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Research on the IDP Expanded Testing Phase Summary Report

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Abbreviations and Acronyms used

ALN   Additional learning needs

ALNCo   Additional learning needs co-ordinator

ELLS   Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

IDP   Individual development plan

IEP   Individual education plan

NAfW   National Assembly for Wales

PCP   Person centred planning

PWU   People and Work Unit

QAS   Quality assurance systems

SEN   Special educational needs

SENCo   Special educational needs co-ordinator

SENTW   Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales

WAG   Welsh Assembly Government (used until May 2011)

WG   Welsh Government (used from May 2011)

1.   Introduction

The additional learning needs pilot projects and reform of the statutory framework for special educational needs

1.1.   The Welsh Government is planning to reform the statutory framework for children and young people with special educational needs (SEN). Policy reviews identified a range of weaknesses in the current process for identifying and meeting special educational needs (Estyn 2003; NAfW, 2004, 2006).

1.2.   The additional learning needs (ALN) pilot projects were established in 2009 to develop and test alternatives to the current SEN framework. The aspects being piloted included an individual development plan (IDP) which sets out a child's or young person's learning needs and the actions required to support them; a quality assurance system (QAS), designed to monitor outcomes and to enable ALN provision to be evaluated; and developments in the roles and responsibilities of a SENCo/ALNCo (SEN co-ordinator/additional learning needs co-ordinator) in learning settings.

1.3.   The final phase of the pilot projects commenced in September 2012. It aimed to provide an extended trialling of a 'whole system' approach. This included using the IDP and QAS across the 0-25 years age range, working in pre-school settings, across local school clusters and in further education institutions.

This research study

1.4.   The overall purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the IDP process within the context of the "whole system" approach. It was structured as a piece of research, rather than an evaluation of the pilots and the specific objectives were:

- to investigate the influence of person centred planning (PCP), the IDP process and QAS upon the identification of need for children and young people with SEN, in relation to integrated planning;

- to compare and contrast the different planning experiences of all relevant stakeholders with implementing PCP, the IDP paper-based version, the IDP web based tool and QAS with the current system;

- to assess how far the different elements of the system (including the QAS, IDP, PCP and the role of the support co-ordinator) worked together and how multi-agency planning facilitated this; and

- to identify the wider implications of implementing the elements of reform (e.g. possible impact on the Special Educational Needs Tribunal Wales (SENTW) and use of dispute resolution services).

2. Approach and methodology

Introduction

2.1. This was primarily a qualitative research study, which draws upon four key sources of data:

- research with 16 learning settings and one service (the ISCAN project) involved in the pilot (including interviews with a total of 25 professionals);
- responses from sixteen families;
- interviews with nine key stakeholders from local and central government, Careers Wales and the voluntary sector; and
- a desk based review of pilot self-evaluations.

2.2. In order to highlight the key commonalities and differences in the experiences and judgments of stakeholders, the report distinguishes between responses from: "professionals" such as school teachers, SENCos and health professionals, and "parents and carers". Within each of these two broad groups, in order to provide an indication of the balance of opinion on a particular issue, the report uses Estyn's (2011) convention to indicate the proportion of research participants making a particular point.

2.3. In interpreting responses, it is important to bear in mind that not every stakeholder commented on a particular issue discussed in the report. Therefore, even if, for example, a "minority" of interviewees are recorded as having made a particular point (as is frequently the case, as it was rare for more than 12 of the 25 people interviewed to make a particular point), this does not mean that the "majority" disagreed.

3. Findings: The identification of need for children and young people with SEN

Comparing and contrasting existing processes and the PCP approach and IDP processes

3.1.   Under existing arrangements, the additional support that a child or young person with special educational needs requires is normally met through classroom practice such as differentiated teaching, more specific support such as School Action or School Action Plus, or a (statutory) Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN).

3.2.   As table 1 illustrates, there are some important differences of emphasis in the PCP and IDP processes compared to assessment for School Action and School Action Plus or a statutory assessment. In particular, the PCP approach defines a child's needs in relation to what is important to them and for them. It also focuses upon a child's or young person's strengths, rather than their weaknesses. In addition, as the table illustrates, the PCP approach and the IDP broadens the focus to potentially include a wider range of needs and support than the existing processes and plans (which focus solely upon special educational needs)

3.3.   Nevertheless, as Table 1 also illustrates, there is still a large degree of overlap between the existing processes and plans and the PCP process and IDP. For example, they all share the same aim: to meet a child's/young person's needs and the support needed by a child to address their learning difficulty and a review of the effectiveness of that support would be a feature of all three processes and plans.

