graphs.

Across the curriculum, when given suitable opportunities, pupils use their numeracy skills appropriately. However, in a few instances numeracy tasks are contrived or lack sufficient challenge to support the development of pupils' numeracy skills.

Overall, pupils develop their digital skills successfully in information and communication technology (ICT) lessons and in a few relevant subjects across the curriculum. They demonstrate a sound understanding of how to research information on the internet and present their findings in engaging digital presentations. They use a range of spreadsheet functions confidently, such as conditional formatting, and use coding and graphics software well when creating animations in ICT lessons.

The school encourages pupils to increase their use of the Welsh language appropriately, outside of Welsh lessons, through the Criw Cymraeg who run a range of events and promote the Welsh word of the week. In Welsh lessons, when speaking most pupils construct basic sentences with suitable accuracy and speak willingly. A few use more complex sentence structures, with an increasingly adventurous vocabulary. However, a few pupils make frequent errors in their written Welsh and rely too heavily on scaffolding and support materials.

When given the opportunity, pupils develop their thinking and creativity skills well. Many pupils consider the viewpoints of others with sensitivity, and, when prompted, justify their own viewpoint confidently. In technology lessons pupils explore a variety of themes and experiment with different ideas and techniques during the design process. A few pupils demonstrate impressive creativity through the Ferndale Cluster Writing Project, when writing about 'The Unexpected Visitor' in English and space tourism in geography.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Staff at Ferndale Community School demonstrate a genuine commitment to the well-being, of all pupils. They know their pupils very well and build positive, trusting relationships with them. This is a notable strength of the school. Pupils value these strong relationships and many feel that the school supports them to be the best they can be.

The school is at the heart of the community. It has valuable links, such as with the Fern Partnership which seeks 'to bring children, young people and adults together for mutual benefit'. A youth centre, and adult education and Flying Start facilities on the school site, help to promote the importance of lifelong learning.

The pastoral team work strategically and collaboratively to meet the needs of all pupils. They provide individualised support that helps many pupils engage purposefully with their education. The school also works with an extensive range of external agencies to meet pupils' needs, for example the Green Light Project for those pupils at risk of not being in education, employment or training. In general, pupils are aware of the wide range of support available to them and are comfortable with using it.

The school offers pupils a variety of opportunities for personal development and seeks to raise their aspirations for the future, for instance through visits to Welsh and Oxbridge universities. Pupils develop their leadership skills suitably through

participation in a range of valuable groups such as the charity committee. The pupil Senedd contributes to improving the school learning environment, for example by introducing water fountains and increasing the amount of litter bins. There is an ambitious programme of educational trips to broaden pupils' horizons, including cultural visits to Dubai and Singapore, supported by grant funding.

Many pupils develop an appropriate understanding of the importance of healthy eating and lifestyles through the PSE programme, physical education lessons and assemblies. Their social and emotional skills are developed well through 'family form time' and thought for the week. The school promotes equality and diversity appropriately, celebrating events such as Black History Month and Show Racism the Red Card.

Leaders emphasise the importance of good attendance clearly to pupils and parents through regular communications and the use of rewards. The school also provides a wide range of worthwhile interventions to support pupils whose attendance is a concern. There is an appropriate graduated response to persistent absence. Pastoral staff work closely with parents to encourage good attendance. As a result, last year attendance improved at a faster rate than it did nationally for all pupils, including for those eligible for free school meals, and is continuing to improve this year. In spite of the useful strategies the school uses to improve the rate of attendance, it remains well below pre-pandemic levels and is a cause for concern.

Leaders have developed a strong culture of safeguarding. Consequently, most pupils feel safe in school. Staff record and communicate safeguarding concerns robustly. They work closely with parents and external agencies to support the safety and well-being of all pupils. The school has developed beneficial links between its approaches to safeguarding and attendance, which help ensure consistency and continuity in supporting vulnerable pupils. The school has clear processes to deal with the very few incidents of bullying that occur. Many pupils feel that staff treat them fairly and that any incidents are dealt with effectively.

