

The Reform of ALN

Introduction

Being introduced more than 30 years ago, with an assessment process that is ineffective, unproductive, and inflexible as well as being difficult to follow and use and inadequately suited to the child, the current SEN Code of Practice for Wales is now outdated and no longer viewed as fit for purpose within Wales. Hence the introduction of the new Additional Learning Needs Code of Practice for Wales (Senedd Cymru, 2021 and Welsh Government, 2018a). The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 will take the place of the current Special Educational Needs framework with a reformed system based on Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and has gradually been phased in since September 2020 (Provision Map, 2018a). They identified that many families feel that finding the advice and information to support them is difficult and they need to fight at every stage of the process to ensure that their child receives the proper care and support (Welsh Government, 2018a), therefore one of the eleven new aims includes increased collaboration, between agencies and parents/carers (Welsh Government, 2021a). The current SEN system covers children up to the age of 19, however a further aim of the new draft code is to extend the age group up to 25 years of age in order to have a single legislative system (Welsh Government, 2021a, Welsh Government, 2019 and Snap Cymru, No Date). The term Special Educational Needs will be changing to Additional Learning Needs to assist in avoiding some of the stigma connected with existing terms and indicate a distinct change from present methods (Welsh Government, 2018a). Welsh Government (2019) defines a child with Additional Learning Needs as having a learning disability or difficulty that necessitates additional learning provision (ALP).

Changing Terminology

The introduction of the new ALN Code of Practice has introduced a replacement from the term Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCO) to Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCO) and has stated that it is essential and expected that all education settings appoint an ALNCO whom is a qualified teacher and senior member of staff with expertise in the area of ALN (Welsh Government, 2018a and Provision Map, 2018b). The new status and role of the ALNCO could potentially be a barrier as not all teachers are on the senior management team or have a substantial amount of knowledge of ALN. ALNCO's play a critical role in assisting schools in preparing fulfil their statutory obligations and under the ALN Act 2018, and although they have the chance to implement systems and practises, establish successful and collaborative partnerships and take control of their educational environment in effectively implementing the new ALN system, this is a lot of pressure and extra work on one individual (Cerebra, 2020 and Provision Map, 2018b). Therefore, the Government have developed an ALN National Profession Learning Programme which has the purpose of assisting the ALNCO carrying out their responsibilities of planning, preparing, and delivering the new programme (Cerebra, 2020).

The increase of and ever-growing list of responsibilities within the ALNCO role, on top of normal teaching responsibilities puts a substantial amount of pressure on the individual in the role. The Welsh Government has recognised that the transition to the new code of practice will include significant changes for schools and local authorities, and therefore has stated it will be phased in over time issuing advice outlining the timelines (Snap Cymru, No Date a) and has stated that the ALNCO requirements may be perceived as too onerous, discouraging people from continuing or becoming an ALNCO (Welsh Government, 2018a).

The introduction of the new ALN legislation will also see a change from the term Special Educational Needs to Additional Learning Needs, encompassing all children and young people with additional needs, irrespective of how acute they may be (Welsh Government 2021a and Welsh Government, 2021b). Including a complete variety of needs, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, global learning delays and difficulties, speech and language disorders and physical disabilities (School Run, 2018). The aim of this shift in terminology is to bring all forms of needs together under one name and ensures the current term Special Educational Needs is no longer stigmatised, and that all learners with ALN are given the support and assistance they need in order to overcome obstacles to learning, so each child has the opportunity of reaching their full potential (Welsh Government, 2018a and Rhondda Cynon Taf, No Date).

Introduction of / Change to IDPs

With the new ALN Code of Practice, the Welsh Government is proposing better, simpler, and more adaptable approaches for serving children's and young people's Additional Learning Needs, through the introduction of the Individual Development Plans (IDPs). The IDPs will include a description of the child's ALN and the Additional Learning Provision (ALP) that the child's learning difficulty necessitates, an action plan and an area to include evidence of the action taken and will contain a written documentation that can be used to track or view the child's progress (Welsh Government, 2021b and Snap Cymru, No Date b).

