

Reanalysed data from Family Interviews

Implementation of Education Reforms Summer 2023

Background

During the summer in 2023, 40 families were interviewed from across Wales about their experience of accessing education and childcare as part of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's (*'the Committee'* hereafter) inquiry: *Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?*

The focus was on access to services; however, families often mentioned their experiences of the recent education reforms, especially focusing on the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code.

These interviews have been reanalysed to extract data that may be relevant to the Committee in their Senedd-long inquiry: *Implementation of Education Reforms*.

This paper aims to summarise what was shared in discussion by the families. A number of key themes arose which have been outlined below.

Local authorities

The role of the local authority was discussed in detail and the following themes arose.



- Poor Communication:

Many families were experiencing long delays for the diagnosis of their child's learning disability. As an interim measure, many local authorities were drafting Individual Development Plans (IDPs) without a diagnosis so that the child had some support while they waited. However, one participant explained they had been in conversation with the local authority since early 2023 and it still hadn't been finalised when the interview took place in June 2023 despite the participant trying to have several conversations about how long the process was taking. It was likely this child would not be able to access adequate support until the new school year began. For students with IDPs, they are still encountering problems with the structure of this system.

“There is no communication, no forward planning from the local authority. The SEN school is brilliant. But at the moment if something changes on my daughter's IDP I don't get an update, even though I have asked for that. I try to keep checking them but I just don't know if they have put anything new on there.” – The participant explained that the system is digital and when updates occur they are not notified. This mechanism is integral from the family's perspective to ensure their child's needs are always being met.

One participant said they would like the IDP to be *“more of a working document because some of my child's triggers, wants, likes and needs, can fluctuate.”* IDPs are supposed to be working documents, however it appears that either they are not being used as such, or this has not been communicated to the participant.

- Lack of trust, perhaps linked to cost cutting:

A lack of trust had developed with many families whose children may have accessed several years of support from the local authority. Many

families alluded to a resistance to supply adequate support and local authorities pushing back on support as if to save money,

“I don’t have the trust and faith in the council to do right by my son to the point that I have already told them that I will be instructing a solicitor to look over it [the child’s IDP] because I feel vulnerable as parent. I’m fearful and have a lack of trust because I’ve been through an ordeal before.”

- Lack of resource to roll out:

One participant had concerns about the volume of paperwork that was being required for the transition to IDPs. They explained how this might impact the availability and general pressure on a range of systems.

“Local authorities are overrun with work, and so aren’t coping to be able to deal with making changes [to IDPs].”

Education or Childcare settings

- Lack of training:

Many participants explained that they thought schools needed to be able to access training to be more inclusive, but the support to enable this is not there, i.e. teaching staff were not being given the time to attending training courses.

- Lack of access to resources i.e. funding which was linked to local authority funding:

One participant said the new system was “awful” and “it will be detrimental to my son.”

“I see it as a bit of a dilution of entitlement, whereas before the school would get funding for whatever your statement outlined, that’s been removed and now the school are recommending what support your child should get without any extra funding, and it feels like, they are never going actually support my child to the level he needs because they aren’t getting any funding to do that.”

“My five-year-old daughter was in a mainstream and was entitled during the 8/10 hours that she was there, to get a one-to-one support worker, and it just never happened. They used a regular member of staff who was already factored into the classroom situation, and they were calling it one-to-one. I was going up to the school early and I was seeing her being moved by other children, physically push and moved out of the way and there was no one watching her. No matter how many times I went in, they just said they’d sort it out but it just kept happening.”

- Poor communication leading to families feeling like they are not being listened to:

“Despite the ALN Code, I don’t feel that they are listening to parents’ views, wishes and feelings. They didn’t listen to us; why?”

One participant discussed their child's transition from one setting to another. They said there was a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for ensuring ALN is communicated from school to school when children move schools. The participant felt it was their efforts that made sure this was communicated and they were concerned that not all parents would realise this. This lack of transparency could result in more children slipping through the net when they change settings.

