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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 39

Ymateb gan: Platform

Response from: Platform

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# DO DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE?



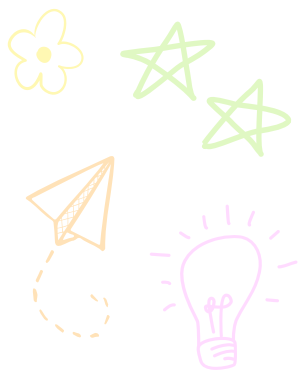
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We welcome the inquiry by the Welsh Government to investigate whether disabled and neurodivergent children and young people have equal access to education and childcare. We know how important it is to review what is going well and what could be improved in order to ensure no young person is disadvantaged in life because of their individual differences. As a project, we know that there are many factors that affect children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, with education being one of them.

Young people we work with, and that we have engaged with through our project, recounted past experiences of others' lack of understanding; being treated differently; feeling left out and schools appearing to act from self-interests. These ultimately led to poor mental health and school performance for disabled and neurodivergent young people.

Regarding current support, young people provided both positive and negative examples of support they knew about in education and childcare settings. They felt that the support put in place did help at the time but had been discontinued since, in most cases. There is still a feeling that support is far too dependent on individual schools or staff members and is not consistent across the system.

Young people proposed recommendations for how education and childcare institutions could involve young people more in decisions about their own support and what a more inclusive and accessible place would look like on an individual level and an organisational level.



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## ABOUT POWER UP

Power Up is a young people's wellbeing and social action project for young people aged 10-25 living in Cardiff and The Vale of Glamorgan, led by mental health and social change charity, Platfform.

Power Up is a partnership project, with Platfform working alongside EYST, YMCA Cardiff, iBMe UK, Llamau, ProMo Cymru, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, Cardiff Council, Vale of Glamorgan Council, and Cardiff Metropolitan University.

The project provides frontline wellbeing support to young people experiencing challenges with their mental health. This includes 1-1 coaching sessions, the delivery of wellbeing programmes, and regular social groups. The project takes a trauma and relationally informed approach to providing support, focusing on connection, community, and creativity. Alongside providing a wellbeing service, Power Up also supports young people to create social change within their communities and within Wales.

## ABOUT PLATFFORM

Platfform was born in 2019 from Gofal, a mental health charity established in Wales in the late 1980s. Through decades of working across housing and mental health, we gained real insight into the reality of mental health in society, the impact of trauma, and the causes of distress. That work led us to change our focus and become Platfform, the charity for mental health and social change.

Today we work with over 9,000 people a year. We support people of all ages, across urban and rural communities, in people's homes and alongside other services. Our work spans inpatient settings, crisis services, community wellbeing, supported housing and homelessness, businesses, employment, counselling, schools and youth centres.

# DO DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE?

## ➤➤➤➤➤ RESPONSE

The Power Up team know from engaging with 490 children and young people about their opinions and experiences, that education is a major contributing factor to overall mental health and wellbeing, with its effect only becoming more complex and interconnected when other factors such as disability and neurodiversity are considered. If we want to employ a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing, then that means ensuring young people with individual needs are not at a disadvantage to accessing education. Young people we talked with expressed their frustration over others forming assumptions and lack of understanding of “the different things that can go on for us e.g. ADHD” as well as their ideas to make the world a better place by ensuring it is “accessible for disabilities”, has “less expensive wheelchairs” and “teaching assistants for everyone”.

We wanted to explore this further as Power Up, and so we held a focus group with 11 young people, 3 employed by Platform and 8 who are part of our young people’s advisory board, and discussed whether disabled and neurodivergent children and young people have equal opportunity to access and partake in education and childcare.

Our response comes predominantly from our engagement with young people, and is focused on them sharing their voice. We recognise that some of the recommendations we make may be being implemented already in schools, and elsewhere in the system, but the lived experience of young people is often telling a different story, and it is important we hear their reality on the ground.



