

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar gyfer yr ymchwiliad: [A oes gan blant a phobl ifanc anabl fynediad cyfartal at addysg a gofal plant?](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) for the inquiry: [Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?](#)

AEC 35

Ymateb gan: **Whizz Kidz**

Response from: **Whizz Kidz**

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## **1. Whizz Kidz**

1.1 [Whizz Kidz](#) in the UK's leading charity for young wheelchair users, having provided over 30 years of support to thousands of children and young people. We empower young wheelchair users by providing them with essential mobility equipment, offering confidence-building activities and experiences, such as wheelchair skills training, and activity and employability programmes, and campaigning for a more inclusive society.

1.2 This evidence is informed by the children, young people, and families we work with. It is also built upon by our knowledge and experience as a charity, developed over the decades we have supported young wheelchair users.

1.3 We are submitting the following evidence to this inquiry as we want to ensure consideration is given to young wheelchair users and the specific barriers that they face in education and childcare settings.

## **2. Executive Summary**

Young wheelchair users do not always have the same access as their non-disabled peers when it comes to education and childcare. Their choices can be limited by the inaccessibility of the physical environment, a lack of knowledge or, at times, the attitude and willingness of staff to adapt activities and learning to the needs of young people, and mobility equipment that does not meet the holistic needs of young people and fails to promote their independence. Without equal access to education, young wheelchair users may find themselves falling behind and experiencing lower educational attainment which can affect their career and life opportunities. Additionally, discrimination and the reinforcement of negative attitudes towards wheelchair users and what they are capable of can have lasting effects on young people's confidence, self-esteem and overall wellbeing.

## **3. Inquiry Response**

*3.1 Are disabled and neurodivergent children and young people able to access everything their school or childcare offers?*

**3.1.1 Provision of Accessible Childcare:** Before considering the extent to which disabled and neurodivergent children can access everything their childcare offers, there must be consideration of whether they can access suitable childcare in the first place. Currently in Wales, over a third of councils do not have enough childcare for disabled children<sup>1</sup>. For young wheelchair users, childcare options must meet an array of criteria to be suitable. Firstly, childcare venues must be physically wheelchair accessible; secondly, childcare options must meet a child's medical and physical care needs; and thirdly, it must meet their social needs, allowing them to play, interact and socialise fully. It can therefore be difficult to find childcare that will meet all the needs of young wheelchair users. Moreover, the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales state that 'the physical environment is, as far as it reasonable, suitable for children with disabilities or additional needs'<sup>2</sup>. This largely leaves the interpretation of 'suitable' up to each childcare facility and does not offer tangible, measurable minimum standards. It makes no mention of wheelchair accessibility.

**3.1.2 Physical Accessibility of Schools:** Similar to childcare options, schools can also pose issues of physical accessibility. The built environment of school sites, playgrounds, classrooms, bathrooms, sports and recreation facilities can impede on a young wheelchair users' ability to access all that schools have to offer. One young wheelchair user told us '*[My school] put one of my mandatory classes upstairs with no lift. When I raised the issue, they said the class wasn't compulsory for me, but that limits my equal opportunity to education.*' In 2018, it was found that there is an over-reliance on schools themselves to plan for the needs of disabled pupils and four out of 22 councils in Wales did not have accessibility strategies in place despite being required by law<sup>3</sup>.

**3.1.3 Mobility Equipment:** The wheelchair a young person has can affect their ability to access everything in their school. Due to strict and inflexible criteria, many young wheelchair users receive mobility equipment from the NHS which does not afford them independence or personal autonomy and does not meet their holistic needs. One young person and their family approached us for a riser (which raises the height of the wheelchair), telling us '*[He] is due to start high school in September. He already feels left out and different now. I'd love for him to be able to do all lessons at high school including science, art and food technology which all have high tables.*' Having the equipment that offer young wheelchair users independence and considers their holistic needs, such as their ability to sit at high tables at school, allows young people to have more choices and options.

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<sup>1</sup> [Lack of disabled childcare in Wales laid bare by pandemic | Contact](#)

<sup>2</sup> [National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare \(NMS\) \(gov.wales\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [School disability access: 'Welsh Government must do more' - BBC News](#)

3.2 Are disabled and neurodivergent children and young people excluded from any part of their education because of their disability or because they are neurodivergent?

**3.2.1 Physical Education:** Young wheelchair users often find themselves having less opportunities for sport and physical activity than non-disabled young people, thereby excluding them from Physical Education (PE) curricular. Less than 60% of schools have equipment which enables disabled pupils to take part in sport<sup>4</sup>. The impact on disabled students is clear – 7,000 pupils who have an impairment or a disability reported doing no frequent physical activity (less than once per week) during the last academic year<sup>5</sup>.

