

A report on

Ysgol Friars

**Ffordd Eithinog
Bangor
Gwynedd
LL57 2LN**

Date of inspection: February 2026

by

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

This report is also available in Welsh

About Ysgol Friars

Name of provider	Ysgol Friars
Local authority	Gwynedd Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Secondary
Religious character	N/A
Number of pupils on roll	1383
Pupils of statutory school age	1124
Number in sixth form	259
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%)	13.5%
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%)	11.1%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	11.7%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	5.4%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	No
Date of headteacher appointment	29/01/2026
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	13/11/2017

Start date of inspection	23/02/2026
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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

Following an extremely difficult period, Ysgol Friars has seen significant changes in leadership and governance. Since her appointment in April 2025, the headteacher has focused on strengthening safeguarding and pastoral systems, re-establishing quality assurance processes and placing a strong emphasis on rebuilding trust and fostering an inclusive culture. This well considered programme of change is securing improvements in teaching and middle leaders' ability to evaluate provision and learning within their areas of responsibility. Leadership is increasingly cohesive and collaborative. Staff and governors are committed and supportive of the headteacher's vision and the changes implemented by the senior leadership team.

In most lessons, teachers establish clear classroom routines. As a result, many pupils behave well, show respectful attitudes towards the teacher and other pupils and apply themselves suitably to their work. Many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make sound progress over time. A few pupils make exceptionally strong progress due to highly effective teaching. In these cases, teachers have notably high expectations and challenge pupils to think deeply to develop their understanding in new and more complex contexts. In a minority of lessons, weaknesses in planning limit pupils' progress. In these lessons, teachers do not always plan carefully enough to ensure consistent progress and do not match the pace of learning to the needs of pupils well enough. Overall, the quality and impact of written feedback is variable. Planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills, including planning opportunities for pupils to develop their Welsh language skills across the curriculum, is at an early stage of development.

The school provides a caring environment. The pastoral team works effectively with a wide range of external agencies to support pupils' well-being. Provisions such as the Wellbeing Centre, 'Hafan', 'Hwb Dysgu' and 'Harbwr', offer nurturing spaces and tailored, specialist support for pupils' emotional and learning needs. Safeguarding arrangements are appropriate and well understood by staff. There is a continuous focus on training for leaders, staff and governors on a range of safeguarding matters. Leaders have taken suitable steps to enable pupils to express their views and undertake leadership roles. Leaders' strategic oversight and monitoring of attendance is at an early stage and has not secured enough improvement in this important aspect. Rates of attendance have declined over time and remain below that of similar schools.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Strengthen the strategic leadership and coordination of approaches to improve pupils' attendance
- R2 Improve the provision for the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum
- R3 Ensure that teaching consistently challenges pupils to make strong progress
- R4 Strengthen the planning for the provision of Welsh, including opportunities for pupils to use the language across the curriculum

What happens next

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

Main findings

Teaching and learning

In most lessons, teachers establish clear classroom routines and constructive working relationships with pupils. Many pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards learning and behave well in lessons and around the school. They settle quickly to their work, listen respectfully to their teachers and peers, and sustain their concentration well in lessons. The majority of pupils collaborate purposefully when given the opportunity to work in pairs or small groups, and show pride in the presentation of their work.

Many pupils, including those with additional learning needs, make sound progress in their lessons and over time. These pupils show appropriate recall of their prior learning and apply their knowledge and understanding well to new contexts. In many lessons, teachers have suitable expectations of what pupils can achieve. They provide clear instructions and explanations, and plan tasks that build incrementally on each other. These teachers ensure that pleasant and supportive learning environments support pupils' learning. Many teachers are effective language models and draw pupils' attention purposefully to key vocabulary, including subject specific terminology. They question pupils suitably and circulate the classroom to support pupils with their work. In the majority of instances, teachers provide worthwhile verbal feedback to help pupils to make progress.

In a few lessons, pupils make exceptionally strong progress. In these lessons, teachers:

- have notably high expectations of pupils and plan lessons creatively to engage and stimulate curiosity and independence
- inspire pupils with their passion and enthusiasm for their subjects
- use their subject knowledge skilfully to identify and address misconceptions
- question pupils deftly to probe and deepen their understanding
- provide highly effective explanations enhanced with examples and analogies

In a minority of instances, shortcomings in teachers' planning reduce the progress pupils make. In these cases, teachers do not have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve and plan tasks which are not sufficiently challenging or do not build on pupils' prior knowledge. They do not adapt the pace of learning to match the needs of pupils well enough. They ask overly simple questions which do not probe pupils' understanding, provide answers for pupils, or teach shortcuts that do not support pupils to deepen their thinking.

