

A report on

Cardinal Newman R.C. Comprehensive School

**Dynea Road
Rhydyfelin
Pontypridd
RCT
CF37 5DP**

Date of inspection: February 2026

by

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

About Cardinal Newman R.C. Comprehensive School

Name of provider	Cardinal Newman R.C. Comprehensive 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	Catholic
Number of pupils on roll	980
Pupils of statutory school age	980
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 20.3%)	14.2%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Secondary is 9.0%)	2.4%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	2.0%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	5.8%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	01/04/2011

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Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	22/05/2018
Start date of inspection	09/02/2026

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

Cardinal Newman Catholic School is a warm, welcoming and inclusive community where Catholic values underpin school life. Staff and pupils have a positive and respectful working relationship, creating a strong sense of belonging. Most pupils are courteous, proud of their school and eager to contribute to its life and work. Most arrive punctually, settle quickly and engage purposefully in lessons. The school's deeply embedded culture of care and dignity ensures that most pupils feel safe, valued and well supported.

Across the school, teaching is effective overall. Many teachers demonstrate strong subject knowledge and plan coherent learning that builds pupils' understanding securely over time. In these lessons, pupils engage well, respond thoughtfully to questioning and make suitable, and often strong, progress. In a few particularly effective examples, teachers have very high expectations, adapt learning skilfully and use assessment information precisely to address misconceptions, enabling pupils of all abilities to thrive. Where teaching is less effective, expectations and challenge are not consistently high enough, and feedback does not always help pupils to improve their work.

The curriculum is shaped by a clear vision rooted in Gospel values and inclusion. Innovative approaches in Years 7 and 8, such as 'expeditionary learning', which involves project-based, real-world learning across subjects, including off-site visits, provide engaging and authentic cross-curricular experiences. In Years 10 and 11, pupils benefit from a balanced range of academic and vocational pathways tailored carefully to individual needs. Pupils in Year 9 do not have access to the full range of learning experiences required at this stage.

Provision for literacy is a strength. Many pupils read confidently, synthesise information from challenging texts and write effectively for a range of purposes. In numeracy, many pupils apply secure basic skills appropriately across subjects. However, planning for the progressive and consistent development of numeracy skills across the curriculum is at an early stage. Pupils also make suitable progress in developing digital skills. Provision for Welsh language and culture supports pupils to develop confidence and pride in their Welsh identity.

Care, support and guidance are strong features of the school. Effective pastoral systems, inclusive practice and well-targeted interventions support pupils' well-being successfully. Safeguarding arrangements are secure. Attendance has improved and persistent absence has reduced. However, despite focused support and appropriate use of funding, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals remains too low.

The headteacher is supported well by senior leaders and governors. Together they have secured important improvements since the previous inspection, including in digital provision and financial stability, and have responded positively to national reforms. They have well-established self-evaluation processes. However, these do not always focus sharply enough on the impact of teaching on pupils' learning.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Refine self-evaluation and improvement planning processes so that they focus more precisely on the impact teaching and provision have on pupils' learning and progress.
- R2 Ensure that pupils have access to the full range of learning experiences until the end of Year 9.
- R3 Strengthen the provision for the progressive development of pupils' numeracy skills.
- R4 Improve the attendance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals.

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 Cardinal Newman Catholic School are polite, courteous and welcoming to visitors. They arrive promptly to lessons, settle quickly and behave well. Clear routines and positive working relationships between staff and pupils create a purposeful learning environment. As a result, many pupils sustain concentration, participate willingly and demonstrate positive attitudes towards their learning.

In many instances, effective teaching enables pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), to make at least suitable progress. In these lessons, teachers have strong subject knowledge. They provide helpful explanations and plan coherent sequences of worthwhile activities that build appropriately on prior learning and offer suitable challenge. As a result, pupils recall, develop and apply their knowledge and understanding securely over time. These teachers model expectations well and use questioning suitably to check pupils' understanding. They monitor progress closely, providing helpful and timely verbal feedback where necessary. In general, these teachers provide beneficial written feedback. However, there is too much variation in how well pupils engage with this feedback to ensure its impact on their learning is maximised.

