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Evaluation of the additional learning needs (ALN) system: survey of parents and carers

Executive Summary

Background and methodology

The Welsh Government commissioned Arad Research to conduct a four-year formative evaluation of the implementation of the ALN system.

Two reports have been published to date as part of the evaluation:

- [Evaluation of the Additional Learning Needs system: scoping report](#) (2023)
- [Evaluation of the ALN system: survey of practitioners and professionals](#) (2025)

This report presents findings from a survey of parents and carers. The survey was carried out in March and April 2025 and examined parents and carers' experiences of the ALN system.

Methodology

The survey questionnaire was informed by the theory of change for the ALN system outlined in the [evaluation scoping report](#) and tested with a sample of parents and

carers. The survey included a mix of closed and open-text survey questions. It was designed to capture a broad range of experiences of parents with children who require extra support to learn, both learners with an Individual Development Plan (IDP) and those without.

A link to the survey was distributed widely via ALN co-ordinators (ALNCos) and schools who had previously agreed to distribute the survey. It was also publicised in the Welsh Government's education newsletters, bulletins, social media channels and through stakeholder networks.

Survey analysis

Percentages shown in this report refer to all parents who answered the relevant question (which may include more than one response for those who answered for an additional child).

A thematic approach was taken to the analysis of responses to the open-text questions. The sections of this report that present summaries of these written responses present the themes raised most frequently first.

Sample

There were 2062 responses to the introductory survey profile questions (including responses from 101 parents who chose to answer for an additional child). However, respondents were only asked the main survey questions if their child:

- was of compulsory school age (or above) and/or was attending a maintained school setting, and
- required extra support to learn (or probably needed this) in the parent's view

70% of responses (1441 out of 2049) said their child required extra support to learn. A further 9% said they were not sure but thought they probably did. These parents were asked the main survey questions about their views on the ALN system.

19% of responses said their child did not require extra support to learn and a further 2% said they were not sure but thought they probably did not. These parents were not asked the main survey questions. The total number of responses to the main survey questions was therefore 1621 (including 93 responses from a parent answering for an additional child).

All local authorities were represented among the sample of 1621 responses to the main survey questions, however, there was considerable variation in the number of responses across local authorities. The largest proportion of children (38%) about whom respondents replied, received their education in a primary school. A further 27% received their education in a secondary school.

Notes on interpretation

Whilst the survey was promoted and distributed widely, the survey sample cannot be considered representative of the general population.

Written comments provided in response to the open-text survey questions often presented more critical or negative views than were expressed in responses to closed questions. However, it is important to note that only a proportion of respondents chose to provide written comments. Respondents who provided more negative responses to the closed survey questions—for example, selecting ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree’—were also more likely to provide written comments than those that had responded positively to the closed survey questions.

Respondents who provided written responses to the open-text survey questions raised a wide range of themes. There are very few questions where a single theme was raised by a majority of respondents. It should be noted, therefore, that each of the themes summarised in corresponding sections was raised by a minority, or indeed by a relatively small minority, of respondents unless otherwise stated.

Main findings

A summary of key findings is presented below. Please note that the term “responses” is used rather than “respondents” as parents had the option to answer for an additional child:

Individual Development Plans (IDP)

Over half (58%) of responses said their child had an Individual Development Plan (IDP), a further 32% said they did not and the remaining 10% were not sure. Among those whose children had an IDP, 77% said the school was responsible for preparing and maintaining their child’s IDP. Parents were most likely to say that their child did not have an IDP because their child’s education setting (or LA) decided that they do not require ALP.

No IDP open-text comments

Respondents to the closed question on the reasons why their child did not have an IDP had the option to provide additional information if they wished and 180 responses were received. The most frequently raised themes included:

- IDP not required – a number of parents highlighted that they had requested an IDP but their child’s school determined an IDP was not required. Reasons for this noted by parents included that the school had determined that the child did not have ALN, or the school had accepted that the child had ALN but

decided that their needs could be met through 'universal provision' rather than ALP

- support without an IDP – in response to this question, some parents also reflected on the support provided by schools to their children, expressing mixed views. In some cases, parents cited that their child's educational needs were expected to be met under 'universal provision'. However, these parents felt this was insufficient and was negatively affecting their child's educational progress and outcomes. Other parents spoke of being satisfied with the support which their child was receiving through universal provision noting that they felt the support was sufficient and was benefitting their child
- IDP linked to diagnosis or assessment – it was also a common view amongst parents who provided additional comments that having a diagnosed health condition was necessary for their child to be provided with an IDP

Views on the support provided

There were mixed views among parents about whether the support provided by their child's school or education provider was meeting their needs, with 41% "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" that it was meeting their needs and 44% "disagreeing" or "strongly disagreeing" with this. Parents who said their child had an IDP were more likely than those of children without an IDP to agree that the support provided was meeting their child's needs.