“We are supposed to be considered when the IDP is being put together but they literally do not care. They don’t care that we have experienced so much and we know what is going on.”

Although communication improved for one family when putting the IDP in place, they felt the school would brandish lines in the policies when the family questioned things that weren’t inclusive. They were frustrated that the school did not seem to understand they should apply reasonable adjustments for disabled children.

“It feels like every year, I need to educate the new teacher about my son. There is supposed to be a file but I don’t think they read it.”

“I don’t think the IDP is going to cover all his needs, and I don’t see how he’s going to ever really progress, or even catch up with his peers. He’s the youngest of the year so he’s already at a disadvantage [...] the IDP doesn’t capture his sensory issues, it doesn’t reflect him.”

Wider issues with the ALN Code

- The new system is ambiguous and is being interpreted differently across Wales:

“They [IPD’s] are as vague as possible and I think that’s purposeful.”

Several participants said this was due to a lack of funding. For example, if the IDP states an adult must support their child’s learning rather than saying *“the child must have 1:1 support”*, then a teaching assistant can be present in the classroom and deal with more than one child. This risks the child’s needs not being met but staffing costs will be lowered. However, it could be problematic if one of the children for which they are responsible needs to leave the room, as the other child/children will then be without support for a period. This support could be vital for some students.

“Nobody will quantify support [...] children with down syndrome need a high level of support and they're not getting it because of the system that's now in place.”

“They [local authorities] are saying you can't have a 1:1. We don't offer that anymore and there's no money for it. Despite the fact that you've got written in an IDP that you need a high level of adult support across the board.”

Participants said that IDPs and statements are important to clearly demonstrate what their child is eligible for, therefore when things are “taken out” they have felt that this lessens the impact of the document. Furthermore, when the families have taken their complaint to tribunal and won they feel disheartened that there were professionals *“attempting to remove things of need from disabled children. It became an unnecessary fight that never should have been.”*

Tribunals often carry a cost to the family and not all families can afford this cost. This, therefore, makes it more challenging to reinstate support they feel their child may need.

“We had to sort out a private solicitor and I paid a couple of private experts to support me in our quest to achieve regular physiotherapy and speech and language therapy. We won.”

Participants said that any system such as IPD's or statements should protect the resources to which they considered children entitled to. Many said this was not happening in the old or the new system.

“Education must safeguard children's rights to ensuring that provision included in the Statement of SEN/IDP is actually delivered and is of adequate quality to ensure progress. While this relates to speech and language therapy provision in a special school nursery, I could have chosen any provision to illustrate this point. For example, my son's Statement secured weekly input from occupational therapy in school, though questioning during his

second SENTW appeal in 2016 revealed that he had not actually seen an OT for over a year.”

- Issues with the IDP content:

The new ALN Code requires the learner to be involved in the discussions about their support and education plan. One participant explained:

“There is better inclusion now within that system. But the problem is that it’s done as a bit of a tick box exercise.”

One participant had concerns about how realistic the targets were and how often they would be monitored.

“One of the targets was for him to sit with a staff member for 10 mins to read 2-3 times a week. But we are lucky if that happens even once a month. I don’t see the point of waiting a whole academic year until we review those targets. Especially for children who are so far behind their peers. I think it warrants being more closely monitored.”

One participant was aware that the local authority is responsible for making sure the targets are reached, but they were not aware of how that works in practice. One participant also said that the new format seems more complex, making it difficult for the parent to be able to track the child’s progress.

“Under the new system, I don’t really feel like I know where he is in relation to his peers. That’s how I rationalise his development and then find the gaps so I could help support him at home.”

Some participants said the new IDP structure did not do enough for children with more complex needs:

“My son has some 200 targets each year. It’s multidisciplinary and so several of the inputs might be implemented with a range of professionals. Because things interlink the current IDP structure doesn’t lend itself to describing his needs and provision in a useful way. You cannot list 200 plus targets and the provision that meets each one, as is required by the template: it is unwieldy and useless for the professionals supporting my son...I feel like children with multiple complex needs are shortchanged by the new system.”

