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Programme of Action Research to Inform the Evaluation of the Additional Learning Needs Pilot Developmental Phase: summary final report

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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The Additional Learning Needs Pilot projects

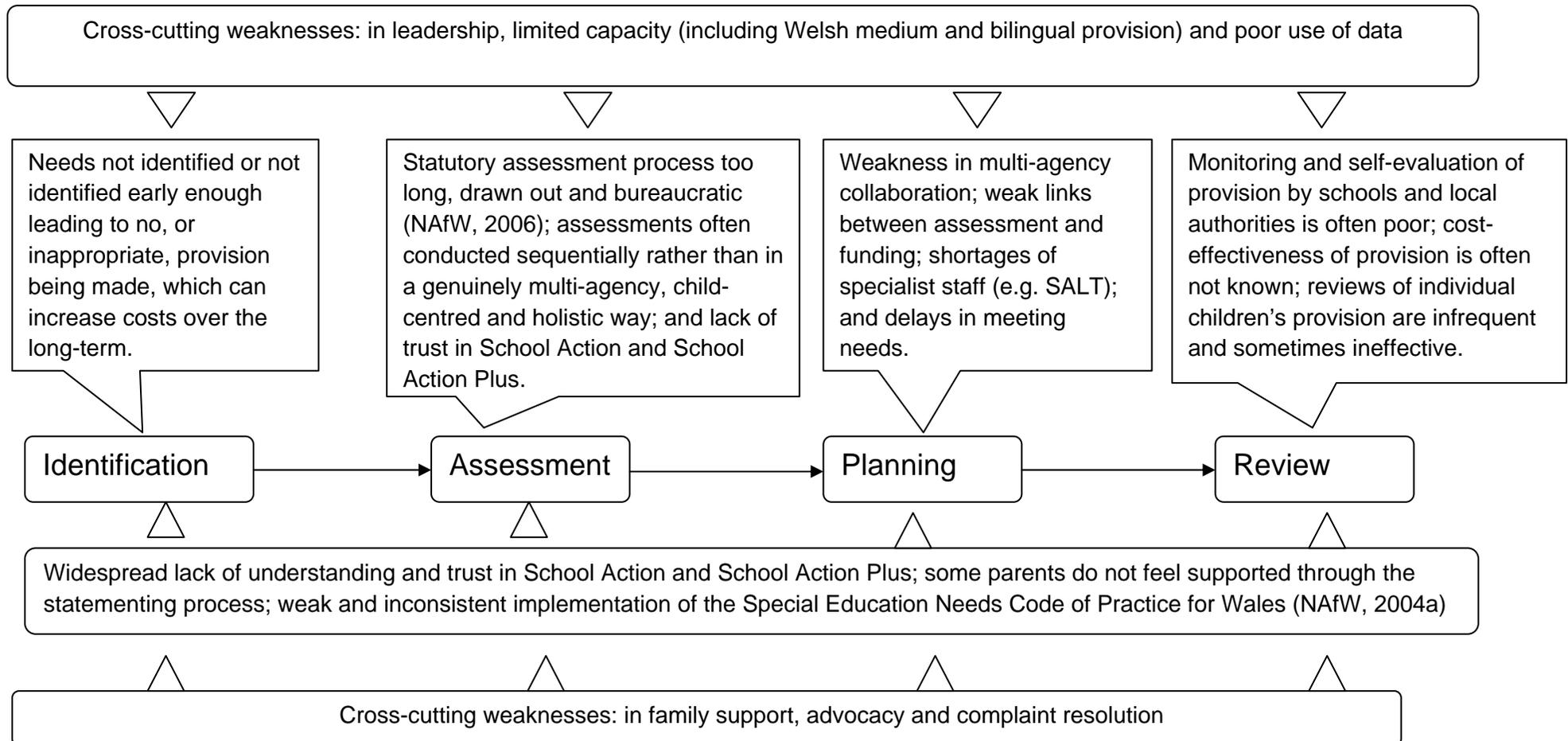
1. The Welsh Government is reforming the statutory framework for children and young people with special educational needs. This process of reform follows a policy review of special educational needs (SEN) undertaken by the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW), Education Lifelong Learning and Skills (ELLS) Committee. This policy review was initiated in response to recommendations made in reports by Estyn (2003), the Audit Commission (2002) and Cambridge Education Associates (n.d.). The review was conducted in three phases, with reports focused upon early identification and intervention (Part 1) (NAfW, 2004a), the Statutory Assessment (Statementing) Framework for Children with SEN (Part 2) (NAfW, 2006) and Transitions (Part 3) (NAfW, 2007). The review considered provision for both special educational needs and additional learning needs (referred to as additional educational needs).