## IMPROVING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

### Past experiences

Young people reflected on whether disabled and neurodivergent children and young people are ever left out or treated differently because of their individual needs.

They expressed that there were a lot of misunderstandings held by peers and members of staff, which meant it was hard for young people to make connections and/or were bullied because of their differences. A lack of awareness and understanding by teachers resulted in individuals' behaviours were being misinterpreted as 'disruptive' instead of showing how their needs were not being met effectively, or as one young person said "your intentions being misunderstood".

They felt that this often led to young people being 'dismissed' by teachers and told that their abilities depended on "how well you fit in their box". They also felt disheartened by attendance and attainment scores, as they failed to take into account the effort and different and varying needs disabled and neurodivergent children and young people have and rewarded people for "being healthy".

One of the underlying themes in many conversations held by the focus group was that perhaps schools were looking out for their own needs first instead of their students, which may be why young people tended to be suspended or excluded from school or "dropped out of some lessons" in order to prioritise students they considered more important, maintain their reputation and make their lives easier.

Young people also described feelings that they had 'missed out' on parts of the education experience, whether that was because they had leave class to get extra support or not be able to go on school trips because they were not disability or neurodivergent friendly, to being simply excluded.



All these negative experiences combined create huge consequences on children and young people's mental health and school performance.

Being treated differently can lead young people feeling sad and having a lack of confidence and self-worth as well as feeling isolated and that they have no one to turn to, due to others not understanding their needs and misinterpreting their behaviour. This in turn can lead to further adverse mental health problems such as depression and feelings of worthlessness plus individuals being excluded from friendships groups and/or school. Martino et al. (2015) highlights the importance of social connection, with isolation being associated with increased depressive symptoms and poorer health.

With all this considered, it is not surprising that disabled and neurodivergent children and young people's academic achievement are negatively affected. This may be in the form of students having reduced opportunities to learn due to being frequently taken out of lessons to get support or struggling to get assessed in order to obtain appropriate support for learning in class or in time for exams and instead, it is being put in place too late (for example once they have left school).

One young person noted that these distressing experiences can lead to "people asking 'what is wrong with me?' rather than 'what is wrong with the system?'". If we want to ensure that disabled and neurodivergent children and young people have equal access to education and childcare, then we need take a whole-systems approach and look at the influencing factors around them and change those (and not expect the young people themselves to change).

### **Current provision**

Young people talked about the current support available in education



## IMPROVING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

settings. Some experiences were positive, for example, staff ensuring disabled and neurodivergent young people could take part lessons by making adaptations such as putting a bell on hockey balls or braille buttons on fitness machines as well as being taught how navigate around school grounds. One young person praised the beneficial support available specifically for those with visual impairments, like SenCom in Gwent. Another young person applauded the additional learning needs support they received in Bridgend and Cardiff and Vale College, citing that the school helped them with finding suitable work experience, where they will “hopefully gain skills and a job”. With all this said, the general consensus from young people was that support was better than it used to be.

However, young people also reported some experiences that were more negative, such as school buildings not being made accessible enough so having to be taught in different places to their peers like in the library, or as extreme as being stereotyped by staff and bullied by peers because of their individual needs. The focus group brought up the issue of disabled and neurodivergent young people being left to their own devices during breaktimes and lunchtimes, which they felt whilst not intentionally harmful, was detrimental to young people’s development and most would actually benefit from getting help outside of classroom time. One young person spoke about how they liked that schools were now trying to create quiet rooms or wellbeing spaces but expressed annoyance that they were not often used correctly or felt they were sometimes ‘abused’ by other students. Moreover, although coming from a well-meaning place, one young person conveyed their disappointment over being “pulled out of dance and arts” and instead having to do other subjects.

Young people also expressed wishes for shorter waiting lists or alternative routes to obtain autism diagnoses, especially for disabled young people,





so that young people have an easier time of accessing the support they need. One young person commented on the need to move away from labelling young people as “problem children” and look beyond the surface and see whether there are any unmet needs.

