

**A report on**

**Park Lane Special School**

**Park Lane  
Trecynon  
Aberdare  
Rondda Cynon Taf  
CF44 8HN**

**Date of inspection: June 2025**

**by**

**Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education**

**and Training in Wales**

## About Park Lane Special School

Name of provider	Park Lane Special School
Local authority	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
Language of the provider	English
School category according to Welsh-medium provision	
Type of school	Maintained Special
Religious character	
Number of pupils on roll	139
Pupils of statutory school age	107
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 46.6%)	55.6%
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 100.0%)	100.0%
Percentage of pupils who speak Welsh at home	*
Percentage of pupils with English as an additional language	*
Date of headteacher appointment	01/09/2023
Date of previous Estyn inspection (if applicable)	01/03/2017

Start date of inspection	30/06/2025
<p>Further information</p> <p>Park Lane Special School is maintained by Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority and provides day education for 148 pupils aged 3-19 years with a range of additional learning needs. Nearly all pupils come from within the Rhondda Cynon Taf area. Since the last inspection the number of pupils on roll has increased by just under 40% and is due to increase further in the autumn term.</p> <p>Nearly all pupils are autistic and have speech communication and language difficulties and many have a learning difficulty. Around a third have social, emotional and behavioural needs and a few have physical and medical needs. In addition, a very few pupils have sensory impairments.</p> <p>Nearly all pupils have individual development plans that are maintained by the local authority.</p> <p>English is the predominant language of nearly all pupils. No pupils speak Welsh as their first language at home. Around half of pupils are eligible for free school meals. Very few pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds.</p> <p>The school has 14 classes: eight primary and six secondary classes. In addition, older pupils access a school-based provision at the local further education college.</p> <p>The headteacher was appointed in September 2023.</p>	

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.

## Summary

Park Lane School provides a nurturing, inclusive, and supportive environment where pupils feel safe, respected, and ready to learn. Its strong, family-oriented ethos is evident in the trusting relationships between staff, pupils, and their families. Teachers and support staff know their pupils exceptionally well and carefully tailor learning experiences to individual needs. As a result, most pupils make strong progress in key areas such as communication, independence, and life skills. Older pupils leave school with relevant qualifications and are well equipped for their next steps.

Teaching is a notable strength. Lessons are thoughtfully planned and highly engaging, with staff using a wide range of visual strategies and tools to support understanding. Teachers and support staff maintain high expectations, and classroom routines help pupils to remain focused and, over time, to develop their confidence. Pupils are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and develop practical life skills such as preparing food, managing personal routines, and navigating road safety fostering greater independence as they move through the school.

The school building does not fully meet pupils' complex needs. Issues include poor acoustics, overcrowded classrooms, limited mobility space, lack of breakout areas, and loss of specialist facilities. Growing pupil numbers are increasing pressure on toilets and personal care spaces, with challenges expected to worsen with a 30% increase in pupils from September.

Pupil well-being is at the heart of the school's approach. However, many pupils face long journeys to school, often arriving tired or dysregulated, which affects their well-being and readiness to learn. Despite this, the school has appropriate arrangements to support their needs effectively.

The pupil support team works in close partnership with staff and families to provide timely, tailored emotional and therapeutic support. Interventions such as counselling, music therapy, and sessions with a therapy dog are well embedded in daily life. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary across the school, and pupils are confident in seeking help when needed. Safeguarding is robust and well managed, with strong systems in place and clear oversight from trained staff and governors.

Under the leadership of a forward-thinking and compassionate headteacher leaders have established a clear and ambitious vision centred on pupil needs, curriculum development, and staff growth. Strong partnerships with other schools and external specialists have supported professional development and informed reflective practice, helping the school move forward with purpose.

The school's motto is **imagine, believe, and achieve**. Under the current leadership, the school has adapted well to range challenges and is a vibrant, caring, and ambitious community where pupils are supported and encouraged to imagine, believe and achieve.

## Recommendations

We have made three recommendations to help the school continue to improve:

- R1. Continue to share effective teaching practices across the school
- R2. Continue to refine systems to evaluate the work of the school
- R3. Work with the local authority to address issues in relation to accommodation and pupil transport

## What happens next

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

## **Main evaluation**

### **A curriculum that builds pupils communication, confidence and independence**

Leaders at Park Lane School have set out a clear and purposeful vision for a pupil-centred curriculum that is both engaging and inclusive. There is a growing whole-school focus on creating exciting learning experiences that meet the needs of all learners, with staff working collaboratively to continuously refine curriculum planning and delivery.