Table 1. Comparing PCP and the IDP with the existing assessment and planning processes

Process Elements	Individual development planning	School Action or School Action Plus	Statutory assessment
Plan	Individual Development Plan	Individual Education Plan	Statement of SEN
Purpose of the process	To identify: what is important to the child/young person; their strengths as well as the challenges[1] they face; and how best to support them (what's important for them)	To identify additional or different action to enable the child /young person to learn more effectively	To identify the child's/young person's learning difficulties and any non-educational needs[2] and the provision necessary to meet the child's/young person's SEN
Review of existing support	What is working and what is not working? (which would include reviewing strategies and interventions)	Review of the strategies that are being used and the ways in which they could be developed	Review of the steps taken to support the child/young person
Desired outcome	Realisation of what's important to and for the child/young person (which should include educational and/or developmental targets)	The short-term educational and/or developmental targets set for or by the child/young person	Longer term objectives which the additional provision aims to meet.

PCP and IDP process

3.4.   PCP was described as providing much richer information about who the child/young person is and what is important to and for the child or young person. This reflected a reframing of questions from a deficit- to a strengths-based approach and the involvement of, and dialogue between, a number of people who knew the child.

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[1] This would include, for example identifying what is and what is not working.
[2] Part 2 of the statement describes all the child's learning difficulties identified during the statutory assessment and the child's current functioning; Part 5 describes any non-educational needs.

3.5.   All settings visited recognised the importance of involving children and young people and parents and carers. PCP and the IDP process were felt to build upon and extend existing practice and, in some cases, steps were taken to involve children and young people who had not previously participated. However, the extent, nature and impact of children's and young people's participation in PCP and the IDP process was mixed across the pilot areas. Some settings report that it has been difficult to meaningfully involve children and young people, particularly young children and/or those with more complex needs, in IDP review meetings (as distinct from other parts of the process).

3.6.   Family support services were felt to be very important in encouraging and enabling parents' and carers' participation. However, in general, patterns of participation in PCP and the IDP meetings by parents or carers did not change from previous participation – they mirrored what already happens under the existing system. That is, with some exceptions, those who did not take part in the existing system did not take part in the PCP approach and IDP process. The lack of parental engagement or involvement is reported by professionals to be a long standing problem. Professionals identified a number of reasons for this, including:

- the perception that some parents or carers feel that the school and/or other services are responsible for helping their child and that they therefore do not need to be involved; and
- parents and carers, particular those with poor literacy skills, who find participation in the process daunting.[3]

3.7.   As with parents and carers, the pattern of participation by professionals in PCP and IDP reviews generally mirrored their participation in existing processes. An analysis of participation indicates[4]:

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[3] Approaches to supporting parents or carers who may themselves have additional learning needs are emphasised as part of the training.

[4] Table 2 is based upon pilot self-evaluation reports and differences in the detail and way attendance was recorded makes direct comparisons between the participation of different types of professionals and between local authorities, problematic. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the number and range of professionals who would be expected to attend depends upon the needs of each individual child.

- relatively high levels of participation by school based staff and local authority staff/services, such as advisory teachers and educational psychologists;
- a mixed picture of participation by health staff/services, with relatively high levels of participation by health visitors and physiotherapists and generally much more mixed or lower levels of participation by others such as paediatricians, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists; and
- a generally low level of participation by social workers (with the exception of school based social workers).

3.8. Pilot areas identified a range of reasons for non-attendance. These included: time pressures and the number of meetings professionals were asked to attend; the perception that IDP review meetings were "education" meetings; and key people leaving or moving on.

3.9. PCP was generally well received by those parents and carers, schools and professionals who had taken part in the process. The process was felt to be more informal than other processes, such as statutory assessments and reviews. In a small number of cases, it was described as giving parents a voice in the process, which they had not previously felt they had. However, half of the parents interviewed for this study talked negatively about aspects of PCP and IDP. This reflected a number of concerns, including:

- the way the review was organised and the ways in which they and their child were asked to contribute;
- the shift from a "deficit" to "strengths" based approach to planning; and
- dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the process.