IDPs were described as vulnerable due to the flexibility of the document and the nature of it being a “working document.” Some parents said this made them more susceptible to frequent changes without the agreement of the parent.

“My concern about IDPs is that they can be changed at any time, by anyone, and the parent and local authority could call for a review at any point. Potentially, you could go to a tribunal, get things organised to get the right provision in place, and then a few months later, the school could say we will change it.”

- Lack of ownership / leadership by authorities or schools:

When trying to access the systems offering additional education support, many participants said they need to do the work and put in the time else their children’s needs will not be met in their education setting. They dedicate a lot of time and effort to ensure the right information is available and the processes can move on to the next stage:

“The process to get his IDP was pretty straightforward. This was because I asked for every report from every professional I had been given.”

But some participants were concerned that not all parents would have the time or focus to be able to support in the same way. This

was particularly the case if they were working parents, or disabled. Participants said systems were not designed to be easy.

Participants said there's a lack of general understanding of the new system. They linked this to either a lack of training or poor communication about how the ALN code should work. They did not feel local authorities or schools were taking ownership or leading the way to make sure things were consistent across Wales.

"There is no information out there, especially when it comes to education, on what we are supposed to do, what our choices are, what education means for our kids? I still don't really fully understand what is happening with the IDPs. Perhaps the local authority feel that it isn't their job to make sure that we know all these things, but if it's not their job, then whose job is it?"

- The schools have more responsibility but no power to enable external services support or very little power to request funding to support the needs of individual students:

"It's not OK to say, "we don't have the funds." It should be a child centred approach based on what each child needs. Somebody that has the power should be able to make a decision about what each child receives and that's changed now because schools are the ones that are holding IDPs they don't have any power."

One participant gave an example where they were supposed to have a meeting with a number of local agencies (physiotherapist, occupational therapist, speech and language therapist etc), but most of them were not present at the meeting.

Parents also feel they have lost some power in the decision making process as it is no longer possible for a parent to select the school that they would like their child to attend. Some participants saw this as a big drawback. Parents feel they have less control of the

allocation and that they are not listened to when the local authority chooses the school their child will attend.

"In the statement, I was able to name the school my son would go to, that was quite a powerful thing."

- Children in the middle:

For children who have learning needs but do not require an IDP to meet this need, participants felt their children were being overlooked. They are not able to keep up with their peers and no provision is being put in place. This is considered to be detrimental long term and these children may struggle to attain a good education.

"I:1's are not being given to the children who are managing. But they are getting no teaching and no learning, because they can cope. That's not okay. All children have a right to an education [...] I believe that disabled children are left out of parts of their education [...] when speaking about children with down syndrome, access to education is inconsistent [...] some schools are doing a brilliant job, but other schools are not."

Concerns were raised from participants about strategies being put in place pre-diagnosis. One participant, who had an IDP but still no official diagnosis, said *"when the school used one-page profiles, they didn't bother to read them."* So they were not convinced there was a good system to make sure teachers were informed across a school, or perhaps there was a good system but the teaching staff did not have time to ensure they were aware of each pupil's needs.

- Lack of inclusion

One participant found the journey to getting an IPD was more difficult because the child refused help frequently.

“He didn’t want support through fear of looking different to his school mates. But the school is failing to provide an environment where it’s okay to be different.”

- Positives:

One participant spoke positively about the school’s approach, describing their access to an IDP as “good”. They attributed this to the ALNCo professional being good at their job. The participant had a lot of support from the school to enable access to funding for a car seat.

Another participant said it would depend greatly on which school the child was at and how engaged they were with supporting ALN. The participant explained,

“I got his IDP at his old school after he left and I got an IDP at his new school before he began. This school is amazing, [...] It depends on the person or school staff you are working with.”

“I think things have gotten worse recently, certainly since the new ALN Act. I think we were just very, very lucky that we had a very good ALNCo in the secondary school.”