

ALN Reform: Implications for Practitioners

Introduction

The key objective of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) is to ensure that every learner, aged 0 to 25 with an additional learning need (ALN) is able to achieve their full potential by providing an inclusive education which meets their individual needs and allows them to truly enjoy learning. The main aims of ALNET can be found in the ALN Code which has been published by Welsh Government (2021a).

Role of the ALNCo

Ensuring that children with special educational needs within a school are having access to the support that they need is a crucial role which has been undertaken by Special Educational Need Co-ordinators (SENCo). The importance of this role has been increasing over previous years and under the ALNET legislation this role will be increasingly developed and a change in the name of the role, which will now be 'ALNCo', Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator.

Maintained schools must all have a designated ALNCo, and it is required that they be a senior staff member and be of equal standing with the Headteacher and the Deputy Headteacher (Provision Map, 2019).

The Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (Wales) Regulations 2020 outline the functions of the school based Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator role. According to these regulations the ALNCo is required to; identify pupil's additional learning needs and co-ordinating their required provision, to keep the correct records of decisions made about the pupils' ALN and their Individual Development Plan and to ensure the promotion of inclusion to those with an ALN in the school, providing access to the curriculum, the facilities and extra-curricular activities.

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

One significant change which the ALN system introduces is the move from Statements and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to the new Individual Development Plans (IDPs), which is discussed by Bevan and Vallance (2020). The introduction of the new IDP system in Wales also supports a single consistent approach and continuity in the recognising and identifying of support needed for those children with ALN who attend various settings (PACEY, 2021). Contrary to the previous system of Special Educational Needs being determined and Statements being written by Local Authorities, these responsibilities will now be taken over by the school. The child's school setting will be accountable for determining their ALN and then preparing and maintain the child's IDP. It is only in particular circumstances that a Local Authority will prepare and maintain the IDPs of a child, examples would include where the child's needs are severe or complex and where a child is looked after by the Local Authority. This information is explained in Section 2 of the ALNET Act 2018.

Increased collaboration

Role training of all professionals was a key finding in a report by Coventry University for the Department of Education (2017). Good quality interventions can be provided by teaching assistants providing they are well trained. Even highly qualified professionals can have little impact on the outcomes and support for children if they do not have the understanding of key principles or the motivation behind the chosen approach. Team working for teaching assistants with teachers, ALNCoS and relevant professionals ensures that any support which is provided to children links to curriculum and that best practice is being followed. Teaching assistants often spend more time working closely with children than the class teacher so are able to get to know the children individually, which will ultimately provide knowledge to support the planning process. This also will be extremely beneficial in the development of IDPs.

Government Funding

In order to successfully implement the new ALNET Act, National Assembly for Wales (2017) announced funding of £20 million. £10.1 million of this will come from the £100 million investment already set aside to improve school standards in Wales. Over the next five years, this funding will greatly impact learners and practitioners by supporting the transfer over to the new ALN system, allowing organisations to work collaboratively, developing the workforce and to raise awareness of ALN.

Due to education barriers caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Welsh Government announced in February 2021 that they were providing an extra £9.8 million to support those learners with an ALN. £8.8 million of this will be spent through Local Authorities and £1 million will be for those in further education. It is believed that Local Authorities will use this funding to clear backlogs of assessments which have been delayed due to social distancing and restrictions. This will then allow learners to return to the classroom sooner. As well as this, it is expected that it can also fund specialist software's and one-to-one support (Welsh Government, 2021b).

Conclusion

With the implementation of the ALNET Act imminent for September 2021, major changes are coming into force affecting Local Authorities, schools and further education settings. This will have a major impact of the education professionals and practitioners that work within the named sectors (SNAP Cymru, 2021). With a budget proposed of £20 million to implement the new system, training will be a vital role in the success of the Act. Upskilling the workforce to be able to implement these changes will include the need to develop all practitioners core skills, an advanced development for those with an ALNCo role and specialist training for those working in Local Authorities in order to provide the support of specialist services (Welsh Government, 2020).