The quality and impact of written feedback to improve pupils' work is variable. In the few best examples, teachers provide constructive written feedback which clearly identifies how pupils can improve the quality of their work. In other examples, comments are overly generous or too general and do not help pupils move on in their learning. In too many instances, pupils do not respond to teachers' comments to make improvements. The school has recently adapted its approach to marking pupils' work for technical accuracy, but it is too early to see the impact of these changes.

Skills

The school's provision to support the progressive development of pupils' skills is at an early stage. Senior leaders have recently used quality assurance activities purposefully to gain a clearer understanding of how well pupils apply their skills in lessons. As a result, leaders are beginning to focus appropriately on supporting individual departments to develop the skills that are most relevant to them. There are broadly suitable interventions to support those pupils with weaker skills.

Literacy

The school is beginning to develop a positive culture of reading for pleasure through whole-school events, form time and extra-curricular activities. Across the curriculum, pupils have suitable opportunities to practise basic reading skills. Many pupils retrieve and locate information accurately in a range of subjects. Around half analyse literary and non-fiction texts suitably, identifying techniques and explaining their effect on the reader, with a few making perceptive observations. These pupils infer meaning appropriately from visual and written texts, although only a few demonstrate more developed inference skills. However, opportunities to develop advanced reading skills outside of English lessons are limited.

Many pupils write with suitable accuracy, and the majority organise their ideas logically using paragraphs and appropriate sentence structures. The majority use subject-specific terminology confidently and accurately across subjects. A few pupils produce particularly well-structured extended pieces across a range of contexts, communicating their arguments clearly and effectively, such as when considering whether everyone should give to charity in religion, values and ethics (RVE) lessons. They demonstrate a mature awareness of audience and purpose, planning extended responses carefully and using ambitious vocabulary with flair and sophistication. However, a minority of pupils make frequent spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors, including repeated careless mistakes. They struggle to organise their writing coherently and rely too heavily on scaffolds.

The school places a suitable emphasis on developing pupils' understanding and use of subject-specific vocabulary. However, in too many cases, teachers do not plan deliberately enough to develop pupils' speaking and listening skills in lessons. Many pupils respond to teachers' questions when prompted, although their answers are often brief. A few pupils use a wide range of vocabulary particularly effectively and provide thoughtful, coherent extended verbal responses. However, a minority of pupils remain passive or provide responses that are brief and underdeveloped, limiting depth in whole-class and group discussions.

Numeracy

Many pupils demonstrate secure basic number skills. They apply the four rules of number accurately, for example when working with fractions, percentages and calculating averages. However, pupils are not consistently supported to develop a deep understanding of mathematical and numerical concepts. As a result, they sometimes have difficulty in recalling prior learning and a few struggle with basic calculations. Across relevant subjects, many pupils handle data appropriately, construct graphs and, in the best examples, draw accurate conclusions from data. However, in a few cases, pupils make errors when plotting graphs or constructing suitable axes.

Many pupils can apply their financial literacy skills appropriately to calculate tax and mortgage repayments in real-life contexts. Many have a good understanding of shape, space and measurement skills. The majority of pupils develop their understanding of algebra appropriately. A few demonstrate a strong grasp of mathematical concepts, including forming and solving quadratic equations, rearranging complex formulae and deriving rules related to circle theorems. The majority of pupils show their workings appropriately and use these to ascertain where they have misunderstood or made mistakes.

Digital

Leaders support teachers to use digital technology to enhance pupils' learning and provide beneficial professional learning opportunities for staff. Pupils are given a range of suitable opportunities to develop their digital skills across the curriculum. For example, in expressive arts pupils use software creatively to enhance and refine their work when designing jewellery. In English lessons, they apply digital tools appropriately to present their work effectively, including opportunities to produce podcasts and create advertisements. In computer science, more able pupils extend their advanced digital skills successfully.