Views on the support provided – open-text comments

Parents were invited to provide additional comments on the support provided and 705 responses were received. Those who had disagreed or strongly disagreed that the support provided was meeting their child's needs were more likely to have provided a written response than who had agreed or strongly agreed with this. Among those who provided comments, the most frequently raised themes were:

- a lack of provision, capacity (for example, workforce) and/or resources (for example, funding) to enable their child's needs to be met
- unsuitable or insufficient provision and support – a number of parents reported that the support or provision their child was receiving was not suitable or was insufficient to meet their child's needs
- concerns relating to their child's school and/or their local authority, for example a lack of awareness and understanding about ALN
- positive views on ALNCoS and other school staff – some parents reported positive experiences through their engagement with their child's ALNCo and other school staff
- concerns about the process of identifying their child's ALN

Information and guidance

Parents were most likely to say they had accessed information and guidance in relation to ALN and the ALN system from their child's school/education provider (65%) followed by their local authority (42%). A third (32%) of responses reported accessing information from another organisation, with parents mentioning support and advocacy services, family support services, health professionals, information online and parent-peer support.

There were mixed views on the clarity of information parents had accessed. Around a third of responses each agreed, disagreed and neither agreed nor disagreed that information was clear and supported their understanding of the ALN system.

Clarity of information – open-text comments

Those who disagreed that the information accessed was clear were invited to provide further comments. Among the 433 responses to this question, the most frequently raised themes were:

- a lack of information or support – a number of parents referred to a lack of information or support provided, and being unable to access sufficient information to enable them to understand the ALN system
- unclear, contradictory or misleading information – some parents commented that information that they had accessed or received lacked clarity, was not user-friendly, over-complicated, not specific enough to be useful, contradictory or misleading
- poor communication – some parents felt they had received poor communication from education providers, local authorities and other services (for example, health practitioners) in relation to processes, timescales and support available
- complexity of the ALN system – some parents considered that the ALN system was over-complicated and difficult to understand

Information and guidance - further support requirements

Over half of responses (69%) either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they required further information, advice, and guidance in relation to the ALN system”. These responses were most likely to say that they required further information/advice/guidance in relation to how children and young people with ALN will be supported under the ALN system.

Information and guidance - further support required (open-text comments)

Parents were also given the opportunity to specify what further information/advice/guidance they required via an open-text comment box. The most frequently raised themes were:

- information about processes – a number of parents felt they were in need of further information, advice and guidance about both general and specific aspects of the ALN system. These parents tended to report being unclear about core elements of the system, such as legal timescales and dispute resolution processes, as well as more nuanced aspects, such as how IDPs intersect with other educational or health plans in place for a child
- information about IDP reviews – some parents reported that they were unclear about how IDPs were reviewed on an ongoing basis to assess whether ALP was appropriate and effective
- accessibility of information – some parents noted that they found aspects of the system complicated to understand, including the language used by professionals and also within official documentation, including in IDPs
- support services – some parents referred to a need for better information on the support available and how to access support services

Identification of ALN (parents of children with an IDP only)

Over half of responses (56%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they were supported to participate in processes to identify their child's ALN, and over half said they were listened to during the process. Parents reflected less positively on the timeliness of the identification of their child's ALN; around half of responses (49%) “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that their child's ALN were identified in a timely way.

Identification of ALN (parents of children with an IDP only) – open-text comments

Some parents provided additional information in relation to their own participation in identification processes. Parents who had disagreed with the closed question statements were notably more likely to have provided written comments than those who had agreed. This is reflected in the themes set out below. Among the 313 open-text responses received, the most frequently raised themes were:

- parents not feeling listened to – a number of parents reported that they did not feel their views were listened to during the process of identifying their child's ALN
- delays in assessing needs and decision-making – some parents referred to delays in the process of getting their child's needs assessed and in determining whether or not their child had ALN
- general concerns about schools' and local authorities' approaches to identifying ALN
- good support and communication – some parents referred to examples of their child being well supported by their school, early years provider and/or their local authority

- inconsistency – some parents referred to inconsistencies in approaches to identification, planning and provision in different schools their child had attended