A particular strength is the school's effective approach to developing pupils' communication. Most pupils make strong progress using their preferred methods such as speech, gestures, communication boards, or technology to express themselves, make choices, and interact confidently with others.

The curriculum offers pupils a broad range of meaningful experiences within their community. Activities such as volunteering, horse riding, and visiting the local library support the development of pupils' confidence and independence. Pupils also benefit from cultural opportunities, including collaborative music projects with a local Welsh-medium school, which enhance their understanding of Welsh language and culture while building social skills.

Although in its early stages, the school is beginning to plan for the integration of wider skills such as literacy, digital competence, careers education, and relationships and values education. A structured approach to skill development is in place, supported by curriculum guides, mid-term planning, and individualised pupil progress targets that align closely with their development plans.

The use of digital tools to document and share pupils' learning journeys with parents is highly effective. Clear pathways to accreditation ensure pupils are well prepared for life after school.

### **Skilled and responsive teaching that supports individual pupil engagement and progress**

Teaching and learning at Park Lane School is a significant strength, underpinned by staff's deep understanding of pupils' individual needs. Teachers plan lessons closely linked to pupils' personal targets, which enables most to make strong progress in key areas of learning and development. Staff use effective assessment tools, including detailed learning journeys, to track progress and identify the next steps in each pupil's education.

In the most effective lessons, teachers and teaching assistants work collaboratively to deliver engaging, well-paced activities tailored to pupils' interests and abilities. Staff

maintain high expectations and use a wide range of strategies, including visual aids, clear instructions, and sensory resources, to support understanding. Classroom routines are well established, and transitions are smoothly managed, helping pupils feel secure and enthusiastic about their learning. As a result, pupils demonstrate positive attitudes and high levels of engagement.

The school places a strong emphasis on developing pupils' independence. Many pupils take responsibility for their own learning using visual schedules and routines and develop practical life skills such as food preparation and road safety. However, opportunities to practise these skills in real-life contexts are limited due to constraints in the school's accommodation.

Staff provide consistent support for pupils' sensory, physical, and communication needs. Personalised sensory programmes and activities – such as exploring weather through tactile experiences – enhance pupils' well-being and engagement. Pupils with complex needs make good progress in mobility and fine motor skills and enjoy a range of physical activities including cycling and basketball.

Literacy and numeracy development is tailored to individual abilities. Pupils learn to use symbols, signs, and technology to communicate and write, with more able pupils confidently producing extended writing and reading aloud. Overall, Park Lane School provides a rich, well-structured learning experience that prepares pupils successfully for life beyond school.

### **Limitations in the physical environment constrain provision for pupils**

The physical environment presents ongoing challenges. Although the school has adapted creatively, the current building does not fully meet the complex needs of all pupils. Poor acoustics affect language processing, especially for those with communication difficulties. Overcrowded classrooms and the storage of mobility equipment restrict pupil movement and limit opportunities to practise independent living skills. The absence of breakout areas hinders emotional regulation and access to targeted support, while the loss of specialist spaces such as an independent living flat further impacts pupils' preparation for adult life. As pupil numbers continue to grow, there is increasing pressure on the available toilet facilities, including those that support pupils with personal care needs. This is likely to worsen as the school accepts approximately an additional 30% of pupils in September.

### **Extended travel time impact on pupils' well-being and readiness to learn**

Long travel times for many pupils, arranged by the local authority, can negatively affect their well-being and readiness to learn. Pupils often arrive tired, anxious, or dysregulated, reducing their ability to settle and engage. For some, especially those with sensory or emotional needs, these extended journeys can lead to difficulties with concentration,

behaviour, and participation in school life. In addition, it takes around 40 minutes for all pupils to arrive at their classroom at the beginning of the day.

### **A nurturing, values-drive culture strengthens well-being, safeguarding and staff morale**

Well-being is a central strength at Park Lane School, supported by a warm, family-oriented ethos and strong relationships among pupils, staff, and families. Pupils feel safe, valued, and confident in knowing which adults to turn to for help. Clear routines and positive relationships enable pupils to settle quickly and engage fully in their learning.

#### **Spotlight 1: The pupil support team**

Park Lane School's well-being is strongly supported by a highly effective Pupil Support Team (PST), which works closely with staff and leaders to provide timely, personalised interventions. Planned provision includes therapies such as hydrotherapy, counselling, and music therapy, along with daily check-ins that promote a whole-school approach to well-being. In addition, the PST delivers staff training and collaborates with external partners, improving consistency in well-being support. The school's clear and structured approach to positive behaviour support is applied effectively by nearly all staff, resulting in exemplary pupil behaviour throughout the school.

