

**A report on**

**St Joseph's Catholic School and 6th form Centre**

**Newton Avenue  
Aberavon  
Port Talbot  
SA12 6EY**

**Date of inspection: January 2026**

**by**

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

**This report is also available in Welsh**

## About St Joseph's Catholic School and 6th form Centre

Name of provider	St Joseph's Catholic School and 6th form Centre
Local authority	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	Catholic School
Number of pupils on roll	835
Pupils of statutory school age	639
Number in sixth form	192
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%)	32.8%
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%)	11.9%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0.0%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	4.9%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No

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Date of headteacher appointment	05/01/2026
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/10/2019
Start date of inspection	19/01/2026

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](http://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

St Joseph's Catholic School and Sixth Form Centre is a welcoming and inclusive community where the Catholic ethos strongly underpins school life. Over the past 12 months, the school has experienced a challenging period. However, throughout this time, staff have remained deeply committed, continuing to support the pupils and one another despite the challenges faced.

Leaders and staff at all levels work collaboratively to ensure that a strong culture of safeguarding is central to the school's work. As a result, most pupils feel safe. Care, support and guidance are a strength of the school.

The acting headteacher provides compassionate leadership and continues to steer the school through challenging times. He knows the school well and considers pupil and staff well-being carefully. However, the current leadership arrangements are not equitable or sustainable over the longer term. Although leaders know the school well, they are not precise enough in their evaluation of the impact of teaching on pupils' learning.

Despite recent improvements in planning, the school's provision for developing pupils' reading and writing skills is in the early days of development. Around a half of pupils struggle with grammatical accuracy and spelling, which is not addressed or corrected. In general, pupils do not receive enough opportunities to develop their numeracy and digital skills in relevant subjects across the curriculum.

In most lessons, there are positive relationships between teachers and pupils, contributing to a calm and productive atmosphere. The majority of teachers offer pupils suitable learning activities. In these lessons, many pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning, follow instructions attentively, and collaborate effectively. A few lessons are particularly effective, where teachers use questioning skilfully to probe pupils' understanding, and plan activities that grow increasingly challenging. However, in a minority of cases, pupils make limited progress due to a lack of challenge and weak questioning.

Effective provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) helps them to make suitable progress against their individual targets. Sixth form pupils are polite and welcoming to visitors, have positive attitudes to learning and contribute well during lessons. The school is beginning to develop opportunities for pupils to undertake leadership roles and whole school responsibilities. There is a wide variety of enrichment activities, including clubs and cultural visits, which complement the curriculum and the school's Catholic ethos and values. Pupils' attendance rates are improving well, and this remains a priority for the school.

## Recommendations

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

- R1 Ensure senior leadership roles and responsibilities are defined clearly and balanced well and that leaders at all levels hold staff to account fully for their work.
- R2 Strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.
- R3 Improve provision for pupils' reading and writing skills so that they have meaningful and challenging opportunities to develop these skills across the curriculum.
- R4 Improve the effectiveness of teaching.
- R5 Improve the coordination of provision to develop pupils' numeracy and digital skills.

## What happens next

### Significant improvement

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that this school is in need of significant improvement. The school will draw up an action plan which shows how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress about 12 months after the publication of this report.

## Main findings

### Teaching and learning

In most cases, teachers demonstrate secure subject knowledge and establish clear classroom routines that are embedded well and applied consistently. They treat pupils with respect and classrooms are calm and safe environments. As a result, most pupils behave well and show respect for teachers and peers, listening carefully and following instructions appropriately. Most teachers provide explanations and instructions that are generally clear, accurate and accessible for all pupils.

In many instances, teachers foster positive working relationships with pupils. They circulate the classroom regularly to monitor pupils' progress, providing timely support and individual guidance. They ask appropriate questions to assess pupils' understanding and offer suitable verbal feedback. As a result, many pupils engage positively with their learning and often show enthusiasm, particularly during paired and group activities.