2. The policy review identified weaknesses in relation to each stage of the process for meeting special educational needs (identification, assessment, planning and review) and in relation to quality assurance and evaluation of the process. Figure one provides a summary of the key weaknesses. These weaknesses contributed to poor outcomes for many children and young people, to parents' and carers' dissatisfaction and, in some cases, anger over provision, and to poor value for money for the state. For example, failure to intervene early and effectively can lead to problems escalating and becoming more expensive to deal with.

3. In 2009, in response to these weaknesses, four pilot projects were set up as part of a programme of action research designed to inform and enable reform of the statutory framework for children and young people with special educational needs. The pilots were established to address particular elements of reform as follows:
 - pilot A, to develop a pilot model for the quality assurance of provision made for children and young people with additional learning needs (undertaken by Caerphilly and Flintshire local authorities);

- pilot B, to develop and pilot an interdisciplinary model for the identification, assessment, planning and review of provision for children and young people with severe or complex needs (undertaken by Carmarthenshire and Torfaen local authorities);
 - pilot C, to develop and pilot a model for the identification, assessment, planning and review of provision for children and young people with additional learning needs that are not severe or complex (undertaken by Bridgend, Pembrokeshire and Torfaen local authorities); and
 - pilot D, to develop the role of the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator/ Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo/ALNCo) (undertaken by Cardiff and Newport local authorities).
4. The initial developmental phase of the pilot was originally intended to run from September 2008-July 2011. However, delays arising from legal issues meant that the start date was delayed until September 2009 and contracts with the pilot projects were not signed until October 2009-January 2010. Therefore, the developmental phase was cut from almost three years to less than two years. In August 2011, the Additional Learning Needs Pilots moved to the piloting phase (known as the robust testing phase). The piloting phase is due to conclude in July 2012. Consideration is being given to a further period of piloting to evaluate how the elements of the proposed reforms work as a system.

Figure 1: overview of the shortcomings at each stage of the process



Action research and evaluation of the Additional Learning Needs Pilot projects

5. The People and Work Unit were commissioned to undertake a programme of action research to assess the impact and effectiveness of the ALN pilots. This has included:
 - work with the pilot projects and the Welsh Government statutory reform team in the role of critical friend;
 - undertaking a systematic scoping review looking at the literature on the need for reform, a detailed analysis of the costs of reform and evaluation of the progress made by the pilot projects; and
 - participation in, and contributions to, a series of project meetings and meetings of the Additional Learning Needs Statutory Reform Group.

Management and implementation of the Additional Learning Needs Pilot projects by the Welsh Government

6. The consultative process, which led to the establishment of the pilot projects, highlighted a substantial degree of consensus around the weaknesses of the existing system but less clarity on the direction of change.
7. The need for a comprehensive vision was identified early on in the developmental phase of the pilot projects. This needed to outline:
 - the intended outcomes of reform;
 - the means for achieving those outcomes, such as the introduction of new planning and quality assurance processes; and
 - the ways in which the different strands of reform (such as planning and quality assurance processes) were intended to fit together to realise these outcomes.
8. However, given the breadth and complexity of the proposed reforms, which included many different strands, it proved to be challenging to develop and communicate a comprehensive vision. This made it difficult to see how the different strands being piloted related to each other and to other parts of the

system. This, in turn, contributed to weaknesses in integrating the different strands, such as the quality assurance system, individual development plan (IDP) and ALNCo role, across the pilot projects. It also made it challenging to communicate the vision of reform and engage with stakeholders who were not directly involved in the pilots.