Cymraeg

Most pupils following the Welsh as a second language pathway make suitable progress in their reading skills and a majority write with fluency, using an appropriate range of vocabulary and basic grammar. A minority make strong progress in their reading skills. They annotate texts successfully to identify stylistic features such as idioms, metaphors and similes and how they impact on the reader. More able pupils write accurately using the conditional tense, such as when they provide written advice on how people could live in a more environmentally responsible way. However, many pupils lack confidence when speaking Welsh. These pupils are overly reliant on the teacher to provide answers and translation of words.

Most pupils who follow the Welsh as a first language pathway listen attentively and show a secure understanding of what they hear. When asked, many younger pupils offer comprehensive responses and express themselves fluently and accurately. The majority of older pupils are willing to contribute answers but often offer brief responses to questions. Most pupils across the age range converse in English with peers during paired tasks and do not take advantage of opportunities to develop their confidence when speaking Welsh. Many older pupils who study Welsh literature read extended texts competently. They annotate novels accurately and consider well the author's choice of vocabulary and stylistic features. The majority of pupils develop secure writing skills over time. They produce fluent and coherent extended pieces with increasing independence. However, a minority do not make enough progress in the accuracy of their writing.

Wider Skills

When given the opportunity, pupils develop their wider skills suitably. In RVE lessons, pupils develop their thinking skills well when they consider why individuals were perpetrators or bystanders during the mistreatment of Jews in Nazi Germany. In arts subjects and design technology, pupils demonstrate creativity by generating original ideas from stimulus and confidently testing their effectiveness. In physical education lessons, many participate actively in team games and demonstrate secure hand-eye coordination, for example when practising high-pass techniques in basketball.

Sixth Form

Most sixth form pupils engage well with their studies and demonstrate a clear interest in their chosen subjects. They contribute purposefully to class discussions, collaborate effectively with peers and express themselves confidently, using a wide range of subject-specific terminology and a rich vocabulary. Many work well independently and in small groups and develop their ideas thoughtfully. A few are particularly curious and work well independently to deepen their understanding of complex themes.

Curriculum

The school has a clear vision for its curriculum, focused on developing pupils' knowledge, skills and well-being to prepare them as active and responsible citizens. Leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to developing an inclusive curriculum and are beginning to refine teaching and learning experiences, using findings from pupil voice, quality assurance activity and a suitable range of data. Clear and useful 'learning journey roadmaps' support pupils' understanding of progression. Leaders are beginning to identify opportunities for literacy, numeracy and digital skill development within their subject areas. Pupils benefit from worthwhile opportunities to develop their understanding of the local area through appropriate learning experiences.

The school has a wide range of GCSE options for pupils to choose from in Years 10 and 11. Pupils are offered the opportunity to study Mandarin, and multi-lingual pupils are supported well to complete qualifications, where available, in their home languages. Leaders work purposefully with external providers to provide opportunities for pupils to study a suitable range of vocational subjects, such as agriculture or hair and beauty. At post-16, the school provides a wide range of general and vocational qualifications, supported by beneficial collaboration with partner organisations. Sixth form pupils receive strong guidance and support about their next steps and benefit from valuable opportunities to develop leadership skills. The school provides suitable alternative curriculum arrangements, including tailored provision and extended work-related learning opportunities, for those pupils who need it.

In recent years, the school has worked consistently to expand provision for Welsh. As a result, there has been a steady increase in the number of pupils gaining qualifications in first language Welsh and Welsh literature. Strategic planning for developing Welsh language provision, including increasing Welsh across the whole curriculum, remains an area for development.

Personal and social education is planned coherently across year groups and supports pupils' understanding of well-being, healthy relationships and diversity. Provision to promote equality and inclusion across the school is a strength. There are suitable opportunities to support pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through assemblies and tutorial time. Pupils benefit from a wide range of enrichment opportunities, such as the 'Scribblers' club, visits to Glan Llyn and cultural events. These contribute positively to pupils' engagement and wider personal development. Pupils value these opportunities and recognise their contribution to school life.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Ysgol Friars is strongly committed to providing a supportive and inclusive environment. The pastoral team works collaboratively to promote pupils' well-being and support their personal and social development. They build and maintain supportive relationships with pupils and respond swiftly to their needs. The school works well in partnership with a range of external providers and organisations to provide a valuable range of specialist support. Recent developments, such as the 'Hwb Dysgu', 'Hafan' and 'Harbwr', provide safe and nurturing spaces for pupils who require additional support for their learning or well-being. The 'Wellbeing Centre' is a notable feature as it provides a calm and engaging space outside the main school building where external agencies and health specialists run therapeutic interventions and support sessions for pupils.

