

Report following monitoring

Level of follow-up: Special measures

River Centre 3-16 Learning Community

**Pontygoф
Ebbw Vale
Blaenau Gwent
NP23 5AZ**

Date of visit: December 2025

by

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

Outcome of visit

The River Centre is judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the most recent core inspection.

As a result, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is removing The River Centre from the list of schools requiring special measures.

Progress since the last inspection

R1. Address those issues identified in the health and safety letter

The school and the local authority have responded to the issues identified in the health and safety letters.

R2. Establish a clear purpose and vision for the school and implement a staffing structure that is fit for purpose and adequately reflects roles and responsibilities

The local authority recognised that the original dual-purpose model, of the special school which also functions as a pupil referral unit (PRU), has not been effective in practice and no longer expects a fixed proportion of pupils to be reintegrated into mainstream schools. The school continues to work with the local authority and partner providers to support reintegration where this is in pupils' best interests, reflecting a more realistic understanding of pupils' needs and the school's role within local provision.

There has been a clear strengthening in the stability and capacity of the leadership team, resulting in the most sustained period of leadership continuity since the core inspection. Leaders and staff share a strong and consistent set of values and principles centred on understanding and meeting pupils' emotional needs, which increasingly underpins a nurturing and inclusive culture where pupils are supported to flourish socially, emotionally and academically.

Leadership structures have strengthened further through the appointment of permanent leaders at Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) and assistant headteacher level. The extension of the deputy headteacher's secondment until August 2026 has also added valuable stability.

Recruitment to most key roles is now complete, resulting in a more settled workforce, markedly reduced reliance on temporary staff, and a more coherent staffing model overall. Leaders engage positively with national and local priorities.

They take a balanced and well-considered approach to forming connections with, and learning from, other similar settings, using this engagement to broaden perspectives and inform their understanding of effective practice. The appointment of areas of learning experience (AoLE) leads and the continued and valuable support of the school improvement service, has increased the school's capacity to develop and oversee curriculum planning, drawing on a blend of internal expertise and newly appointed staff.

Staffing improvements, alongside strengthened leadership structures and external engagement, are contributing to greater consistency in the learning offer across the school. Collectively, these developments are beginning to build a more stable environment for staff and pupils and are supporting increasingly coherent approaches to curriculum and provision.

Despite these improvements, there remains continued uncertainty regarding the school's substantive leadership arrangements. While interim and extended secondment arrangements have provided short to medium-term stability, the absence of confirmed long-term leadership presents a potential risk to sustaining momentum and embedding improvement securely over time.

The skills and experiences of members of the governing body have been used to very good effect in advising and supporting leaders with the vision for the school, staffing and finance.

R3. Ensure that the curriculum is sufficiently engaging, broad and balanced and prepares pupils well for their next stage in life and learning

The school's strategic approach to curriculum planning supports a strong focus on progression and coherence. Leaders have established a shared understanding of how pupils' learning builds over time, which is increasingly reflected in teachers' planning across the school. This has strengthened consistency in expectations while maintaining flexibility in how learning is taught and contextualised. Regular curriculum meetings play an important role in this work, engaging staff in developing their understanding of curriculum design and implementation, while also actively seeking their views on shaping the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils. This reflects a strong collegiate approach, underpinned by a clear framework of professional support and development.

Staff demonstrate growing confidence in planning for pupils' progress. Teachers are increasingly secure in identifying next steps in learning and in designing sequential experiences that revisit and deepen understanding.

This confidence is strengthened through collaborative professional dialogue, enabling staff to refine their thinking and share practice. A clear focus on progression, rather than task completion, supports more purposeful use of assessment information.

Teachers are now better at making meaningful connections between different aspects of learning and explaining how pupils' knowledge and skills become more developed over time. Overall, the school's strategic direction supports a coherent, cumulative curriculum and is strengthening staff capacity to plan effectively for the progress of all pupils.

Greater exposure to learning beyond the school site has strengthened pupils' personal, social and leadership skills. Competitive football has strengthened pupils' teamwork, resilience and confidence, and their success at the schools' championship level demonstrates strong commitment and an increasing ability to perform effectively under pressure. Visits to the Senedd have developed pupils' communication skills and understanding of civic responsibility through direct engagement with Members of the Senedd. Participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award has further enhanced pupils' independence, perseverance and self-belief, reinforced by the recognition of being presented to Prince Edward. Overall, these experiences contribute positively to pupils' confidence, maturity and wider skill development.

Monitoring, evaluation and review processes, including shared book looks and professional dialogue, are strengthening subject-specific pedagogy and improving consistency. Staff report feeling valued and well supported by accessible leadership and effective line-management arrangements. This is contributing to a clear cultural shift characterised by higher morale, improved pupil behaviour, stronger pupil engagement and a more aspirational, pupil-centred ethos. Although adapting provision for a complex and changing cohort remains challenging, pupils now benefit from richer learning experiences, a broader range of qualifications and clearer progression tracking.

R4. Improve the behaviour of pupils, particularly on the secondary campus

The school has made strong progress against this recommendation since the core inspection. Leaders have strengthened the school's capacity to meet pupils' emotional and behavioural needs through targeted staff training, particularly in trauma-informed practice, and the recruitment of staff with appropriate skills and expertise.

Senior leaders model expectations consistently and effectively, which has increased staff confidence and developed a shared understanding of pupils' emotional development. As a result, staff are increasingly skilled at recognising pupils' emotional needs and supporting them to regulate their behaviour appropriately.

These developments have led to a sustained improvement in the school's culture. Staff place a strong emphasis on well-being and relationships as the foundation for learning, resulting in more positive interactions between staff and pupils and among pupils

themselves. During the visit, most pupils were observed to get along well with one another, staff and visitors.

