

## **Estyn's response on the proposal to close the sixth form at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School with pupils transferring to Aberdare Community School no later than September 2026.**

### **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**

The proposal is by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (RCTBC), and it proposes to close the sixth form at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and amend the catchment area for post-16 provision only, and place Mountain Ash Comprehensive School in the catchment area of Aberdare Community School. The proposals are likely to improve the standard of post-16 provision within the area.

### **Description and benefits**

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

According to the Mountain Ash Comprehensive School property condition survey, the council outlines that it is classified as a grade B for condition and suitability and partially compliant with the Equality Act 2010 for accessibility. As such, the school site and building require further upgrades at approximately £1.4 million. Aberdare Community School is graded A for condition and suitability. It was designed to meet the standards and regulations as outlined in Building Bulletin 99. The site and building are fully compliant with the Equality Act 2010.

Currently, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School offers pupils the opportunity to receive their post-16 provision at the school. However, Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data indicates that whilst the number of statutory school-age pupils has remained broadly consistent over the last five years, the number of pupils attending the sixth form has decreased by approximately 6.8%. Since 2014/15, the number of sixth-form pupils has reduced by 43%.

Mountain Ash Comprehensive School is currently part of the Cynon Valley Post-16 Consortium, which enables them to comply with the expectations outlined in the current 16-19 Curriculum in Wales are set out in legislation through the Learning and Skills Act (2000), the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 and associated guidance. The majority of sixth-form pupils at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School had dual registration, meaning they received some of their post-16 education at another secondary school in the consortium. In comparison, the minority of sixth-form pupils at Aberdare Community School have dual registration, meaning that the majority receive all their post-16 education at their school. The council predicts

sufficient capacity to accommodate all prospective sixth-form pupils from Mountain Ash Comprehensive School at Aberdare Community School. This would reduce the projected surplus capacity of Aberdare Community School to approximately 15.8% if implemented.

The proposals will not affect the existing post-16 institutions. It will remain the same the same in that pupils have the choice of continuing their study in their catchment sixth-form or studying at Coleg Y Cymoedd.

The council provided a suitably detailed description of the proposal, presented its background, and included an estimated timetable for completing statutory procedures.

The council has considered a range of alternative options, including maintaining the status quo, federating Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and Aberdare Community School, and removing the sixth-form provision from both. The council has provided reasonable advantages and disadvantages of these alternative options. These seem to be fair and appropriate.

The council has appropriately outlined the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal. The main advantages include an improved curriculum catering to academic and vocational pathways, an enhanced learning environment, financial efficiency and improved social and academic interactions. The main disadvantages include a negative impact on pupil wellbeing by transferring to an unfamiliar environment, increased travel time for pupils from the Mountain Ash Comprehensive School catchment area and associated costs to RCTBC. However, it appears that the council has not considered this decision's impact on 11-16 provision sufficiently well at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School. For example, siblings may decide to go to Aberdare Community School even though they live within the Mountain Ash Comprehensive School catchment area.

The council has identified three risks in relation to the proposal. These risks include a reduction in staff at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School due to some roles no longer being required, an increase in traffic on the road network and the negative impact on the Mountain Ash Comprehensive community with the removal of the sixth form. Whilst the council has presented suitable mitigation to these risks, there is no information regarding how many staff would be affected by these changes. However, the council considers the possible loss of employment to be a medium impact as opposed to a high impact.

The council has demonstrated the proposal's impact on transport arrangements. Under the council's current transport policy, post-16 pupils who live 3 miles or more from their nearest suitable school or college will continue to receive free transport. It is estimated that nearly all sixth-form pupils living within the Mountain Ash Comprehensive catchment area will be entitled to free home-to-school transport to attend post-16 provision at Aberdare Community School. This appears to be fair and reasonable.

The council has suitably demonstrated the impact of the proposal on surplus places. According to PLASC data 2023-2024, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School had 981 pupils, including 82 in the sixth form, and has surplus places. Its capacity has been calculated at 1,394 pupils. Consequently, it appears to be undersubscribed. The council data demonstrates that by 2028-2029, there is a projected surplus capacity

of approximately 32.6% (455 places) at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School. According to PLASC data 2023-2024, Aberdare Community School, had 1,285 pupils, including 124 in the sixth form, and has surplus places. Its capacity has been calculated at 1,574 pupils. Consequently, it appears to be undersubscribed. The council data demonstrates that by 2028-2029, there is a projected surplus of approximately 21.0% (330 places) at Aberdare Community School.

The council has undertaken a Community Impact Assessment for this proposal. It states that should the proposal go ahead; the catchment area of Aberdare Community School would expand to include the catchment area of Mountain Ash Comprehensive School for post-16 provision only.

The council has undertaken an impact assessment on the Welsh language and considers that there will be no negative impact. It suggests that the impact on Welsh language groups should be neutral as it will not result in a new English medium sixth form opening in RCTBC.

The council has adequately considered the financial implications of the proposal. They suitably highlight the financial pressures of small sixth-form pupil numbers, and where they do exist, resources intended for statutory-age learners are redirected to subsidise post-16 provision. The council indicated a shortfall of approximately £201,000 across the two schools between the allocated funding and the actual cost of delivering post-16 provision. However, the council anticipates that should the proposal proceed, there will be a marginal reduction in the estimated allocation per pupil at Aberdare Community School and an increase in Mountain Ash Comprehensive School to £5,775.

In addition, the council suggest that this proposal will improve the 11-16 provision at both schools and positively impact school finance. It highlights that this closure would not have any capital funding implications, and revenue savings will be reinvested into supporting the education of children and young people across RCTBC.

### **Educational aspects of the proposal**

The council appears to have considered the impact of the proposals on the quality and standards in education. They have included the outcomes of the most recent inspection reports of both Mountain Ash Comprehensive School and Aberdare Community School. In 2019, Mountain Ash Comprehensive School was placed in Estyn review (non-statutory category). In 2018, Aberdare Community School was placed in the significant improvement category. However, both schools were judged to have made sufficient progress in 2021 and were removed from their respective category.

The council suggests that rationalising the small sixth forms at both schools would better meet the educational needs of pupils by strengthening management arrangements, improving the efficient use of resources, and delivering a broader curriculum that enhances the quality of the educational experience.

The council has considered this proposal's impact on pupils and proposes suitable support mechanisms to mitigate this impact.

The council has indicated how the proposal to close the sixth form at Mountain Ash Comprehensive School with pupils transferring to Aberdare Community School by no

later than September 2026 could have a major positive impact on all five Estyn inspection areas. Whilst these reasonably outline the potential benefits for Aberdare Community School, they do not consider the impact on Mountain Ash Comprehensive School. Hence, they do not provide a balanced viewpoint.

The council has undertaken an impact equality assessment to consider the impact on the protected characteristics. As a result of this assessment, it has been concluded that there is no evidence to suggest that the proposal will have a negative impact on the protected characteristics. The council has considered the impact of the proposal regarding additional learning needs (ALN). They suggest that there is sufficient capacity at Aberdare Community School to accommodate an increase in pupils with additional learning needs. Their response is appropriate.