

A report on

Tonyrefail Community School

**Gilfach Road
Tonyrefail
Rct
CF39 8HG**

Date of inspection: May 2026

by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales

About Tonyrefail Community School

Name of provider	Tonyrefail Community School
Local authority	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	All age schools
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	1707
Pupils of statutory school age	1298
Number in nursery classes	39
Number in sixth form	319
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 All - age is 18.9%)	20.7%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in All - age is 8.1%)	4.9%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	2.6%
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	1.0%
Lead partner for Initial teacher education	Yes
Date of headteacher appointment	02/09/2024

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Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	23/05/2022
Start date of inspection	11/05/2026

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

Leaders in Tonyrefail Community school have created a caring and inclusive environment where most pupils feel safe and enjoy being members of the school community. Staff place a high priority on getting to know their pupils well and have established positive working relationships with them. As a result, most pupils behave well in lessons and show high levels of respect for their teachers and peers.

Since his recent appointment, the headteacher has purposefully realigned senior leaders' roles and responsibilities and has begun to strengthen evaluation and improvement processes. These recent changes have led to improvements in aspects such as the provision for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN), securing a positive safeguarding culture and supporting leaders to develop a broad understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. However, over time leadership has had a limited impact on other important aspects, including the provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and Welsh skills and the quality of teaching. In addition, the school has made limited progress against the recommendations from the previous core inspection. Although leaders have taken recent steps to improve evaluation and improvement processes, too often they focus too heavily on provision and do not consider its impact on pupil progress and well-being well enough.

In a majority of sessions, teaching supports pupils to make expected progress. In these sessions, teachers have suitable expectations of pupils and provide clear explanations to support learning. They model concepts suitably and adapt their teaching in response to pupils' progress. There are a few cases in the secondary phase where effective teaching enables pupils to make strong progress. In these cases, teachers plan carefully for learning and question pupils skilfully to probe and deepen their understanding. However, in both the primary and secondary phases, there is too much variation in the progress that pupils make in the development of their knowledge, skills and understanding. A minority of teachers do not have high enough expectations of pupils' progress or engagement. These teachers plan tasks that do not support pupils' learning and regularly allow pupils to remain passive in learning. In these sessions, pupils make only limited progress.

The school provides a broad and balanced curriculum to pupils in Years 10 to 13, including a range of both academic and vocational qualifications. The school's health and well-being programme is well planned and supports pupils' social and moral development appropriately. Despite this, the school's curriculum for pupils up to Year 9 is not strategically planned or coordinated well enough. As a result, pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills or understanding progressively as they move through the school.

The support for pupils' well-being is a positive aspect of the school's work and pupils benefit from a range of strategies and extra-curricular activities designed to support their emotional and physical development well. Transition arrangements are a particular strength which helps pupils settle well to school life and to adapt to change as they move through the school. Leaders place a strong emphasis on mitigating the impact of poverty and provide a broad range of support. This includes providing helpful learning experiences to increase pupils' aspirations. Over the past three years the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals in Year 11 has compared favourably pupils in similar schools. The recent strengthening of attendance processes has helped to secure improvements in pupils' attendance; However, attendance remains too low, particularly that of those pupils who are eligible for free school meals.

The Complex Learning Centre (CLC) provides a calm and nurturing environment for pupils with complex learning needs. Pupils in this provision feel safe and generally enjoy coming to school. Staff plan a broad range of learning experiences for these pupils which generally supports them to make suitable progress.

The governing body are keen supporters of the school and work productively with leaders to monitor finances and address the school's deficit budget. They engage purposefully with school life and have a broad understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement.

