

Reflecting on the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Reform: Embedding the voices of children and young people (CYP)



Background

The ALN reform in Wales, introduced through the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and the ALN Code of Practice (2021), replaces the former Special Educational Needs (SEN) system with a single, unified system for CYP aged 0-25. This new system centres a commitment to person-centred practice, early and effective intervention, and the meaningful involvement of CYP and families. The decision to replace the previous system stemmed from widespread recognition that the SEN framework was outdated and no longer fit for purpose.

The implementation of the new ALN system began in September 2021, with a phased transition due to end in 2024. However, in recognition of the practical challenges faced by schools and local authorities, especially following the covid-19 pandemic, the Welsh Government extended the implementation period by one year to August 2025.

This time provides an important opportunity to reflect on how effectively the reform has delivered on its main principles, particularly the commitment to ensuring that children's views, feelings and wishes are heard, as explained in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Implementation of the ALN Reform

This extension of the implementation period aimed to allow additional time to transfer all CYP from the SEN system to the new Independent Development Plan (IDP) framework while maintaining the quality and consistency of support. During this period progress has been made in embedding the principles of the new system particularly the shift towards a unified 0-25 framework, the introduction of IDPs as single statutory plan and multiagency collaboration between education, health and social care. The

transition has also highlighted challenges such as variation in local authority capacity, the significant administrative workload associated with developing IDPs and the need for ongoing training and professional development for staff.

The conclusion of this period provides an opportunity to reflect on how effectively the system's core values of inclusion, person-centred practice, and early intervention are being realised in practice. Central to this reflection is whether the voices of CYP are genuinely shaping both individual planning and wider delivery.

CYPs Voices in the ALN Reform

A central ambition of the ALN reform is to place CYP at the heart of decision-making about their education and support. This reflects the principles of person-centred practice embedded in the ALN Code and also Wales' broader commitment to the UNCRC.

Moving from Statements of Special Educational Needs (SENs) to IDPs was intended to ensure that the wishes and feelings of CYP are considered at every stage of the planning and review process. The Code requires practitioners to actively seek out children's perspectives, present information in accessible formats and involve them meaningfully in discussions about their learning and support. This shift in theory aims to achieve Article 12 of UNCRC which states that every child has the right to express their views on matters affecting them.

Children in Wales were commissioned by the Welsh Government to engage with CYP in educational settings across Wales to gather their experiences of the ALN Act. Reviewing the end-of-year report from this work and highlighting the key themes that emerged is crucial for gaining meaningful insight into children's views of the reforms.

Emerging themes from engagement and their implications on children's rights

CYP highlight both positive examples where CYP feel listened to and involved, and ongoing challenges such as inconsistent teacher support, unsafe or overwhelming environments, variable IDP quality, and gaps in the curriculum that leave some CYP feeling disengaged.

1. Relationships and support

Article 12 Right to be heard, Article 29 Right to Education goals

"I don't ask for help in case they think I'm weird or stupid"

CYP shared that when teachers took time to understand them and their individual needs, it often resulted in those needs being better met. Effective approaches that supported this included person-centred, whole-school, fluid and responsive environments, and relational practice.

Relational practice involves building respectful, trusting relationships where CYP feel emotionally and physically safe, valued, and heard. However, the consistency of relational practice varies across schools. Some CYP reported that teachers lacked the necessary skills or knowledge to provide appropriate Additional Learning Provision (ALP) causing them to express feelings of frustration, low self-esteem and disengagement.

Additionally, CYP expressed that they sometimes feel unable to be open and honest about their support needs due to concerns about upsetting teachers or being ridiculed by peers.

Schools must ensure that teachers are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to embed relational practice across their settings. CYP should feel confident in expressing their views and supported to reach their full potential through Individual Development Plans (IDPs) that accurately reflect and respond to their unique needs. When this happens, CYP's personalities, talents, and abilities can be nurtured and developed effectively.

2. Safe spaces

Article 28 - Right to education, Article 23 – Rights of children with disabilities

“In math’s, the teacher gives me praise, notices me, he is kind. Other teachers are so understanding, and they go out of the way so that I understand the work. I know they want school to be a safe space for me and they want me in their classroom”

CYP noted that they value safe spaces where they feel psychologically secure, however some are worried to ask for this support. They shared that chaotic or noisy classrooms can feel overwhelming, and poor behaviour management towards other peers, left them feeling uneasy and unsafe. CYP felt safer when they believed that teachers genuinely care and understand their needs.