The Welsh Government's aim is to provide any child or young person between the ages of 0-25, that requires support beyond what is offered on the standard or differentiated curriculum, with an IDP (Snap Cymru, No Date b). The process of creating IDPs will be similar to the current process of creating IEPs, the child, parents/carers and all other necessary professionals will be consulted to contribute to the information going onto the IDP in order to ensure each need is being met and each view is taken into consideration (Lodgson, 2021). However, rather than sending a copy home for the parents to view, sign and return to school, a new process of having a meeting with parents/carers to complete IDPs will be brought into practice (Snap Cymru, 2016). Meeting with parents and carers of each child and agreeing on targets and an action plan will be a lot more time consuming for the practitioner, however it will be more wide ranging and has a higher chance of producing better results and outcomes. As a result, will ensure practitioners are doing things as expected and better reflects their practice (Snap Cymru, 2016).

The IDP will replace any other plans that are currently in place such as Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Individual Behaviour Plans (IBPs) and possibly even Health Plans (Snap Cymru, No Date b). Where a learner already has an identified ALN, the process of shifting them from the SEN system to the ALN system will entail converting all their existing plans (Welsh Government, 2018b). With this need to transfer each child currently on a plan, onto an IDP and ensuring it has been done accurately including all of the relevant and required information in order to meet the child's needs is a significant increase of workload, pressure and time on the ALNCO, and other members of staff who may be supporting to complete this. Although the increase in workload, once each child has been converted onto an IDP, practitioners may find it will be more beneficial and accessible to have all information on one document rather than several different documents for each individual (Snap Cymru, No Date b). Furthermore, although it may be time consuming to liaise with specialists for their advice and input, the practitioner may benefit from the additional knowledge, ensuring that the assistance and interventions they are offering to the child is vital and beneficial to them and all needs are being identified and met (Council for Disabled Children, No Date c).

Proposed Bilingual System

The lack of reference to the Welsh Language in the draft Bill of the new ALN Code of Practice for Wales has been highlighted. On the face of the Bill, stakeholders advocated for a legislative requirement that each level of the process be available in both Welsh and English (Dauncey, 2016) and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011) states the Welsh language should be treated the same as English.

The legislation mandates that, providers examine whether a child or young person requires additional learning provision in Welsh and the bilingual system proposed is directed at the support and interventions that are needed for each child, as well as their IDPS (Welsh Government, 2021a). The ALN Code for Wales (2021) states that if a child's IDP states a certain type of Additional Learning Provision must be offered in Welsh, it is the responsibility of the setting to make every effort to ensure that it is delivered accordingly. This may be an implication to many settings as not all practitioners have extensive expertise with, and fluency in, the Welsh language, and as a result staff will need to attend training to meet these needs. This can be viewed as an advantage to practitioners as the introduction of the new ALN legislation is providing them with training opportunities, which can further and build upon their communication skills and continued professional development. Building upon their Welsh language development means they can meet the needs of Welsh language speaking pupils more effectively. However, the ability of settings to put staff on training for the Welsh Language may be affected by funding, Senedd Cymru (No Date) prove that within 2015/16, the percentage of Welsh Government expenditures committed to Welsh Language related projects is rather small, approximately 0.16% of the Government's total spending.

To aid practitioners with the translation to Welsh language and ensuring each child who is entitled receives the support they need in the appropriate language, local authority translation units can be accessed (Wales Interpretation and Translation Services, No Date). Practitioners and settings accessing translation services ensures that teachers and students are understanding each other on all levels and gives parents and carers the ability to interact with the setting. These services will support the setting in ensuring they are providing support, interventions, and paperwork in the Welsh Language for those learners who require it (ARGO Translation, 2019 and British Council, 2019). However, although this support is a positive in supporting practitioners fulfil their roles, accessing these services results in an increase in workload and paperwork for practitioners and to ensure each child is receiving the support and interventions in the correct language will be time consuming (Rea 2021).

Conclusion - With the act not being fully implemented yet, at this point in time it has not been properly or fully evaluated by many researchers, therefore the success of this new code and its full effect is yet to be known. An integrated and collaborative system placing the learner at the Heart of the act and their learning and ensuring timely and effective support and interventions are introduced will benefit all parties involved. Increased collaboration and information sharing between agencies and the need for staff to undertake training ensures needs are met early and the appropriate support is provided (Welsh Government, 2021a). However, it is important to note that the pressure to undertake training and the substantial increase in workload for ALNCOs and settings, along with funding and finance pressure on settings and local authorities are just a few issues that have been highlighted. It is important that these issues are dealt with promptly before the full implementation of the act.