Some parents also provided comments in relation to their child's participation in identification processes and whether ALN was identified in a timely way. Parents who had disagreed with the closed question statements were notably more likely to have provided written comments than those who had agreed. Among the 305 responses received, the most frequently raised themes were:

- delays in identifying their child's ALN – a number of parents referred to delays in identifying their child's ALN, expressing frustration at the waiting times involved
- impact of delays on children's development and well-being of families – some parents emphasised the negative impact of delays in identifying ALN on children's development and progress in school. Other parents reported that delays in identification or failure to identify ALN altogether were having damaging effects on children's mental health and well-being, contributing to emotional problems. In some cases, parents described the impact of delays on the wider well-being of the families
- struggles experienced by parents during the process of identifying ALN – some parents commented on the 'fight' or 'struggle' they had experienced in order to ensure that their child's ALN were identified
- external support accessed by parents – some responses reported that they had accessed external help to support them during the process of seeking to get their child's ALN identified
- positive views on the identification process – in some cases, parents provided positive comments on the process of identifying their child's ALN. These responses frequently referred to the valuable support provided by experienced ALNCoS, childcare practitioners and/or local authority officers
- frustration with feeling their child's views were not listened to – in some cases, parents expressed frustration that their child's views were not listened to during the process of identifying their ALN. These parents reported that their children were viewed as having 'behaviour issues' or as being 'troublesome' and their views were not taken seriously
- opportunities to participate in processes – some parents reported that their child was not given sufficient opportunity to participate in processes or discussions to identify their ALN

Person-centred planning (PCP) meeting (parents of children with an IDP only)

Parents whose child had an IDP were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with statements relating to the meetings that were held to prepare their child's IDP. Over half of responses either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that:

- it was clear to them what the next steps would be after the PCP meeting

- that the purpose of the PCP meeting was well-explained to them in advance
- that they were satisfied with the length of time it took for their child's PCP meeting to be arranged

Person-centred planning (PCP) meetings (parents of children with an IDP only) – open-text comments

Some parents provided additional information about their experiences of the PCP meeting. Those who provided a response were more likely to have disagreed that they were satisfied with the length of time it took for their child's PCP meeting to be arranged and that the next steps after the PCP meeting were clear. Among the 192 responses received, the most frequently raised themes related to:

- perceived challenges with the PCP process – a number of parents reflected that the PCP meeting was not always conducted in ways consistent with a person-centred practice approach. These parents reported that the PCP meeting had been difficult because they did not feel they had been listened to in the meeting and targets identified during meetings could be unclear, leading to a lack of practical and effective support for their child.
- communication with parents – some parents expressed dissatisfaction with the level of communication they received from education providers or the local authority regarding the PCP process
- PCP delays – some parents reported they had experienced delays in the PCP process which were sometimes very long and beyond the permitted timescales.

Preparation of IDP (parents of children with an IDP)

In terms of parents' involvement in the process of preparing the IDP, 70% of responses "agreed" or "strongly agreed" their views were listened to during the process of preparing the IDP.

In relation to their child's involvement, 44% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" their child's views were listened to during the process of preparing the IDP, whereas 18% of responses "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" (18% selected "not applicable").

Over half of responses (55%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" they were satisfied with the length of time it took for their child's IDP to be prepared and 53% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" they were satisfied that all their child's ALN were identified and accurately described in the IDP.

Preparation of IDP (parents of children with an IDP only) – open-text comments

Parents were also invited to provide additional information about their child's IDP process. A higher proportion of written comments was received from parents who had disagreed with the closed question statements. The themes raised most frequently across the 222 responses received were as follows:

- IDP quality and ALP support – a number of parents reported being concerned about the quality of their child's IDP. These parents reported that their child's IDPs lacked sufficient detail and that ALP objectives were not always clearly set out or were inappropriate
- IDP delays – other parents noted delays in the process and reported that it took a long time to receive an IDP
- IDP processes – some parents reported being dissatisfied with IDP processes and planning. A common view expressed by parents was that meetings were too hurried, with insufficient time to adequately discuss needs, and identify and agree appropriate support

Additional Learning Provision (ALP)

Parents were most likely to state that a school/education provider provided the ALP as outlined in Section 2 of their child's IDP; 79% of parents said this, with 18% stating ALP was provided by local authority outreach services.

Parents of electively home educated (EHE) children were most likely to state that a parent / carer provided their child's ALP.

Over half (59%) of parents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" they understood the ALP which had been outlined in their child's IDP.

