

Early Expert Input for ALN

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 12 Ionawr 2026
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Reference: RS25/12417-5

Introduction

Petition Number: [P-06-1532](#)

Petition title: Early Expert Input and Safeguarding Reform for Children with Additional Learning Needs in Wales

Text of petition: The current ALN Code in Wales is failing children with complex needs like Autism, ADHD, and PDA. Without early expert input or safeguarding assessments, children are entering school unsupported. Our daughter experienced autistic burnout and trauma before age 5. Families are left to battle alone while vital support is delayed or denied due to system flaws and unclear processes.

Despite having a diagnosis before starting school, our daughter received no formal risk assessments, safeguarding plan, or specialist input. Concerns raised pre-transition were dismissed, leading to a total breakdown in education and mental health. Schools lack the expertise to draft legally sound IDPs alone, and LEAs often refuse to step in early enough. Families are forced to privately fund support or face long waitlists while their children deteriorate. We're calling for mandatory Educational Psychology input for all children with complex needs before school entry, clear safeguarding plans based on parent/professional concerns, and early LEA responsibility for complex cases. The IDP system must be proactive, not reactive—our children deserve better.



1. Background

The [Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018](#) replaced the previous Special Educational Needs (SEN) system with a new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system. This new ALN system was introduced on a phased basis over four years (September 2021 to August 2025).

The previous SEN system in Wales was designed to support learners from Reception (age 4–5) to Year 11 (age 15–16), with some support extending into post-16 education (e.g. sixth form or college) up to age 19. The new ALN system is from age 0-25, bringing together the separate school-age SEN system and post-16 system of Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LDD).

1.1. The ALN Code and the Early Years Lead Officer

As required by the 2018 Act, the Welsh Government issued an [Additional Learning Needs Code](#), which was approved by the Senedd in March 2021. The ALN Code outlines requirements and guidance for schools, including maintained nursery schools, further education institutions, local authorities, NHS bodies and others on delivering the ALN system. Local authority funded, non-maintained providers of nursery education are required to have regard to relevant guidance in the Code, in accordance with the local authority's funding arrangements.

1.1.1. Duty to consider seeking advice from an educational psychologist

Chapter 11 of the Code provides detail on the “Duties on local authorities in relation to children under compulsory school age who are not at a maintained school in Wales”. It includes a sub-section on a local authority's duty to decide whether a child has ALN, of which paragraph 11.6 says:

Parents' observations of their child are often crucial to early identification. Local authorities and non-maintained nursery providers should be open and responsive to such expressions of concern and take account of any information provided.

Chapter 11 goes on to say:

When deciding whether the child has ALN, the local authority must consider whether to seek advice from an educational psychologist.

The authority must seek such advice where it considers that the advice is necessary to determine-

(a) the extent or nature of the ALN that the child may have, or (b) the ALP called for by the child's ALN. [Bold our emphasis]

The Code also says that:

The advice sought must relate to- (a) the educational, psychological or other features of the case which appear to be relevant to the child's educational needs (including the child's likely future needs), (b) how those features could affect the child's educational needs, and (c) the provision which may be appropriate for the child in light of those features, whether by way of ALP or other types of provision, and any matters affecting the delivery of that provision.

1.1.2. Early Years ALN Lead Officers

All local authorities are required to have Early Years ALN Lead Officers (EYALNLO) to coordinate arrangements in respect of children under compulsory school age who are not yet in a maintained setting. The local authority functions that the EYALNLO is responsible for coordinating in respect of the ALNLO cohort include:

- deciding whether children have ALN;
- the preparation and maintenance of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) including securing the Additional Learning Provision (ALP) specified in the IDP, and the provision of information about IDPs;
- the review and revision of IDPs;
- the review of ALP arrangements.

An [information toolkit](#), which the Welsh Government issued in November 2025 for parents and carers describes the EYALNLO role as follows:

The role of an EYALNLO is to work with parents, nurseries, schools, children's services and health professionals to raise awareness of ALN and promote early intervention where necessary,

Whether your child goes to a flying start setting, private or voluntary nursery, playgroup, or is at home with you, the EYALNLO co-ordinates the local authority's responsibility to children under compulsory school age. They work with schools and other settings to help identify ALN and make sure the right support is in place.

Chapter 10 of the [Additional Learning Needs Code](#) provides more information and guidance on the role of the EYALNLO.

Of general relevance may be the National Day Nurseries Association's publications: [The Additional Learning Needs System in Wales for nurseries](#) and [Neurodiversity in the Early Years](#).

1.2. Estyn thematic report

Estyn, the education inspectorate, has published two reports reviewing the implementation of the ALN reforms. The [first report](#) was published in September 2024. The [second stage of the review](#) (published December 2024) built on the findings from the first report and considered the implementation of the Act in early years settings, pupil referral units and maintained special schools.

