Transforming Education for Children with Additional Learning Needs in Wales: Practitioner implications

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Introduction:

According to the Welsh Government (WG) (2018a) the current system regarding the Special Educational Needs of children is based on a model that is over 30 years old and no longer fit for purpose. Therefore, WG (2018d) recognised the need for reform and from three consultations held during the last 2011 to 2016 Assembly (Dauncey, 2016), the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill was introduced (National Assembly for Wales, 2017) and later passed at the end of 2017 (Estyn, 2018).

The transformation programme of ALN was initially expected to begin implementation in September 2020 (Snap Cymru, no date), however, Williams (2019) states this has now pushed back to September 2021 in order to dedicate sufficient time for the required training and development. Thus, WG (2018c) aim to develop a skilled workforce, who understand their rights and responsibilities in successfully implementing such changes for the benefit of all.

Practitioner Training:

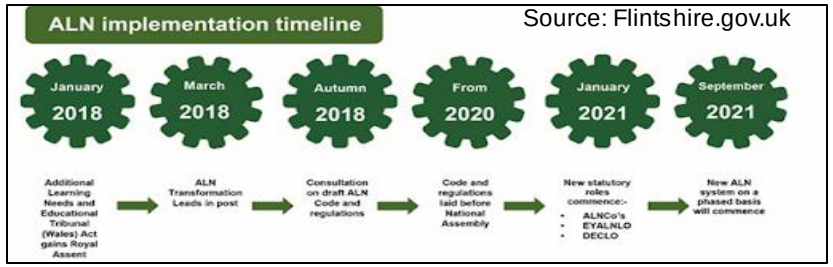
WG (2016) believe that early identification and intervention is the key to significantly better outcomes and successful futures for children with ALN. Furthermore, with the WG (2018d) expectations that in many cases, practitioners are responsible for identifying and supporting the ALN, practitioner knowledge and understanding of needs and legislation are crucial (WG, 2016). Consequently, one of the five themes of the recently developed ALN transformation programme is 'workforce development' which aims to support the development of practitioners' skills (WG, 2018a), particularly in person-centred practice which WG (2018e) states is at the centre of the approach.

According to Williams (2019), much of the training provided in mainstream schools will be transmitted to practitioners from ALN leads such as, the ALN coordinator (ALNco). However, Robertson (2016) suggests that the quality of training provided varies among authorities and settings. Furthermore, research undertaken by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) (no date) recognises that increasing workloads and lack of time could cause difficulty in undertaking and providing training efficiently. Consequently, House of Commons Education Committee (2019) maintain that poorly trained practitioners could have detrimental effects on the successful implementation of the reform. Nevertheless, WG (2018a) reassure that they will continue to support practitioners and schools including via the use of interactive materials and ensure that the expectations are realistic and manageable.

Funding and Time:

According to WG (2018a) the ALN transformation programme will create a much simpler process for all, compared with the current Special Educational Needs (SEN) programme. Nevertheless, Inger (no date cited in Lewis, 2019) indicates that many mainstream settings do not yet have the sufficient resources, capacity or funds to adequately support children with ALN. However, Williams (2019) contends that by delaying the implementation of the new system, particularly to commence at the start of a new academic year, will remove any added pressures from practitioners and ease transition challenges.

NASUWT (2018) recognise that current budget cuts have resulted in significant challenges for practitioners through a rise in children with ALN, often complex, attending mainstream classes, increased class sizes and a reduced number of practitioners. However, WG (2018a) maintain they will provide substantial financial support in order to support settings to ensure practitioners are able to efficiently implement the reform. Nevertheless, members of the National Assembly for Wales (2017) claim that almost half of the proposed budget invested in the ALN reform, will depend on future budget allocations and could potentially change.



Source: Flintshire.gov.uk

Role of the Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) currently (Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENco):

The National Assembly for Wales (2017) state that much of the Welsh Government's financial investment in the ALN reform will be invested in the ALNco role, to ensure they receive the necessary training and professional development. The aim, according to WG (2017) is due to the expectations that the ALNco will provide practitioners with support and training in PCP, early identification of ALN and assessment and planning for children's individual development plans (IDP). Consequently, improving outcomes for all learners (WG, 2018b).

However, despite WG (2017) viewing the role of the ALNco as crucial in implementing the reform, NASUWT (2018) suggest that the demands on current SENco's have increased significantly in the last decade yet their allocated time for ALN duties has substantially reduced. Particularly, as Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel (2015) state that many SENco's are also full-time teachers which is a role with its own demands. Nevertheless, the Minister of Wales contends that there will be no new demand for full-time ALNco's in settings (National Assembly for Wales, 2017). Consequently, Cowne, Frankl and Gerschel (2015) believe that the ALNco's ability to adequately observe, monitor and evaluate ALN as well as leading and supporting practitioners could be unmanageable. Thus, according to Martin-Denham and Watts (2019) could impact on the health and well-being of ALNco's and subsequently have a knock-on negative effect to practitioners and furthermore, the children with ALN. Therefore, the House of Commons Education committee (2019) proclaim it is essential that the Government provides settings with the capacity to support ALNco's to enable them to carry out their duties effectively.

Conclusion:

The Welsh Government (2018c) believe that the new ALN legislation will not only benefit children with ALN but help to create a fair and inclusive education system for all. Therefore, WG (2018a) state that in order to develop this effectively, they will substantially invest in developing a skilled, knowledgeable workforce. Nevertheless, Dauncey (2018) suggests that as with most legislation reforms, the system will not be without challenges. However, WG (2018b) contend that they have minimised difficulties by collaborating with and learning from Governments who have previously implemented reforms. Moreover, Dauncey (2018) maintains that the overarching aims of the change are to implement 'an integrated, collaborative process of assessment, planning and monitoring which facilitates early, timely and effective interventions.' However, NASUWT (2018) affirm that successful delivery of this will only transpire if the workload, well-being and retention of practitioners are continuously supported.