CYP must be protected from environments where they feel unsafe and overwhelmed, and those with ALN must have the support necessary in inclusive settings. They must also have their privacy respected and be in environments that are responsive, familiar and fluid where they feel calm and relaxed. They need teachers who do not overestimate or underestimate them and understand their capabilities, celebrate their strengths and create opportunities for CYP to be stretched in ways that felt comfortable.

3. Involvement in ALN Processes

Article 13 – Freedom of expression, Article 23 – Rights of children with disabilities, Article 28 – Right to education

“I get to say what I like in school, what I want, need and I get to explore possibilities”.

There were examples of effective ALN processes, but they were inconsistent. Experiences of participating in IDP and person-centred planning (PCP) meetings are mixed, with schools adopting varying approaches. Some CYP report that participation in PCP meetings was empowering, enabling them to reflect on their progress and shape their educational journey. Concerns were also raised about the quality and relevance of IDPs in reflecting real needs.

In line with ALN policy, teachers are finding ways for CYP to share their views and have a say in the decisions affecting their lives. However, other CYP highlight a lack of resources and support, and most feel confused by ALN terminology. Teachers are finding ways to work with the CYP to inform statutory documentation. Children must have information provided to them in an accessible format so that they can express their views effectively.

4. Learning and the Curriculum

Article 28 – Right to education, Article 29 Goals of education

“In school they just say write this down even when I don’t really know what I’m writing about”.

Across all settings, pupils noted that there was a lack of implementation of the core principles of Universal Learning Design. CYP predominately commented that teachers used multiple means of representation (presenting information in different formats) but highlighted that they were provided with insufficient means of expression and engagement to demonstrate their knowledge.

CYP noted how a lack of engagement with the curriculum isn't just affecting their academic achievements but also, their mental health. Feeling unable to understand and connect with their learning has left them feeling inadequate, unmotivated, overwhelmed and isolated. CYP also admitted to experiencing frustration and a lack of motivation when being over or under-estimated during lessons and that there are sometimes limited opportunities to develop their interests, strengths and talents. CYP did highlight times when teachers and peers showed belief in their potential through growth mindsets, however, this was inconsistent. CYP should have access to inclusive learning opportunities.

What next?

As the ALN reform implementation period concludes, there must be a focus on ensuring that CYP's rights and their meaningful participation is embedded in practice during the next phase. CYP with lived experience should help design, monitor and evaluate ALN systems. The Welsh Government review of the ALN legislative framework, launched in October 2024 is aiming to improve clarity, consistency, and practical delivery of the ALN system. This review is intended to respond to feedback from implementation, particularly around variability in practice, lack of clarity in guidance, and a lack of understanding the framework. A recent publication from Welsh Government as part of the review summarises responses received from key delivery partners and stakeholders on their experience of delivering the ALN system and the practical challenges they face. Cabinet Secretary for Education, Lynne Neagle MS has also set out 5 priorities for the next phase:

[Additional Learning Needs \(ALN\) legislative framework review | GOV.WALES](#)

Through Children in Wales participation programme with CYP several considerations emerged:

- What is being done to strengthen teacher and pupil relationships in schools?
- How are teachers being better supported to understand respond to the needs of ALN learners to provide adequate support?
- How is s ALN implementation helping CYP with ALN to feel safer in school?
- How is ALN implementation supporting CYP to develop better awareness and understanding and awareness of ALN policy, and ensure CYP are inputting into ALN processes?
- How are schools ensuring ALN documentation, i.e IDP's/ one-page profiles are relevant and purposeful?
- How are schools considering curriculum-based isolation and the impact on pupils' mental health?
- How is ALN implementation supporting transitions for ALN learners, from early years to post 16 Education, where CYP's strengths and aspirations are being recognised, developed and realised?

These considerations align with the review's five priorities. If these are all addressed, CYP views on the ALN reforms will have been meaningfully embedded in the review. This time provides a crucial opportunity to embed children's rights more firmly into the ALN system so that every CYP voice is not only heard but acted upon.