In relation to early years, the second report said:

- Most early years settings and EYALNLOs participating in the review noted improvements in joint working across services for children and their families.
- Nearly all local authorities had developed better joint referral processes, ensuring that emerging needs were identified promptly.
- Many EYALNLOs cited the capacity of colleagues in health services as a challenge particularly regarding the diagnoses of neurodivergence.

2. Welsh Government action

In October 2024, in response to evidence and concerns that some parts of the ALN legislative framework are complex and unclear, the [Cabinet Secretary for Education announced](#) a review of the ALN legislative framework. The review considered the clarity, ease and consistency of understanding of the legislative framework to inform policy and legislative solutions on areas of the Act, Regulations and Code that were considered complex.

The [Cabinet Secretary for Education made an Oral statement in the Senedd](#) on 14 October 2025 in which she set out five priorities for the next phase of the review:

- clarifying who and how learners with ALN get support
- ensuring national consistency

- improving support for families
- strengthening multi-agency integration
- advancing bilingual and inclusive education

The Welsh Government also published a [summary of the evidence](#) it had received as well as an [Evaluation of the Additional Learning Needs system: survey of parents and carers](#). In relation to ALN in the early years, there were some positive comments about the role of the Early Years ALNLO enabling stronger partnerships and improved relationships with parents and local authority early years teams. Other comments relating to ALN in the early years included:

- There are practical challenges of identifying ALN and ALP and maintaining IDPs for children under compulsory school age. Concerns were expressed about the need to ‘predict’ a child’s future learning need rather than provide for their current need.
- The Code does not acknowledge that children need opportunities to access early intervention and to evidence its impact before ALN can be considered.
- There is a lack of clarity whether intervention from health-based services, before three years of age, constitutes the need for an IDP.
- Confusion was also expressed around what constitutes ‘education’ for children under compulsory school age and how ‘education’ relates to childcare.
- Local authorities reported challenges to ensure that early years settings are equipped to support children with ALN in a complex landscape of small scale, private settings.

Discussing the Welsh Government’s response to the review and the actions it was taking to improve things, in both [Plenary](#) and the [CYPE Committee](#), the Cabinet Secretary said a professional adviser had been recruited who will focus on improving delivery of ALN in early years. She also said the Welsh Government was developing a suite of resources to better communicate the ALN offer in early years.

In the Welsh Government’s response to this Petition, the Cabinet Secretary for Education says:

Early Years Additional Learning Needs Lead Officers (EYALNLO) are working successfully with parents and settings to ensure timely and beneficial support for young children with emerging or identified ALN.

Lynne Neagle MS goes on to say:

In February 2025, the Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing announced a £13.7 million extension to the Neurodivergence Improvement Programme, continuing it until March 2027. (...)

The programme is addressing immediate pressures while developing integrated, needs-led services and building a skilled, resilient workforce. This includes support for schools and teaching staff, as well as enhanced advice and support for parents and carers through the National Neurodivergence Team.

3. Welsh Parliament action

The Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee (CYPE) has been scrutinising the implementation of the ALN reforms (along with other major reforms to the curriculum) throughout this Senedd. It has done this through a series of 'check-ins' and has carried out four of these. The Committee published an interim report in July 2024 and further scrutinised the Cabinet Secretary on the findings of the Welsh Government's review of the ALN reforms on 23 October 2025.

Over the last few years, the Petitions Committee has considered a number of petitions about ALN:

- P-06-1392 Reform of the additional learning needs Code of Wales 2021
- P-06-1341 Accessible guidance for parents and schools to help develop plans to support children with additional learning needs
- P-06-1342 Fund more specialist school places and staff for children with additional learning needs in Wales
- P-06-1347 Review Additional Learning Needs policies & make compulsory to FULLY train all teachers and TAs in regulation techniques

- [P-06-1406 Financial penalties for Local Education Authorities who do not comply with timeframes for ALN](#)

The Committee considered the petitions together and Members noted that the Cabinet Secretary was already working with campaigners to address concerns. They also noted ongoing work in this area by the CYPE Committee, which is due to report again by the end of the Senedd. The petitions were closed and there was a [Plenary debate on 8 May 2024](#) on the petition in relation to the reform of the additional learning needs Code of Wales 2021. Senedd Research published an [article](#) ahead of that debate.

The Committee also considered [P-06-1499 Stop the use of term 'Universal Provision' as a reason to deny ALN](#) in June 2025. The Committee agreed to keep the petition open while awaiting the Cabinet Secretary's statement and, in the meantime, to refer the petition to the CYPE Committee given its ongoing review of the ALN reforms.

See the transcript of the CYPE Committee's meeting of [23 October](#) (paragraphs 116 – 128) for discussion of the ALN reforms in relation to early years, during its scrutiny of the Cabinet Secretary.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.