Less than half of parents "agreed" or "strongly agreed":

- they were satisfied with the length of time it took to put their child's ALP in place (43%)
- the ALP outlined in the IDP was sufficient to meet their child's needs (39%)

Additional Learning Provision (parents of children with an IDP only) – open-text comments

270 parents provided comments to elaborate on their reasons for disagreeing that the ALP outlined in their child's IDP was sufficient to meet their child's needs. The most frequently raised themes were:

- that ALP addressed some but not all of their child's needs, for example not being sufficiently tailored to individual needs
- that the quality of the ALP provided was poor or that the ALP provided was inconsistent with the IDP
- that the level of support/ALP was limited by available resources; in a smaller number of cases, parents suggested that one of the main reasons that ALP was not sufficient related to there not being enough staff or resources in place.

ALP – Welsh language needs (parents of children with an IDP only)

When asked whether they felt their child's ALP should be provided in Welsh, a small minority (6%) said they did. Among these, over half (56%, 33 out of 59) said their child was receiving ALP fully in Welsh, a minority (25%, 15 out of 59) said their child was receiving ALP partly in Welsh and the remaining 19% (11 out of 59) said their child was not receiving ALP in Welsh.

Transition between education settings

Around a quarter of responses (27%) said their child had moved between education settings in the past year.

Among those who had moved between settings, less than half of responses (44%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" they were provided with clear information about how their child's ALN would be met during their move between settings. A further 42% of responses "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with this statement.

Less than half of responses (44%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" their child's ALN were met during their move between education settings. A further 42% "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with this statement.

Management of ALN across multiple settings

Parents who said their child received their education in more than one setting were asked about the management of ALN across multiple settings. Less than half of responses (22 out of 53, 41%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" the providers worked together to support their child's ALN, whilst 18 out of 53 (34%) "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with this statement.

Less than half of responses (20 out of 53, 37%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" they received clear information from each provider regarding how their child's ALN were being supported; 8 out of 53 responses (34%) "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with this statement.

Awareness of rights to challenge decisions

Around half (54%) of responses said they were not aware of their rights to challenge decisions under the ALN system, compared with 46% who said they were.

Those who were aware of their rights were most likely to say they were made aware through their child's school/education setting/the ALNCo (38%) or via other means (38%), such as dedicated services and organisations, professional workers and official resources (for example, the ALN Code or Education Tribunal for Wales website).

Challenging decisions

Less than half (31%) of responses said they had disagreed with a decision made by an education setting or local authority, relating to ALN. The remaining 69% said they had not.

Challenging decisions – open-text comments

Some parents who had disagreed with a decision made by an education setting or local authority provided further detail in relation to the disagreement. Among the 396 responses received, the themes raised most frequently included:

- disagreements about decisions about receiving an IDP or carrying out assessments - a number of parents reported they had disagreed with a decision not to provide an IDP or not to refer their child for an assessment by the local authority
- disagreements about provision - some parents reported that they had disagreed with decisions in relation to the provision of support for their child
- disagreements about an education setting placement - some parents reported that they had disagreed with decisions relating to the allocation of a place for their child in an education setting
- the process of disagreeing with a decision - some parents expressed negative views on their experiences of the process itself of disagreeing with a decision made by an education setting or local authority. These parents explained they had encountered delays in receiving responses from education settings and local authorities and they felt dissatisfied and frustrated with the process in general

Disagreement resolution

Among parents who said they had disagreed with a decision made by an education setting or local authority relating to ALN, 68% said the disagreement was not resolved.

Satisfaction with ALN system, including ALP (parents of learners with an IDP)

We asked parents whose child had an IDP to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements relating to satisfaction with aspects of the ALN system, including ALP. Over half (59%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their child’s school/education setting promoted their inclusion in the school community. Around half also “agreed” or “strongly agreed”:

- that those who support their child worked well together (52%)
- that the ALP received by their child was helping them make progress in their education (48%)

Less than half (45%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” their child’s ALN were being met in their education.

A minority (29%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the ALN system was helping to improve experiences for parents and carers, whereas 44% “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with this statement.