In the majority of cases, teachers have suitable expectations of what pupils can achieve. They model language appropriately and make effective use of subject-specific terminology to enhance pupils' knowledge. In these lessons, teachers plan logical sequences of tasks, ensuring smooth transitions between activities and clear progression towards the learning objectives. They deliver lessons that are generally well paced and provide an appropriate level of challenge. This enables pupils to sustain concentration and make at least suitable progress.

In the few lessons where pupils make strong progress, teachers communicate ambitious expectations of what pupils can achieve. They plan challenging activities that build carefully on pupils' prior knowledge and understanding. Their explanations are detailed and are adapted skilfully to meet the needs of all pupils. They use probing questions to challenge pupils' thinking and to further develop their understanding.

In a minority of cases where pupils make limited progress, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low. As a result, they:

- plan lessons that lack sufficient challenge, with too many repetitive tasks
- do not establish an appropriate balance between supporting pupils' learning and developing their independence
- use a limited range of questioning
- do not provide worthwhile opportunities for pupils to develop their skills alongside their subject knowledge
- do not challenge pupils' passivity or disengagement well enough.

The impact of written feedback is limited. In the best cases, pupils use their teachers' advice to improve their work well. However, too often feedback is not helpful enough to enable pupils to improve their work.

### **Literacy skills**

Senior and middle leaders have recently started working with teachers to plan a range of opportunities to develop pupils' literacy skills across curriculum areas. These opportunities are beginning to be integrated, but the strategic planning and coordination of this provision is at an early stage of development.

Many pupils listen respectfully to their teachers and peers. When opportunities arise, they express their ideas clearly and respond suitably to teachers' questions. These pupils use subject-specific vocabulary appropriately. A few pupils express themselves particularly effectively and fluently, articulating what they have learnt confidently and clearly. A few pupils provide only short, underdeveloped answers and lack a wide enough vocabulary.

When given the opportunity, the majority of pupils adapt their writing appropriately for specific audiences, supporting their opinions with evidence and clear reasons. A few write particularly effectively. These pupils structure their work well and select their vocabulary carefully, producing sophisticated pieces of writing. However, around half of pupils make frequent, basic spelling and grammatical errors. Shortcomings in assessment and feedback for literacy lead to pupils continuing to make these basic errors. A few have notably poor handwriting that is difficult to understand.

### **Reading**

The school has recognised the importance of improving pupils' reading skills and made it a whole-school priority. Leaders have recently completed a useful pupil audit which has given them a clear understanding of pupils' perception of reading provision. Leaders are beginning to plan activities to develop pupils' reading skills across the curriculum. However, these are at very early stages of development.

In general, pupils understand the importance and appreciate the value of reading in many aspects of their lives. Many pupils locate information efficiently and complete basic comprehension exercises competently. These pupils identify key words suitably when annotating texts, infer basic meaning from images and texts and summarise information suitably. In English lessons, older pupils analyse literary texts competently. They include valid quotations to support the points they make and explore the language in detail. The majority of younger pupils apply techniques to analyse texts suitably, though a minority identify techniques without then analysing or exploring their effect. However, in general, opportunities for pupils to develop and apply advanced reading skills such as synthesis, comparison and evaluation, across the curriculum, are limited. Although pupils complete a

range of reading comprehension exercises, these activities do not help them develop more than a superficial understanding of the topic being studied. Overall, too many pupils' experiences of reading is limited to information retrieval that offers only a modest level of challenge.

The school's current transition arrangements identify and support those pupils who arrive in Year 7 with weak reading skills. Leaders use a range of basic tests and information gathered by teaching staff to identify those pupils who need support with their basic reading skills. The 'Pioneer Provision' class supports pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) to develop their reading skills and to participate and engage fully in class reading activities. Sensible strategies are being introduced to secure a consistent approach with local primary schools to improve pupils' reading skills. However, these are in the early stages of development.