9. Strong central leadership and co-ordination of the pilot projects was required for the following reasons:

- the diversity of the pilot projects;
- the absence, at the start of the developmental phase, of a detailed vision outlining how the pilot models would relate to each other and the other proposed reforms of the statutory framework; and
- the limited time available for the developmental phase.

10. The ability of the Welsh Government to provide strong central leadership and co-ordination of the pilot projects, was constrained by the small size (and, consequently, limited capacity) of the statutory reform team and by the open, collaborative approach taken to managing the project; an approach which was effective in engaging the pilot projects in development but which slowed the process.

11. The pilot projects fostered strong support and engagement from those involved in the process and were effective in engaging parts of the voluntary sector. However, the pilots had only limited success engaging stakeholders from other key sectors not directly involved in the pilot projects, such as school improvement services within local authorities and health and social care services.

12. The IDP proved, in many ways, to be the most complex element of the three models that were developed. The IDP is intended to replace statements of special educational needs, one of the most contentious parts of the existing system and is, therefore, central to the proposed reforms. Moreover, unlike many other elements of reform, the proposed introduction of IDPs requires primary

legislation. Therefore, decisions about the IDP have to be made before legislation can proceed and the planned legislative timetable has created additional pressures.

13. The IDP came to dominate and, arguably, unbalance the pilot projects, drawing in increasing amounts of the pilots' and the Welsh Government reform team's time and energy, to the detriment of the development of the other models and other elements of the proposed reforms, such as parent partnership support services.

Management and implementation of the Additional Learning Needs Pilot projects by local authorities

14. Overall, the pilots were well-managed and the pilot projects' management structure, involving pilot lead officers and project managers and reference or steering groups, was effective. As outlined below, each pilot project largely fulfilled their terms and conditions.
15. **Pilot A**, led by Caerphilly and Flintshire, was contracted to develop a model for the quality assurance of provision made for children and young people with additional learning needs. The work included three core strands, the development of:
 - outcome measures, to enable a range of 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes, such as changes in children and young people's attainment and attitudes, and the experiences of children and young people, their parents and carers and other professionals working with them, to be measured by schools;
 - provision mapping, a tool for linking data on inputs, such as expenditure and the type of interventions being delivered to children and young people with additional learning needs, with data on outcomes for those children and young people; and
 - a self-evaluation toolkit to enable schools to evaluate their capacity to meet the needs of pupils with additional learning needs.

16. Good progress was made on all three strands and each was extensively piloted. By the end of the developmental phase, however, further work was needed to refine the IT systems to support the provision map. Moreover, amongst the pilots that had not piloted the tools (pilots B, C and D), there was some scepticism about some elements of the quality assurance system, such as the outcome measures.

17. **Pilot B**, led by Carmarthenshire and Torfaen, was contracted to develop and pilot a framework for the identification, assessment, planning and review of provision for children and young people with additional learning needs that are severe or complex. This included the development of:

- an individual development plan (IDP);
- structures and processes for enabling multi-agency working;
- structures and processes for enabling multi-agency funding decisions to be made, including developing the role of Complex Needs Panels, which make funding decisions; and
- family information and support services and dispute resolution mechanisms.

18. Good progress was made developing the IDP, known as Planning Together. Although the time it took to develop the IDP meant that only limited piloting was possible, feedback on the IDP developed by pilot B from professionals, parents, carers, children and young people was positive. The model was accepted by a multi-agency advisory group as the proposed model, for all children and young people with additional learning needs¹, to be piloted following the completion of the developmental phase of the pilots.

