



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru
Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

A report on

River Centre 3-16 Learning Community

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

Date of inspection: June 2022

by

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

About River Centre 3-16 Learning Community

Name of provider	River Centre 3-16 Learning Community
Local authority	Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Special
Religious character	*
Number of pupils on roll	53
Pupils of statutory school age	53
Number in nursery classes	*
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 [SECTOR] is [xx]%)	54.7%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in [SECTOR] is [xx]%)	100%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	*
Date of headteacher appointment	01/01/2018
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	
Start date of inspection	27/06/2022
<p>The River Centre 3-16 Learning Community is a day special school in Blaenau Gwent. It provides education for children between the ages of 3 and 16. Following the closure of the local authority pupil referral unit (PRU), the school opened in January 2018. The school's catchment area is predominantly Blaenau Gwent. However, a very few pupils are placed by other local authorities in south Wales and a very few pupils are placed by English authorities.</p>	

The school is based on the two main sites that were the location of the PRU. The primary campus in Tredegar provides education for children from the foundation phase through to Year 7 and the secondary campus in Ebbw Vale provides education for pupils from Year 8 to Year 11. In addition, pupils who have high levels of anxiety and are unable to attend school attend Tŷ Afon, a converted house close to the secondary campus.

The school currently provides a home tuition service. Since the pandemic, this service has been provided remotely.

The majority of pupils have statements of special educational needs, and all have needs in relation to their social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Just over a quarter of pupils have learning difficulties and very few are identified as having speech and language needs.

The majority of pupils are expected to attend the school over a short period of time to receive specific support to address their special educational needs and then return to mainstream school.

The majority of pupils are eligible to receive free-school meals. All pupils are from predominantly English-speaking backgrounds. A very few pupils are looked after by their local authority.

The school employs 11 teachers and 31 support staff.

Over the past 18 months the school has experienced significant and widespread changes in leadership and staffing and has been supported, at different times, by three interim executive headteachers.

The substantive headteacher has been in post since the school opened and was previously the headteacher of the PRU. This is the first inspection of the school.

At the time of the inspection Year 11 pupils had left school. However the attendance of pupils on the secondary campus, over time, is poor.

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.

Overview

The River Centre 3-16 Learning Community was established following the closure of the local authority PRU. Based on two main campuses the school largely operates as separate entities. The result is that there are significant differences in systems, procedures, and processes between sites. The school does not operate as a cohesive organisation. The systematic collection, collation and analysis of key school performance information is extremely under-developed. This seriously impedes the ability of leaders to both report to, and be held accountable by, the governing body.

Pupils that attend the school have faced significant challenges in mainstream settings. Overall, the progress that pupils make in their learning and well-being is stronger for pupils that attend the primary campus and Tŷ Afon, than for those that attend the secondary campus. The positive aspects of provision that are found on the primary campus and Tŷ Afon are generally not found on the secondary campus. For example, the curriculum on the secondary campus is not sufficiently broad or balanced and does not prepare pupils well enough for their next stage of life and learning. In addition, the quality of the learning environment, including the culture, varies considerably across the campuses.

Over the past 18 months, there have been significant and wholesale changes to governance, leadership and staffing and these have had a detrimental impact on the learning experiences, well-being and outcomes for pupils. Staff too have been affected by these changes but generally remain committed to the pupils.

Pupils at the secondary campus experienced significant disruption to their education during the spring term of 2022. Senior leaders at the time determined that for health and safety reasons pupils should not attend the school and arrangements were made for them to attend alternative providers. Overall, attendance at these providers was low. Year 11 pupils missed a crucial part of their education whilst preparing to sit examinations. This is a significant cause for concern.

Overall, the school has failed to provide an acceptable standard of education for some of the most vulnerable pupils in Wales.

Recommendations

- R1 Address those issues identified in the health and safety letter
- R2 Establish a clear purpose and vision for the school and implement a staffing structure that is fit for purpose and adequately reflects roles and responsibilities
- R3 Ensure that the curriculum is sufficiently engaging, broad and balanced and prepares pupils well for their next stage in life and learning
- R4 Improve the behaviour of pupils, particularly on the secondary campus
- R5 Improve the quality of the learning environment and culture, particularly on the secondary campus
- R6 Improve the outcomes for pupils, particularly those on the secondary campus
- R7 Establish systems, procedures and routines across the school that are clearly understood by staff and relevant partners

What happens next

In accordance with the Education Act 2005, HMCI is of the opinion that special measures are required in relation to this school. The school will draw up an action plan showing how it is going to address the recommendations. Estyn will monitor the school's progress on a termly basis.