The school's approach to developing a reading culture, and the focus upon vocabulary, are in their infancy. The school has re-opened its library recently and it is working on improving this resource. Timetabled opportunities have now been allocated for pupils to visit the library during English lessons. To date, limited work has been done with parents to promote reading for pleasure.

### **Numeracy and digital skills**

Strategic planning to support the progressive development of pupils' numeracy and digital skills across the curriculum is underdeveloped. When given the opportunity, pupils apply basic aspects of numeracy appropriately in a few relevant subjects. For example, in science many present data clearly in tables and calculate magnification accurately using basic multiplication. However, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to apply numeracy skills beyond routine tasks, for example, to solve complex problems in unfamiliar contexts. Many produce inaccurate graphs with plotting errors and poor presentation which are often not identified or addressed by teachers. Where digital skills are taught explicitly through information and communication technology (ICT) lessons, pupils develop suitable skills. For example, in computer science many older pupils develop an appropriate understanding of coding. However, there are limited opportunities across the school for pupils to develop and practise advanced digital skills.

### **Cymraeg**

In general, pupils display a positive attitude towards the Welsh language. Many pronounce Welsh vocabulary appropriately and translate basic words from Welsh to English accurately. They produce short pieces of writing in Welsh using a suitable range of vocabulary. A very few construct more complex responses, using verbs and tenses effectively. However, in general there is an over-reliance on sentence builders and a lack of exposure to the spoken language. As a result, pupils lack confidence to communicate in

the language. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 have only two lessons a fortnight, which restricts their language development.

The school provides suitable opportunities for pupils to develop their knowledge of the Welsh language and culture outside of Welsh lessons, for example through the residential visits to Llangrannog, and a school Eisteddfod. The language and culture of Wales is also celebrated through the work of the 'Cryw Cymraeg' during 'Diwrnod Shwmae / Su'mae' and 'Dydd Miwsig Cymru' celebrations.

## **Curriculum**

The school has a clear vision for its curriculum that reflects its Catholic virtues and promotes 'nurturing healthy, confident and ambitious young people through faith and learning'. Pupils experience a broad range of subjects across all areas of learning and experience. In designing the curriculum, leaders have considered appropriately the school's local context and drawn usefully on the views of pupils and staff. Overall, leaders do not evaluate curriculum provision robustly enough to determine its impact on pupils' learning and development and provide a clear rationale for their curriculum choices.

In Years 10 and 11, the school offers a suitable range of academic and vocational courses that reflects pupils' interests and aspirations. Staff strengthen this provision further by adapting the curriculum for pupils at risk of disengaging from school. For example, the 'alternative pathways and provision programme' offers pupils vocational options and access to external provision, including a junior apprenticeship.

Teachers enrich pupils' experiences by providing purposeful opportunities to learn about their local community, Wales and the wider world. For example, pupils in humanities lessons explore the history and impact of the local steel industry. Pupils develop their understanding of diversity through a few opportunities in the curriculum, such as reading literature by black, Asian and minority ethnic writers in English lessons. The school promotes creative and artistic development effectively. For example, Year 8 pupils design, construct and pitch sustainable products to local businesses. However, overall, leaders do not coordinate these cross-curricular experiences to ensure opportunities are maximised across subject areas.

Pupils develop their social, moral, spiritual and cultural understanding well and learn about healthy lifestyle choices through 'pastoral care' lessons and religion, values and ethics lessons. The school further broadens pupils' experiences through a wide range of extra-curricular clubs and an extensive programme of educational visits, including a business studies trip to Brussels, an eco-visit to Kraków and a cycling pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

## **Sixth Form**

Nearly all pupils in the sixth form demonstrate a positive attitude to their studies. They contribute willingly to class discussions and demonstrate enthusiasm for learning. They relate well to each other and show respect for each other's views. Many pupils in the sixth form make at least expected progress in lessons as a result of effective teaching. The school provides helpful intervention support to pupils in the sixth form, for example, mentoring, subject drop-in sessions and examination technique workshops.

