

The Independent Living Skills (ILS) Curriculum in Further Education: Building a person-centred skills-based curriculum

Our recommendations

Medr should:

1. Revise ILS programme specifications to:
 - ensure that they are aspirational, better reflect learners' ALN, have clear expectations on learner outcomes and progression and support FEIs to be person-centred
 - align with colleges' statutory responsibilities under the ALNET (Wales) Act (2018) and wider national priorities including The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015)
2. Ensure that learners have clearly understood targets and progression pathways by providing guidance to the sector on important areas of ILS such as:
 - person-centred baseline assessing, incorporating personal development goals
 - outcomes-based curriculum planning, including accredited learning
 - part-time provision
 - what destination data to record and how to use it in planning for improvement
 - progression within and between learning pathways

The Welsh Government should:

1. Ensure that all young people with ALN can access post statutory education and training in line with their non ALN peers, in Welsh and English
2. Ensure that updates to the ALN Code provide clear guidance to local authorities, schools and FEIs on how to work in partnership to support better transition into tertiary education, and in particular onto ILS programmes, through appropriate target-setting, IDP drafting and curriculum planning
3. Provide further national guidance and accountability mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation and quality assurance of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) across all regions

FEIs should:

1. Embed systematic links between RARPA target-setting and IDP intended outcomes to ensure statutory coherence
2. Provide professional learning for teaching and support staff that is appropriately tailored to meet the breadth of additional learning needs learners experience as well as the pedagogy to support this, including ensuring that staff supporting the development of learners' employability skills and in work placements are suitably trained

3. Work with local employers to identify skills gaps that could be filled by learners as trainees or interns, leading to volunteering, apprenticeships or paid employment
4. Ensure that the attainments and destinations of ILS learners informs self-evaluation processes including collating and evaluating the number of learners dropping out of ILS courses and reasons for them leaving
5. Ensure that their websites provide accessible information for young people who have ALN on the courses available to them
6. Ensure that all learners classified as having ALN meet the statutory definition and hold a current, high-quality IDP

Local authorities should:

1. Ensure that advice and guidance they give to young people with ALN leaving statutory education is clear and reflects their ALN post-16 strategy, working with Careers Wales as appropriate
2. Work with FEIs, local employers and independent specialist colleges to ensure equitable access to the most suitable further education and training provision for all learners with ALN, in English and Welsh
3. Support schools and PRUs to ensure a consistent understanding of the legalities and importance of timely information sharing as pupils progress to further education and training, including sharing IDPs
4. Formalise arrangements to support those learners with ALN who drop out of further education in terms of appropriate review, updating or ceasing of an IDP and provision of any other support in line with the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework

What did our thematic say?

The further education (FE) sector has seen notable improvements to Independent Living Skills (ILS) provision since we last reported on it in 2017, especially in personalising learning and improving collaboration. However, variability in provision, inconsistent assessment and tracking, and weaknesses in quality assurance systems persist. In addition, curriculum offers are not consistently aligned to statutory responsibilities under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 risking non-compliance and inconsistent outcomes for learners. This report calls for re-configuration of the ILS curriculum into a more coherent, aspirational, and outcome-focused model that better supports learners in preparing for fulfilling adult lives.

As of September 2024, 12 further education institutions (FEIs) in Wales, including Adult Learning Wales, provide ILS programmes for learners with ALN, an increase of one provider since Estyn's 2017 thematic review. St David's Catholic Sixth Form College remains the only FE institution not offering ILS provision. Around 1,700 learners completed ILS programmes in 2023-2024, reflecting growing demand.

ILS programmes serve learners with a range of needs including moderate to severe and profound learning difficulties and disabilities, autistic spectrum conditions, and social or mental health needs. They also cater for learners who have disrupted educational experiences and minimal qualifications. While some learners join at age 16, others enter aged 19 from special schools.

Entry into ILS programmes is guided by college-level assessments, drawing on Individual Development Plans (IDP) and, occasionally, Education, Health and Care Plans for learners from

England. Where provision is unsuitable, learners may be referred to independent specialist colleges.

Medr recognises the additional cost of supporting learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. ILS learners receive differentiated funding through course funding structures, and sometimes through additional learning support (ALS). Key information is tracked via the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR), which collects data on course completion and qualifications. There is no national collection of destination data for these learners.

The 2017 Estyn review identified a lack of robust assessment and tracking systems, overreliance on qualifications to measure progress, and inadequate focus on life skills, independence, and employability. This led to five key recommendations, prompting reforms including the adoption of the Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) framework, a reduction in inappropriate accredited learning, and a move to personalised, skills-based curricula. While many improvements have been made, inconsistencies in quality remain, especially in initial assessments and IDP integration.

Pathways 1 and 2 serve learners with the most complex needs. However, inconsistency in interpreting learner profiles leads to variation in which learners access these pathways. For example, learners with a similar profile may end up on pathway 1, 2 or even in independent specialist colleges, dependant on the local offer. Some providers lack clarity on programme duration and learners' expected outcomes, risking perceptions of the college providing day service-like activities rather than purposeful learning and skills development.

Pathway 3 accommodates the largest share of learners and meets a wide range of learning needs. It often includes learners with behavioural or emotional challenges, many of whom have not been identified as having ALN or who do not identify as being an ILS learner. Colleges have developed a breadth of curriculum offers including vocational tasters, employability training and personalised development of social and communication skills. The delivery, planning and assessment of these pathway 3 programmes varies considerably and often includes accredited learning. In some providers this is similar provision to the Jobs Growth Wales+ 16-19 employability programme, and meets the needs of similar learners. It is important to note that not all FEIs deliver Jobs Growth Wales+.

Pathway 4 provides supported internships. While the delivery model for this pathway has demonstrated life-changing potential for some learners, delivery inconsistencies, funding constraints, and the differing expectations of learners, parents and/or carers, colleges, supported employment agencies and employers limit its impact.

Quality assurance practices across FEIs are evolving but remain inconsistent both within and across different institutions. Strong providers align self-evaluation with learner achievement of targets, use robust observation processes, and involve learners and stakeholders. However, many colleges identify progress monitoring, especially for non-accredited learning, as a key area needing improvement.

Current programme specifications overemphasise learners' impairments rather than their learning needs and goals. The four 'pillars of learning' (health and well-being, community inclusion, independent living, and employability) are inconsistently defined, not well understood and sometimes misapplied. Many view the existing terminology, including the term 'ILS', as lacking aspiration and clarity.

FEIs are improving transition support from schools, aided by growing collaboration. However, issues persist, including misaligned curricula, lack of consistency in IDP content, and learners entering college without an IDP.

Welsh-medium provision remains underdeveloped. Only two colleges routinely deliver Welsh-medium provision, and a very few other providers report being able to provide this if it is requested but rarely do. As a result, too often learners whose first language is Welsh are only able to access ILS provision through the medium of English.

While professional learning opportunities have expanded, they are inconsistently aligned to the specific demands of ILS teaching and assessment. Many colleges lack tailored professional development plans for ILS staff, and the evaluation of how professional learning impacts on learner outcomes remains limited.

ALN reform has increased collaborative working across stakeholders, although the transition from the Special Educational Needs (SEN) system has created challenges. IDPs are often delayed, incomplete, or misaligned with post-16 needs. The administrative burden of developing, maintaining and sharing IDPs on colleges has increased substantially, and inconsistencies in IDP quality hamper effective curriculum planning for meaningful, individualised skill development.