**3.2.2 Limited Options in School:** Whether due to physical or attitudinal barriers, young wheelchair users report that they have limited options in school. One parent told us *'Their school only offered him experiences in cooking and art'* when it came to lessons at school. At Whizz Kidz, we offer young wheelchair users experiences and opportunities through work placements, and we have had success in sourcing different accessible opportunities for young people across different career sectors. The same young person who was offered limited choices at school has attended a number of placements with our support and has since said *'I can do anything I want, not just cooking and art. There are things out there for me'*. Young wheelchair users should be given the same choices and opportunities for learning as any other young person. This will provide young people with the confidence and experience to aspire to any future they would like.

**3.2.3 Flexible Learning Opportunities:** Due to the nature of their disabilities, some young wheelchair users may be forced to miss school due to unavoidable circumstance, such as chronic pain, fatigue, or medical appointments and treatment. The department for Education found that level of absence is twice that for children with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) or Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) than those with no identified SEN<sup>6</sup>. This can exclude young people from education if schools do not offer alternative formats of learning, like online classes, recordings of teaching, online resources, and exercises. In a recent small-scale survey conducted by Whizz Kidz' Kidz Board, there was a call for more flexibility within education, with a general consensus that online learning could help many young wheelchair users. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when almost all learning was delivered online across the education sector, disabled students felt the benefits; *'COVID showed me that learning isn't accessible because of the institutions' choices, not because learning can't be'*.

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<sup>4</sup> [School Sport Survey 2022 | Sport Wales](#)

<sup>5</sup> [4. Everyone | Sport Wales](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2017 to 2018 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

*3.3 Have disabled and neurodivergent children and young people been discriminated against because of their disability or because they are neurodivergent?*

**3.3.1 Equal Opportunities:** Whether directly or indirectly, young wheelchair users do face discrimination because of their disabilities. As per paragraphs 3.1.2, 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3, young people found themselves without the same opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts, be this a result of issues with the physical accessibility of education facilities, a lack of inclusive sporting opportunities, limited options in their education due to being wheelchair users, or a lack of reasonable adjustments, such as flexible learning.

**3.3.2 Attitudes of Staff:** The young people that we work with describe the attitudes of school staff as dismissive and negative when it comes to discussing their education and career aspirations. Young wheelchair users do not always feel listened to by adults. One young person told us '*Sometimes people think we should quit whilst we are ahead*', whilst another was said that had been '*told I wouldn't be able to do it – so I didn't think about it*'. The ableist attitudes of some staff can quickly diminish young wheelchair users' hopes for the future.

*3.4 What impact do these issues have on disabled and neurodivergent children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and how well they do at school or nursery?*

**3.4.1 PE, Mental Health and Wellbeing:** PE offers major benefits to young wheelchair users. It can improve strength and gross motor skills; maintain or improve muscle length and strength, which in turn maintains ranges of motion and reduces pressure on joints; increase bone density, reduce fatigue, and improve sleep<sup>7</sup>. Overall, this can improve function and independence in young people<sup>8</sup>. With respect to mental health, sport also allows children to build their self-esteem, develop social relationships and overcome their perceived limitations<sup>9</sup>. When children and young people miss out on PE due to a lack of inclusion and accessibility, they also miss out on the associated health and wellbeing benefits.

**3.4.2 Limitations and Discrimination:** When young wheelchair users have limitations and low expectations imposed upon them by school staff, it can undermine their confidence and self-esteem. Whether the outlook and bias of staff is conscious or unconscious, the impact this can have is great; misconceptions about disability and negative attitudes towards disabled people pose barriers to disabled people living the lives they want<sup>10</sup>. If young wheelchair users are told they cannot take part in certain activities and lessons, they can feel

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<sup>7</sup> [Games and Activities for Children in Wheelchairs \(gympanzees.org\)](https://www.gympanzees.org/)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> [Benefits of exercise for children with disabilities | Sunrise Medical](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Disability Perception Gap | Disability charity Scope UK](#)

othered from their peers, stigmatised and isolated<sup>11,12</sup>. This can have severe consequences for young people, their mental health and wellbeing, and the way they view themselves.

**3.4.3 Educational Attainment:** The issues faced by young disabled people in their schooling can manifest as lower educational attainment than their non-disabled peers. In 2014/15, children with SEN in Wales had an educational attainment nearly three times lower than that of non-disabled children<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, only 24.9% of disabled people aged 21 to 64 years in the UK held a degree as their highest qualification compared to 42.7% of non-disabled people, and 13.3% of disabled people had no qualifications compared with 4.6% of non-disabled people (year ending June 2021)<sup>14</sup>. Poor education outcomes and a lack of qualifications can have lifelong consequences for disabled people, impacting their long-term job prospects, earning potential and social mobility.