3.10. Professionals saw the emphasis upon a collaborative approach as particularly important. This was felt to increase parents and carers trust and confidence in the process. Nevertheless, a few professionals and parents reported that parents or carers, who have been used to "fighting" to get the support they

feel their child needs, have found the change to working collaboratively difficult to accept.

Impact upon planning to meet need

3.11. Opinions amongst the professionals and parents were divided about how rigorous PCP and IDP were compared to the existing processes for assessing and planning for need. For example, while half the parents welcomed the shift to a strengths'-based approach, that shift was a particular cause of concern for a minority of parents. This often appeared to reflect a lack of confidence that their child's needs would be met unless the focus of the process was upon their difficulties. Some parents also felt that the insights that a diagnosis and in depth assessment of needs, offered by a statutory assessment, was lost.

3.12. While professionals felt their improved understanding of the child helped with communication and support, there were only a few examples of more fundamental changes to the interventions that were delivered. Therefore, a few professionals and half the parents concluded that although the experience was positive overall (which we discuss further below), the actual outcomes of the process were not very different from what they would have been anyway.

3.13. In some cases, PCP and IDP were felt to have helped parents and carers understand what they (as distinct from the school) could do differently to help their child.

3.14. The involvement of a range of professionals, alongside parents and carers, is generally felt to improve action planning, as actions can be agreed during the IDP review meeting. Nevertheless, there was a concern amongst a minority of professionals that this approach does not always or naturally lend itself to target setting. Targets sometimes related to actions (what was to be done), rather than the intended outcome. It may be appropriate to have targets for actions, but actions are only a means to achieve a desired outcome, and targets should include these outcomes.

Information technology

3.15. The online dimension to the IDP was generally welcomed in principle, but has experienced technical problems in practice. There was frustration amongst some parents who had been told the process would be online, when this could not be delivered in some areas. There were also some concerns about how parents with poor digital literacy and/or limited access to hardware, such as computers, would cope and whether schools would have to take responsibility for enabling them to access online IDPs.

The impact of the PCP approach and IDP process upon professionals' workloads

3.16. Just under half of professionals felt that while PCP and the IDP process was worthwhile, it was markedly more time consuming than existing processes. Many were concerned about how they could scale up the process to include more children and young people. Many SENCos, in particular, felt that using such an approach more widely would only be viable for SENCos who had sufficient non-teaching time and administrative support.

3.17. Overall, there was some evidence that the process got faster once established. Nevertheless, it was felt that the nature of the process, with its emphasis upon informality and dialogue, made it difficult to reduce the time needed for a review meeting to much below one hour.

Parallel or sequential planning

3.18. There are very few examples of the IDP directly replacing other plans or documents (other than Statements of SEN) at this stage. Nevertheless, some local authorities are looking at streamlining processes and, crucially, paperwork so that the IDP can replace other education plans and documents that schools (and other bodies) are required to produce.

3.19. There are more examples of PCP and IDP informing (but not replacing) other plans, However, some services and, in particular, social services were reported to be both unable to change the reports they produced (given statutory requirements) and unwilling to combine planning meetings which could inform the production of more than one plan or report.

Integration across the different pilot elements

3.20. There is relatively little evidence for a "whole systems'" approach. Most trialling of the IDP and QAS has been within schools and even trialling within school clusters (in Torfaen, Carmarthenshire, Cardiff and Newport) has often been limited. This limits the conclusions that can be drawn about effectiveness and operation across a system.

Parents' and carers' confidence in the process

3.21. There remain substantial concerns amongst parents and carers about the legal status of IDPs, and whether they will lose the legal protection they feel a Statement of SEN provides. This indicates a lack of confidence in the process, often influenced by their previous experiences. For example, as one professional put it, it was "hardest when they're used to the old system, [and] have a Statement" (which they want to keep).

The nature of disagreements and conflict

3.22. There are a range of reasons why conflict between a family and the school and/or local authority can arise. PCP and IDP can, if sensitively and skilfully managed, enable many of these issues to be addressed. However, there is nothing inherent in the process that guarantees this. Some of the sources of disagreement, such as a misunderstanding of the process, are more amenable to resolution through the type of collaborative discussions between families and professionals that the PCP approach and IDP process can foster, than other problems, such as a breakdown of provision.

Workforce development

3.23. The approaches that have been piloted require:

- a knowledge and understanding of new processes and tools;
- a range of social and emotional skills for engaging stakeholders and managing and facilitating review meetings; and
- a cultural and attitudinal change (in some cases).

