

ALN Toolkit for Parents: Advisory Group Review

Date: December 2025

Background

As a result of the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into Disabled Children's Access to Education and Childcare, and its continued scrutiny of the implementation of education reforms in Wales, the Welsh Government has developed an Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Toolkit for Parents. This resource is intended to support families in navigating the ALN system in Wales.

Participants

The Citizen Engagement Team interviewed four members of the original advisory group involved in the inquiry into disabled children's access to education.¹ Interviews were conducted in the mode of the participant's choice, online or in writing.

Summary of findings

Participants felt strongly that the toolkit did not align with their lived experiences as parents of children with additional needs. There was a strong feeling that the toolkit oversimplifies the realities of the ALN process, including timelines, local authority involvement, and the transition between school and local authority responsibility. Participants agreed that the toolkit presents processes as seamless and straightforward, whereas the reality for many parents is much more nuanced, complex and often emotionally challenging. They called for more detailed advice

¹Engagement findings: Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?



for parents within the toolkit, as well as more legislative information to help parents understand their own rights, as well as the rights of their children.

Key Issues

Practicality of advice

1. Participants highlighted that the ALN toolkit does not provide information beyond what is already available in the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales. They noted that it lacks practical guidance for parents seeking to challenge decisions or navigate complex processes for their children.
2. Participants agreed that the toolkit's advice, such as suggesting judicial review or tribunal appeals, is overly simplistic and does not reflect the complexity, stress, financial implications and legal risks involved with these processes. They argued that the toolkit does not offer parents sufficient advice or guidance on following these routes and could therefore mislead parents into thinking these are easy options for those facing challenges within the system.

"I mean these things (education tribunals) are really complicated and difficult, and it makes it sound like it's, I don't know, like going to get your hair cut or something...in order to be in a position to do these things, you would need so much support...it nearly broke me."

3. One participant acknowledged that the toolkit could be marginally helpful to those who are at the very beginning of their journey with the ALN system, but for parents who are already familiar with the process, it doesn't provide enough detailed, practical information.

"This is kind of OK as a very kind of brief thumbnail sketch of a lot of things. But the reality of it is massively complicated".

"I also found the tool kit completely different from reality".

4. When discussing the accessibility of the toolkit, participants felt that the information provided was vague and that the use of technical terms and the assumption of prior knowledge made it potentially inaccessible to parents from diverse backgrounds or those new to the ALN system.

5. Another participant felt that the length of the toolkit could be inaccessible to some parents navigating the information available and called for an executive summary.

"63 pages is a lot for a parent to read...it might be useful to produce some 1 page guides to support the document i.e. What is an IDP, What is ALN - so that parents can pick up what's relevant to them without having to read the whole document."

6. Participants also raised concerns around the toolkit's presentation of one-to-one support and that it downplayed the necessity of such support in providing individualised assistance for safety and educational reasons. They questioned whether the toolkit addressed the needs of young people with more extreme needs, marginalising them further.

7. One participant however, stated that the 'myths' section of the toolkit was useful in providing clarity on misunderstood issues.

"I thought the myths section was very good - again maybe these could be produced on cards / separate to the toolkit to make it more accessible to parents. For example I run parent / carer support groups and these would be great as handouts."

Misleading timelines and inconsistencies in support

8. There was a sense amongst participants that the toolkit presents the process from diagnoses to defining responsibility over Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and beyond as seamless, without acknowledging the significant delays in each step of these proposed timelines.

9. One participant felt that timelines would be easier to understand if presented as a flowchart, citing a recently produced example by the Children's Commissioner for Wales on ALN procedures as particularly effective.

10. They also felt that the toolkit did not account for the disparity and inconsistencies in the support provided by local authorities in Wales. In terms of IDPs, for example, participants felt that the toolkit information did not reflect that local authority policies on who maintains IDPs and when they take over from schools are unclear, and vary widely. This could lead to confusion for parents as there is a lack of standardisation across Wales.

"Time scales wise, it's very nice and shiny saying it's going to take this long for this to happen, but in reality it doesn't. And there's no point in putting that in there if that's not going to be the reality for people."

"I think even when you've got a diagnosis, it doesn't happen in the way that document says at all."

- 11.** Another participant felt the toolkit did not clarify for parents in detail what school support should or could look like for their child.

"Having looked through the toolkit, I was trying to find out how schools assess and capture effective data regarding a child's needs. If you don't know what good support for your child looks like because you've never seen it, it's hard to say what it is. Particularly if you're exhausted and worried."

- 12.** One participant highlighted the toolkit's emphasis on inclusion, which they felt could mislead parents into not seeking support from specialist schools. They felt that parents reading the toolkit need to be made aware that alternative provisions and services are available outside of mainstream settings.

Comparison to other resources

- 13.** Participants agreed that they found more helpful and practical information through peer networks and guidance from charities, as this advice was often more nuanced and rooted in others' personal, lived experiences.

Lack of post-16 information

- 14.** There was agreement amongst participants that the toolkit did not provide any useful advice for parents of young people who are navigating unique challenges in their post-16 journey. For example, one participant explained that their child has been struggling to access transport to college due to their needs.

"The college support for learners with ALN is, as far as I can see, non-existent. So this toolkit makes for painful reading."

Suggestions for improvement

- 15.** Participants questioned who had been consulted in the creation of this toolkit, and whether it was informed by the lived experiences of parents whose
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children have more complex or high-level needs. They emphasised that **inclusion should mean involving those affected at every stage to ensure resources are relevant and practical to all parents.**

16. One participant argued for **better, holistic support for parents in the ALN system, such as provision of caseworkers or advocates to guide parents through the system from the outset,** rather than relying on generic documents or late-stage disagreement resolution services as suggested in the toolkit.

17. The group stressed the need for the **toolkit to include clearer, more detailed explanations of parents' and children's rights, as well as all steps involved in securing support.** They felt the toolkit should more adequately prepare parents for a complex and often lengthy timeline they are likely to encounter.

18. All participants expressed frustration that the system and toolkit often treat children as a homogenous group, and that **the toolkit needs to recognise the diversity of needs and the importance of truly individualised provision and support.**