

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i weithredu diwygiadau addysg](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Implementation of education reforms](#)

IER 71

Ymateb gan: Mudiad Meithrin

Response from: Mudiad Meithrin

Mudiad Meithrin is an organisation that is passionate about giving every child in Wales the opportunity to play, learn and grow in Welsh. Our aim is to give every young child in Wales the opportunity to benefit from early years services and experiences through the medium of Welsh, as we know that receiving care and early education in Welsh in the early years makes it easier to become a confident Welsh speaker.

We believe that equal opportunities should be ensured for all children to access Welsh-medium services in the early years within easy reach of their home, that children, whatever their needs, benefit from good quality early years experiences, and that children's rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children's Act 1989 are very important.

The sector must be supported to continue to interpret and realise the objectives of the Curriculum for Wales with tailored support tailored for the non-maintained sector (namely the Nursery Groups).

The need for support for families and children with additional learning needs must also be recognised by creating a national one-stop shop as a resource, advice, support and referral platform.

In order to support the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill 2021 and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, to see an increase in the number of hours groups are open and increase the number of children who attend nursery groups, and to re-open or expand 55 Cylch Meithrin nursery groups (or Ti a Fi Groups where none already exist) during the Senedd term, continuing to support each Cylch Meithrin to remain open as an important community

resource, we need the certainty that the necessary financial investment from the Welsh Government would bring (for us as Mudiad and for the individual settings), also noting the need for large capital funds to pay for extensions and modifications as finding locations is challenging.

With increased Welsh Government investment in Mudiad, we can develop into a powerhouse for the early years in the knowledge that the early stage in children's lives is the key to ensuring the growth of the Welsh language.

Implementation of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system

There is much to praise in the new system in general and, in particular, the principles and rights that the legislative framework promotes. However, a number of challenges greatly affect the success of the system in terms of childcare, play and foundation learning settings.

The system is being implemented successfully in some local authorities and settings show strong awareness of how to refer a child and what support is available. However, situations and arrangements vary greatly throughout Wales, which leads to inconsistency and a postcode lottery. This is particularly challenging for an organisation such as Mudiad Meithrin, which offers support with placements across local authorities, especially where care organisations have been withdrawn from local referral schemes.

There is a clear role for funded non-maintained nursery education providers, but children with ALN also attend childcare settings that are not funded to provide education. While any support the child receives often follows the child to the setting where the education is provided, the child may still attend a setting that does not provide education during the day - it is quite normal for a child to attend more than one setting. Differentiating on the basis of whether or not the setting provides education does not always make sense, because interventions and strategies could occur across settings. It can be a significant blow to a setting if funding moves to a setting where education is provided, while the child still needs the support in the setting where education is not provided.

We understand that the early years sector can be complex in terms of structure, but the new system should be able to adapt to focus on central child-based planning across more than one setting.

Welsh language

We are in favor of changing the wording in order to move from taking 'all reasonable steps' to 'ensuring' in order to set expectations and promote the rights of children and young people with ALN. Officials have reported to us that 'all reasonable steps' is being used as a way of avoiding Welsh-medium provision at worst. There is still much work to be done, but the creation of the Arweinydd y Gymraeg (Leader of Welsh) role in terms of implementing ALN is an important step forward and has promoted more strategic intervention to plan Welsh-medium provision and resources, and we call on the Government to ensure that the role continues beyond the two-year trial period.

From an early years perspective, settings say that not enough professional health workforce is available, mainly in the form of language and speech therapists who can support multilingual children and can understand children's needs in a language immersion context. We believe that Welsh-language education opportunities need to be promoted for children with ALN, and that learning difficulties do not prevent access to Welsh-medium education and care. A lack of understanding among some agencies leads to misleading advice being given to some Cylchoedd (groups), e.g. that language immersion is not suitable for a child with ALN.

Applying the definition of ALN

The definition of ALN places the emphasis on preparing a child for school. So, despite the recognition that early intervention is key to supporting the development of children with ALN, the current system emphasises preparing children for statutory education and preparing support for their time at school.