Satisfaction with the ALN system (parents of learners with an IDP) – open-text comments

Some parents provided further comments in relation to their satisfaction with the ALN system. Those who provided a response to this open-text question were more likely to think that their child's education setting promoted their inclusion in the school environment and less likely to think that the ALN system was helping to improve experiences of parents/carers, or that those who supported their child worked well together. Among the 196 responses received, the most frequently raised themes were:

- support for children and their families – a range of views were expressed by parents about support from schools, including the view that they had received poor, inadequate or no support from their child's school, whilst others, albeit fewer parents, reported receiving sufficient support from the school
- funding and capacity - some parents commented on a perceived lack of funding and resources to implement the ALN system adequately and ensure all learners with ALN received the required support
- how well providers work together - other parents felt providers did not work well together. They referred to poor communication and information sharing between providers, noting that this needed to improve
- a 'battle' for parents - a number of parents referred to feeling they faced a 'battle' or 'fight' to ensure their child's needs were recognised and that their child received the support they felt they required
- a perception that the ALN system was complex and confusing and/or the Act was ambiguous and open to interpretation
- staff expertise and skills - other parents felt that education providers did not always have staff with the relevant expertise and skills to support their child. These parents thought more training was required to ensure staff were better equipped and upskilled to support children and their families

Satisfaction with the ALN system (parents of learners without an IDP)

We also asked parents whose child did not have an IDP to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements relating to satisfaction with the ALN system.

Less than half (45%) of responses "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that their child's school/education setting promoted their inclusion in the school community, whilst a minority (26%) "neither agreed nor disagreed" with this.

A small minority (14%) "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the ALN system was helping to improve experiences for parents and carers. Less than half (43%) "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed", and a further 39% "neither agreed nor disagreed" with this.

Among parents of children without IDPs who provided written comments in relation to their satisfaction with the ALN system, the most frequently raised themes were similar to those raised by parents whose child did have an IDP.

Electively home educated (EHE) children

Over half of responses from parents whose children were EHE (19 out of 33, 58%) said their child had been deregistered from school within the last 12 months.

The vast majority (28 out of 33, 85%) of responses from parents of EHE children said their decision to begin home educating their child was influenced by a concern that the schooling offered by the local authority would not meet their child's learning needs. Half of these parents (14 out of 28, 50%) said they would prefer for their child to return to school if appropriate support and provision was in place. A minority (5 out of 28, 18%) said they would not prefer for their child to return to school and the remaining 9 (out of 28, 32%) said they were not sure.

General views on the ALN system – open-text questions

What is working well?

Parents were asked to comment on what they felt was working well under the ALN system and 885 responses were received. A proportion of parents answered this question by reporting that nothing, or very little, was working well under the ALN system, and expressing concerns about issues including a lack of capacity (for example, staff), resources (for example, funding) and suitable provision and support for their child.

The remainder of this section outlines the other frequently raised themes relating to what parents felt to be working well:

- IDPs, planning and review processes – some parents reported that processes relating to IDPs, particularly PCP meetings, and planning were working well. These parents valued the opportunity to discuss their child's needs in PCP and review meetings and noted that targets in IDPs were clear and helpful for them
- Engagement with ALNCo and other school staff – some parents had positive views on their engagement with ALNCo and other staff at their child's school
- Support provided for their child – some parents expressed positive views about the support that their child was receiving
- Communication and information – some parents commented on good communication and useful information they had received from their child's school and/or their local authority
- Identification of ALN – some parents reported that identification processes had improved, specifically mentioning early identification of needs for children of pre-compulsory school age

What is working less well?

Parents were asked to comment on what they felt was working less well under the ALN system and to suggest any improvements. Among the 1010 who responded, the most frequently raised themes were:

- capacity, resources and provision – some parents reported a lack of capacity (for example, staff), resources (for example, funding) and suitable provision (for example, smaller groups, alternative provision, specific classroom materials) in education providers, local authorities and/or health bodies
- communication with parents – some parents commented on the need for education providers, local authorities and health bodies to improve communication with parents
- practitioner skills and professional learning – some parents reported a lack of expertise about ALN among the education workforce, and/or that the ALN system could be improved by providing more training on ALN for practitioners
- meeting learners' needs – some parents reported that their child's needs were not being met in their education
- timeliness of processes – some parents considered that processes in the ALN system took too long, particularly identification processes and decisions to determine ALN
- parents being listened to – some parents expressed frustrations that their views were not sufficiently listened to by education providers, local authorities and/or health bodies
- challenges in implementing the ALN system – some parents perceived that education providers were unable to effectively implement aspects of the ALN system. For example, some expressed concerns about the quality of IDPs and inconsistencies in approaches to writing IDPs
- definitions of ALN and ALP – some parents commented on issues and challenges relating to definitions of ALN and ALP

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Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-additional-learning-needs-system-survey-parents-and-carers>

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

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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