

From: [Robert Gairey](#) on behalf of [Enquiries](#)
To:
Subject: 12 23 01 River Centre 3-16 Learning Community, Ebbw Vale, Blaenau Gwent
Date: 12 October 2023 14:58:09
Attachments: [Inspection report River Centre 3-16 Learning Community 2023.pdf](#)

Dear

Thank you for your email to the Estyn Enquiries inbox. Please find the attached report as requested.

Yours sincerely

Robert Gairey
Swyddog Arweiniol Cyhoeddiadau / Lead Officer: Publications

Estyn
Arolygiaeth Ei Fawrhydi Dros Addysg A Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru His Majesty's Inspectorate For Education and Training in Wales

Cyfeiriad: Llys Angor, Heol Keen, Caerdydd, CF24 5JW
Address: Anchor Court, Keen Road, Cardiff, CF24 5JW Ffôn Estyn/Estyn Phone: 02920 446309
E-bost/E-mail: robert.gairey@estyn.gov.wales

Gwefan/Website: www.estyn.llyw.cymru / www.estyn.gov.wales Mae Estyn yn croesawu gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg a Saesneg. Bydd gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn y naill iaith neu'r llall yn cael yr un flaenoriaeth.

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Sent: 12 October 2023 11:41
To: Enquiries <Enquiries@estyn.gov.uk>
Subject: River Centre 3-16 Learning Community, Ebbw Vale, Blaenau Gwent

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Hi,

Please confirm if it's possible to obtain a copy of the most recent review undertaken at the above noted school. The last full report was made in September 2022 when the school was put

in special measures. My understanding is that a review was carried out in May/June this year.

Await your advices.

Many thanks

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

Report following monitoring

Level of follow-up: Special measures

**River Centre 3-16 Learning Community
Pontygof
Ebbw Vale
Blaenau Gwent
NP23 5AZ**

Date of visit: May 2023

by

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

Outcome of visit

The River Centre 3-16 Learning Community is judged to have made insufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the most recent core inspection.

As a result, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales is maintaining the level of follow-up activity.

Estyn will re-visit the school in around four - six months' time to monitor progress against a sample of the recommendations.

Under the provisions of Section 39 (9) of the Education Act 2005, every annual report to parents prepared by the governing body under Section 30 of the Education Act 2002 must include a statement on the progress made in implementing the action plan.

The Education (Induction Arrangements for School Teachers) (Wales) Regulations 2015 state that an induction period may **not** be served in a school requiring special measures i.e. as described in grounds 6 or 8 in section 2 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 (1). The presumption is that schools requiring special measures are not suitable for providing induction for newly qualified teachers, other than in exceptional circumstances. Therefore, schools requiring special measures should not normally appoint a newly qualified teacher (NQT) to their staff.

Progress since the last inspection

R1. Address those issues identified in the health and safety letter

Overall, in relation to the recommendations considered during this visit the school has and continues to take appropriate steps to meet the requirements of the recommendations. However, the school is at the very early stages of its improvement journey. Significant risks remain, not least instability and protracted uncertainty around school leadership and the relative isolation of the school. Additionally, there is insufficient support provided to staff for enhancing their knowledge, skills, and understanding of the school's role and purpose in fulfilling its responsibilities towards school, local, and national priorities. Staff absence also has a significant negative impact on creating a stable environment for pupils and driving school improvement.

Since the time of the core inspection there have been significant changes to the learning environment on the secondary campus. Classrooms have been redecorated, toilets have been refurbished and damaged items have been removed from the grounds. However, there is an absence of internal signage at the school and current refurbishments do not allow for pupils to receive a hot lunch.

The school has made beneficial changes to monitor on-site security across all 3 campuses. Electronic signing in and fob access is in place. Further, CCTV has been introduced across the school. However, leaders are currently unable to access this footage as the linked policy is currently out for consultation with staff and unions.

Leaders have developed suitable health and safety advice, risk assessments and traffic management plans for Ty Afon. From September 2023, the local authority will fully resume responsibility for transporting pupils to the three campuses. This will enable education staff to supervise transitions in and out of school and prepare for the school day more effectively.

Leaders have developed suitable risk assessments for pupils to transition between the secondary campus and the multi-use games area [MUGA]. However, the MUGA is not currently used due to the risks associated with transitioning to this area, for example pupils absconding. A new MUGA is being developed within the secondary campus to enrich the outdoor learning environment. However, this area is incomplete and is currently inaccessible to pupils.

Leaders have developed appropriate policies relating to the use of physical intervention. Comprehensive records of each incident are reviewed internally and shared with the local authority. Each pupil now has an individual behaviour plan which details helpful information for staff outlining support needed to prevent incidences of challenging behaviour occurring. Governors now receive information in relation to the number of physical interventions, exclusions, and complaints prior to each meeting of the governing body. Systems to collect this data and to allow leaders to review trends over time are in the early stages of development. In addition to this, leaders have strengthened risk assessments and pastoral support plans at the school, particularly for educational activities away from the school campus.