The overall sentiment from the focus group was that while there may have been beneficial support in place when they were at school, it had since been removed. These comments highlight the importance of person-centred care; what might work for one person may not work for someone else and it is important that schools spend time finding out the best solutions for their students.

### **In the future**

The focus group talked about recommendations for what schools and childcare could do to improve things for disabled and neurodivergent children and young people. The main themes were around ensuring individuals and their families were more involved in decisions around support plus making childcare and schools settings more inclusive and accessible.

With decision making, young people discussed that it could be improved by having multiple “meetings with people” and opportunities to “reflect on decisions made”. Meetings could be optimised by gathering opinions from parents and guardians beforehand and meeting regularly. One young person commented on the importance to meet about positive progress (“not just to discuss negative things”) and schools should take initiative from students and adjust their practice accordingly.

There were also suggestions for how the decision-making process could be made more inclusive for families too, one was that schools should





provide alternative methods for families/parents who speak languages other than English to take part in the meetings. Another was to make sure that children and young people were informed throughout the process so that they were “prepared for any changes”; they have a right to not only know what support they will be receiving but also to help decide the support.

One young person thought it would be good idea for individuals to be encouraged to make decisions independently with their parents supporting the individual with their input, rather than the other way round. Coupled with one young person’s recommendation of schools streamlining access “instead of the family having to liaise with multiple teams and charities”, this would help schools ensure that the young people and their families were at the heart of the decisions made around their care and support.

Benefits of this approach, as detailed by the focus group, would lead to better school performance as “included students will pay more attention in class”. This has already been tried with some young people in the focus group, who mentioned that “it’s gotten better” already.

In terms of making education more inclusive and accessible, the focus group had specific ideas.

By asking and listening more to young people, schools could be made more inclusive for disabled and neurodivergent children and young people. The focus group thought that both neurotypical and neurodivergent young people should be queried what their individual schools could do better to support young people with individual needs as they “might have ideas too” but highlighted that support needed to be personalised as “not one size fits all”.



## IMPROVING ACCESS TO EDUCATION

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Young people had recommendations for how support could be made more accessible for certain individuals as well as for everyone generally. They wanted to ensure all worksheets, certificates and resources were in an accessible and appropriate format for the individual.

For everyone, the focus group thought that staff could be given training like communication access training or generally on neurodiversity and disabilities. Peers could be more informed about disabilities and neurodiversity by incorporating awareness into the curriculum. For students who struggled to attend and work in a typical classroom learning environment, quieter classrooms, alternative learning styles and online learning could be implemented more. Young people also thought that it would be vital to have one person responsible for “compliance to accessibility standards” which would also hopefully make reporting complaints simpler and result in them being documented and dealt with swiftly.

The Power Up Project supports these recommendations as well as the idea of disabled and neurodivergent children and young people receiving continuous help throughout education. By taking a person-centred approach focused on forming and maintaining relationships between individuals, their families and those who support them, we can ensure that to the best of our abilities that disabled and neurodivergent children and young people have equal access to education and equal opportunity to succeed.



## CONCLUSION

To sum up, young people voiced how disheartening and distressing they had found past negative experiences of school, being left out and treated differently because of their various individual needs.



## CONCLUSION

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However, they also mentioned that they had had some positive experiences too and that schools were increasingly improving their provision of support to students over time. Despite this, they did convey that there is still more to be done and that more money could be spent on. “Disabilities are for life” which is why it is so vital children and young people get the help they deserve.

Education and childcare organisations should approach these situations with huge understanding a real drive to want to help and supportive students with individual needs and without any doubt an air of judgement. An easier system to access support and actually having access to good support would set children and young people up to succeed in school and prepare them for life after education and childcare. In the words of one young person, “we aren’t going away so support shouldn’t go away”.



## REFERENCES

Martino, J., Pegg, J., & Frates, E. P. (2015). The Connection Prescription: Using the Power of Social Interactions and the Deep Desire for Connectedness to Empower Health and Wellness. *American journal of lifestyle medicine*, 11(6), 466–475.

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