19. However, less progress was made in developing existing systems, processes and structures for enabling multi-agency working or developing family information and support services and dispute resolution mechanisms. Moreover, the developmental work to date has focused upon children and young people aged 5-

¹ Initially separate IDPs were developed by pilot B, for children and young people whose additional learning needs were severe or complex and by pilot C, for those whose additional learning needs were neither severe nor complex.

16, with only limited links made to the Early Support programme, for children aged 0-4, and to provision for those aged 17-25.

20. **Pilot C**, led by Bridgend, Pembrokeshire and Torfaen², was contracted to develop and pilot an identification, assessment, planning and review framework for children and young people with additional learning needs that are not severe or complex. This included the development of an IDP – an integral part of the planning process. They were also contracted to develop family information and support services, dispute resolution mechanisms and to develop and pilot a system for facilitating the improvement of schools' additional learning needs provision.
21. Good progress was made developing the single individual planning process covering all aspects of a child's or young person's needs. Although only limited piloting of the IDP, known as John/Jenny's plan, was possible, feedback on the IDP developed by pilot C from professionals, parents and carers, and children and young people was positive. Nevertheless, at the end of the developmental phase, it was agreed by a multi-agency advisory group, that a single IDP based on Planning Together (pilot B's IDP), be developed for all children and young people with additional learning needs. Despite the differences in the models developed by pilots B and C, there had been strong consensus across the pilots on the content and approach to IDPs and both Planning Together and John/Jenny's plan, developed and shared a person-centred planning approach. The work undertaken by pilot C was also used to inform the further development of Planning Together.
22. Good progress was also made on the other key elements, including developing family information and support services, an identification, assessment, planning and review framework, and proposals for facilitating the improvement of schools' additional learning needs provision.

² Torfaen was involved in both pilots B and C. However, in practice, it worked more closely with Carmarthenshire on pilot B. We, therefore, discuss Torfaen's contribution in relation to pilot B. It is also important to note that the distinction between pilots B and C was blurred once the decision had been taken to develop one IDP for all children and young people with additional learning needs, regardless of whether or not their needs are severe or complex.

23. **Pilot D**, led by Cardiff and Newport, was contracted to develop and define the role of the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) and to develop and pilot an accredited course for ALNCos.

24. Good progress was made in developing and defining the role of the ALNCo. A role specification was developed, outlining 'principles' – what an ALNCo needs to know - and 'themes' – what an ALNCo needs to do (pilot D, unpublished document). A professional qualification to equip ALNCos with the knowledge and skills demanded by the principles and themes in the role specification was also developed. Feedback from stakeholders, including representatives from special schools, the local authority and the voluntary sector, about the proposed role specification and qualification has been positive. However, it was agreed with the Welsh Government that until decisions about the future ALNCo role and training had been made, and a commissioning process undertaken, it would not be possible to pilot the accredited course needed for the professional qualification.

The role of action research in the development of the pilot

25. The effectiveness and impact of the People and Work Unit's role as critical friend to each of the pilot projects varied and most pilots only used the support sporadically. In contrast, the People and Work Unit's role as critical friend to the programme as a whole was more effective.

Outcomes and impact of the Additional Learning Needs Pilot projects during the developmental phase

26. This report focuses upon the outcomes and impact of the developmental phase of the pilot projects upon the proposed statutory reform process. Four key ways in which the pilot projects could contribute to this process were identified:

- piloting key elements of reform to enable their cost-effectiveness to be evaluated;
- clarifying a comprehensive and positive vision of reform, outlining both how the existing system would be reformed and the expected impact of that reform;
- informing proposals for system-wide reform; and
- fostering understanding of, and engagement with, the statutory reform process amongst key groups of stakeholders.