They respond appropriately to others, and show increasing co-operation, kindness and mutual support. Many pupils enjoy attending school, and the calm, nurturing environment supports their sense of safety and belonging.

Inspectors observed consistently positive behaviour across all campuses, including during offsite learning. Nearly all pupils behave respectfully and appropriately and are polite and welcoming to visitors. Movement around the school is calm and orderly, with supportive interactions between pupils and staff. Increasingly, pupils can recognise and manage their emotions; for example, they say clearly when they need time away from an activity. Overall, the atmosphere across the school is calm, safe and well managed, reflecting the positive impact of leaders' focus on behaviour, well-being and positive relationships.

Leaders have robust processes in place to review incidents of challenging behaviour and address underlying causes proactively. This has led to a significant reduction in restrictive physical interventions and a decrease in overall pupil exclusion rates.

Across the school, pupils are well supported to engage meaningfully in learning and demonstrate growing confidence and independence. They increasingly explain their thinking, choices and actions during activities. For example, younger pupils select appropriate resources independently, handle materials with increasing control, and apply numeracy skills effectively when weighing and mixing ingredients during practical tasks.

A broad range of well-chosen activities further supports pupils' emotional regulation, behaviour and skill development. Matching games are used purposefully to develop working memory and concentration, while reflexology sessions help pupils remain calm and focused. Physical activities, such as boxing, promote self-discipline, co-operation and respect, with older pupils acting as positive role models for younger ones. Together, these approaches contribute to consistently positive behaviour and pupils' strong progress within a calm, nurturing environment that supports both learning and well-being effectively.

R5. Improve the quality of the learning environment and culture, particularly on the secondary campus

Improvements to the school's accommodation, particularly on the secondary site, have created calm, secure and well-resourced learning environments that better meet pupils' emotional and behavioural needs.

Refurbished classrooms, improved facilities and well-maintained shared spaces support clear routines, orderly movement and pupils' pride in their surroundings.

On the primary site, indoor spaces are nurturing and the effective use of outdoor environments further support regulation, engagement and well-being.

These improvements to the physical environment have enabled staff to apply relational and trauma-informed approaches more consistently.

As a result, behaviour has improved, incidents of dysregulation have reduced and there has been a significant fall in restrictive physical interventions and pupil exclusions.

Together, strengthened accommodation and effective use of internal and external spaces have supported a positive cultural shift. Pupils feel safe, valued and are more engaged in learning, while staff report greater confidence and morale. Overall, the quality of the learning environment has been important in establishing a calm, nurturing and aspirational culture across the school.

R6. Improve the outcomes for pupils, particularly those on the secondary campus

Overall, attainment reflects appropriately personalised programmes of study that are well matched to pupils' abilities, needs and future aspirations. Pupils follow varied qualification pathways, resulting in a wide range of outcomes across the cohort. GCSEs make a significant contribution to overall attainment where appropriate, while alternative and vocational qualifications provide meaningful accreditation for pupils for whom GCSE pathways are less suitable.

The variation in outcomes reflects pupils' differing starting points, disrupted prior experiences and individual learning needs, making direct comparison over time inappropriate. Many pupils progress to positive destinations, and effective tracking against individual development plan (IDP) targets supports the setting of personalised targets and realistic outcomes aligned to pupils' intended post-16 pathways.

R7. Establish systems, procedures and routines across the school that are clearly understood by staff and relevant partners

The River Centre now operates successfully as a single, unified school. This has strengthened coherence across campuses and improved consistency in practice. Leaders make timely and informed decisions about staff deployment to ensure that staffing arrangements reflect the differing needs of cohorts. These decisions take good account of staff skills, experience and the level of support required by pupils. As a result, staff understand their roles and responsibilities well and are confident about how best to support pupils' learning including their emotional needs.

Staffing at the school is stable. Leaders have significantly reduced the use of agency staff and developed a clear staffing structure to ensure the smooth running of the school. This stability contributes positively to continuity of care and learning for pupils.

Leaders have introduced clear routines and systems across the River Centre to enable the smooth day-to-day running of the school. Nearly all staff report that they feel well supported and that communication from leaders is clear and effective.

As a result, staff carry out their roles with increasing confidence and autonomy, and staff are consistent in how they apply agreed approaches when supporting pupils.

Leaders have established robust systems to track pupils' academic progress, additional learning needs, well-being, attendance and behaviour. Leaders work effectively with other stakeholders, including families, to support the work of the school effectively.

The school's approach to attendance is increasingly systematic and collaborative. Leaders work closely with external agencies and have established clear pathways for intervention supported by regular analysis and monitoring, including for pupils educated off-site. Although overall attendance remains too low and is significantly affected by the complex needs of pupils within the Ty Afon cohort, leaders' work is beginning to secure improvements.

Primary attendance is strong, and secondary attendance shows a gradual upward trend, increasing from 71% to 77% compared to the same period last academic year. Leaders have established a graduated and well-understood attendance pathway that emphasises support and positive incentives, and this is contributing to improving attendance patterns over time. Policies and procedures are stable and well embedded at the school. Recent developments in teaching and learning and performance management have been introduced collaboratively and have been welcomed by staff. Line management arrangements are clearer, more regular and increasingly effective. As a result, staff feel well-supported in their roles. Leaders have also established a clear and purposeful approach to professional learning.

Since summer 2025, leaders have implemented a clear and collaborative monitoring, evaluation and review (MER) cycle with defined timescales. This allows staff to use pupil progress and well-being information meaningfully. This is beginning to provide leaders with an accurate understanding of the current strengths and areas of development at the school.

The school is well supported by the governing body, school improvement partner, local school improvement service and local authority.

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