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Ein cyf/Our ref MA(L)ARD/0549/17

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Further to my letter of 17 July 2017, in response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's recommendation in its stage 1 report about the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill, I committed to keeping you informed about the implementation of the additional learning needs (ALN) transformation programme. This will be by way of quarterly updates, of which this letter is the first.

The programme is made up of five strands:

Legislation and statutory guidance

The first strand of the programme is legislation and statutory guidance, which comprises the Bill, explanatory memorandum, regulations and the ALN Code, which will include mandatory requirements. The revised regulatory impact assessment (RIA) will be published on 11 September.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

I can also update the committee about my consideration of recommendation 17 of the committee's stage 1 report, which said: "The Minister should provide further explanation as to why special schools have been removed from the list of schools for which the duty to designate an ALNCo would apply."

I asked my officials to write to special schools to seek their views about a statutory requirement for them to have an ALN co-ordinator. Of the 39 schools we wrote to asking for a response before the summer holidays, 15 replied; 10 said they would not favour a statutory duty to appoint an ALNCo.

Eight of the 10 who opposed a duty expressed a clear view that every teacher within a special school takes on the role of an ALNCo, with specific duties fulfilled by head teachers and other senior leadership team colleagues. This is consistent with the Welsh Government's view, as reflected in the provisions in the Bill and explained in my response to the committee's recommendation. Two of the five head teachers who supported a statutory duty raised specific issues about training, funding, collaborative working, general staff development and development opportunities for teachers with specialist knowledge of ALN. Similar issues were highlighted by four of the 10 head teachers opposed to a statutory ALNCo.

There is a concern among some special schools that if they do not have a designated ALNCo, they could miss out on some of the funding, training and joint working initiatives that will accompany the introduction of this role in mainstream schools. While these are important issues, we believe they can be addressed as part of the wider transformation programme and we consider the Bill's requirement on education settings to designate an ALNCo should not be extended to include special schools. We will maintain our dialogue with special schools as we take the programme forward.

Implementation/transition support

In March 2016, the Welsh Government set up the ALN Strategic Implementation Group (ALN SIG) as part of arrangements for the ongoing development of implementation planning to support local authorities, schools, early years settings, further education institutions, health boards and other partners to prepare for the wider ALN transformation programme, including the statutory changes provided for in the Bill. The group meets bi-monthly to consider practical solutions and provide advice and recommendations to the Welsh Government to support implementation.

Expert groups have been established by the ALN SIG to give detailed consideration of a number of technical issues in relation to the approach to implementing the new ALN system, including:

- Individual development plans
- ALNcos
- Early years ALN provision
- Post-16 ALN provision
- Transition between settings, providers and into adulthood
- Health
- Training
- Looked-after children

All the expert groups met for a two-day workshop in March 2017 and have since been working towards an agreed set of actions.

In November 2016, I announced the launch of the £2.1m ALN innovation fund, which will run until 31 March 2018. This is a grant to support regional partnership projects supporting learners with ALN. The funding targets the development of creative, collaborative delivery models and practices to improve systems, arrangements and relationships. The funding is also being used to support further education institutions and health boards. Projects established in year one are being developed and outputs will be reviewed by the relevant expert group.

In February 2017, I launched a consultation about how the Bill should be implemented if it receives Royal Assent. It closed on 9 June and the responses are currently being considered by my officials. A summary of responses will be published this term and I intend to make a statement about our proposed approach to implementation. The Welsh Government will publish a transition guide for delivery partners setting out detailed guidelines to support implementation.

I wrote to you in July about the creation of five ALN transformation leads who will support delivery partners to prepare for the implementation of the new system. The recruitment process is now underway and the successful candidates should be in post before the end of the year. These posts will play a crucial role in implementation planning and the roll-out of training and awareness-raising about the Bill as part of our core skills development (see below).

Work has started on the approach to monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Bill, at key stages of the implementation process readiness for the new system in preparation for implementation; compliance with the provisions in the Bill once the new system commences; and monitoring the impact of the Bill over the longer term. Arad Research and the University of South Wales have been contracted to undertake a baseline assessment of the existing special educational needs (SEN) system, which will inform a future evaluation of the impact of the legislative changes in due course. My officials have also been liaising with Estyn to coordinate an approach to monitoring readiness for implementation; Estyn will be focusing some of its thematic inspection activity this year on the readiness of education settings for the new ALN system. The ALN transformation leads will support delivery partners to undertake readiness self-assessments to identify areas to focus on in preparing for transition to the new ALN system.

Workforce development

This strand is a programme of skills development for practitioners who are involved in supporting learners with ALN and is focused at three levels – core skills development; advanced skills development and specialist skills development. The approach to implementing this aspect of the programme is being developed in conjunction with the training expert group and the ALNCo expert group.

Core skills development will provide training and development resources and opportunities for all practitioners to improve their skills, knowledge and confidence to support learners with a wide range of low complexity, high incidence additional learning needs within settings and access to ongoing professional development.

Core skills development has already begun with the Learning with Autism programme, developed by the National Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) team and funded by the Welsh Government. This offers schools free resources to raise awareness of autism and training for teachers and support staff. The programme, which is available on the ASDinfoWales website is available to primary schools and has been completed by more than 4,000 staff and 10,000 pupils. The programme is being extended to secondary schools, early years, further education and work-based learning providers.

Advanced skills development will support the role of ALNCoS, who will replace current Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCoS).

In respect of recommendation 14 of the committee's stage 1 report – "The Minister should reconsider his approach with regard to qualifications for ALNCoS, and make it clear that going forward, a Master's qualification should be desirable and not required" – and recommendation 15 – "The Minister should consider whether it would be desirable for other qualifications and skillsets, of a similar level to Master's, to be considered as appropriate for an ALNCo" – my officials are working with professionals to identify skills and training requirements for the profession.

Specialist skills development includes those staff working in local authority-provided specialist support services, for example, educational psychologists and teachers of visually or hearing impaired. My officials have been working with the WLGA and Data Unit to collect data from local authorities about their existing workforce (including qualifications, demographics, linguistic skills, etc) together with current and projected vacancies. Once the results are available they will be used to consider our support for post-graduate specialist training.

Awareness-raising

In February and March this year a series of regional events were held, attended by more than 800 practitioners and parents. I attended one of the events in Newport and was very pleased with the attendance and positive feedback from the session.

Our extensive work with stakeholders is ongoing and we are planning a programme of activities to explain and promote the new system and the rights it will confer to children, their parents and young people.

Supporting policy

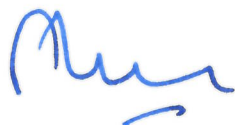
This strand of the programme is focused on producing policy and guidance to ensure good practice is supported and embedded in the current SEN system and the future ALN system.

This year, to support practitioners we have published: guidance about post-16 funding for learners with learning difficulties at specialist colleges; advice to local authorities and education professionals about the role of the SENCo; guidance for teaching practitioners to support learners with specific learning difficulties and guidance for governing bodies of schools and local authorities about supporting learners with healthcare needs.

To support the planning and delivery of early, timely and effective interventions to support children and young people with ADHD, ASD, hearing impairments, visual impairments and multi-sensory impairments, contracts have been awarded to Bazian, SQW and the University of Birmingham to undertake rapid evidence assessments to inform accessible guides on interventions which are known to be effective in supporting young people with specific forms of SEN.

I will provide a further update about the transformation programme work at the end of November.

I am copying this letter to the chairs of the Finance and Constitutional and Legislative Affairs committees.



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