



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

**A report on**

**Héronsbridge School**

**Ewenny Road  
Bridgend  
CF31 3HT**

**Date of inspection: October 2023**

**by**

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

## About Heronsbridge School

Name of provider	Heronsbridge School
Local authority	Bridgend County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
Type of school	Special
Religious character	None
Number of pupils on roll	236
Pupils of statutory school age	182
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 Maintained Special is 46.2%)	39.2%
Percentage of pupils identified as having additional learning needs (a) (The national percentage of pupils identified as having an additional learning need in Maintained Special is 99.8%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	0
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	3.4%
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2016
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	02/06/2014
Start date of inspection	02/10/2023
<p>Heronsbridge is a residential special school maintained by Bridgend local authority. The school provides education for pupils aged three to 19 years. Nearly all pupils attend on a day basis.</p> <p>The school population has grown over many years from 219 in 2014 to 266 currently on the roll of the school. During the same timeframe, the profile of pupils attending the school has changed. There has been a marked increase in pupils</p>	

with a primary diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and complex needs who attend the centre for autism at the school.

Many pupils have either a statement of special needs or a local authority individual development plan (IDP). A minority of pupils are at school action plus. Pupils at the school have a range of needs, including profound and multiple difficulties (PMLD), severe learning difficulties (SLD) and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The school is organised into departments, primary, secondary, post-16, and a centre for pupils across the age range that have a primary diagnosis of autism and complex needs.

Most pupils live in Bridgend local authority, and a few are placed at Heronsbridge by neighbouring authorities. A very few pupils come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Very few pupils speak Welsh as their first language at home. A few pupils are looked after by the local authority. Forty-one percent of pupils receive free school meals. This is slightly lower than the all-Wales average of 46% for special schools. Attendance rates are around 91% which is above the all-Wales average of 88%.

Since September 2023, the post-16 department (four classes) has relocated to Bridgend College. This is in response to increasing pupil numbers at the school. The school is due to have a new build in 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](https://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

Pupils at Heronsbridge School are happy, safe and enjoy coming to school. They are kind to each other and courteous and respectful to staff and visitors. This stems from the highly effective values, which are well-established at the school. 'Together we can' is embedded in all that happens at the school and celebrated by pupils, staff, parents and all stakeholders.

Nearly all pupils make extremely strong progress in their learning during their time at the school. They develop effective communication systems, which pupils use purposefully during the school day. Many pupils develop writing and reading skills appropriate to their needs. Most pupils develop numeracy skills that are relevant to their needs. In all aspects of learning and over time, many pupils develop valuable independence skills.

A strong feature of the school is the decidedly positive behaviour of pupils and their highly effective attitudes to learning. Together with strong working relationships with staff, pupils fully engage in all aspects of the school community. Pupil voice is another strong feature of the school. Allowing pupils to influence what and how they learn is well-established at the school. Staff proactively provide relevant opportunities for all pupils to influence their day-to-day experiences at the school extremely effectively.

The broad, stimulating pupil-centred curriculum is robustly planned and involves the whole staff team, pupils and parents. As a result, as pupils move through the school, their experiences broaden, are purposeful and where appropriate they gain valuable accreditation. Staff have high expectations for all pupils including developing lifelong independence skills. These prepare pupils well for the next stages in their lives. As a result, pupils transition to a range of post-school destinations, including college, successfully.

Leadership and management of the school is outstanding. Highly effective processes are in place that support improvement planning across the school strongly. Staff are highly motivated and manage the needs of pupils exceptionally well. Staff access a robust and valuable professional learning programme. As a result, they are highly skilled and strive to continually improve their practice to better support the needs of pupils at the school.

## Recommendations

No recommendations.

## What happens next

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

Estyn will invite the school to prepare two case studies on its work in relation to the curriculum and professional learning, for dissemination on Estyn's website.

## Main evaluation

### Learning

Nearly all pupils, including those eligible for free school meals and care experienced children, make very strong progress in their learning. Over time, the majority of pupils exceed expectations against their English and mathematics targets. For nearly all pupils, this represents highly significant progress from their starting points.

Most pupils listen well to staff and to each other. With the support of staff, many pupils use communication systems that are appropriate to them including signs, symbols and digital communication devices. They use these purposefully during the school day. For example, where appropriate, pupils use switches or digital communication devices to make a choice of a song in class.

