

**Leading change:  
The impending changes of  
Additional Learning Needs in Wales**

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This paper intends to highlight three key areas of change to Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Wales. The areas included are the role change from Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCo) to Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators (ALNCo) title, the introduction of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and the need to increase collaborative working. In addition, the paper aims to highlight potential implications for early years practitioners.

The new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Tribunal Wales Act 2018 (WG, 2018a) was passed by the National Assembly for Wales in 2017. The transformation reform was sought to make significant changes in experiences and outcome to the lives of children and young people aged 0-25 in Wales with ALN (WG, no date). Implementation will be rolled out in 2020 and 2021, and the new ALN system is expected to go live in September 2021. This period will last three years; during this time existing statements of SEN, individual education plans (IEPs), and learning and skills plans will be converted into individual development plans (IDPs). However, Welsh Government (2018b) stated that both ALN and SEN systems will run side by side, requiring the new ALNCo and teaching practitioners alike to continue to use both documentations required in each system until full implementation of the ALN Act in September 2023.

Prior to the Children and Families Act 2014, the Special Educational Needs (SEN) systems of both England and Wales were broadly similar (WG, 2004; Department for Education, 2014). However, due to the changes introduced in Wales, it has demonstrated how the English and Welsh systems have become disconnected and emphasises how the reform will now not only represent change in the way SEN children are planned for but also how children will be supported to ensure they are able to reach their full potential (WG, no date: Department for Education, 2015). Furthermore, one of the main agenda in Wales is to abolish the term SEN and replace it with term ALN. This is argued to be less stigmatising for children and young people and makes a clear distinction from the SEN systems used in England (WG, 2018a).

The reform is a direct result of consultations on the current Special Educational Needs framework (SEN), which according to the National Assembly for Wales (2015) is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. The impending changes in Wales have been through rigorous amounts of consultations and planning proposals to address implications and concerns on the outcomes of children with ALN. Consequently, these consultations highlighted weaknesses in the SEN system, suggesting it is far too complicated, making it difficult to adopt a flexible approach to special educational provision and the arrangements for children with SEN. Furthermore, it highlights that the transition of children with SEN from school to post education provision can be disrupted (WG,2014). Whilst the reform in Wales is inevitable ministers remain cautious in their aspiration and continue to retain what works from the previous system and input into the new system.

The new ALN Act aims to unify the current SEN system, by ensuring a simpler and less adverse system through increased collaboration from multi-agencies, families, and children (WG, no date). The Act aligns to the goals within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WG, 2015a) and underpins the UNCRC (UNICEF, no date). Furthermore, the ALN Act in Wales aims to enable easier access to specialist support, information, and advice for families (WG, no date). In comparison, Castro and Palikara (2016) stated that while the new introduction of SEN policy in England claims to present a holistic, inter-disciplinary, and multidimensional approach to disability in practice, it does however restrict the service provision on actions that are based on an essentially medical model of SEND.

Similarly in Wales, during the trial phase, key areas within the new Act were challenged. Stakeholders, practitioners and families have raised concerns on how effective the system will be. Therefore, during an evaluation by Welsh Government (2014), it was noted that the clarity and understanding of needs of children who require support within the new ALN system is unclear and lacks clear guidance. Moreover, evidence from the evaluation also found that local authorities in Wales are often disintegrated and unclear on needs and available services for children and

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young people transitioning into and through compulsory education and into further education. However, Dauncey (2018) believes the focus within the new ALN act will ensure the needs of children with ALN are identified and addressed quickly to reduce the gaps in attainment and ensure children with ALN are supported to reach full potential. In comparison, the SEN code of practice (DFE, 2015) in England, provides clear clarification of the support children with SEN require. Moreover, those responsible for meeting those needs are included, further noting that successful partnerships between, schools, parents, pupils, health and social services alongside other agencies is required to ensure children with SEN needs are met and supported. Although, it is emphasised that schools are accountable for the progress children make.

One of the key areas introduced, of which, has increasing concern for practitioners in Wales is the change in roles from Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) to Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo). The ALNCo role has been given greater prominence, and the role is now set at strategic level within educational settings. Although the roles remain somewhat similar in duties, the main change of the role is now to oversee and manage the effectiveness of settings and practitioners when planning, managing, and implementing additional learning provision for children with ALN (WG,2021a: WG, 2017). An example of key responsibilities of the ALNCo highlighted to undertake, include day-to-day responsibility for the operation of ALN policy and co-ordination of the provision made for individual children with ALN, working closely with staff, parents and carers, and other agencies.

Therefore, Welsh Government (2021a) emphasises that the ALNCO is to undertake more of a leadership role to provide quality support and training for practitioners in identifying and meeting the needs of children and young people with ALN, rather than undertake interventions themselves. Due to the increase in level of responsibilities within some areas of the role, if the ALNCo role is combined with other teaching duties, compatibility of both roles should be considered to ensure duties of both roles will be managed appropriately and undertaken effectively. The significant level of change in role of the ALNCo is to ensure that the ALN Code (WG,2021b) is consistently followed and implemented appropriately through a whole school approach. This Code is developed under the ALN Act, and together, the Code and the regulations developed under the ALN Act provides the statutory system in Wales for identifying and meeting the additional learning needs of children and young people. Therefore, the role must either form part of the senior leadership team or have clear lines of communication to the senior leadership team (WG,2021a). There are high expectations of the practitioners undertaking the ALNCo role; this is to ensure quality provision is in place for children.