The sixth form curriculum is broad and varied. It offers a wide range of both academic and vocational subjects. The school provides an age-appropriate and comprehensive programme of personal, social and health education through 'pastoral care' lessons. External partnerships with local and national organisations play a significant role in enriching the sixth form experience.

Pupils in the sixth form play an active role in the life of the school, for example, leading elements of the school's transition programme or mentoring younger pupils. Pupils benefit from worthwhile careers guidance to help support their transition to the next steps in their education. For example, the school delivers sessions on UCAS applications, apprenticeships and careers. In addition, pupils engage extensively with university outreach programmes. Pupils enjoy a range of extra-curricular activities including playing for school sports teams or participating in trips and visits.

## **Well-being, care, support and guidance**

St Joseph's Catholic School and Sixth Form Centre is a caring community with a clear and purposeful commitment to pupil well-being that is rooted in the school's Catholic virtues. Staff know pupils well and foster positive relationships which contribute meaningfully to pupils' sense of belonging.

The school supports pupils' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development appropriately through a range of worthwhile partnerships with external agencies. These partnerships enhance the school's provision and promote important values. For example, workshops focused on racism and misogyny help pupils develop their understanding of equality and diversity. School assemblies on themes such as kindness and curiosity reinforce the school's ethos.

Vulnerable pupils benefit from valuable, tailored support provided through 'The Cwtch', 'The HWB' and the 'Ready for learning' room. Relationships between pupils and staff in these areas are strong, and the support pupils receive helps them to overcome barriers to learning and engagement. In addition to this staff-led provision, pupils also support one another well. For instance, the 'Spill the Tea' club provides a safe space where older pupils support younger pupils, particularly those in Year 7.

Staff take their responsibility for safeguarding pupils seriously, and as a result most pupils feel safe in school. Leaders, staff and governors receive safeguarding training that is appropriate to their roles and have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. Safeguarding procedures are robust and understood by staff. A designated safeguarding governor is in place, and senior leaders provide regular and useful updates to the governing body. Leaders work closely with the local authority and a wide range of external agencies to ensure that vulnerable pupils are supported effectively.

Pupil behaviour is managed consistently and fairly. Pupils understand the school's stepped approach to rewards and sanctions, which is linked clearly to its ethos and Catholic values. For those who struggle in mainstream lessons, the school provides valuable alternative curriculum pathways. Most pupils say they do not feel bullied in school. Incidents of bullying are rare and dealt with appropriately when they occur.

Between 2022-2023 and 2024-2025, there has been a substantial increase in whole-school attendance. Over the same period, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals has improved and is now above the average for similar schools and the national figure for Wales. Rates of persistent absence have decreased steadily over the last three years and are now below those seen in similar schools and nationally. Despite these positive trends, overall attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels. The school is continuing to prioritise improving attendance. It has recently strengthened its pastoral team, enabling a greater focus on this aspect. Staff target support appropriately towards pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are persistently absent.

The ALN team work diligently to support pupils with ALN. Leaders work purposefully with pupils and parents to produce appropriate individual development plans (IDPs), which provide detailed overviews of any agreed additional learning provision. These are supplemented by useful one-page profiles that offer teachers guidance on how best to support pupils' learning. However, leaders do not monitor closely enough how well teachers adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of pupils with ALN in mainstream lessons.

Progress against IDP targets is monitored closely through person-centred review meetings, where leaders consider the views of pupils, their parents, and teachers. Leaders use a suitable range of baseline testing and make effective use of this data to identify need and co-ordinate the interventions available to pupils with ALN. The detailed planning and tracking of interventions provide leaders with a sound understanding of the progress made by pupils who access interventions. The 'Pioneer Provision' provides smaller nurture classes in Year 7 to 11 for pupils with ALN who need extra support. Staff know these pupils well and work hard to meet both their well-being and academic needs. However, leaders do not have a secure enough understanding of the progress that pupils with ALN make in mainstream lessons.