Many pupils across the school develop writing skills appropriate to their needs. For example, a minority of pupils make steady progress from handheld interventions, which include prewriting skills such as sensory mark making and overwriting to more independent writing skills. A very few pupils write using interesting words such as 'caterwauling'. A minority of pupils develop their story writing skills appropriately, in line with their needs. For example, they take turns to clarify their understanding of the story by answering questions on the digital display, overwriting character names, or tracking letter patterns. However, the area of writing proves to be more challenging for many pupils due to their physical difficulties and the need for the use of augmentative communication devices.

Many pupils develop appropriate functional reading skills in line with their abilities. For pupils with more complex needs, they develop the skills to recognise words linked to colours and shapes. Many older pupils are able to read information from a menu to support them to choose a breaktime snack. However, due to the complex learning needs of the pupils at Heronsbridge School, only a very few pupils read extended writing or independently read for enjoyment.

Most pupils enjoy identifying single numbers using a range of multi-sensory approaches and over time become increasingly able to recognise numbers. For example, many pupils with more complex needs are able to confidently count the whales in a 'Starry eyed Stan' themed lesson on an interactive board. A minority of pupils develop a suitable understanding between concepts such as big, small, long and short. The majority of older pupils develop an appropriate understanding of the value of money. They use this knowledge wisely when budgeting for purchases in local shops.

Across the school, many pupils use their digital skills well in line with their abilities. Many pupils with more complex needs are able to use tablet computers with support. For example, they learn about left and right and they make marks with a pen on the

screen to indicate the direction of travel. Older pupils independently use adapted digital equipment to research information as part of their learning projects.

Many pupils respond appropriately to well embedded Welsh terms such as 'amser chwarae' and 'pwyt ti'. Over time, they gain a sound understanding of incidental Welsh, including greetings and instructions.

Many pupils develop their physical skills suitably through a range of purposeful activities, for example indoor bowling and regular use of the trampoline and swimming pool. Many older pupils, including pupils who use a wheelchair, enjoy activities such as 'squiggle while you wiggle' to match their movements to music.

Many pupils develop their motor skills appropriately, for example using gross motor skills to apply force to ingredients in a sensory science lesson to create 'circus slime' or developing fine motor skills to support their use of a pen.

In line with their abilities, nearly all pupils develop suitable creative skills. For example, pupils create portraits of themselves as clowns. Older pupils recreate paintings using a variety of different dots and colours in the style of Roy Lichtenstein. In addition, across the school, most pupils are able to use shapes and colours to express their ideas, feelings and emotions with increasing confidence.

Where appropriate, and in line with their individual starting points, many pupils develop valuable independence skills. For example, nearly all older pupils confidently use lockers and take responsibility for organising their belongings. Over their time at the school, they develop secure independence skills for their future lives.

Over time, the majority of leavers attain externally accredited courses. For example, in the last academic year, many of the leavers achieved beneficial entry level literacy, numeracy or life skills qualifications in addition to valuable work related accreditation in horticulture or catering. Further, a minority achieve the bronze Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

Over the past three years, around half of the learners leaving school, including those with more complex needs, have successfully progressed to further education or training.

### **Well-being and attitudes to learning**

All pupils benefit from the warm and welcoming atmosphere at the school. Nearly all pupils feel safe, secure and happy to come to school, and attend regularly. Many pupils know where to go to if they have concerns or worries. For example, pupils effectively use the well-being post-box to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

In line with their abilities, pupils demonstrate a valuable understanding of their rights. Most pupils accept individual difference and are supportive of one another. They engage positively with their peers and are polite and welcoming to staff and visitors.

A notable feature at the school is the very positive behaviour of pupils and their strong attitudes to learning. They respond well to a range of reward strategies that motivate them, for example the 'shine bright like a diamond' board. Many pupils work

very effectively on an individual basis and in small groups, and a minority work purposefully in larger groups.

Pupils develop very strong working relationships with staff. This supports them to know where to turn to for support and guidance. They respond well to instructions from staff using their preferred communication approach. Nearly all pupils respond positively to the well-established and consistent routines provided. This creates a learning environment in which most pupils can express themselves safely and confidently.

Pupil voice is a strong feature of the school. Pupils with particular interests and passions take their roles very seriously in the wide range of leadership groups available. This includes school council, eco council, well-being warriors and as representatives on the friends of Heronsbridge committee. Where appropriate, pupils are actively involved in both influencing and determining curriculum design at the school. For example, pupils choose themes for the topic work and older pupils select the skills they need to develop for their futures.