Recommendations

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

- R1 Strengthen the quality and impact of evaluation and improvement processes
- R2 Improve the quality of teaching so that pupils in all phases make strong progress
- R3 Improve the strategic leadership and coordination of the provision for the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and Welsh skills
- R4 Improve attendance, particularly for pupils who are eligible for free school meals
- R5 Ensure that the curriculum up to Year 9 enables pupils to build progressively on their learning

What happens next

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

Most teachers in Tonyrefail Community School foster positive relationships with pupils. They use helpful classroom routines to ensure that most pupils behave well and demonstrate high levels of respect for teachers, visitors and their peers. Many pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards school and are keen to improve their learning. Pupils in nursery settle well into classroom routines and respond positively to familiar adults.

Across all phases, in a majority of sessions, pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), make expected progress in their learning. In these sessions, teachers:

- have suitable expectations of pupils' engagement and progress and plan appropriately for their learning
- provide clear explanations and instructions to support pupils' understanding and model concepts appropriately
- adapt their teaching in line with pupils' learning, and use questioning to check pupils' understanding and recall

In the secondary phase, there are a few instances where pupils make strong progress. In these sessions, teachers plan carefully for learning and use worthwhile tasks that build well on pupils' prior knowledge and skills. These teachers question pupils skilfully to develop both their verbal responses and thinking skills.

In the primary phase, teachers are beginning to use the outdoor environment to support the development of pupils' physical skills. However, overall, they do not use the outdoors or other learning environments well enough. Too often, unstructured or independent activities are not planned carefully enough to support pupil progress.

In a minority of sessions across all phases, pupils make only limited progress. In these sessions, teachers:

- have low expectations of what pupils can achieve and do not intervene when pupils are not engaged purposefully in learning
- do not plan well enough for learning, too often providing undemanding tasks that simply keep pupils busy and do not develop their knowledge, understanding or skills

- over-direct pupils' learning, limiting the development of their independent learning skills

Many teachers circulate their classrooms regularly to monitor pupils' engagement. The majority provide appropriate verbal feedback that helps pupils improve their work. However, the quality and impact of written feedback on pupils' work is generally limited.

Pupils in the sixth form are generally enthusiastic and committed to their learning. They have positive attitudes towards their work and engage well during sessions. They present their work clearly and respond well to feedback from their teachers and peers.

Skills

Leaders have recently taken appropriate steps to prioritise the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills. However, the provision for the progressive development of pupils' skills across the curriculum is not planned and co-ordinated strategically enough. As a result, pupils across all phases do not have sufficient opportunities to apply and develop their skills, in particular their literacy, numeracy and Welsh skills, in a range of relevant and challenging contexts.

Enhanced reading focus

The majority of pupils make appropriate progress in their reading. Many of the youngest pupils display enthusiasm for books and engage well when listening to stories. In general, pupils up to Year 3 read written instructions and simple texts with appropriate fluency and accuracy. However, many pupils in Years 1 and 2 do not always recognise sound blends and continue to segment common words when reading. In addition, pupils in Years 3 and 4 have not developed sufficient strategies to help them understand the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Pupils from Years 3 to 6, generally enjoy reading a broad range of texts and the majority read with appropriate fluency and comprehension. However, only a few develop advanced reading skills, such as inference and summary, well enough, because there are too few meaningful opportunities for them to do so.

In secondary phase English sessions, many pupils highlight and annotate texts suitably to identify important words and ideas. The majority are beginning to develop their ability to compare, analyse and infer from what they read, such as when considering different impressions of Miss Havisham in 'Great Expectations' and the poem 'Havisham'. However, around half of pupils rely too heavily on support from their teachers when doing this. A few pupils analyse writers' techniques perceptively, although teachers place too much emphasis on identifying language features at the expense of understanding authorial purpose and intent.

Across the curriculum, there are a few valuable opportunities for pupils to develop and apply advanced reading skills, including analysis and synthesis, particularly in humanities subjects. However, across all phases, these opportunities are limited and pupils primarily read short, simplified texts to locate information. In addition, when carrying out research, pupils often copy material out rather than summarising and adapting it to suit the purpose of the task.