Opportunities for pupil leadership are limited. The recently re-instated school council is beginning to develop its priorities. Roles such as Year 11 'Merit Leaders' and sixth form prefects offer some additional leadership experience. Overall, pupils do not have a strong enough voice in school life and are not represented on the governing body.

The school provides a worthwhile transition programme, including the 'love spoon project' and Christmas cards from Year 7 to Year 6 pupils. Staff offer worthwhile guidance for pupils moving into Year 10 and Year 12, supported by strong links with Careers Wales. Vulnerable pupils benefit from valuable alternative vocational pathways, keeping them engaged in learning and helping them prepare for further education or the world of work.

### **Leading and improving**

The acting headteacher provides committed, thoughtful and considered leadership. During a notably difficult time for the school, he has supported staff and pupils with a reassuring, sensitive approach. During this period there have been substantial changes in leadership that have had a significant impact on the school community.

The acting headteacher has a clear vision for the school based on empowering all staff to carry out their roles as effectively as possible, whilst maintaining the school's strong Catholic values of inclusivity and care. He is realistic about the school's barriers to improvement, including instability in the senior leadership team.

With the support of the governing body, senior leaders have ensured that the well-being of pupils and staff has been prioritised during this period of change. The school has taken suitable steps to consolidate and strengthen its safeguarding culture. It has also put considerable effort into strengthening its links with the local community, although some parents still feel that the school does not communicate with them well enough.

Recently, a temporary leadership structure has been put in place to increase the capacity of the senior team. In general, senior leaders provide helpful support for the acting headteacher. However, their roles are not sufficiently well balanced or well established, and the current senior leadership arrangements are not sustainable in the long term.

Senior leaders have recognised the need to strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning processes and are beginning to implement sensible changes to this aspect of the school's work. In general, the priorities identified in the school's improvement plan are sensible and identify suitable, broad areas for development. Overall, however, self-evaluation and improvement planning processes lack precision. Evaluations focus mainly on what teachers do, with insufficient consideration of the impact that provision has on pupil progress. This hinders leaders' ability to plan well for further improvement.

Middle leaders are committed, enthusiastic and have an appropriate understanding of their role and responsibilities. However, they do not receive sufficient challenge and

support from line managers to fulfil these responsibilities effectively. Overall, there is a lack of rigour in how well leaders at all levels hold staff to account.

Staff engage in a suitable self-reflection process, focusing on their professional development needs as part of the professional development review process. However, this is at an early stage of implementation. In general, professional learning is aligned suitably to whole-school improvement priorities, although it is not sufficiently tailored to meet the needs of subject areas, teams and individual staff. It has not had sufficient impact on, for example, the progressive development of pupils' skills or leaders' capacity to evaluate teaching and learning effectively.

Governors are experienced, know the school well and provide senior leaders with beneficial support and challenge. They demonstrate a generally clear understanding of their role and responsibilities. They have a secure understanding of the work of the school and have a detailed knowledge of the school's financial position. The acting headteacher, business manager and governors monitor the school budget and expenditure closely. Although the school currently has a deficit budget, it has an appropriate recovery plan agreed with the local authority.

The school uses grant funding such as the pupil development grant suitably to support the progress and well-being of pupils from low-income households. This has had a positive impact on the attendance of these pupils, although their outcomes at the end of Year 11 have varied over the last three years. Leaders do not evaluate the impact of the strategies funded by the pupil development grant rigorously enough.

The school uses a variety of helpful strategies to support pupils from low-income households, such as providing pupils with equipment and revision materials, subsidising extra-curricular activities and reviewing the suitability of curriculum provision. Overall, leaders have addressed many national priorities appropriately, although they have not had sufficient impact on improving the provision for pupils' literacy and numeracy skills.

### **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 on the whole.

However, the school remains in a deficit budget position and has a recovery plan agreed by the local authority.

## 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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