Many pupils develop key interpersonal and leadership skills successfully. For example, members of the eco council pride themselves on developing notices to remind people to switch off lights, put litter in the right bins, and keep the grounds safe. Further, pupils organise litter picks within and outside of school, including at the local beach. Pupils also run bring and buy sales and a recycle shop. As a result, during their time at school, pupils develop a sound understanding of sustainability and their role in the school and local community.

A minority of pupils, in line with their abilities, are aware of the importance of making healthy choices and how to keep themselves healthy. For example, they will grow and pick vegetables and fruit to cook in the school café.

Most pupils enjoy a range of opportunities to develop their physical skills at an appropriate level. For example they enjoy outdoor play, swimming, or sessions in the hydrotherapy pool.

### **Teaching and learning experiences**

Heronsbridge School has a highly effective broad and stimulating pupil-centred curriculum, designed in collaboration with the whole staff team, pupils and parents. The curriculum meets the needs of pupils extremely well and prepares them very effectively for the next stage in their lives. There is a strong understanding of the purpose of the curriculum across the school.

The secure provision for the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum is very effective. Sound and well-established curriculum planning enables pupils to successfully acquire skills and extend their knowledge.

The curriculum broadens as pupils progress through the school. For example, the oldest pupils have opportunities to gain purposeful accreditation in a range of courses such as careers and work-related experiences, vocational pathways, and independent living skills. The school offers a range of meaningful work experience placements in the local community.

The school has a highly effective personal and social education (PSE) and relationship and sex education (RSE) programme, which has been appropriately adapted to the needs of all pupils. As a result, pupils develop a beneficial understanding of the importance of healthy choices, positive relationships and keeping themselves safe. For example, during a lesson about online safety, pupils can recognise that their password could be unsafe and identify ways to protect themselves in the future.

Teachers and support staff make purposeful use of the onsite café, orchard, swimming pool and outdoor horticultural space to provide valuable opportunities for pupils to learn outside the classroom. For example, many pupils develop important life skills through preparing and serving food in the café and learning how to swim.

Pupils' learning experiences are enriched by a wide range of exciting extra-curricular experiences. For example, they work with partners such as Penybont football club and the Botswana, Tanzania, and Wales partnership (BOTAWA). In addition, staff at the school value collaborative working such as the annual Christmas performance, which involves the whole school and includes a carol service at the local church. Further, staff provide a highly beneficial camp during the summer holidays.

Staff place a high importance on their role in providing education in a school in Wales. They include valuable opportunities for pupils to develop an understanding of incidental Welsh language skills across the curriculum through daily greetings, use of songs and key phrases. Welsh is interwoven throughout the school day and is a strength of the school.

Across the school, staff have a robust understanding of the individual learning needs of the pupils. Nearly all teachers' planning relates closely to the targets set in pupils' individual educational plans. This approach effectively supports pupils to make strong progress in those areas that promote their wider personal and skills development. This includes understanding how to stay safe online and, in the community, working with others and understanding emotions.

Staff consistently use the school's bespoke feedback strategy of 'brilliant blue' and 'on the way orange'. This strategy is well embedded and clearly understood by staff and pupils. Teachers celebrate pupils' progress throughout the day, enabling pupils to have positive self-esteem and pride in their achievements. As a result, across the school pupils engage well and make very strong progress in their learning.

Teachers robustly track assessment data over time to inform curriculum design and monitor the progress of pupils. They use this information well to ensure that teaching builds securely on pupils' previous learning. Teachers capture each small step of progress relative to pupils' additional learning needs. This includes gathering valuable information across a range of skills relevant to the needs of the pupils. For example, in addition to academic data, staff utilise information on the development of physical skills. This is a significant strength of the school.

In nearly all lessons, teaching is highly effective in ensuring that pupils make secure progress in their learning. In these lessons, the pace is purposeful, and the level of challenge meets the needs of all pupils. Teachers use a range of resources



effectively to support curriculum delivery. Teachers deploy support staff skilfully, which supports pupils' learning experiences and helps to make learning accessible.

Teachers use a suitable range of communication approaches to support pupils to access the curriculum. Staff use questioning highly effectively to ensure the engagement and participation of all pupils in their classes. Nearly all staff use visual cues skilfully to gain pupil attention and cue them into the conversation or instruction with staff or peers.

Support staff know and understand the needs of pupils extremely well. They provide valuable and positive support to pupils, using their professional skills to proactively manage potentially challenging situations. They have very strong, nurturing working relationships with pupils.

Behaviour management is highly effective across the school. Teachers and support staff manage pupils' behaviour confidently due to their knowledge and understanding of the needs of the pupils. They support pupils, expertly decoding nonverbal communication in order to pre-empt challenging behaviours and encourage pupil engagement.