Staff well-being is prioritised through a purposeful action plan offering physiotherapy, chiropractic care, menopause support, mindfulness sessions, and after-school well-being activities. Leadership aligns roles with staff strengths, values staff voice, and promotes a reflective, supportive culture thereby strengthening morale and staff capacity.

Safeguarding is robust and well co-ordinated, with clear policies, a skilled safeguarding team, and regular upskilling opportunities. Initiatives like 'Keeping Learners Safe Week' and a well-structured relationships and sexuality Education (RSE) programme empower pupils to understand about the importance of themselves and others safe. Systems for staff and visitor safety are secure, and safeguarding practices are regularly monitored by leaders and governors.

The school provides a strong, inclusive approach to supporting additional learning needs through One Page Profiles (OPPs), Individual Development Plans (IDPs), and personalised targets. Shared mealtimes and carefully planned routines support pupils' social, emotional, and sensory development. Attendance has improved due to strengthened family partnerships, and exclusions are rare.

Pupil voice continues to grow, with active involvement in school life and the promotion of Welsh culture. Independence is fostered through experiences like travel training, enterprise activities, and college links. Effective tracking systems support smooth

transitions and continuity in learning. Together, these practices reflect Park Lane's commitment to nurturing every pupil's well-being, independence, and success.

### **Spotlight 2: Resilient and Reflective Leadership Driving Sustainable Improvement**

Park Lane School has made rapid progress under strong and strategic leadership. Since the appointment of the current headteacher, leaders have established a clear direction focused on curriculum reform, raising teaching standards, and developing leadership capacity. Their vision is grounded in reflective practice and strengthened by collaboration with other special schools, external advisors, and the school improvement partner. These partnerships have helped shape curriculum design and enhanced professional development, particularly in key areas like literacy and well-being.

A major strength is the school's increasingly reflective and accountable culture. Staff are now more engaged in self-evaluation and learner-focused approaches, supported by improved performance management and clear accountability. Target-setting is now more tailored across teaching and support staff, contributing to a more cohesive and professional working environment.

Leadership capacity has been strengthened through peer mentoring, profiling tools, and a revised staffing structure that encourages distributed leadership. Governance has also improved, with governors taking more active roles in strategic planning and oversight particularly in safeguarding, finance, and staffing.

Despite challenges such as previous leadership instability, high staff turnover, and increasing pupil numbers, the headteacher and leadership team have created a more stable and sustainable platform for improvement. Self-evaluation is more robust, involving lesson observations, stakeholder feedback, and learning walks. A few evaluations remain too descriptive and do not fully explore the impact of teaching and learning.

Improvement priorities are appropriate, but action plans do not provide clear enough success criteria, timelines, and accountability measures to ensure effective implementation and tracking.

Teaching consistency has improved, supported by tools like the Park Lane Good Lesson Guide. Staff now have a better understanding of how to meet pupils' diverse needs. The curriculum is becoming more closely aligned to Curriculum for Wales and effectively incorporates developmental priorities in the planning of areas of learning experiences. The use of "I can" statements support planning and progression.

Financial management is secure, with strategic budget planning enabling more efficient staff cover arrangements and better staff attendance. Grant funding is used thoughtfully, though the evaluation of its impact on pupil outcomes is still developing.

Overall, Park Lane School demonstrates a strong capacity for sustained improvement. Effective leadership, a maturing self-evaluation culture, responsive financial planning, and a focus on inclusion and well-being contribute to a positive trajectory. The school's ethos, embodied in its motto ***Imagine, Believe, Achieve***, is evident across its strategic leadership, curriculum planning, and culture of care, creating a learning community where both staff and pupils are supported to realise their potential.

### **Additional information**

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils do not give any cause for concern

The school's arrangements for site management do not give any cause for concern

The school has appropriate arrangements for promoting healthy eating and drinking

Leaders and governors manage the school's finances appropriately, including the use of the pupil development grant. Financial management is secure, with strategic budget planning enabling more efficient staff cover arrangements and better attendance. Grant funding is used thoughtfully, though the evaluation of its impact on pupil outcomes is still developing.

## **Evidence base of the report**

Before an inspection, inspectors:

- analyse the outcomes from the parent/carers 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

## Appendix 1: Numbers – quantities and proportions

The report makes references to different quantities and proportions e.g. '*most pupils...*' or '*very few pupils...*'. We use these terms to describe quantities and proportions as outlined in the table below:

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

## 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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