3.24. The current training in PCP and setting up IDPs has focused upon the first and third of these. However, there has been less focus upon the second. The evidence from the piloting indicates that not all professionals involved in the process have this knowledge and these skills.

4. Conclusions

The experiences of different stakeholders

4.1. The PCP approach has been positively welcomed by schools, most other professionals involved in the process (such as educational psychologists) and many, but not all, families. The impact upon parents' and carers' experiences is crucial, as a key perceived weakness of the existing system is that many have found it a difficult process.

4.2. The majority of professionals who commented on this issue feel that, although it is valuable, the PCP approach is more time consuming than existing arrangements. Moreover, the participation of professionals who are not based in schools, or part of the local authority education services, has been mixed.

4.3. Schools support the principles underpinning the QAS and online IDP. However, implementation of each has been limited, constraining the conclusions that can be drawn about stakeholders' experiences of them.

The influence of PCP, the IDP process and QAS upon the identification of need for children and young people with SEN

4.4. The PCP approach is generally felt by both schools and parents and carers to offer richer information about a child and a better understanding of their needs than existing processes. In some cases, this has led to the identification of needs that would otherwise have been missed or that were not fully understood.

4.5. Nevertheless, parents and some professionals have some concerns that the insights that a diagnosis and in depth assessment of needs would offer have been side-lined by the shifts in emphasis. In particular some are concerned that the focus of the process has swung too far from a deficit- to strengths-based model, and from a child's special educational needs to what is important to and for the child.

4.6.   The IDP is felt to be an effective way of recording the insights generated by the PCP approach and the action plan is generally felt by parents to offer much greater clarity than existing plans. The impact of this has been changes in school practice that may be relatively modest in scale, but which are often very important for children and young people.

Integration of the different elements such as PCP, the IDP, QAS and parent partnership support services

4.7.   The integration of PCP and IDP has worked well, but their integration with other pilot elements such as the QAS has, to date, been weak. Moreover, whilst professionals recognise the potential for a single, person-centred planning process to produce multiple plans, this vision has often been difficult to realise in practice and there remains extensive parallel and sequential planning.

The wider implications of reform

4.8.   The positive impact of PCP and the IDP upon parents' and carers' experiences is important, because the need to improve their experiences was a key reason for seeking to change the statutory framework for special educational needs. Schools feel that the more collaborative and informal process offers the potential to build parent and carer trust and confidence, reducing the level and frequency of disputes and disagreements. However, it is still too early to judge whether this will happen in practice. There is also a widespread concern amongst parents and carers that the legal protection that is currently felt to be offered by a Statement of SEN will be lost because of the proposed reforms.

4.9.   To date, the IDP has only been trialled with relatively small numbers of children and young people. Many professionals find the process more time consuming than other existing processes. Even if they feel it is worthwhile, they are concerned about how SENCos with little or no non-teaching time

could manage the process with larger numbers of children and young people. This could also have implications for SENCos to take on a strategic role in relation to ALN/SEN provision in schools.

Observations

4.10. With the exception of the time needed for PCP, none of the problems or challenges highlighted by the research are inherent to the approach or models. The PCP approach, and tools such as the IDP, are flexible enough to be adapted and to accommodate differing demands.

4.11. However, at the heart of the reforms there is a tension between the desire to prescribe what should be done and how it should be done in order to ensure quality and increase consistency, and the need to empower practitioners and give them the flexibility to respond to individual needs and interests. Much will therefore depend upon the skills, attitudes and commitment of the education workforce in implementing the new processes. The risks also highlight the importance of robust accountability mechanisms.

4.12. The evidence from the ALN pilots indicates that the pilot models and approaches seek to address the key weaknesses of the existing system, but are not a "silver bullet". The evidence demonstrates that while these tools can be very effective, there is no guarantee that they will be. Context, for example, can influence stakeholders' expectations and engagement; the ease with which new systems can be adopted; and the resources and services available to meet the needs identified through a PCP approach. This means, for example, that PCP and the IDP worked best where parents, carers and professionals were already actively involved in existing processes.

4.13. Finally, it is important to note that much of the evidence is from settings who opted into a pilot project. They were sufficiently interested to opt in, generally worked with small numbers of children and young people (in the pilot) and benefitted from more support than is likely to be the case if, and when, the pilot models are rolled out to all settings and larger groups of learners. Findings on effectiveness and impact should be treated with some caution.

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