Teaching and support staff skilfully establish beneficial routines and transitions. This promotes a calm environment across the school. As a result, pupils are confident and settle quickly and are ready to engage in their learning. In addition, nearly all staff sensitively support pupils with sensory breaks during lessons to promote engagement.

Parents are kept well informed about their child's progress and achievements through home to school diaries, phone calls and meetings. Annual school reports to parents are detailed and informative. Many parents value the information they receive about their child's progress and well-being. An electronic platform further supports communication with parents and enables them to view work completed in school by their child. Communication between home and school is a significant strength of the school.

### **Care, support and guidance**

Heronsbridge is a happy school where pupils are valued and inspired to give their best. The work of the school is directed by clear values through the Heron squad, including independent Izzy, opportunity Ollie, sustainable Sam, and well-being Wynnie. Staff at all levels place the pupils at the heart of their work.

The school has well-developed policies and strategies for care, support and guidance that make a strong contribution to pupils' learning outcomes and well-being. Staff develop a very comprehensive understanding of their pupils. They provide highly skilled support to meet their learning, emotional and social needs. Further, the school provides a range of beneficial interventions to support pupil well-being effectively. As a result, nearly all pupils develop improved levels of confidence, communication and engagement during their time at the school.

The school produces a range of valuable documentation about individual pupils with guidance for staff to ensure high standards of care and support. This is strengthened

through effective relationships with therapeutic and healthcare professionals. As a result, pupils receive consistent, sensitive support that meets their emotional, physical, and learning needs well.

Leaders carefully track a range of information about pupils, including attendance and behaviour. They use this information robustly to respond swiftly to any concerns. As a result, pupils attend well and nearly all pupils show improvements in their behaviour during their time at school. Attendance for the last academic year was higher than the all-Wales average. This is a notable strength in a school where pupil attendance rates are impacted by their complex medical needs.

The school has a clear and effective approach to managing challenging behaviour, which is well understood by staff. This effectively supports the positive relationships between staff and pupils and underpins the caring culture at the school. As a result, nearly all pupils engage well with their peers, staff and learning.

The school has a worthwhile focus on supporting pupils to develop skills and knowledge for their future lives. Staff provide meaningful opportunities for pupils to develop their independence and independent living skills in a range of contexts. Leaders make the best use of the learning environment and use it flexibly to meet the needs of pupils. In a few areas, pupil independence is hindered by the restrictions of the school accommodation, such as the inability of wheelchair users to move independently around the school.

There is a comprehensive work experience offer. For example, pupils work in the school café, the recycle shop or valet cars within the school enterprise centre. Where appropriate, the majority of the oldest pupils move on to external work experience placements, for example within local shops, childcare, libraries or IT services. As a result, pupils and parents develop a strong understanding of future opportunities in employment or voluntary work.

The school has developed extensive transition plans to support pupils as they join, progress within and leave the school. Each summer staff plan 'transition fortnight' where pupils are given valuable opportunities to build relationships with new teachers and become accustomed to new learning environments. As a result, pupils begin the new school year calmly and settle quickly to their learning.

Leaders plan skilfully for successful transitions when pupils leave the school. Pupils benefit from a range of visits to Bridgend College, starting three years before they leave the school. They gain experience in range of subject areas including performing arts and catering. In addition, leaders have developed beneficial links with the college to support learners with transition, for example through linking the curriculum. As a result, pupils develop important independence and safety skills as well as confidence in new settings. Further, the school provides pupils and parents with important advice and guidance about transition.

The school has developed worthwhile practice in promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development in relation to their needs and abilities. This provision encourages pupils to take responsibility, show consideration for others and show kindness and compassion. For example, pupils learn about the experiences of children in other countries through links to schools in Botswana and Tanzania.

Staff ensure that all pupils have opportunities to contribute to the life of the school and the wider community. They provide pupils with meaningful opportunities to take on responsibilities, for example the pupil voice book where pupils articulate their vision for the new school building. Further, pupils raise money for charitable causes and volunteer at the local foodbank. Pupils participate in weekly whole-school assemblies to celebrate their achievements.

Staff provide pupils with positive experiences to learn how to live healthy lives. Staff promote healthy eating and teach pupils how to prepare a range of healthy meals. For example, pupils grow vegetables in the school garden and use them for cooking sessions, making tasty soup to sell in the school café. Further, the school provides pupils with a comprehensive range of physical activities such as football, walks, trampolining and swimming.