Main evaluation

Learning

Many pupils at the secondary campus make very limited progress in their learning. They do not always progress as well as they should or use their skills to a level that matches their ability. The disruptive behaviours of a minority of older pupils during lessons interrupt their own learning and that of their peers. However, despite the challenges faced by staff and pupils, nearly all pupils at the primary campus make suitable progress from their initial starting points.

At the primary campus, pupils settle quickly into the warm and caring environment which most pupils respond to well. This supportive environment is helping pupils, particularly those who previously found it hard to engage in education, to make suitable progress both academically and socially. This is due to the skilled support and encouragement they receive from teaching staff.

Many younger pupils develop their social skills effectively. They work in pairs or small groups, they follow instructions, take turns, co-operate with teaching staff and with each other and listen and respond appropriately to others in class discussions. This is a significant achievement for pupils when considering their prior educational experiences. For example, they commend their peers' successes and responses to questions in class. However, many older pupils do not engage well with their learning and do not listen well enough to teachers and support staff or when other pupils are speaking. They do not use their communication skills appropriately in a range of contexts throughout the day.

Over time, across the school, the majority of pupils develop their oracy skills in line with their ability. They are confident in responding to questions and share their opinions suitably. A few pupils extend and develop their ideas successfully. For example, in a science experiment, they discuss enthusiastically the reasons why their home-made boats may float or sink.

A majority of pupils develop suitable reading skills in line with their ability. They skim and scan texts and can locate information appropriately. Many younger pupils enjoy listening to a range of genres such as factually based materials and fiction texts. However, the majority of pupils do not get appropriate opportunities to develop their progressive reading skills across the curriculum and this hinders their progress in developing these skills.

The standard of writing across the school is variable. Many younger pupils, particularly those on the primary campus, develop their independent writing skills progressively. They improve their letter formation, spacing and legibility and are able to spell words and write short sentences successfully. In addition, a minority of pupils across the school develop an awareness of writing for different purposes. For example, they use effective adjectives to describe an imaginary character or use appropriate language and structure to analyse poetry. However, a majority of pupils, particularly those at the secondary campus, do not develop their writing skills well enough over time. These pupils make frequent careless errors and struggle to write at length.

Across the school, a majority of the pupils make suitable progress in developing their numeracy skills. For example, in mathematics they apply their understanding to work out the perimeter measurements for a variety of shapes, they understand coordinates and learn to budget for a shopping trip.

The majority of pupils are beginning to develop appropriate digital skills. For example, they produce simple spreadsheets, use coding programmes and use search engines to research and produce information sheets.

Many pupils improve their physical skills appropriately. For example, pupils enjoy activities such as basketball to develop their self-confidence and team working skills. Younger pupils develop their physical skills well with resources such as bikes and trikes available during break times.

A majority of pupils develop their creative skills appropriately. In their art lessons, pupils use different tools to create an attractive night sky painting as well as aboriginal art drawings. Younger pupils develop both their fine motor skills and their creativity by using clay to create a monster from a story book.

A minority of older pupils achieve a very narrow range of qualifications appropriate to their abilities. Overall, the qualifications offered are not relevant to pupils' age, additional learning needs, abilities, and interests.

Historically the proportion of pupils progressing into education, training or employment, at the end of key stage 4 has not been strong and has worsened over time. For the academic year 2020-2021 half of the pupils leaving key stage 4 did not progress into any form of education, training or employment

Well-being and attitudes to learning

Overall, many pupils feel safe in school and nearly all feel as though the school deals well with incidents of bullying. However, the behaviour of a minority of pupils at the secondary campus is disruptive. They frequently verbally abuse staff, each other, and damage property. At times, the secondary campus is not a safe environment for either pupils or staff. This is a significant and serious concern.

Overall, the majority of pupils are respectful and polite and interact well with staff and their peers. However, pupils on the secondary campus have fewer opportunities to interact and collaborate with each other. As a result, relationships between a minority of pupils are less well developed.