In a few particularly effective lessons, teachers have notably high expectations of what pupils can achieve. These teachers plan lessons meticulously and skilfully adapt them to meet the needs of all pupils, resulting in pupils of all abilities making strong progress. They use effective questioning techniques to challenge pupils' thinking, develop their understanding and deepen their learning. In addition, they use assessment information well to identify and address misconceptions or gaps in pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills. For example, these teachers ensure that pupils engage meaningfully with written feedback so that it improves their work.

In a few cases, where there are shortcomings in teaching, pupils make limited progress. In these lessons teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low. As a result, they plan activities and ask questions that are insufficiently challenging. They do not always provide helpful feedback which supports pupils to understand how they can improve. These teachers either lead the learning for too long, design tasks that are too repetitive or engage too few pupils in questioning. Consequently, the pace of learning is too slow, and this contributes to pupils not always engaging well enough with their learning.

The school has a clear and purposeful curriculum vision, firmly rooted in its Catholic ethos and Gospel values, which permeate all aspects of school life. The curriculum and pastoral provision support pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural awareness effectively,

promoting inclusion and respect for diversity. Overall, the curriculum provides suitable breadth and depth across the areas of learning and experience. However, the curriculum narrows in Year 9. As a result, these pupils do not have access to the full range of learning experiences required by Curriculum for Wales.

The school has developed innovative approaches to aspects of curriculum design in Years 7 and 8. 'Expedition learning' projects promote a strong cross-curricular approach and enable pupils to engage in deep, authentic learning through immersive, real-world experiences. In Year 7, expeditions begin with a guiding question and introductory activity or visit. Pupils engage with experts, such as former miners, and complete cross-curricular investigative tasks. Each expedition culminates in a high-quality final product, such as a book or film, which is shared with the school community and parents. Recent examples include 'How Do Communities Create Belonging?', 'Black Gold – Was It Worth It?' and 'Today and Tomorrow... It's Up to You'. The cross-curricular 'Move, Mind, Make' carousel further enriches provision, enabling pupils to participate in non-traditional physical activities, wellbeing and mental health work, and creative projects.

The curriculum in Year 10 and 11 balances a strong academic core with relevant vocational and alternative routes. Leaders respond flexibly to individual needs, providing bespoke pathways to support vulnerable pupils while maintaining high expectations. Provision for more able and talented pupils is well developed and includes valuable enrichment opportunities.

A wide range of extra-curricular, cultural, sporting and spiritual opportunities enrich pupils' experiences and broaden their aspirations. Lunchtime clubs are well attended and include a science club and culture club, which supports black, Asian and ethnic minority pupils and celebrates diversity across the school. Overall, the school provides a rich and inclusive learning environment that supports pupils to thrive.

The provision for reading is a notable strength of the school's literacy provision. The English department has led this work effectively, supported by a well-resourced library and peer reading initiatives. Many pupils read confidently, locate and synthesise information accurately from a variety of appropriately challenging texts, such as when reading about Catholic beliefs on the divinity of Jesus Christ. A majority of pupils apply their advanced reading skills appropriately and make complex inferences from the texts and images they read.

These pupils synthesise their findings from multiple texts to make valid conclusions from what they have read, for example, in history they combine information on immigration in the USA during the early 20th century. In a few subjects, pupils are not given enough opportunities to practise these advanced reading skills.

A majority of teachers model vocabulary effectively and plan meaningful opportunities to teach sophisticated and subject specific terminology. This helps pupils to share their views confidently using a broad range of vocabulary. Many pupils listen well and work successfully in pairs and groups. These pupils respond appropriately to the contributions of others and around half are highly articulate when providing detailed responses to teachers' questions, for example, when discussing the effects of language in poetry by LGBTQ+ writers in English. A few do not listen well enough or express themselves clearly when answering teachers' questions or when working with their peers.