There is a robust culture of safeguarding at the school. Staff at all levels are alert to the signs of possible abuse and neglect. They follow appropriate procedures to ensure that the children at the school receive effective support and protection. All staff undertake beneficial training to keep pupils and themselves safe. As a result, staff understand the school's arrangements for safeguarding and respond to safeguarding concerns promptly. The school's arrangements to keep pupils safe meet requirements and give no cause for concern.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of Heronsbridge School is outstanding. Leaders have a well-established vision and strong values, which are shared by all staff and stakeholders. These firmly place the pupils at the core of all that happens at the school. 'Together we can' is deeply embedded in everything that occurs across the school. As a result, all staff have high expectations and aspirations for all pupils.

There are clear and well-planned roles and responsibilities for staff. Staff know what is expected of them, how they contribute to all aspects of continued school improvement and how to competently meet the learning and well-being needs of pupils. Staff are highly motivated and passionate to deliver the highest quality of learning experiences they can for all pupils during their time at the school.

Heronsbridge was part of the pilot for schools as learning organisations (SLO) model. The ethos of this model underpins the school improvement processes extremely well. In addition, the model complements the school values and commitment by leaders and staff to continually improve as an organisation. This is a strength of the school.

Leaders have well-established high quality systems in place to maintain a robust process of self-evaluation and improvement planning. These involve all staff and a wide range of stakeholders. Leaders maintain a strong track record in making and sustaining improvement at the school. They are reflective, and forensically analyse a wide range of useful data. As a result, leaders accurately identify strengths and areas for improvement and set highly effective strategic priorities. This is a strong feature of the school.

Senior leaders have a well-considered process for succession planning and have established strong middle leaders at the school. Robust processes are in place

across all departments, led by the middle leaders for improvement planning. They effectively map activities to provide all staff with clear information on how all aspects of their work successfully contribute to school improvement planning and priorities. As a result, there is an extremely high commitment from all staff to the improvement processes. In addition, the progression pathways for support staff builds additional capacity in leadership roles across the school.

A robust performance management process is in place for all staff, which is integral to improvement planning processes. As a result, staff are strong reflective practitioners who continually review and assess their practice in relation to school improvement and pupil progress. This is well supported by an extensive range of exceptionally strong professional development opportunities, and in particular the well-established enquiry based practitioner work.

Peer coaching and triad working is well-established at the school. This benefits staff development and supports their improvement. For example, video recordings are utilised purposefully to support and demonstrate effective practice. Annual evaluation of this work by leaders is robust and the outcomes effectively inform the next cycle of planning.

As a result of the exemplar and extensive school improvement processes, the school improvement plan is robust with clear, well-considered evidence based priorities identified to continue the cycle of improvement. A comprehensive ongoing evaluation process of the identified priorities is in place, which is realistic and demonstrates the impact for pupils extremely well. Leaders are mindful of the well-being of their staff and recognise that they need to ensure that staff can maintain and consolidate these processes and systems.

Leaders have established a strong safeguarding culture across the school. All staff and governors are clear about their responsibilities in safeguarding pupils and understand the processes in place thoroughly.

Professional learning is a strength of the school. A rigorous process is in place to meet the professional learning needs of all staff. This is integral to improvement planning, with an extensive evaluation of impact by leaders. As a result, the school has a highly trained work force who are skilled in managing the needs of pupils across the school extremely well.

Partnership working is strong across the school. Over time, the school has forged sustainable and strong working relationships with health and social services, which benefit pupils and families highly effectively. The wide range of partnership working with over 100 partners includes the National Professional Enquiry project (NPEP) with Cardiff Metropolitan University, Autism Spectrum Disorder network group, and Bridgend association of voluntary organisations (BAVO). These partnerships strongly benefit pupils and families. In addition, they provide staff with essential networking opportunities to continue to develop their practice at the school.

The school is proactive in working with the local authority and regional consortium, where it regularly contributes to cross regional working groups, leads on aspects of professional learning and support, and shares good practice with other schools.

Leaders have developed highly effective working relationships with parents who are overwhelmingly positive about the school. Leaders have developed a highly effective culture of parents as partners in the education of their child. As a result, many parents feel that they are fully included in the community of the school and have a strong understanding about their child's progress and well-being.

Governors have strong links with the school and know and understand the school priorities for improvement well. Governors benefit from regular visits to school and have clear roles and responsibilities on sub-committees as well as being linked to staff who lead on the areas of learning at the school. These links provide governors with regular and valuable opportunities to discuss curriculum developments. The financial planning arrangements at the school are robust.

## 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](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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