27. By the end of the developmental phase of the pilot projects:

- three models – the quality assurance system, an individual planning process centred upon the IDP, and ALNCo role - had been developed and subjected to limited piloting. This helped inform an analysis of the expected costs of reform. However, the limited piloting meant it provided very little evidence on the likely impact or cost-effectiveness of the models;
- the models the pilots developed, became key elements of the proposed reforms of the statutory framework for children and young people with special educational needs. The pilots' developmental work also provided a clearer picture of the impact that these and other elements of the reform programme, such as family information and support services, were expected to make. Nevertheless, the vision for reform for children and young people aged 5-16 was much clearer than that for those aged 0-4 and 17-25. There were also important aspects of the vision, which cut across the 0-25 age range, which were unresolved at the end of the developmental phase. These included the extent to which the existing legal protection accorded to statements would be extended to children and young people whose additional learning needs are not severe or complex; the definition

of additional learning needs; and the eligibility of children and young people for IDPs;

- the pilots have largely validated the initial analysis of the case for change, which identified systemic weaknesses in the existing system. Although the limited piloting of the models reduced their contribution, the pilots have still made a significant contribution to analysis of the implications of a system-wide reform. This has informed the proposed reforms of the statutory framework for children and young people with special educational needs in Wales; and
- the pilots successfully engaged those directly involved in development work and piloting, but were not an effective, nor arguably appropriate, vehicle for engaging other groups of stakeholders, such as those working on school improvement, health and social care.

28. The expected outcomes and impact of the pilot project models themselves, upon children and young people, their parents and carers and the state, will be evaluated following completion of the piloting phase.

Conclusions

29. The pilot projects reinforced the case for evolutionary rather than revolutionary reform. The pilot models were consistent with the principles embodied in the existing Special Education Needs Code of Practice for Wales (NAfW, 2004b) and build upon existing good practice, using the models that have been developed to enable and support change. Crucially, the evidence from both the pilots and the scoping review indicates that while aspects of the existing system are inefficient and/or ineffective, many of the weaknesses of the existing system are not inherent in its models and structure, but relate to poor implementation and limited capacity.

30. The developmental approach, using pilot projects, was largely successful in developing models but it demanded strong central co-ordination and struggled to fully pilot the models within the developmental phase.

31. Progress has been made in developing and piloting models for children and young people in school and aged 5-16. However, further work is required to develop and pilot the models. Further work is also required to develop and pilot models for children aged 0-4 years, where links have been made to the Early Support programme, but remain inchoate, and, for young people aged 17-25, where only limited progress has been made. Further work is also required to pilot the models with those working in other sectors, such as health and social care.
32. There is no panacea. Successful reform will depend upon a range of inter-dependent reforms and there is, therefore, a clear case for system-wide piloting. However, it is likely to be challenging to achieve this within the time available for the current piloting phase, which is due to conclude in July 2012.

Recommendations

33. Recommendation one: in relation to the IDP and quality assurance system, consideration should be given to specifying the processes and requirements for an individual planning process and quality assurance system, and providing examples of good practice, based upon the existing evidential base (drawing, for example, upon other studies and evaluations) and evidence from the models that have been developed by the pilots, without requiring the adoption of a specific tool or piece of software. An approach akin to the 'adopt or justify model'. In contrast, we recommend that consideration is given to making the ALNCo training mandatory and organised on a national basis.
34. Recommendation two: consideration should be given to asking local authorities to develop their plans on how they are going to build on their existing good practice when implementing the proposed reforms.
35. Recommendation three: as part of the piloting phase, consideration should be given to exploring the applicability of the models that have been developed to young children aged 0-4 years and young people aged 17-25 years.
36. Recommendation four: consideration should be given to embedding a programme of engagement of key stakeholders from the Welsh Government and

local authorities, Local Health Boards and Local Health Trusts into the piloting phase.

37. Recommendation five: during the piloting phase, due regard should be given to identifying and mapping out the contextual changes required to enable the pilot models to function to full effect. The evaluation should, therefore, look at both processes and outcomes.

38. Recommendation six: consideration should be given to commissioning further research to better understand the cost-effectiveness of multi-agency panels, the extent of training needs and how they could best be met, and the requirements for key working and designated key workers.

2007', National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff. Accessed at:

<http://www.assemblywales.org/a418a2221ff4ec27fb94740522d38822.pdf>

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