With a rise in children and young people with ALN being educated in mainstream settings and recent data showing their overall academic attainment lower than that of their peers (Estyn, 2020), ALNCo's role and responsibilities requires practitioners to undertake strategic levels of specific duties and provide professional guidance to other school staff. They are also required to communicate and collaborate with outside agencies, to ensure the aims of securing high quality teaching and support is available for children with ALN (WG,2014). According to Sylva et al. (2003) children who experience high quality provision achieve higher outcomes at school and develop better social, emotional and cognitive abilities necessary for life-long learning. Whereas poor quality provision does not support children's learning and development in the long term.

Rather than isolating the role and some responsibility of the ALNCo, it is suggested that some responsibilities are to be shared across all professionals within a school setting. For example, both teachers and teaching assistants are now required to undertake roles to ensure children with ALN needs are identified, record relevant information, monitor, and review provision. Therefore, a significant part of the ALNCo role is to ensure all children with ALN are provided with quality educational provision, and equality in opportunities throughout all areas of the curriculum in line with their peers. However, according to Estyn (2018a), teachers' knowledge and understanding of SEN and the specific needs of pupils they teach is variable. Therefore, the transformation will

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focus on development of skills for practitioners in education, emphasising that training will be directed to all practitioners to enhance confidence and professional development skills to ensure consistent support is provided for children with ALN (Snap Cymru, no date). Sylva et al. (no date) stated to ensure practitioners are confident and understand complex needs, high quality training is key in delivering quality services and support for children with ALN. With such invaluable training, the impact of support and interventions for children with ALN can be positive and successful. For example, interventions such as Lego-based therapy, visual timetables and one-to-one support all support children within mainstream classes and allow children with ALN to attain successful education outcomes, through improved progression within holistic development and skills as well as academic skills.

However, such implementation has developed concern over the qualifications and expertise that are required for undertaking the role. The new requirements have placed an increase of pressure on practitioners, who are currently undertaking the role, and also potential practitioners who take on the role (WG,2014). Therefore, Welsh Government have directed training towards ALNCo only. This is to ensure they meet the requirement for the role, underpin the legislation and deliver the functions effectively as prescribed by law (WG,2018b; Estyn, 2018a). However, a complication of direct ALNCo training has resulted in teaching practitioners who have gained extended responsibilities to identify and support needs of children who have ALN whilst teaching day to day in the classroom, to raise concerns over non direct training. For example, suggesting training only being provided for the new ALNCo rather than for all practitioners could potentially impact effective working alongside children with ALN within the classroom. This could result in misunderstanding, miscommunication and misconception on policies, procedures, and practice. (WG,2014).

Even though there is a lack of direct training opportunities available for all practitioners, and more emphasis on teaching and non-teaching practitioners having to perform further responsibilities and duties for children with ALN on top of their teaching duties and within the day-to-day classroom environment, the extra workload, responsibilities and pressures required of them within the new ALN Act and ALN Code in educational settings has raised concerns for the health and well-being of staff. In addition to this, practitioners' confidence to undertake these additional responsibilities is said to have been affected (WG,2014). In response to these findings, Welsh Government has noted that sufficient time should be given to ALNCo and practitioners to complete duties required under the new role and responsibilities (WG, 2021a). Although, according to Welsh Government (2021b) due to the timeframe of the implementation, some of the new duties and responsibilities placed upon the ALNCo will not take effect or be performed until the whole ALN system comes into force. Therefore, as the roll out is on a phased basis, the role can be adapted and developed gradually as and when new guidance of duties is published. This will allow time for ALNCo and other school staff, efficient time to implement changes, gain confidence and training needed.

However, there are further implications for school settings, including time away from classroom teaching, and the financial cost of supporting children with ALN. The Welsh Minister for Education and Skills National Assembly for Wales (2015) has acknowledged that the education budget requires reprioritisation, in line with the implementation to ensure schools and practitioners are trained and have sufficient costs to cover new provision put in place. Furthermore, a review to assess the funding for the current SEN system and use this data to inform the costs of the new ALN Act is to be commissioned.

The Lamb inquiry (2009) identifies that the existing system with SEN is problematic for children and found that they often become side-lined from the planning process. SEN planning often develops around children rather than include them. The report highlighted the risk that the information recorded within the planning process overlooked children's essential information, such as their additional needs. Therefore, the new Act in Wales has introduced the development

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of Individual Development Plans (IDPs). The statutory IDP is a single, legally binding document developed using a person-centred planning approach (WG, 2018a). IDPs will replace the variety of existing statutory and non-statutory SEN practices, such as statements of SEN, current Individual Education Plans (IEPs), School Action and School Action Plus documentation. Moreover, they will include a person-centred planning approach (PCP), embedding children's rights and valuing their contribution. The aim of a single IDP is to allow for an easily adaptable and flexible approach to recording information such as strengths, needs and the full details of targeted support required for children with ALN (WG, 2018a). Furthermore, the introduction of IDPs aims to allow for continuous planning and monitoring with the inclusion of families and relevant agencies having access.