The school has recently introduced a new behaviour policy which provides staff with a clear graduated response for dealing with incidents of poor behaviour. This enables them to focus on managing and responding to any issues and escalate concerns appropriately if needed. However, there is variability in how staff apply the policy, including consistency in awarding positive points. The pastoral team monitors data to identify trends in individual pupil behaviour and identify any actions needed. The school encourages parental engagement using a digital platform to share important information including pupils' behaviour and attitudes. Monthly drop-in sessions for parents at a local venue provide valuable opportunities to discuss any concerns. As a result of the increase in provisions to support well-being and learning since September 2025, there has been a reduction in the number of fixed-term exclusions.

Recently, leaders have taken suitable steps to consider pupil voice when making strategic and operational decisions. They now provide appropriate opportunities for pupils to contribute their views about school life. As a result, pupils have had a positive influence on some aspects of the curriculum and in increasing the range of extra-curricular activities. Pupils have suitable opportunities to take on leadership roles. For example, sixth form pupils organise charity events and act as peer mentors to younger pupils. Many pupils benefit from participation in a broad range of enrichment activities outside of the classroom including the 'Buzz Club', the school choir and Jazz Band, theatre trips and other cultural activities.

The additional learning needs team is committed to the development and progress of pupils who experience barriers to learning. The team provides helpful training to all staff about different learning needs and strategies to support pupils during lessons. Pupil individual development plans (IDPs) are helpful documents that set out clearly their needs and the support they require. The ALN team has adopted a child-centred approach in reviews and provides timely updates to staff, including any changes to provision. However, teachers do not always use this information well enough when they plan lessons. The ALN

team provides beneficial literacy, numeracy and well-being interventions for individual pupils that are monitored suitably. The school supports pupils who have English as an additional language appropriately. There are broadly suitable transition arrangements to help pupils with ALN before they start at school and to prepare them for their next stage in learning.

Leaders have focused strongly on strengthening the school's safeguarding arrangements and culture. Governors have adopted the local authority's safeguarding policy in its entirety, and this statutory document is clear and comprehensive. There are secure staffing and leadership arrangements to implement the school's safeguarding and child protection responsibilities including a designated safeguarding governor and deputy safeguarding governor. Meetings between the safeguarding governor and the designated safeguarding lead are regular and focus on sharing information, discussions on the quality of provision and the culture of safeguarding. Leaders and governors produce comprehensive safeguarding reports which are discussed at every full governing body meeting. Safer recruitment arrangements are appropriate. The school site is secure and well-managed and lockdown processes are clear and suitable.

Safeguarding is a key priority and a standing item on every management meeting agenda at all levels. Leaders and the local authority have prioritised providing staff with a comprehensive suite of statutory and other relevant training. There is a continuous focus on training and professional development on a range of safeguarding matters. The school maintains regular and productive communication with a broad range of partners and specialist training providers, alongside senior local authority officers, to ensure a swift response to any emerging concern. Staff understand their roles and responsibilities in keeping pupils safe and all senior leaders and other relevant officers are trained in child protection protocols.

The school uses a digital platform for staff to log any concerns, and they are competent in using this. Safeguarding staff monitor the information within the platform well and share information swiftly and sensibly where needed. Safeguarding arrangements for pupils who are subject to a pastoral support plan (PSP) and the very few pupils who follow a reduced timetable are sound.

The school's safeguarding culture is developing suitably. There are appropriate arrangements for pupils to learn about healthy living and relationships through the curriculum and in assemblies, tutor periods and presentations and performances by external organisations. Staff remind pupils regularly of the support available to them, encourage them to identify emotionally available adults and promote the school's four core values regularly (Ready, respectful, resilient and responsible).

Between 2022- 2023 and 2024-2025 attendance declined and remains below that of similar schools. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals continued to fall in 2024-2025 and remains below that of similar schools. The rate of persistent absence has increased since 2023 and is higher than that in similar schools. Although the school has recently introduced an attendance strategy, it lacks a systematic and strategic approach to address low attendance. Current analysis of attendance data lacks rigour and does not identify well enough the reasons for pupil absence. This limits leaders' capacity to plan actions to improve whole-school attendance, including that of groups of pupils.