Many pupils benefit from meaningful opportunities to write at length for different purposes and audiences and plan their work suitably. Many use paragraphs appropriately and produce writing that engages the readers' interest successfully by including sophisticated ideas and varying vocabulary choices. However, a minority of pupils make basic errors in their written work which are not always addressed by their teachers. In addition, these pupils do not proofread their writing well enough before they hand it to their teachers.

Many pupils demonstrate sound basic numeracy skills and apply these appropriately in a range of relevant subjects. In mathematics, many pupils calculate accurately using the four rules of number, work confidently with percentages and round answers correctly to a given number of decimal places. A majority manipulate algebraic expressions suitably and many apply their understanding of area and perimeter appropriately to solve problems. In other relevant subjects, many pupils draw simple bar charts and pie charts accurately, for example in geography where they calculate mean averages from survey results and plot graphs to illustrate population change over time. However, a few pupils have less secure basic numeracy skills and do not always apply them consistently. For example, pupils do not consistently use agreed conventions accurately when constructing graphs or include units on diagrams. In addition, they do not always show their working out clearly enough, limiting their ability to identify misconceptions and improve their accuracy. Leaders have helpfully reviewed and mapped numeracy opportunities across relevant subjects and provide appropriate training for staff. However, planning to ensure progressive challenge and consistent application of numeracy skills across the curriculum is at an early stage of development.

Many pupils make at least suitable progress in developing their digital skills and apply these effectively in a range of subjects. In Year 7, many develop a secure understanding of sequences and algorithms when coding, for example when exploring machine learning concepts. In physical education, younger pupils present fitness routines effectively through video, embedding sound and animation appropriately. Across many subjects, there are relevant and purposeful digital tasks, supported by appropriate staff training and a detailed review of digital provision to map opportunities for progression.

Across the curriculum, many pupils develop their creative, physical and thinking skills suitably. In art, drama and music, they produce imaginative work, for example when devising performances or composing a musical score to complement a scene from a film. Pupils also demonstrate worthwhile thinking skills, for instance when interpreting symbolism in history and religious education or responding thoughtfully to design briefs in technology.

The school nurtures pride in the Welsh language and culture, with pupils and staff working collaboratively to champion bilingualism, and to embed Welsh into daily life. This is enriched further by participation in school and national Eisteddfodau and residential trips. Pupils develop an understanding of ‘cynefin’, Welsh history and identity through valuable curricular experiences and whole-school events.

Many pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning Welsh and develop suitable oracy skills. They speak confidently on familiar topics and produce short written responses using an appropriate range of vocabulary. These pupils read and annotate basic texts effectively, however, pupils’ inference and evaluation skills are less developed. Nearly all pupils gain an appropriate qualification in Welsh at the end of Year 11.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Spotlight – A culture of care and belonging

The school’s supportive ethos is rooted in dignity and respect and is evident in the quality of relationships across the school community. Staff and pupils model the school’s ‘heart to heart speaks’ values in their daily interactions, creating an inclusive culture in which most pupils feel known, valued and listened to. This strong sense of belonging is reflected in pupils’ positive behaviour, their courteous engagement with visitors and their willingness to contribute to school life.

The school places pupils’ well-being at the centre of its work. Restorative approaches, inclusive pastoral systems and targeted support, including the work of the ‘Caritas Centre’, help pupils to feel safe and supported. The promotion of diversity through curriculum experiences and pupil leadership initiatives further strengthens pupils’ understanding of respect and social responsibility. As a result, this caring environment is deeply embedded and is a notable strength of the school.

The impact of the school’s inclusive culture is evident in pupils’ daily experiences. Most are friendly and courteous and engage maturely with visitors, reflecting the school’s ethos. The emphasis on restorative practice contributes to a calm environment and as a result, most pupils behave well in lessons and during social times. They feel safe and believe that staff take concerns, including bullying, seriously. A minority of pupils raise concerns about

the condition of a few facilities, particularly toilets, which they feel detract from their comfort and well-being.