The school undertakes a range of activities to promote the value of reading for pleasure and are beginning to develop a culture of reading across the school. While staff use a range of means to monitor pupils' progress in reading and identify pupils who need additional support, the coordination of the progressive development of reading skills throughout the school is at an early stage of development. Teachers have not received recent professional learning focused on effective strategies to support pupils' reading at each stage of its development

Many pupils in the nursery make good progress in their speaking skills, from their starting points. As pupils move up through the primary phase, they develop active listening skills and expand their vocabulary suitably. Many secondary aged pupils listen appropriately to teachers and their peers, but a few do not listen well enough. When given the opportunity, a majority willingly answer basic questions and communicate clearly, using a suitable range of vocabulary. However, across the school, pupils' use of subject-specific vocabulary is generally underdeveloped and the majority offer only brief responses. When given the opportunity to take part in group or paired discussion, around half participate well. Around half lack confidence when speaking about their learning.

Many of the youngest pupils build fine-motor skills well and develop their early writing skills appropriately. However, from Year 3 onwards a minority of pupils have weak handwriting which impacts on their ability to communicate clearly. Whilst a majority generally write with suitable accuracy, a minority make basic repeated errors, such as not always using capital letters appropriately or the correct tense. When given the opportunity to write at length, many structure and organise their work appropriately. Across all phases, pupils write for a suitable range of audiences and purposes, with the majority adapting the tone and content of their writing appropriately for the task. In around half of cases, pupils use a suitable range of subject-specific and generally academic vocabulary and experiment with their language choices to create effect, for example when writing gothic horror stories in Year 8. A few write at length maturely and confidently and use more ambitious vocabulary. However, a minority lack independence when writing at length and produce simplistic or underdeveloped responses. This is largely due to repetitive tasks that do not build well enough on pupils' skills, or an over-reliance on resources that restrict pupils' writing at length.

Leaders promote the advantages of learning Welsh suitably. There are valuable opportunities to enhance pupils' experiences of Welsh culture through the annual school Eisteddfodau for nursery to Year 8, guest speakers and events organised by staff. Enthusiastic pupils who are members of the 'Cryw Cymraeg' play an important role in the school.

Pupils' Welsh language skills are generally underdeveloped. Around half of the pupils lack confidence when they hold short conversations in Welsh with their peers and around half of pupils in the secondary phase write with an appropriate level of accuracy. However, they often rely too heavily on sentence starters and word banks provided by the teacher when writing. Although, generally, pupils have a positive attitude towards learning Welsh only a minority of pupils are entered for a Welsh GCSE qualification at the end of Year 11. The planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills in Welsh is underdeveloped as is the use of Welsh around the school.

The majority of pupils have suitable basic number skills relative to their age and ability. Older primary pupils use the four operations competently and work confidently with adding and subtracting two and three digit numbers. Many younger primary pupils order numbers and perform simple calculations competently. A minority of pupils have weak recall of basic number facts. In the secondary phase, the majority of pupils find the area of a range of shapes and work competently with fractions, decimals and percentages. Generally, pupils do not develop their understanding of mathematics and numeracy concepts well enough. In addition, they do not benefit from sufficiently demanding or relevant opportunities to apply and develop their numeracy skills across the curriculum.

As pupils move through the primary phase, they make suitable progress in developing their digital skills, for example when designing and printing decorations for the Christmas fair. In the secondary phase, a few subjects provide helpful opportunities for pupils to develop their digital skills, such as recording and editing pieces of music.

Curriculum

The school provides pupils with a broad and balanced curriculum from Years 10 to 13, including a variety of vocational and academic options. However, there is not a strategic enough approach towards curriculum design and progression for pupils up to the end of Year 9. As a result, the school's curriculum for these pupils does not always build progressively, and staff do not provide regular opportunities for pupils to learn about the history and culture of the local area and Wales.

The school offers a carefully planned programme of personal and social education to support the development of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural skills effectively. This includes providing many pupils with meaningful opportunities to learn about healthy

relationships and to develop their understanding of diversity. The school responds promptly to issues arising from surveys and in the community by adapting provision, for example, highlighting the issues around risk taking behaviours.