Senior leaders recently introduced new procedures to manage pupils' behaviour. These are having a positive impact on improving pupils' behaviour and have been broadly welcomed by the school community. The school uses a range of worthwhile interventions to help pupils regulate and improve their behaviour. 'Chwarae Teg' is an effective onsite provision for a few pupils at risk of exclusion. These pupils gain valuable qualifications in English and mathematics and a few access mainstream lessons, for example to study vehicle maintenance, or participate in local work placements.

Strategies to meet the needs of pupils with ALN are communicated clearly to staff and many make appropriate use of them. The nurture class, 'Tŷ Calon', provides a valuable range of successful interventions which enable pupils to make good progress from their starting points. The specialist class, 'Gorsaf Wên', provides a nurturing and supportive environment that sets high expectations for pupils. Staff provide high quality care, support and guidance that helps pupils to develop their confidence and feelings of self-worth. There are many opportunities for these pupils to integrate in the life of the school. This has a positive impact on their well-being.

Leading and improving

The headteacher provides calm, thoughtful and passionate leadership. He has a strong commitment to raising aspirations and securing the best possible outcomes for all pupils. He considers carefully the well-being of pupils and staff, alongside the needs of the local community, in all aspects of his work. He has secured a collaborative, inclusive and supportive culture to embed and enable his vision 'Believe – Achieve – Succeed' to drive improvements in pupils' life chances. This vision is well understood by staff. Leaders and governors have a strong understanding of their responsibility to keep pupils safe and have secured a strong safeguarding culture in the school.

Following the recent appointment of two new senior leaders, the newly established senior leadership team are developing well in their roles, which are equitably distributed and suitably matched to school and national priorities. They have a sound understanding of their responsibilities and work together closely to realise the school's ambitions for its pupils. In general, middle leaders have a sound understanding of their role in improving pupil outcomes. Line management arrangements provide them with a helpful balance of challenge and support. In particular, they value the way that the school's coaching model helps them to develop their effectiveness as leaders.

Leaders at all levels have a clear understanding of the school's improvement priorities. In general, they use a wide range of data and self-evaluation activities appropriately to identify areas for development and plan for improvement. The school uses pupils' views well to evaluate teaching strategies and other aspects of school life. The 'Sharing our Daily Practice' process provides individual staff with helpful guidance as to how to improve their teaching. However, processes to evaluate the impact of the school's work are not always sharp enough. For example, leaders do not always identify the specific aspects of teaching in need of development with sufficient precision. This reduces their capacity to secure consistently rapid improvement.

Staff benefit from a range of helpful internal and external professional learning, including opportunities to share good practice. They reflect thoughtfully on how these activities have impacted on their work. Performance management processes are suitable and align sensibly with professional learning and whole-school development priorities.

Leaders at all levels are developing an increasing focus on addressing national priorities. Overall, they have a suitable vision for the development of their curriculum. Supported by strong links with local primary schools, they work appropriately to design a curriculum that supports pupils to fulfil the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales. Leaders have also put in place a wide range of strategies to reduce the impact of poverty. These are having a positive impact on the well-being of vulnerable pupils. Pupils benefit from a suitable range of opportunities to practise their literacy, numeracy and digital skills in a variety of subject areas. However, leaders have not developed a sufficiently coherent and strategic approach to the progressive development of these skills across the curriculum.

The 'Gorsaf Wên' provision is well led. Leaders ensure that high expectations, appropriate challenge and tailored provision help pupils to make good progress.

The headteacher, business manager and governing body monitor the school's spending closely to ensure that it focuses on improvement priorities. Grant funding such as the Pupil Development Grant is targeted suitably on improving outcomes for pupils from low-income households and is evaluated appropriately. This has had a positive impact on, for example, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals.

Governors are passionate, reflective and well-informed supporters of the school who provide an important link between the school and its community. They have a suitable understanding of their role in ensuring that the school promotes healthy eating and drinking. Governors challenge senior leaders robustly and play an appropriate role in evaluating the school's work and setting improvement priorities.

Additional information

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

The school's arrangements for site security give 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.

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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