

What is changing?

The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018

There will be big changes occurring for children with additional learning needs. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 provides the basis for a new statutory framework that will support children and young people within Wales.

Some elements of the act are :

- Special educational needs (SEN) will become Additional learning needs (ALN).
- SENCOs will now be identified as ALNCOs.
- School action plus and statements will be replaced with a statutory document known as an Individual Development Plan (IDP). IDPs will follow the individual throughout further education up to the age of 25.

The act replaces all legislation surrounding SEN and the assessment of children and young people with learning difficulties SNAP Cymru (2020) and Estyn (2018).

Why is it changing?

Changes are occurring because previous academic achievement for children who have additional learning needs is poor in comparison to other learners. Furthermore adding that the changes will enable the 23% of children with additional needs to access the appropriate support they deserve within a fully inclusive education system Welsh Government (2018a).

The terminology that is used currently stigmatised children and young people, and that the system is underpinned by a model that was introduced over thirty years ago, demonstrating that it is no longer fit for purpose. Dauncey (2015 and 2017).

What do the changes mean for learners?

Welsh Government (2018a) state that the new system will allow for planning by skilled professionals to be flexible and unique to the individual child. The professional will be confident in understanding the child's needs and have an awareness of what strategies they can use to support the child. The learner will be at the core of everything they do.

Increased participation

The ALN bill will enable children and young people to become part of the planning process alongside their families and services. The child will have the right to share their views and concerns surrounding the planning process, where they should feel involved (Welsh Government, 2018a).

The act requires children and their parents views to be considered at all stages of the IDP process. The proposed IDP template will include a one page profile to ensure that they reflect the child’s wishes, needs and personality, including what is important to them Welsh Government (2019a).

The act encompasses article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child:

Every child has the right to express their views

Unicef (2019).

However, Lewis (2011) suggests that people must be mindful of how they collect the individuals choices, a one size fits all approach will not work, and various methods of communication must be sought to ensure all children's voices are heard.

The participation of children and their family is a ‘child’s rights approach’, the principles of the model include embedding children's rights, empowering children, participation, equality and non-discrimination (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

11 aims of the act:

1. The introduction of the term ‘additional learning needs (ALN)’
2. A 0 to 25 age range
3. A unified plan
4. Increased participation of children and young people
5. High aspirations and improved outcomes
6. A simpler and less adversarial system
7. Increased collaboration
8. Avoiding disagreements and earlier disagreement resolution
9. Clear and consistent rights of appeal
10. The ALN Code
11. A bilingual system (ALN Wales, 2018)

Training and funding: cost implications

Estyn (2018) State that those schools that are best equipped to cope with the changes of the reform are those that currently have a n inclusive ethos and culture for all learners, as well as this a school that invests in staff and the school improvement system is strong.

There will be 20 million pounds available to support the implementation of the ALN reform, Welsh Government will be targeting workforce development at three levels, including core skills development for all practitioners (Bridgend County Borough Council (2019). However, occasionally issues can arise from training.

Devarakonda (2012) suggests that when policies are trickled through stages to eventually reach children and their families the policy can often be diluted along the way, and not necessarily reflect the vision that the policy maker may have envisioned. Spillane et al. (2019) suggests that often leaders can interpret information in their own ways, and implement change in a variety of ways.

SENco toALNco

The ALNCO is a statutory role within settings, that will replace the SENCO role Welsh Government (2019b). The SENCO role has always been a vital role in ensuring that children who have additional needs receive the support that they should. ALNCOs should be a source of knowledge on ALN, by training and developing specialist skills, provide professional guidance to staff to help them understand early identification, assessment and planning for learners with ALN and ensure IDPs are developed and reviewed appropriately (ALN Wales 2018).

Curren, Mortimore and Riddell (2017) state that Previous reforms have left SENCOs feeling that they are receiving mixed messages, and some information lacked clarity demonstrating that the same problems could be encountered with the ALN reform.

SENCOs play increasingly important roles within settings, but too often they are taken away from their roles for various reasons and do not have enough time to carry out the duties required of them. As the role is so important, SENCOs should have enough time, pay and knowledge to enable them to do their job well. House of Commons Education Committee (2019)

Delays

Cerebra (2019) report that the implementation of the act has been delayed by one year. Curren, Mortimore and Riddell (2017) suggest that previous reforms have left individual feel that they are too rushed, despite the positive impact they can have. However, it is inevitably the children that are affected by such delays. Snap Cymru (2018) share their concerns around the delay that local authorities are concerned that IDP’s are being implemented before there is any legal framework in place.

Conclusion

The reform appears to be a positive factor for children and their families. However more information is required to understand the reform. What is clear is the need for training and funding to support individuals to implement the ALN bill.

Van Del Heuven (2017) suggests that in order for the bill to work effectively and enable children to reach their potential support is required to upskill staff, not only on the code of practice, but for identifying and meeting the needs of children with ALN.