The support is more effective in Flying Start settings or settings that provide education, but there is little support for children in childcare and play settings, and the information about the available support across Wales is vague. One Mudiad Meithrin official who supports Cylchoedd Meithrin nursery groups said: 'I would say

that children who are attached to a funded scheme, e.g. Flying Start and settings that provide education, get the attention - but if they fall outside of these, the support isn't there. There is a feeling among staff that there is more demand but that not everyone knows how to support the children who always fall through the gaps.'

Anecdotally, practitioners believe that recent years have seen greater demand and an increase in needs, but there has been no response to this increase. Although professional learning was offered at the beginning of the Codes' implementation period, there is no consistency regarding the training available to ensure support for children in their settings.

According to the experience of Mudiad Meithrin officials, some children are identified as having ALN but have often not received a diagnosis. The feeling is that the childcare settings are under a lot of pressure to work out for themselves how best to support undiagnosed children. Additional pressure arises from Cylch Meithrin nursery groups having to attend numerous meetings to share information about the child and help the local authority to fulfill its duties and decide how to support the child. In the early years, it will not be possible to implement interventions to prevent ALN from developing or worsening, as, under the current system, children with intense needs are the ones who are likely to be identified with ALN. Children with a diagnosis are more likely to have permanent conditions, e.g. visual impairment, a medical or physical condition. While the ALN Code places great emphasis on early intervention, nursery settings often have to support the child without the necessary professional learning, assistance and financial support - which puts a lot of pressure on settings - and there is insufficient recognition of the positive intervention that can and does take place before the child starts school. Ceredigion's experience - where Mudiad Meithrin manages the Referral Scheme - is that early intervention is effective, as proper emphasis is placed on effectively supporting the nursery settings.

Support available for non-maintained funded nursery settings

Practitioners at non-maintained nursery settings attend meetings and use the skills of their staff to draw on their knowledge in their toolkit. One Mudiad Meithrin official said: 'We have to praise childcare staff for their ability and willingness to adapt their

settings and provision for each child, by being flexible about times and arrangements. There are several examples of settings ready to adapt and change according to the children's needs.'

We believe that, generally, less support is available for Cylchoedd (groups) that do not provide Flying Start.

A high number of Cylch Meithrin nursery groups find it difficult to recruit extra hands, and many have reported that local authorities do not pay consistently with the Cylchoedd; e.g. they do not include holiday pay, and that adds to the financial pressure on the Cylch Meithrin.

Staff at settings are expected to attend meetings without financial support to pay for bank staff.

Factors that affect the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and the ALN system

The biggest problem affecting Cylch Meithrin nursery groups across Wales is the lack of funding to meet the needs of a child in the setting. Cylchoedd are very willing to support children and make reasonable adjustments - this is a normal part of any quality provision. However, a setting will occasionally require additional support to assist a child or children. In these cases, Cylchoedd's perception is that funding is available for children under the Childcare Offer, and that funding follows them to the setting that provides education for them. An Additional Support Grant (ASG) is available, but the dearth of information that has been shared about it means that the local authorities we have asked about the ASG have been unable to answer how they have used the funding to support children who are ineligible for the Childcare Offer. According to Welsh Government research last year: 'Awareness of the ASG among (childcare) providers was relatively low. Around two-thirds (67%) of providers had never heard of the ASG, around one-in-five (19%) had heard of the ASG but never applied to it, and just under one-in-five (15%) had heard of it and were in the process of applying for it or had already applied.' We call on the Welsh Government to work with early years sector providers and families to identify additional support needs at an earlier stage. There should be a consistent and systematic procedure to

collect more granular information about the management of the grant and for local authorities to report it to the Welsh Government. Action is needed in this area because the perception of childcare settings is that the system discriminates against children who are not covered by the Childcare Offer, thereby denying more families who have children with ALN access to childcare and foundation learning.