The school promotes diversity and inclusion effectively through curriculum experiences and pupil-led initiatives. These opportunities strengthen pupils' sense of purpose and social responsibility. The broad range of helpful well-being and pastoral interventions, for example the integrated provision in the 'Caritas Centre', support pupils' emotional and social development. Effective transition arrangements support pupils to settle well and develop their confidence in the early stages of secondary education.

Pupils value the wide range of extra-curricular activities offered to them, including politics club, crochet club, and creative writing. In addition, they benefit from a broad range of enrichment opportunities, to which leaders promote equitable access. These include visits to Glan Llyn, Iceland and participation in a scholars' programme with university visits. These experiences broaden pupils' horizons, raise aspirations and support preparation for future pathways.

Leaders and staff maintain a strong safeguarding culture where most pupils feel safe and well supported. There are clear and well understood systems and procedures for reporting concerns and staff are confident in how to raise any issues. The safeguarding team responds promptly and diligently, making referrals to external agencies where required. Staff complete useful and regular training to help them understand their safeguarding responsibilities. Where a few cases of bullying occur, pupils feel that the school deals promptly and thoroughly.

Staff promote a strong inclusive ethos and provide high-quality learning experiences for pupils with ALN, resulting in most pupils making at least expected progress from their starting points. The ALN team provide effective support, ensuring that staff receive appropriate training to meet the diverse needs of pupils, including recent professional learning on developmental language disorder, neurodevelopmental processes and ADHD. They work productively with families and external agencies to identify needs and provide timely and effective support. Their accessibility, alongside ongoing communication and regular reviews, helps to build positive relationships and supports purposeful planning for pupils with ALN. One-page profiles (OPP) and individual development plans (IDP) provide helpful structures that support staff in planning for and reviewing pupils' needs. Pupils with ALN benefit from a broad range of well-being interventions, including emotional literacy support, work-related learning and projects such as boxing and martial arts. These initiatives are beginning to have a positive impact on their attendance and behaviour. Effective multi-agency working provides valuable guidance and support, and pupils integrate well socially within a school culture that values and celebrates difference, contributing to their strong well-being.

The school has established well-organised pupil leadership structures, including the 'School Senedd', and provides regular opportunities for consultation. As a result, many pupils are confident in expressing their views. Most pupils articulate their views confidently and identify changes resulting directly from their contributions, including the installation of outdoor canopies and the introduction of staggered lunchtime arrangements. These opportunities strengthen their understanding that their views are valued. The school provides a wide range of leadership opportunities that promote pupils' independence and sense of responsibility. Through roles such as 'buddy reading', 'Criw Cymraeg', mentoring, supporting younger pupils in science club and assisting on trips to Llangrannog, many pupils develop resilience, social skills and self-confidence. Despite the available opportunities, pupils with ALN are underrepresented in leadership roles.

Leaders place a high priority on improving pupils' attendance and have developed a strong understanding of individual pupils and the school community. Staff make suitable use of the attendance data of individual pupils and year groups to target specific support to remove barriers to pupils regularly attending school. They have also developed suitable processes to promote good attendance, including increasing engagement with parents through the work of a dedicated attendance officer. Between 2022-2023 and 2024-2025, attendance has improved suitably. It has been above that of similar schools for two of the past three years but remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Although the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved over the last three years, it is still below the average for similar schools and the national average. Rates of persistent absence have reduced over the last three years and are below those in similar schools and nationally.

