

Progress of schools, settings and local authorities in supporting pupils with additional learning needs

Background

This report considers how well the funded non-maintained settings, maintained primary, secondary and all-age schools that participated in the review are implementing and embedding aspects of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) and the accompanying Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code. It also considers how well local authorities have supported schools. The review identifies effective practice to support inclusive education which includes developing strategies to support pupils with ALN, enhancing Welsh-medium support and strengthening professional learning, quality assurance and the roles of the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) and Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO).

Our findings are based on engagement with a sample of eight funded non-maintained settings, 11 primary schools, seven secondary schools and two all-age schools. Of these, nine were conducted through the medium of Welsh. Eight of the schools, including one Welsh-medium school, host local authority specialist class provision for pupils with ALN. We also drew on evidence from our ongoing inspection activity and from discussions between our local authority link inspectors and local authority officers. Further, the report draws on evidence from discussion with a focus group of Early Years Additional Learning Needs Lead Officers (EY ALNLOs). We also canvassed the views of parents and carers in relation to their experiences

Our recommendations

Schools and settings should:

1. Ensure that high quality teaching and learning meets the needs of all pupils and supports inclusive education

Schools should:

1. Ensure that ALNCoS are fully involved in influencing the strategic direction and decision making of the school

Local authorities should:

1. Work with schools and settings to promote inclusive education, targeting support where needed and strengthening the co-ordination of support services to ensure high quality teaching for all pupils
2. Continue to develop the workforce, services, professional learning and provision for pupils through the medium of Welsh

The Welsh Government should:

1. Work with all local authorities to ensure that they have a common and secure understanding of the definition of additional learning provision and that local authorities and their schools apply this consistently
2. Continue to develop workforce planning, resources and professional learning to ensure equitable Welsh-medium ALN provision
3. Evaluate the impact of implementation and the demand for additional and specialist provision for pupils with ALN; this evaluation should guide future funding arrangements, ensuring that resources meet identified needs

What did our thematic say?

Implementing and embedding ALN reform has been a significant undertaking for local authorities, schools and settings. During our visits and in our meetings with stakeholders, the inspection team consistently noted the strong commitment and resilience demonstrated by staff in local authorities, schools and settings. Staff were working diligently to support children and young people with ALN within the context of ongoing challenges. These included the lasting impact of the pandemic on well-being, challenges with attendance, the reported but unverified increase in children and young people with complex needs as well as budgetary and workforce pressures. Overall, the requirements of ALN reform were starting to ensure improvements in provision for pupils with ALN across the country. As a result, where ALN reform had been implemented successfully, many pupils made suitable progress from their initial starting points. However, the implementation of ALN reform was not consistent and, as a result, pupils' additional learning needs were not always supported well enough. Further, the majority of schools and local authorities in the sample had begun to strengthen the quality assurance of ALN processes and provision. Many leaders expressed concerns about their ability to continue to deliver the necessary ALN services, once additional funding comes to an end.

Many schools and settings were fostering an inclusive culture, focusing on all pupils' learning and well-being, but in a minority of cases, the teaching and support were not effective enough. Local authority guidance on inclusive teaching varied across Wales, and support for inclusive practices was still in early development in many areas.

The number of pupils identified with ALN or special educational needs continued to decrease, but the number of pupils with a statutory plan (IDP or statement of SEN) increased. Inconsistencies in interpreting the ALN Code and in the subsequent approaches to school maintained and local authority maintained IDPs remained across local authorities.

Overall, participating schools and settings had a secure understanding of the provision that they make for pupils with ALN. However, it remained the case that the extent to which the provision is classed as ALP was unclear. Most schools and local authorities agreed that it would be beneficial for ALP to be clarified at a national level.

The role of the Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) was recognised as crucial, with most schools valuing the enhanced responsibility of the role. However, in some schools, ALNCoS were not fully involved in strategic decision-making.

This is the first time that we have reviewed the progress of funded non-maintained settings and the role of the Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO) in relation to ALN reform. Many of

the funded non-maintained settings that we visited as part of this review provided effective learning experiences for children with ALN. Overall, they planned carefully to tailor learning experiences to meet the individual requirements of each child including those with ALN. Further, the role of the EY ALNLO was well established across Wales. Overall, these officers worked effectively to support parents and early years settings to ensure beneficial and timely support for younger children with emerging or identified ALN.

The extent to which local authorities, schools and settings planned and provided equitable support for Welsh-medium ALN provision remained underdeveloped. This has been recognised by the Welsh Government and local authorities, but significant challenges remained in relation to Welsh-medium recruitment and retention as well as the provision of Welsh-medium standardised assessments and resources.