Fire reports have been updated following the school refurbishment. Leaders have received assurances from the local authority health and safety officer that relevant works in this area have been completed, however, they have not received a copy of the most recent report.

The school has taken appropriate steps to address the issues raised 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

The school was established to provide both short term temporary and long-term placements for pupils. The school and local authority have acknowledged the need for enhancing staff skills to fulfil the recently restated ambition. In addition, mainstream schools lack a clear understanding of The River Centre's purpose and the vital role it plays in supporting the purposeful re-inclusion of students.

The River Centre has taken appropriate steps to employ those staff that were on long-term temporary contracts. Despite this positive move the school continues to experience changes to its staffing with many staff on temporary secondments including many members of the leadership team. Formal arrangements to support the induction of the acting headteacher are not in place. In addition, staff absence remains a significant concern. Since September the equivalent of a whole calendar year has been lost due to staff absence. This has a significant, detrimental impact on the school and its pupils.

The situation regarding the substantive headteacher is unresolved and there is no timeline for its conclusion. This perpetuates uncertainty at the school and hinders leaders from making improvements at the necessary pace. For example, whole-school teaching approaches, curriculum development, well-being initiatives (including trauma and attachment), and student support are currently inadequate and inconsistent. The frequent turnover of staff, including at the leadership level, has resulted in a lack of confidence among the staff regarding the stability of key positions. This further hampers the school's ability to implement necessary improvements. The ongoing high level of staff absence impedes the ability of middle leaders to lead on areas that they were appointed to lead on.

Overall, the school and its staff remain relatively isolated and unaware of effective practices that exist in other schools or relevant settings. This fundamentally impacts negatively on the confidence of staff and their ability to deliver on school, local and national priorities.

R3. Ensure that the curriculum is sufficiently engaging, broad and balanced and prepares pupils well for their next stage in life and learning

Inspectors did not evaluate this recommendation during this visit

R4. Improve the behaviour of pupils, particularly on the secondary campus

Inspectors did not evaluate this recommendation during this visit

R5. Improve the quality of the learning environment and culture, particularly on the secondary campus

Following the core inspection, the secondary campus was closed and underwent extensive refurbishment. As a result, the quality of the learning environment has been greatly improved. All classrooms have been refurbished and new classrooms and other learning areas created. Toilet facilities have also been improved. The school now benefits from more appropriate internal security arrangements.

The closure of the secondary campus caused significant disruption to pupils' education. Pupils have been supported by the school's staff and received their education in a variety of locations including community centres and a local vocational skills centre. Since it reopened, in February, a very few pupils have not returned to the secondary campus and remain at the vocational skills centre. Despite this provision being strengthened by the addition of an on-site teacher, these pupils do not receive the recommended hours of education and the blended learning aspect of this provision is poorly attended by pupils.

A few pupils have not received education at the secondary campus for over a year. Despite the best efforts of school staff to support pupils in their learning, this situation has caused significant disruption to pupil's education. The impact on pupil outcomes and, for those in Year 11, their ability to access appropriate further education or training placements is not yet known.

School leaders are acutely aware of the need for continuity and to ease transition between the primary and secondary campus. As a result, the school is increasingly using and employing primary trained teachers to work on the secondary campus.

This has assisted the transition of pupils from the primary to the secondary campus. Where appropriate staff also move between campuses.

During the visit, inspectors noted that around half of pupils lack the confidence or are too anxious to engage in conversations. Those that do engage in sharing their views are generally very critical of provision and frequently highlight a lack of resources as a significant concern. In addition, they would like to have access to a garden area to plant flowers and vegetables.

Too often pupils are out of class and around half of pupils dysregulate very easily. Despite the best efforts of staff to re-engage or re-direct learners, overall, a minority of staff lack confidence with pupils who dysregulate or those that fail to engage.

Overall, the structure and planning for lessons is a too variable. Both staff and pupils do not have a secure enough understanding of what is happening and when.

The local authority continues in its endeavours to secure appropriate support for the school. Since the appointment of the acting headteacher there have been only two visits from the school improvement partner. This contrasts with the support received by the previous acting headteacher. The most recent visit resulted in a report that largely reiterated the findings of the core inspection in July. Therefore, we are unable to evaluate the impact of the support and added value the school improvement service brings to the school.

R6. Improve the outcomes for pupils, particularly those on the secondary campus

Inspectors did not evaluate this recommendation during this visit

R7. Establish systems, procedures and routines across the school that are clearly understood by staff and relevant partners

Inspectors did not evaluate this recommendation during this visit

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