The school provides pupils in Year 9 and Year 11 with impartial advice to support them well with subject options and their next stage of learning. Leaders use secondary subject specialists to enhance the curriculum offer for pupils from Years 3 to 6. This provision is effective at supporting younger pupils with transition to middle and upper school. However, although these members of staff have specialist subject knowledge, they do not always tailor their teaching well enough to support younger pupils' progress.

The school provides a wide range of extra-curricular activities that benefit pupils from nursery up to Year 13, including expressive arts and sports clubs. Leaders consider pupils' suggestions and adapt this provision in response.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Staff in Tonyrefail Community School invest time in getting to know their pupils and build positive relationships with them. This contributes well to the school's nurturing and inclusive environment.

The school offers a suitable range of well-being support, including mentoring and targeted interventions such as 'The Cwtch' provision for younger pupils and a 'Nurture Room' for older pupils. The Flourish programme and work with families through programmes such as 'Shine' and 'Valleys Steps' provide helpful emotional support for pupils and their families. Pastoral teams work well with external agencies such as the school nurse and counselling services to enhance this provision.

Transition support for pupils when they start school or move from one part to another is a notable strength. This includes curriculum days, familiarisation sessions, visits to feeder schools, parental engagement events, as well as specific sporting activities and sessions at each transition point for pupils with particular needs. The school also provides a wide range of enrichment opportunities, including trips and extra-curricular activities which are planned across the curriculum to ensure equity of access for all pupils. Examples include trips to leisure parks and activities such as hammer beading and pyrography.

The school has adapted its processes for managing pupils' behaviour, including strengthening the rewards systems. The 'Inclusion Forum' identifies support for those pupils not fully able to meet agreed expectations. Most pupils behave well, show respect for others and say they do not feel bullied in school.

Pupils benefit from a range of leadership opportunities, including through the school parliament, Criw Cymraeg and mentoring roles. The actions of pupil leadership groups have secured positive changes, such as improvements to outdoor learning facilities and changes to the school rewards system.

Leaders have recently strengthened the strategic oversight of attendance through a whole-school approach that aims to reduce barriers to coming to school. Targeted support, effective use of data and strong partnership working are helping pupils and families, particularly vulnerable groups, to engage more positively with school and attend more regularly. However, despite the positive impacts of these new strategies, overall attendance rates remain too low, specifically, rates of persistent absenteeism and the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals.

Recently, leaders have reviewed the provision for supporting pupils with ALN. There have been beneficial changes to systems and practices including the introduction of a clear graduated response process and a more strategic overview to reviewing individual development plans (IDPs) to ensure the school meets the requirements of the ALNET Act in a timely manner.

The ALN team is committed to the development and progress of pupils with ALN. They know their pupils well, build positive relationships with them and are dedicated to help them overcome any barriers to learning. School IDPs and one page profiles outline pupils' specific needs and the additional learning provision required to meet them well. Teachers are aware of these but, in general, they do not use them well enough to plan to meet the needs of pupils with ALN.

Pupils with ALN benefit from a range of support, including one-to-one and small-group interventions. In addition, 'Anvil' provides purposeful alternative provision for targeted older pupils, supporting them to gain qualifications and prepare for future education, training or employment. Enhanced transition arrangements for pupils with ALN and their families, including coffee mornings and summer sessions, help pupils settle well into school life.

The well-established safeguarding team has secured a strong safeguarding culture where most pupils say they feel happy and safe in school. Staff understand their role in identifying and reporting concerns to help safeguard pupils and processes to raise concerns are clear. The safeguarding team responds swiftly to any concerns, providing helpful tailored support for pupils and their families. Leaders work productively with external agencies and make timely and appropriate referrals when required.