Relationships, particularly on the primary campus are supported very well when pupils attend the breakfast club. They sit together, chat with friends and reflect on their experiences from the previous day.

Many pupils respond well to motivating reward and sanction policies which help them to self-regulate. However, this is more effective on the primary campus. On the secondary campus, the curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning do not meet the needs of learners well enough. As a result, there are high numbers of unacceptable and inappropriate behaviour incidents which lead to a large number of recorded exclusions.

Pupils benefit from a developing range of educational visits which seek to enhance the well-being of pupils. This is particularly strong for pupils from the primary campus where most benefitted from experiences including alpaca walking and visits to National Museum Cardiff. These pupils are becoming increasingly aware of their role in their local community and the wider world. For example, pupils in the primary provision have established an effective 'pen pal' link with pupils in Norway. Pupils at Tŷ Afon are beginning to benefit from visits to places of cultural importance such as the Big Pit and also the local gym. This is particularly significant progress considering their high levels of anxiety.

Overall, many pupils are developing an appropriate knowledge and understanding of the importance of healthy lifestyles. They can distinguish between healthy and non-healthy choices and about half recognise the importance of physical activity. On the primary campus for example, most eat fruit and drink water during their morning break and learn about the importance of healthy choices and living through the curriculum. Across the school, pupils develop good skills in preparing healthy food such as fruit kebabs and healthy smoothies.

Pupils on the primary campus contribute well to decisions in school that affect them, through their participation in the school council and eco committee. For example, pupils decided on which clothing from a particular era they would wear for their recent celebrations of the Queen's platinum jubilee and have more recently planned an outside forest learning area.

Owing to the Coronavirus pandemic, inspectors will not report pupils' rates of attendance during the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Inspectors will, however, consider the school's provision for monitoring and improving attendance as part of inspection area 4.

Teaching and learning experiences

Overall, the school does not provide a broad and balanced curriculum that meets the needs of pupils. The curriculum in the primary campus is suitable and takes into consideration the individual needs of pupils well. This campus is making appropriate progress in planning for the Curriculum for Wales. This approach is supporting pupils to develop creative and thinking skills, for example, when making mythical sea creatures out of clay.

However, there is no meaningful curriculum in place for the secondary campus. Policies and plans for key curriculum areas are not in place and the current timetabling arrangements do not provide the recommended 25 hours of full-time education for pupils. As a result, important subject areas are not routinely taught, for example, there is no delivery of personal and social education (PSE). Arrangements on the secondary campus do not provide pupils with appropriate accreditation opportunities. The range is too limited, and pupils are entered into examinations at inappropriate times of their education. As a result, pupils do not leave school with the skills and knowledge that prepare them for their next stage of learning. This is a significant shortcoming of the school.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school introduced a suitable online curriculum offer for pupils who receive home tuition. This offer enables pupils to gain

a small range of accreditations. However, due to disruptions to leadership and staffing, a few of these pupils experienced inconsistent access to education over time.

The school offers a suitable range of beneficial activities for pupils to develop their physical skills and emotional well-being as part of the curriculum as well as within a positive reward programme. These include attending a local gym, mountain biking, swimming, trampolining and quad biking. In addition, the school provides a budget for pupils to purchase ice cream from a local shop, which strengthens their numeracy skills and understanding of money and change.

On the secondary campus, a minority of pupils' access education delivered by an external provider as part of their weekly timetable. For those pupils that attend, this offers valuable opportunities to develop practical and work-based skills. Over time a very few pupils progress onto an apprenticeship. However, leaders have limited oversight of the impact of the provision on pupils' learning at this provider. In addition, planning does not allow pupils to access the learning missed at the school when attending these sessions. As a result, these pupils miss important learning opportunities in core subject areas.

Staff at the school develop positive and caring relationships with pupils. Many staff demonstrate a good understanding of pupils' well-being needs which underpins learning. Support staff provide an invaluable role in supporting pupils learning and well-being. They are caring and empathetic and have shown great resilience and determination over a period of significant challenge and uncertainty. However, in part due to the high staff turnover on the secondary campus, not all staff have consistently high expectations of pupils' learning and behaviour.

