

Estyn's response on the proposal to extend the capacity at Pen y Cwm Special School from 175 to 205 places, with effect from September 2026. With an additional 45 places in 2030/31 for a capacity of 250 learners.

Introduction

This report has been prepared by His Majesty's Inspectors of Education and Training in Wales.

Under the terms of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and its associated Code, proposers are required to send consultation documents to Estyn. However, Estyn is not a body which is required to act in accordance with the Code and the Act places no statutory requirements on Estyn in respect of school organisation matters. Therefore, as a body being consulted, Estyn will provide their opinion only on the overall merits of school organisation proposals.

Estyn has considered the educational aspects of the proposal and has produced the following response to the information provided by the proposer.

Summary/Conclusion

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council is proposing to extend the capacity at Pen y Cwm Special School from 175 to 205 places, with effect from September 2026, with an additional 45 places in 2030/2031 for a capacity of 250 learners. In addition, and alongside this, the council identified that post 16 provision would need to be permanently moved from the main school site and a more permanent provision be developed in Vision House Ebbw Vale (currently used as a temporary basis for pupils since May 2025). This proposal specifically addresses sufficiency issues in relation to the number of places available for children with ALN in the Borough and is likely to improve the standard of provision in this area.

Description and benefits

The council has presented a suitable rationale outlining the reasons for the proposal.

Pen y Cwm Special School caters for learners across the 3-19 age range, with a wide range of disabilities and difficulties ranging from severe learning difficulties (SLD) to profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), visually impaired (VI), and hearing impaired (HI) pupils. There are several specialist facilities available on site (hydro pool, sensory rooms, rebound therapy room). The school also has additional facilities including specialist rooms for food technology, science and design technology and art.

Pupil numbers and demand for places at Pen y Cwm Special School have significantly increased over the course of the last three years, resulting in the school being oversubscribed with prospective pupils on a waiting list. The council has

undertaken a suitable analysis of additional learning needs (ALN) placements in the Borough which includes a useful model of projected numbers to 2039.

The council has suitably recognised the impact of the proposal on the post 16 provision. An appropriate proposal to build upon and further develop the current arrangements for this provision on a neighbouring site is included (approximately half a mile from the school).

The council has provided a suitably detailed description of the proposal. It has presented a background to the proposal and included an estimated timetable for statutory procedures. The plan is suitably split into two parts, and both include suitable additional factors that will need to be implemented to support the proposals. These include the additional accommodation at the main school site along with improving the temporary facility for post 16 provision at Vision House Ebbw Vale.

The council has appropriately outlined the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal. The proposal includes a clear strategic rationale for reorganising provision, with the intention of maintaining or improving standards of education across the area, and ensuring learners have access to a broad and balanced curriculum at all key stages. The proposal also appears to offer opportunities to improve the quality of teaching and learning through more efficient use of resources, strengthened leadership and management arrangements, and better deployment of staff; although, these lack detail in how they will be achieved. In addition, there are potential benefits in terms of improved learning environments and longer-term financial sustainability, while taking account of accessibility, learner travel arrangements and the needs of vulnerable groups, including pupils with additional learning needs. The council has not identified any disadvantages associated with this proposal.

The council has outlined risks that it has identified in relation to the proposal. These include both a placement and a financial risk in terms of securing suitable 'out of county' provision for learners, not addressing stakeholder perspectives, poor delivery of the plan or budget, insufficient capacity for future demand and carbon dioxide omissions. The council has presented apparently suitable mitigation against these potential risks.

The council has considered a range of alternative options, including maintaining the status quo, creating a new build or internal refurbishment of existing school buildings. The proposal also considers a suitable short-list of options. The council has provided suitable reasons for discounting other options which appear to be fair and appropriate.

The council has considered the impact of the proposal on transport arrangements. The council has established a useful process in order to assess the travel needs of children who may require ALN transport in the home to school & post 16 transport policy 2026/27. The council have also suitably considered the current school location

and traffic infrastructure. This appears to be fair and reasonable, particularly when considering the needs of pupils with ALN.

The council has provided a brief Welsh language impact assessment as part of this consultation. It states that this proposal does not impact upon the number and availability of Welsh-medium school places within Blaenau Gwent. The council does not expect any negative impact on the Welsh Language as a result of this proposal. The proposals states that “Welsh is taught in English-medium and special schools in line with the curriculum. The proposal will therefore have no impact upon the Welsh Language Measure (2011)”. However, there appears to be no consideration of the council’s Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, the Welsh Language Act (2025) or curriculum for Wales.

The council has provided a community impact assessment as part of this proposal. As a special school, the focus is on children with complex specialist needs, so the proposal is expected to have a very positive impact on the health and wellbeing of those who attend, who will have access to the highest standard in terms of facilities, education and care. There is a suitable and relevant assessment of the impact on the community.

The council has adequately considered the financial implications of the proposal. It states that school funding is in line with the fair funding policy with additional funding in relation to special school category funding. There is a suitable reference to the costs for the council on educating pupils with ALN outside the authority. By creating additional places within the county, this cost would be reduced. Whilst there are minimal capital costs in increasing the capacity of places at the current site (part 1), there are significant capital costs (between £8m and £15m depending on the option chosen) associated with part 2 which is subject to capital programme approval within the council. The actual capital costings are very general and lack specific detail and there appears to be no reference to alternative options should capital programme funding not be approved. There are suitable references to the health and safety implications for the potential building phase of part 2 of the proposal.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The council appears to have considered the quality of outcomes, provision and leadership and management at the school sufficiently. They have included the outcomes of the most recent Estyn inspection report in 2024 and have included suitable aspects of the report for each of the five inspection areas. There is also a suitable reference to the recommendations outlined within the report. The council has also considered the impact of the proposal on quality and standards in education including separate sections on learning; well-being and attitudes to learning; teaching and learning experiences; care, support and guidance and leadership and management. While each of the sections appear to be fair and reasonable, they

seem to lack detail in the proposed benefits to the educational aspects of the proposal, particularly the learning experiences and well-being of pupils with ALN.

The council has undertaken a suitable impact equality assessment to consider the impact of the proposal on the protected characteristics. As a result of this assessment, it has concluded that the proposal would have a positive impact on disability as a protected characteristic and a neutral impact on all other protected characteristics.

This council states that by addressing sufficiency issues in relation to the number of places available for children with ALN in the Borough, the proposal will have a positive impact on meeting the needs of these pupils. It will benefit families of pupils with profound or multiple learning difficulties by their child having the education within the County Borough within which they reside, and it will provide designated spaces in the school for key partners such as health care professionals to offer individual support for learners. This appears to be reasonable. The council suitably state that the facilities at the main site will continue to be available for pupils in the post 16 provision.

The council have considered the transition arrangements to post 16 currently located at the school suitably, although the detail in the transition for meeting pupils' specific needs are not clear.

The council have included a suitable staff impact assessment stating there will be no impact on existing staff and that post 16 staff may have new opportunities in the new building within part 2. It states that there will be HR support for the governing body with new appointments, although the proposal does not outline plans to appoint a staff team with relevant skills and experience for supporting pupils with ALN.