Leading and improving

The headteacher provides calm and assured leadership, underpinned by a clear vision for raising aspirations and broadening horizons. Catholic virtues and Gospel values are at the heart of the school's mission and are visible, real features within the school community. This provides the foundation for a supportive environment in which pupils feel safe, are challenged to achieve their best, and develop positive aspirations for the future. Senior leaders understand their roles and responsibilities well and support the headteacher effectively. Leadership, at all levels, has contributed positively to pupils' well-being, improving aspect of teaching and ensuring many pupils make progress. However, it has not had sufficient impact on the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and the precision of self-evaluation processes.

The senior leadership team meets regularly, ensuring consistent guidance for staff and contributing to the efficient running of the school. Nevertheless, these meetings, and those with leaders at different levels, often focus too much on operational matters rather

than long-term strategic issues to continue the school's improvement. Middle leaders are committed supporters of the school and, like their senior leadership colleagues, demonstrate a strong commitment to improving the skills and life chances of pupils. Many have a clear and well-articulated vision for their areas of responsibility and a sound understanding of their roles.

Line management processes are clear and valued by staff. Generally, leaders provide appropriate support and challenge for staff at all levels. This helps to ensure they are engaged with the school's improvement priorities. However, in many cases, professional development review targets are too operational and do not always link precisely to professional learning.

Leaders at all levels undertake a range of appropriate activities throughout the academic year to monitor and evaluate standards and provision. Senior leaders are visible and they support staff well to ensure the smooth running of the school.

Alongside middle leaders, they review each area of learning and experience annually to identify strengths and areas for improvement. As a result, most staff feel that they contribute meaningfully to the school's self-evaluation processes. However, the emphasis in these processes on compliance and provision rather than impact on pupils' learning, means that leaders' evaluations are not always precise enough. Leaders identify suitable priorities for improvement and plan appropriately to address these, although not always with the degree of precision needed to have the greatest impact.

The headteacher, bursar and governors monitor the budget carefully and ensure that improvement priorities are funded suitably. The governing body offers keen support to the school community and provides suitable challenge to school leaders, particularly in relation to pupil outcomes, financial management and helping secure a culture of safeguarding.

Leaders have responded positively to national priorities such as ALN reform and aspects of curriculum development. The school focuses strongly on improving the attainment and well-being of pupils eligible for free school meals and those from low-income households, for example by engaging productively with families and providing additional learning support. As a result, the performance of pupils who are eligible for free school meals in their Year 11 examinations is consistently above that of their counterparts in similar schools over the last three years. The school continues to make generally effective use of the pupil development grant and evaluates its use of this and other funding suitably. Since the last inspection, the school has made strong progress against recommendations to develop pupils' digital skills and eliminate the deficit budget.

Additional information

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

The school's arrangements for site management do not give any cause for concern

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking

Leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately, including the use of the pupil development grant. They ensure improvement priorities are funded suitably and evaluate the use of grant funding appropriately.

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent and pupil questionnaires and consider the views of teachers and the governing body through their questionnaire responses

During an inspection, inspectors normally:

- hold a meeting with parents to hear their views on the school and its effectiveness
- meet the headteacher, governors, senior and middle leaders (where appropriate) and individual teachers to evaluate the impact of the school's work
- meet pupils to discuss their work and to gain their views about various aspects of their school
- meet groups of pupils in leadership roles, such as representatives from the school council and eco-committee, where appropriate
- visit a broad sample of lessons, including learning support groups and undertake a variety of learning walks to observe pupils learning and to see staff teaching in a range of settings, including classrooms, support groups and in outdoor areas
- where appropriate, visit the specialist resource base within the school to see pupils' learning
- observe and speak to pupils at lunch and break times and at a sample of after-school clubs, where appropriate
- attend assemblies and daily acts of collective worship
- look closely at the school's self-evaluation processes
- consider the school's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the school has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of school documents, including information on pupil assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and the governing body, information on pupils' well-being, including the safeguarding of pupils, and records of staff training and professional development

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- review the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection

Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. ‘*most pupils...*’ or ‘*very few pupils...*’. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (<http://www.estyn.gov.wales/>)

The report was produced in accordance with Section 28 of the Education Act 2005.

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