Around half of staff have a good understanding of pupils' needs and adopt successful teaching strategies to ensure pupils are ready to learn. On the primary campus, this has a clear impact on reducing the number of incidents of challenging behaviour with most pupils showing a reduction throughout their time in school. However, on the secondary campus, significant and ongoing disruption in the staff team has meant many pupils lack opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with important adults which impacts negatively on their behaviour and well-being.

The quality of teaching across the school is too variable. Where teaching is good, staff use questioning effectively to support pupils to recall their prior learning and apply this to new contexts. In these lessons, there is a suitable pace of learning and teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge. For example, when teaching poetry, staff are effective language models for pupils and have good subject knowledge. However, where teaching is less effective, staff lack the appropriate subject knowledge to deliver lessons well, there is limited use of questioning and the pace of the lesson is slow, leading to significant disengagement from pupils.

The quality of teachers' planning across the school is inconsistent. Within the secondary campus it does not systematically reflect the needs of pupils, their individual education plan targets or build progressively on skills over time. This has a significantly negative impact on pupil progress.

There is inconsistent teaching of skills at the school. Where this is suitable, teachers provide engaging learning experiences that develop pupils' creative skills. For example, pupils use recycled materials to make jellyfish mobiles that are proudly displayed in classrooms. Across the school there is an over reliance on worksheets. Generally, these do not provide stimulating and authentic learning experiences for pupils and inhibit pupils' independence and creativity. Pupils are provided with opportunities to read as part of comprehension activities, but there are limited opportunities for pupils to develop a love of reading.

Assessment and feedback methods across the school are too variable. Within the primary campus teachers use baseline assessments of well-being and academic achievement to inform planning and monitor pupil progress. The use of assessment information on the secondary campus is weak. As a result, staff have an insufficient understanding of the progress pupils from this campus make.

Staff across the school provide pupils with generous praise to engage and motivate them in their learning. Where this is effective, feedback moves pupils forward in their learning successfully. However, overall, written feedback is poor and ineffective. As a result, pupils do not know what they need to do to improve.

Annual reports to parents are appropriate and provide useful information on attitudes to learning and progress made by pupils but do not indicate expected levels of progress well enough

Care, support and guidance

Overall, the lack of any routine collection of pupil information is a substantial shortcoming. The school does not possess necessary and valuable information on pupils' learning and well-being before they are placed at the school, this is particularly true of the secondary campus. This impedes the schools' ability to plan for the needs of its pupils. In addition, the school does not consistently take sufficient account of the requirements of pupils' statements of special educational needs. As a result, it is failing to meet its statutory duties to these pupils.

Over time, the school has produced detailed and informative individual learning plans for pupils. However, there is little evidence that these are used routinely across the school to adapt provision and approaches to meet the needs of pupils.

The school has employed a range of baseline assessments such as health and well-being, reading, spelling and numeracy which are used on entry to the school. However, the school does not use this information well enough, and approaches are not consistent across the campuses. In addition, teaching staff do not have ready access to the baseline assessment information for pupils. As a result, approaches to support pupils are not always specific enough to meet their individual needs. In addition, the school cannot demonstrate well enough the progress that pupils make across all aspects of the curriculum including their social and well-being skills.

Overall provision to support the well-being, social skills, literacy and numeracy needs of pupils is too variable and approaches to evaluating impact on pupils is under-developed. As a result, the school cannot demonstrate the impact of approaches on the progress made by pupils.

Staff on the primary campus successfully support parents in developing their understanding of the impact that trauma has on their child and modelling how to develop reading skills. There are well developed plans for a family engagement day at a local park.

The school has recently re-established links with Careers Wales to provide independent careers advice and guidance for Year 11 pupils. However, there are no secure transition plans in place for the current cohort of pupils, all of whom are due to leave the school in the current academic year. This is a significant shortcoming and impacts on pupils' progression into further education, training or employment when they leave the school.

The school does not have a consistent plan for supporting pupils in their transition from one campus to the other. At the time of the inspection, pupils from Year 7 remained on the primary campus due to health and safety concerns on the secondary campus.

Overall, on the secondary campus there are limited structured activities for pupils to engage with, particularly on arrival to the school, during break and at lunch times. As a result, a significant minority of pupils become disengaged quickly and their behaviour rapidly deteriorates. They become verbally abusive to one another and staff. Many staff do what they can to "talk pupils down", however the lack of overall structure has a substantial detrimental impact on pupils. Disruption to and within lessons is commonplace. The extent to which the secondary campus provides positive learning experiences for all pupils is limited.