The new requirements emphasise contributions from children and families, and multi-agencies play a key part in developing a quality IDP, with appropriate targets and provision that are in the best interest of a child with ALN (Snap Cymru, no date). The same single IDP documentation will be implemented for all children and young people under the age of 25 with ALN, regardless of its severity (WG, 2020). However, during the testing phase of IDPs, concerns were highlighted on the effectiveness of having and using the same single documentation for children with different levels of severity and complex needs. Stakeholders, practitioners, and families alike disagreed, emphasising that what works for one child differs from another and that 'one size fits all' practice is unacceptable in providing sufficient support (WG, 2014). In addition, some practitioners suggested the IDPs were insufficient for continuous individual planning and monitoring as often other systems of recording information are needed alongside (The National Strategies Early Years, 2009).

Therefore, concerns of time constraints were also highlighted in the Welsh Governments (2014) White Paper by practitioners. The process of putting an IDP together could be lengthy, depending on the severity of a child's ALN. The balance between teaching, preparing and maintaining these documents raises concerns on how they will be completed effectively. In addition, no official documentation has yet to be developed by Welsh Government. This 'oversight' could develop further potential inconsistencies and varieties of IDPs across Wales (WG, 2014).

The potential oversight could impact negatively on children and practitioners alike. For example, first, when different local authorities and schools collaborate, the different documentation can develop issues with practitioners missing important information due to the format of documentation being different. Secondly, for children progressing through schools into further education. If there are different formats, an IDP document that 'grows' with a child, could mean that the changeover in documentation increases the risk of information being lost. Furthermore, due to the variety of documentation that contains the views and the adoption of PCP principles of children and young people, it could be argued that essential information provided by a diagnosis and in-depth assessment of needs is at risk of being side-lined within the documentation. Therefore, the actual needs of children could be missed by practitioners and not supported with adequate provision and support (WG, 2014). However, the ALN Code (WG, 2020) has provided guidance on information required within the documents to ensure that the same information is recorded regardless of design. Furthermore, due to the phased roll out of IDPs practitioners should have time to develop understanding and confidence within this area of the new changes (WG, 2018b).

The new ALN Act and draft ALN 'Code' places a duty on wider agencies and services that benefit children and families with ALN to work together more flexibly and collaboratively. This is to reduce the risk of weaknesses and inconsistencies within the current system, ensuring commitment and consistency of well-co-ordinated support that encourages the achievement of positive developmental outcomes (WG, no date). However, with such a range of individuals and professionals involved, the risk of conflict between them on best practice and support increases as different agencies and services have their own professional way of working (Carroll et al.

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2017). According to Aubrey (2007), communication and collaboration are key elements to overcoming challenges and barriers that can impact on effective team working. Furthermore, included in the term 'increased collaboration', are the children themselves. The new ALN act is underpinned by UNCRC legislation. Within this legislation there are four articles that play a fundamental role for children in realising all their rights. These are: Non-discrimination (article 2), best interest of the child (article 3), right to life survival and development (article 6) and a right to be heard (article 12). Under the new ALN act all children in Wales are to be included in the development of educational provision regardless (UNICEF, no date). However, due to lack of understanding and complexity of needs in some children with ALN concerns have been raised on the level of input children can provide. Some practitioners may question whether some children have the ability to participate and contribute effectively to the planning of provision that suited own needs (WG, 2014; WG, 2021b).

Furthermore, parents and other agencies can disagree with provision, targets, decisions, information within the plan, and also disagree with implementing a plan itself, therefore, increasing the risk of potential conflict (WG, 2014). The increased risk of disagreements can ultimately lead to lack of communication, and impact on the forward planning and implementation of sufficient provision. According to Welsh Government (2014), it was highlighted that other agencies had poor time management and failed to commit to schedules. This resulted in lack of progress in the process and effectiveness of information collected and impacted upon the roles of others involved. However, an advantage to working with families and professional agencies and services involved with children with ALN allows each profession to see the 'bigger picture' as each agency has significant information and advice regarding the support and needs of children with ALN (Gillen, 2011). In addition, it allows professionals to gain deeper knowledge and understanding of other professional roles and insight to how other work (Sheridan et al. 2008).

The transformation to the new ALN and Tribunal Act (2018), has highlighted the significance of modern day working, of promoting inclusion, fairness, and equality for all children with ALN to achieve success, through underpinning policies and expanding new practises to support a positive change for children with ALN. However, research has highlighted conflicting evidence on the impending changes, including uncertainties of the implementation of the new system, lack of consistency across Wales and time constraints of duties. As well as this, evidence highlights a clear lack of intensive and effective training of all practitioners. Consequently, this has led to concerns into the effectiveness of the new system on how it will be delivered, monitored and assessed.

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