

A report on

Castell Alun High School

**Hope
Flintshire
LL12 9PY**

Date of inspection: March 2025

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh

About Castell Alun High School

Name of provider	Castell Alun High School
Local authority	Flintshire County Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	1284
Pupils of statutory school age	1032
Number in sixth form	250
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%)	11.7%
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%)	3.6%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	1.6%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	0.6%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/04/2021
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	25/09/2017
Start date of inspection	24/03/2025

Data reported is sourced from the latest available Pupil Level Annual School Census. These figures may be slightly different to those observed during the inspection.

Further information is available from the Welsh Government My Local School website:

mylocalschool.gov.wales

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

Summary

Ysgol Castell Alun is a welcoming and inclusive community which provides its pupils with valuable opportunities to develop as respectful and conscientious individuals. Most pupils behave exceptionally well and show particularly positive attitudes towards learning, enjoying constructive working relationships with staff. Many pupils work diligently in lessons and show high levels of pride in their work.

Many pupils make secure progress in their learning, while a minority make strong progress. In most lessons, teachers have good subject knowledge and plan well for learning. In the best lessons, teachers have high expectations, they question pupils expertly to encourage them to think deeply and inspire a love for the subject. In a few lessons, pupils do not make suitable progress. In these lessons teachers do not question pupils well enough or do not consider precisely enough how to support pupils from across the ability range.

Pupils benefit from worthwhile opportunities to use and develop their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills across the curriculum. However, the coordination and consistency of planning to help pupils develop these skills progressively is an area for further development.

The curriculum is broad, engaging and meets pupils' needs. It includes valuable provision to support pupils to develop their understanding of health and well-being and helps pupils develop their Welsh language skills well. Extra-curricular opportunities are wide-ranging and inclusive, and leadership opportunities such as the well-being ambassadors and the "Cyngor Cymraeg" help pupils influence school life.

The school places great emphasis on pupils' well-being and personal development. There are effective anti-bullying measures, and excellent support for pupils' emotional, social, and academic needs. Pupils' opinions are valued, and they benefit from extensive opportunities to play an active role in shaping the school's direction. The transition from primary to secondary school is carefully managed, ensuring pupils feel confident and supported from the start.

Leadership has secured some important improvements to the work of the school. For example, rates of attendance, including those of pupils eligible for free school meals, improved well last year. Arrangements for self-evaluation and planning for improvement are robust and collaborative leading to a shared understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. In addition, governors provide helpful challenge in their role as critical friends to the school.

Recommendations

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

- R1. Improve the consistency of teaching by sharing the best practice that exists within the school
- R2. Strengthen the consistency and coordination of how pupils' skills are progressively developed across subjects

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

Most pupils at Ysgol Castell Alun have very positive attitudes towards learning. Their behaviour in lessons and around the school is exemplary. They demonstrate high levels of courtesy towards other members of the school community and visitors. Most arrive promptly to lessons, settle quickly to their work and listen attentively to their teachers and peers. Many pupils sustain their concentration effectively, work diligently throughout their lessons and show high levels of pride in their work. Mutual respect and constructive working relationships between staff and pupils are notable features of most lessons.

Many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN) recall their prior learning well and make secure progress when developing their knowledge, understanding and skills. In most lessons, teachers provide clear instructions and explanations. They have strong subject knowledge and provide pupils with purposeful resources to support their learning. In many lessons, teachers reinforce subject specific terminology effectively to help pupils develop their vocabulary. These teachers have suitable expectations of pupils and plan tasks that build incrementally on each other. They question pupils suitably to check their understanding and circulate the classroom effectively to support and ensure pupils complete tasks.

In a minority of lessons, pupils make strong progress and successfully apply their prior learning independently to challenging and unfamiliar contexts. In these lessons, teachers:

- use and promote ambitious vocabulary to encourage pupils to express themselves with sophistication
- question pupils skilfully to probe and deepen their understanding
- inspire pupils with their enthusiasm and passion for the subject
- have high expectations and plan effectively to promote strong progress
- pause the lesson where necessary to address misconceptions and provide pupils with immediate, impactful feedback

In a few lessons, pupils do not make suitable progress. In these instances, teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve. They do not always plan well enough to support pupils of all abilities and allocate too much time to undemanding tasks. In these lessons, teachers' instructions and explanations lack clarity. They often use a limited range of questions which do not help pupils to explain their thinking.