*3.5 What are the barriers for schools and childcare providers in providing inclusive and accessible education?*

**3.5.1 Physical Accessibility:** Physical accessibility of school and childcare buildings is a key barrier to providing an inclusive and accessible education to young wheelchair users. Under the 2010 Equality Act, it is a legal requirement for all school to have an accessibility plan which shows the schools intent to increase the extent to which disabled students can participate in the curriculum, improve the accessibility of the physical environment, and improve the availability of accessible information<sup>15</sup>. In an ideal world all schools should be completely wheelchair accessible. Whilst this will take require long term planning, goals and funding, any and all progress that can be made towards improving physical accessibility should be made, no matter how small the changes be.

**3.5.2 Teacher Knowledge:** One barrier which stands between young wheelchair users and an inclusive and accessible education is awareness and knowledge of teachers on disability. If teachers and support staff do not fully understand disability and the needs of disabled students, they may find it harder to adapt activities and plan lessons with accessibility and wheelchair users in mind. Therefore, all teachers and support staff should receive comprehensive disability awareness training and training on supporting young wheelchair users in education.

**3.5.3 Funding:** Schools across the UK have faced budget cuts in recent years. A survey of school leaders from schools across Wales found that 90% reported that

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<sup>11</sup> [Document title \(bond.org.uk\)](http://bond.org.uk)

<sup>12</sup> [Reducing stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities \(unicef.org\)](http://unicef.org)

<sup>13</sup> [being-disabled-in-britain.pdf \(equalityhumanrights.com\)](http://equalityhumanrights.com)

<sup>14</sup> [Outcomes for disabled people in the UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](http://ons.gov.uk)

<sup>15</sup> [Accessibility plan: requirements | The Key Leaders \(thekeysupport.com\)](http://thekeysupport.com)

funding for pupils with special educational needs in their school is insufficient and 94% said the additional learning needs (ALN) funding they received is not enough to meet the needs set out by new ALN legislation<sup>16</sup>. Without adequate funding for schools, young wheelchair users need will not be met. Although at a national level funding requirements are high, measurable benefits can be made to young wheelchair users with a small amount of funding. This year, Whizz Kidz has provided a number of schools with £500 of funding to complete a grassroots community change project that will benefit young wheelchair users – the schools involved have purchased sports equipment, installed an accessible planter and bench as part of their forest school, and have campaigned for accessibility and awareness in their local area with a wheelchair parade, poem, and picture book. All of these activities have promoted the inclusion of young wheelchair users within their school community.

*3.6 How well do schools or childcare providers talk to disabled children and neurodivergent children and young people, and their families and keep them informed or include them in decisions and choices?*

**3.6.1 Communication:** Given young wheelchair users have frequently remarked upon the negative and dismissive attitudes that school staff have taken towards their education opportunities and future plans, improvements could be made to the ways schools talk to disabled children and young people. Comprehensive disability awareness training would support better communication with young people.

**3.6.2 Decisions and Choices:** Young wheelchair users have been given a lack of agency to make decision and choices about their education. As per paragraph 3.3.2, one student was only given specific options and experiences, dictated by school and what they were able to offer. Disabled children and young people should be included as active participants when making decisions about their education, as it will ultimately affect their options and choices after leaving school. A key finding of the 'Don't Hold Back' report revealed that 'young people's participation in planning and decision making appears to be very low', meaning 'their different priorities and specific interests can get missed'<sup>17</sup>. Young people's thoughts and opinions were also routinely excluded from accessibility strategies – only one of Wales's 22 councils took the opportunity to seek the views of young people when drafting their accessibility strategy'<sup>18</sup>.

*3.7 Is there good provision for different types of disability?*

**3.7.1 Provision for Young Wheelchair Users:** Improvements could be made to the provision of education and childcare for young wheelchair users. There must

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<sup>16</sup> [Children's education is being damaged by "chronic underfunding" of schools in Wales, school leaders warn - Wales Online](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Dont-Hold-Back.pdf \(childcomwales.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [School disability access: 'Welsh Government must do more' - BBC News](#)

be better provision of choices in education, and fully accessible school and childcare facilities, as well as provision of mobility equipment that affords young wheelchair users the independence and opportunity to flourish in such choices and accessible environments. Once again, training amongst all school staff would better the provision of education opportunities for young wheelchair users. The education sector should be encouraged to share good practice of how young wheelchair users have been included in both school and childcare settings to increase the availability of knowledge and support further inclusion at other institutions.