Important school policies do not reflect recent changes within the school such as the implementation of new software to monitor behaviour and concerns. As a result, they lack clarity and guidance for staff on how to log concerns or incidents within the school. In addition, there is no guidance about how information on incidents across the school is used to promote safeguarding and acceptable behaviour.

Procedures for monitoring attendance across the school are inconsistent. Although the school retains statutory information on attendance of individual pupils, overall patterns in attendance and identification of issues are not analysed well enough.

Nearly all staff are fully aware of safeguarding procedures and believe that pupils are safe, however a few non-teaching staff are not sufficiently aware of procedures for safeguarding pupils. Procedures for ensuring staff have suitable training to safeguard children are not robust enough. In addition, leaders cannot provide evidence that mandatory safeguarding training, such as about Prevent, have taken place.

From the limited data available, the majority of the primary-aged pupils placed at the school on temporary placements have been subsequently placed in other specialist settings. This raises serious questions around the appropriateness of their placement at the River Centre

Leadership and management

Over the past 18 months, the school has experienced significant and wholesale changes in governance, leadership, teaching and support. Just under half the current

staff, including senior leaders, are on temporary contracts or in positions where they are undertaking additional responsibilities for colleagues that have resigned or are absent from work. The culmination of events over this period has had a very marked negative impact on the learning experiences, well-being, and outcomes for pupils, particularly those on the secondary campus. The situation has been unsettling for all staff.

Throughout this period of uncertainty, the school has been supported by three interim executive headteachers, each bringing their own perspectives on the work of the school. The current interim executive headteacher has worked very closely with the acting deputy headteacher and a senior leader from a local secondary school. Together they have determined appropriate priorities for the school. Staff and governors have been included in this process. School priorities largely focus on operational considerations for example, ensuring the safety of pupils and developing a safeguarding culture, developing staff understanding of trauma in children, and improving the quality of the learning environment, particularly on the secondary campus. Staff are beginning to feel more confident and secure with the current leadership team.

Several key policies are not in place, and this seriously impedes the ability of the school to make provision. Again, this impacts negatively on provision, including the learning experiences, well-being and outcomes for pupils. In addition, concerns relating to safeguarding arrangements were brought to the attention of school leaders during the inspection.

The interim executive headteacher has been gently and appropriately introducing support from his colleagues at a local school. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this.

Despite being established as a school in January 2018, the campuses largely operate separately. There are significant and substantial differences in processes and procedures across the school. The routine collection, collation and analysis of key school performance information is extremely under-developed, and this seriously impedes the ability of leaders to both report to, and be held accountable by, the governing body. Overall, the lack of systems and shared understanding of key roles has meant that the school is left with significant knowledge gaps when staff either leave their post or are absent. For example, the school is unable to account well enough for the progress that pupils make, particularly those that attend the secondary campus.

Formalised arrangements to value the contributions that individual staff make and plan for their professional learning are inconsistent and underdeveloped. Overall, the school does not comply with its statutory duty to undertake performance management of teachers. Teachers on the primary campus benefit from performance management but this arrangement is not in place for teachers on the secondary campus. There are no arrangements in place for performance management of support staff, yet around 70% of staff employed at the school are in support roles.

The school now benefits from governors that are highly experienced and able to offer extremely well-placed support and challenge on a range of strategic and practical matters. Governors are committed to the school and passionate about improving

provision. They accept that the school needs to make considerable improvements to achieve this and have been actively engaged with the current interim leadership team and staff in developing a clearer, shared understanding of the function and role of the school. However, it is difficult to judge how effective governors have been in both their support and challenge to leaders as minutes of historical governing body meetings have been recently amended. Neither governors nor staff fully understand their role or the purpose of the school when it comes to reintegrating pupils into either other specialist settings, such as special schools, or mainstream schools.

Governors do not comply with their statutory duty to provide annual reports to parents. Neither do they publish or understand how grants such as the pupil development grant are used.

Overall, the governance and leadership at the school has failed to deliver an education that meets the needs of pupils

Evidence base of the report

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carer 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/carers 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, to listen to them read 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
- visit a broad sample of classes, 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

Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (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 going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court, Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to publications@estyn.gov.wales

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