Leading and improving

Prior to the new headteacher's appointment, the school experienced a period of considerable turbulence, during which staff demonstrated notable resilience and maintained day-to-day provision despite uncertainty and changes in leadership.

Since her appointment in April 2025, the headteacher has provided strong and compassionate leadership. She has established a clear moral direction centred on inclusion, high standards and the rebuilding of trust among staff and pupils. She has taken decisive action to restructure and rebuild the senior leadership team, establishing more coherent and collaborative ways of working. Working closely with this restructured team, the headteacher has led a programme of rapid but well-judged change and strengthened communication with staff, governors and parents. As a result, leadership is increasingly cohesive and transparent, securing greater consistency in practice and fostering a more open and reflective culture. In general, staff have responded positively to the renewed clarity, stability and shared sense of purpose within the school.

Senior leaders have successfully re-established self-evaluation processes and these are now robust. Joint lesson observations, faculty reviews and whole-school summaries now provide leaders with regular and reliable first-hand evidence. Improvement priorities are generally appropriate and grounded in these evaluations. Leaders respond well and in a timely manner to emerging findings by refining improvement plans.

Leaders have responded appropriately to many national priorities. They have prioritised the improvement of teaching which has had a positive impact on pupils' learning. The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals is above that of other similar schools. The school is starting to develop its approach to the leadership of skills, although this work is at an early stage. While leaders have strengthened their approach to ensuring pupils develop their Welsh language skills appropriately, this remains an area for development. Actions to improve attendance, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals and boys, have not had sufficient impact.

Middle leaders are enthusiastic about their work. They have high expectations of staff within their areas and lead their teams well. Many feel positive about the recent changes introduced by the headteacher and senior leadership team and are increasingly involved in shaping developments within their areas of responsibility. Many curriculum leaders have a sound understanding of the main strengths and areas for improvement within their areas of responsibility. In general, they plan for improvement well and include suitable actions. However, success criteria do not always focus sharply enough on measurable impact.

Line management arrangements are sound. They are regular, structured and purposeful, with clear agendas and appropriate follow-up to agreed actions. Meetings provide a suitable balance of challenge and support for departments and are beginning to strengthen accountability and professional dialogue. Faculty and departmental meetings are generally well organised and focus appropriately on key priorities, including teaching, behaviour, safeguarding and individual pupil needs. In many cases, leaders follow up actions systematically.

Performance development review arrangements have been suitably refined and are appropriately aligned to staff roles and responsibilities. Training needs are identified clearly and inform professional learning for teaching and non-teaching staff. However, a minority of objectives lack sufficiently precise and measurable success criteria, which limits leaders' ability to evaluate impact.

Professional learning is aligned well with whole-school priorities and findings from quality assurance activities, particularly in relation to aspects of teaching, assessment and the development of pupils' writing skills. Leaders respond thoughtfully to evidence when shaping professional learning and staff benefit from a range of worthwhile development opportunities. Targeted support for curriculum middle leaders has had a notable impact on their ability to evaluate teaching, learning and provision. Leaders are beginning to evaluate the impact of professional learning on classroom practice and pupils' outcomes.

The governing body, although relatively new, is committed and supportive of the school's work. The headteacher and senior leaders have strengthened transparency through clear and open communication, particularly in relation to pupils' well-being. Governors are beginning to develop their understanding of teaching quality, curriculum implementation and the school's self-evaluation processes, although this is still at an emerging stage.

Governors have a clear understanding of the school's financial position and monitoring arrangements are regular, transparent and well organised. Spending decisions align appropriately with improvement priorities, including staffing stability and enhanced provision for vulnerable pupils. The pupil development grant strategy is clear and is

targeted suitably to those pupils who need it the most. However, leaders do not evaluate the impact of this spending precisely enough.

Leadership of safeguarding is sound. Arrangements are well structured, compliant and monitored systematically. Leaders and governors demonstrate a clear understanding of their statutory responsibilities and maintain appropriate oversight of safeguarding practices.

Leaders promote a strong inclusive ethos and implement practical measures to reduce the impact of poverty on pupils' well-being and learning, such as support with school uniform, food provision and curriculum enrichment opportunities. Multi-agency collaboration strengthens support for families most in need, and investment in pastoral provision, trauma-informed approaches and vocational pathways demonstrate the school's commitment to inclusion.

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.

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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Publication date: 29/04/2026