The Complex Learning Class (CLC)

The CLC provides a safe, nurturing and supportive environment where staff understand pupils' individual needs well. Teachers in the CLC set high expectations of their pupils and have established helpful learning routines. The CLC helps support pupils to access learning alongside their mainstream peers, including through the deployment of support staff. Although staff within the CLC plan for learning suitably to help pupils to make secure progress, they often rely too heavily on worksheets and do not challenge pupils well enough to develop their independence.

Provision for pupils with sensory and other complex needs is well established. Trained staff use agreed and relevant approaches to support these pupils, and these are embedded in daily routines. The ALN team has established positive relationships with the CLC staff. Together, they are beginning to develop processes to evaluate the quality and impact of this provision. Leaders monitor pupil progress suitably and work effectively with external partners to tailor provision to meet the needs of pupils.

Pupils who attend the CLC feel safe and engage positively with their learning. Relationships between staff and pupils are strong and pupils know who to turn to when they require any support.

Leading and improving

The headteacher provides measured, reflective leadership and a clear strategic direction. In a relatively short period of time, he has fostered a strong sense of teamwork across the school. He works effectively to promote the school's vision of 'Learn Together, Achieve Together', placing a strong emphasis on the core values of trust, collaboration and success.

Since his recent appointment, the headteacher has restructured the leadership team purposefully and distributed responsibilities more equitably in line with leaders' strengths. He sets high expectations for staff and pupils and makes effective use of professional development reviews and support strategies to strengthen practice and secure improvement across the school.

The headteacher has begun to strengthen the school's approaches to self-evaluation and improvement planning. Leaders now undertake a suitable range of monitoring activities to evaluate aspects of the school's work. They identify broad areas for improvement appropriately and are beginning to take suitable action in response. However, these developments are at an early stage and have not had sufficient impact on improving pupils' standards and progress.

Middle leaders are enthusiastic and committed to their roles. Many value their recent involvement in the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes alongside senior leaders. This has increased their awareness of important shortcomings within the areas they lead. However, leaders often focus too heavily on provision rather than its impact on pupils' progress and well-being. Although middle leaders appreciate the support they receive from senior leaders, senior leaders do not consistently challenge them about the impact of their work.

Leaders have recently secured worthwhile improvements in a few important areas, including provision for pupils with additional learning needs, pupils' behaviour and improvements in attendance. However, over time, they have not had sufficient impact on other important aspects such as teaching and learning and in addressing the recommendations from the last core inspection.

Leaders have recently aligned professional learning to the school's improvement priorities. The school is currently a lead school for initial teacher education and leaders work purposefully with these partners. Leaders have begun to provide more targeted support for individual members of staff and they tackle underperformance appropriately, where necessary. They place a strong emphasis on staff well-being and have established an open and supportive culture.

Leaders generally take appropriate account of national and local priorities. They consider suitably the impact of poverty on pupils' attainment and well-being and provide appropriate support to minimise the cost of the school day. For example, leaders support families with school uniform costs through the school's 'Give us a shout' initiative and spread the cost of school trips over time to make them more accessible. The school works purposefully with the community to provide worthwhile opportunities for pupils and their families, including collaborating with partners to run a local 'Winter Wonderland' event.

Leaders use grant funding, including the pupil development grant, appropriately to support pupils' needs. Over the past three years, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals in literacy, numeracy and science at the end of Year 11 has compared favourably with that of pupils in similar schools. However, leaders do not always evaluate the impact of this spending on pupils' progress rigorously enough beyond the outcomes they achieve at the end of year 11. In addition, they have not had enough impact on improving this group of pupils' attendance.

The governing body works effectively with the headteacher to promote a strong culture of safeguarding and to monitor the school's finances carefully. The headteacher works purposefully with governors and the business manager to manage the school's licensed deficit budget appropriately. Leaders prioritise spending sensibly in line with whole-school improvement priorities to support pupils' needs. Governors are supportive of the school and are developing their understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement.

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. However, the school is currently in a licensed deficit. Leaders use the pupil development grant appropriately but do not always evaluate its impact well enough.

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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