The impact of feedback on pupils' progress is variable. In the best examples, pupils receive valuable verbal and written feedback on the quality of their work. This is often specific and effective to support pupils to make further progress. In a few subject areas, teachers ensure that pupils use 'reflect and improve' sessions independently and effectively to make substantial improvements to their work. However, in a minority of instances, misconceptions or mistakes are not identified well enough to help pupils make improvements. In these cases, teachers' expectations of how pupils respond to feedback are not always clear.

Most sixth form pupils demonstrate interest and enthusiasm for the subjects they study. These pupils engage positively in class discussions and respond maturely to their teachers' questions, explaining their thinking and reasoning well. Many pupils show strong levels of independence in their learning and a few ask well considered questions of their teacher to deepen their own understanding.

Teachers provide a wide range of suitable opportunities for pupils to develop and apply their literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum. Leaders helpfully analyse national test data to identify areas of weakness in pupils' skills. They provide beneficial support through targeted interventions for pupils and track their progress closely. They provide valuable guidance and professional learning for staff. However, leaders do not evaluate closely the impact of this work and as a result the coordination of provision to progressively develop pupils' skills is not consistent across subjects.

Most pupils listen respectfully to their teachers and peers. They speak clearly when invited to do so and contribute answers of suitable depth. However, in a minority of lessons, there is a lack of opportunity to discuss collaboratively and contribute at length. A majority of pupils use subject specific vocabulary with ease and a few pupils use ambitious, complex vocabulary effectively and express themselves particularly well.

In many instances, pupils compare and contrast information effectively and draw attention to similarities and differences in themes and viewpoints when completing reading activities. For example, in history lessons they consider the different reasons men enlisted in the first world war and whether or not suffragette Emily Davison's death was a tragic accident. Across the curriculum, a minority of pupils use inference and deduction effectively to draw conclusions from what they have read. The school puts valuable emphasis on the importance of reading by providing activities such as reading for pleasure sessions in registration.

Many pupils organise their writing coherently, with suitable accuracy and clarity, for an appropriate range of purposes and audiences. A minority of pupils write with sophistication and maturity, demonstrating a strong grasp of the subject material and using complex sentence structures. However, a few pupils make regular spelling and grammatical errors in their work.

Many pupils have secure numeracy skills and a few make strong progress. Many have a suitable grasp of the basic rules of number and apply them appropriately to different contexts. A majority have a suitable understanding of algebra, for example re-arranging formulae and solving equations successfully in science. Many pupils apply their knowledge of shape and space well, for example when calculating perimeters and areas of regular and more complex shapes. They have a good understanding of probability and represent data using a range of charts and graphs accurately. For example, in geography pupils independently plot climate graphs and interpret population pyramids effectively. In the best cases, pupils draw accurate conclusions from a variety of data and information. However, in a few cases pupils' make errors when plotting graphs and drawing lines of best fit which are not always corrected by teachers.

Many pupils use digital devices to design infographics and create presentations and videos successfully. They collaborate well on digital projects and use computational techniques suitably to interrogate information from databases and sources.

Spotlight 1 - Promoting Bilingualism

The school has prioritised effectively its strategy to enhance and promote bilingualism. Pupils have valuable opportunities to hear staff and peers use the Welsh language inside and outside classrooms, for example in whole-school assemblies. In addition, the school provides worthwhile opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of the heritage and culture of Wales. For example, in religion, values, and ethics (RVE) they study the influence of Welsh reformers such as Robert Owen and Nye Bevan.

Most pupils show positive attitudes towards the language and are beginning to develop confidence when using Welsh in school life. The 'Cyngor Cymraeg', a pupil group which leads on bilingualism, regularly organises activities for pupils. Older pupils actively participate in initiatives like 'Clwb Clebran' to boost their confidence in speaking Welsh. Bilingualism is also encouraged through the positive behaviour policy, where pupils earn praise points for speaking Welsh.

In Welsh lessons, nearly all pupils actively participate in language games, enhancing their skills through interactive activities. Many recall and use vocabulary effectively. They construct simple sentences confidently, supported by teachers' structured drilling exercises. Most pronounce words and phrases well, while a few use more advanced vocabulary to discuss complex topics. A few pupils lack confidence when speaking Welsh.

Most pupils have a suitable range of Welsh vocabulary which helps them identify key details in short reading texts. A majority effectively annotate stylistic features in a variety of texts well. Many pupils write simple sentences and short pieces accurately and can translate sentences quickly and correctly. A few pupils use idioms, verbs, and tenses effectively and apply mutations accurately to enrich their written work. However, at times, pupils rely too heavily on structure patterns and scaffolds for oral and written tasks.

Senior leaders have worked purposefully alongside their primary cluster colleagues to develop an ambitious vision for their Curriculum for Wales. Teachers ensure that there is a clear emphasis on subject knowledge and skills, alongside an engaging approach to contextual learning.

Spotlight 2 - Supporting transition through the effective planning of the health and well-being curriculum

Senior leaders work closely with colleagues from partner primary schools to ensure the continuity of curriculum expectations as well as pastoral care for pupils when they start secondary school. A particular strength is the adoption across the schools of a common programme of personal and social education (PSE). This is rooted in the health and well-being curriculum, reinforcing the values of respect, determination, and honesty. This seamless curriculum model successfully supports pupils' well-being as well as fostering their spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development, enriched by assemblies, tutor-led sessions and external partnerships.

The school has thoughtfully developed a diverse and engaging curriculum for pupils in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form, including for those with ALN. There is well-considered vocational provision, complemented by close working with a local college. The school creatively adapts its sixth form curriculum, ensuring that most pupils can pursue their preferred course combinations. Its robust guidance system supports informed decision-making through the options process in Years 9 and 11, effectively preparing pupils for future careers. Strong links with local businesses and industries, enrich learning by providing valuable real-world connections.

The school provides an extensive range of well-attended extra-curricular activities, including sports, music, drama and other clubs such as a gardening club and the Pride People group. Leaders ensure inclusivity, enabling all pupils to participate including those from low-income households. This commitment to equity and enrichment is a significant strength.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Ysgol Castell Alun is a caring and inclusive community that places the well-being of pupils at the heart of everything it does. The school's core values of respect, determination, and honesty underpins and supports their ethos. Most pupils are polite, respectful and mature, and their positive attitudes are reflected in good behaviour both in lessons and around the school. The passionate and committed pastoral team deliver a comprehensive and organised programme of tailored support to meet pupils' needs. Pupils who receive this support feel valued and accepted. Trauma-informed interventions and targeted outreach provision effectively supports vulnerable pupils and those at risk of exclusion. These interventions have led to positive outcomes such as improved attendance, engagement and attainment.

The development of pupil leadership is a noteworthy strength of the school. Extensive opportunities for pupils to develop their leadership skills and participate in decision making contribute notably to their personal development. These include the 'Cyngor Cymraeg' and well-being ambassadors. Leaders gather pupils' views regularly through the school council and other pupil representative groups. As a result, pupils inform and influence the work of the school, for example by affecting the introduction of a gender-neutral physical education kit. Sixth form pupils make an important contribution to school life. They independently lead the charity committee and are responsible for mentoring younger pupils.

The school implements a robust, pupil-centred anti-bullying strategy supported by a strong pastoral system. It focusses well on helping pupils understand how bullying impacts on others. Clear reporting systems, prompt staff responses and appropriate pupil support contribute to a safe and respectful culture. As a result, most pupils feel safe when at school.

The school has a coherent and well-structured transition programme underpinned by strong collaboration with partner primary schools. Termly cluster meetings, a shared cluster ethos and joint initiatives support pupils' well-being and progression successfully. Leaders use a digital platform effectively to collect and share useful information on pupils' well-being needs.

Leaders demonstrate a strong and committed approach to supporting pupils with ALN. Pupils receive suitable and tailored support from a caring and nurturing team of staff. The ALN team review this provision regularly and adapt according to the individual needs of the pupils. The consistent use of a person-centred approach in reviewing Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and one-page profiles ensures that pupils' needs are clearly identified and appropriately supported. Staff track and monitor the progress of pupils with ALN suitably. They know their pupils well and use this information purposefully to ensure that additional provision is tailored to meet the needs of these pupils.

The nurture provision in Year 7 is notably effective in helping pupils' transition smoothly into secondary school, with a focus on building essential skills. Pupils across the school benefit from well-structured and closely monitored interventions. These include literacy, numeracy, and well-being interventions, and are supported by the innovative use of assistive technology. Staff are generally well-supported through appropriate training around ALN and support materials are in place. However, the use of these materials to inform lesson planning and effective differentiation is not fully embedded.

The school effectively promotes a culture where good attendance is important. Leaders monitor and analyse pupils' attendance carefully and collaborate internally, and with families and external agencies, to improve individual pupil attendance. In 2023-2024, attendance improved and was above that of similar schools, although it remains below pre-pandemic levels. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals improved well in 2023-2024, although it remains slightly below the average for similar schools. Persistent absence has fallen over the last two years. In addition, unverified internal school data suggests that attendance continues to improve in 2024-2025.

Safeguarding is a clear priority within the school, with leaders working collaboratively to foster a strong safeguarding culture. Procedures to protect pupils are well-established, consistently applied, and effective in ensuring pupil safety. The school demonstrates a prompt and proactive approach in responding to concerns, with timely interventions and appropriate referrals to external agencies where necessary. Staff are well-informed and trained regularly in safeguarding protocols, which ensures a shared understanding and consistent practice across the school. The use of secure digital systems supports effective communication, record-keeping, and monitoring of pastoral and safeguarding issues. This system also strengthens continuity in safeguarding practices across the cluster, as it is used by partner primary schools.

Leading and improving

The headteacher provides dynamic, passionate and sensitive leadership. He has guided the school carefully through a period of significant change in leadership. His vision for 'building successful futures' underpinned by the school values of 'respect, determination and honesty' is clearly understood by staff. Senior leaders consider staff well-being carefully. As a result, staff morale is high, and they are proud to be part of the Ysgol Castell Alun community.

The headteacher receives effective support from his senior team, who have well-defined and equitable roles and responsibilities. In general, leaders provide staff with a beneficial balance of support and challenge. Line management arrangements focus suitably on pupils' well-being and progress, as well as the quality of teaching.

The school makes effective use of an extensive range of data to monitor pupil progress and well-being, implementing appropriate interventions where necessary.

The school has developed a well-structured and clearly understood quality assurance process, enabling staff to evaluate provision using a wide range of evidence. In many cases, this helps leaders gain a thorough understanding of the strengths and aspects for improvement in their areas of responsibility. In addition, the collaborative nature of many of these activities helps to develop a shared understanding of the school's progress towards its improvement priorities. However, in a few instances, these activities focus too much on the completion of actions rather than their impact, reducing leaders' ability to plan precisely for improvement.

Staff benefit from a wide range of professional learning opportunities, including the sharing of good practice. These activities focus closely on school and national priorities. The most effective practitioners are deployed helpfully to deliver professional learning to their colleagues on effective classroom approaches.

In many cases, middle leaders have a secure understanding of their role. A few are notably effective leaders who have a detailed, precise understanding of their teams and secure consistently strong teaching and progress. However, in a few instances middle leaders do not hold their teams to account robustly enough.

The school has been successful in addressing national priorities, including improving attendance and promoting the Welsh language. It has developed a wide range of strategies to reduce the effects of poverty on educational attainment. This has had a positive impact on, for example, the quality of teaching. Leaders have been successful in securing a strong culture of safeguarding.

Governors are committed and knowledgeable supporters of the school, who play a full role in setting the strategic direction of the school, evaluating its work and providing leaders with helpful challenge. Governors, the business manager and the headteacher manage the school budget and spending of grant funding diligently. They monitor closely the impact of expenditure, including the pupil development grant, to ensure that it is focused on school and national priorities.

Additional information

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

The school's arrangements for site management give cause for concern and have been brought to the attention of the local authority

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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