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Evaluation of the ALN System: Local Area Studies - Wave 1 Report

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Evaluation of the ALN System: Local Area Studies - Wave 1 Report

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

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Glossary

ALN

Additional Learning Needs

ALNCo(s)

Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator(s)

ALNLO

Additional Learning Needs Lead Officer

ALP

Additional Learning Provision

CfW

Curriculum for Wales

DECLO(s)

Designated Education Clinical Lead Officer(s)

Early years settings

Non-maintained early years settings

eFSM

Eligible for free school meals

EOTAS

Education Other Than At School

EY ALNLO

Early Years Additional Learning Needs Lead Officer

FE

Further Education

FEI

Further Education Institution

IDP

Individual Development Plan

LA

Local authority

LDD

Learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Learning Support Worker(s) / LSW(s)

Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and Higher-Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs)

LHB

Local Health Board

OT

Occupational Therapy

Parents

Used in this report to describe respondents with parental responsibility (i.e. both parents and carers)

PLASC

Pupil Level Annual School Census

PCP

Person-Centred Practice approach or meeting

PRU

Pupil Referral Unit

SEN

Special Educational Needs

SLT

Speech and Language Therapy

TA

Teaching Assistant

ToC

Theory of change

1. Introduction

Policy background

The Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system^[Footnote 1] is the system for supporting children and young people aged 0-25 in Wales with additional learning needs.

The ALN system replaces the previous special educational needs (SEN) system for children in maintained mainstream schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and the system for supporting young people in further education with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD).^[Footnote 2] Implementation of the ALN system is taking place over a 4-year period from September 2021 to August 2025. Further details on the rationale for, and key elements of the reforms are set out in the [Evaluation of the Additional Learning Needs system: scoping report](#) (Welsh Government, 2023).

Evaluation of the ALN System

The Welsh Government commissioned Arad Research to conduct a four-year formative evaluation of the implementation of the ALN system.^[Footnote 3] A [scoping report](#), which presents the findings from the first phase of the evaluation, in addition to the plans and priorities for the remaining phases, was subsequently published in December 2023. A report based on a [survey of practitioners and professionals](#) was published in March 2025, and a report based on a [survey of parents and carers](#) was published in October 2025.

Next steps

Further desk-based research and fieldwork is planned during the next stages of the evaluation. A report including findings from a second wave of research with practitioners and professionals in schools, PRUs, early years settings, FEIs, local authorities and local health boards will be published in 2027.

About this report

The current report presents findings from qualitative research with practitioners and professionals in schools, PRUs, early years settings, FEIs, local authorities and local health boards. It also presents fieldwork with learners with ALN and parents/carers of learners with ALN (for brevity, the term “parents” is used in this report to describe respondents with parental responsibility i.e. both parents and carers). The fieldwork with practitioners was carried out between February and December 2024 and examined practitioners’ and

[1] The current ALN legislative framework was created by the [Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018](#) (the Act), [The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021](#) (the ALN Code) and regulations made under the Act.

[2] The ALN Act replaces the existing special educational needs (SEN) legislation (provided for in Part 4 of the Education Act 1996), the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales and learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) legislation (provided for in the Learning and Skills Act 2000).

[3] The phrase ‘ALN system’ is used to describe the ALN Act, the regulations made under the Act, the ALN Code and associated duties.

professionals' views on various aspects of implementing the ALN system. Fieldwork with learners was carried out in June and July 2025, and examined their views of their education and the support they received from teachers and other staff. Fieldwork with parents was carried out between November 2025 and February 2026 and explored their experiences of various aspects of the ALN system.

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 outlines the methodology for the area studies
- Chapter 3 presents the findings from fieldwork with practitioners relating to the following discussion areas:
 - Overall progress in implementing the ALN system
 - Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and planning processes
 - Additional Learning Provision (ALP)
 - Statutory roles
 - Collaboration and information sharing
 - Disagreement and appeals
 - Bilingual system
 - Wider system factors
- Chapter 4 presents the findings from fieldwork with learners and parents relating to the following discussion areas:
 - Experiences of the education setting
 - Support for learning
 - IDP and PCP meetings
 - Wellbeing
 - Future goals
- Chapter 5 sets out a summary of the findings

2. Methodology

This chapter provides detail on the research methodology. This includes the research tool design process, the sample, fieldwork conducted, analysis process, and limitations of the methodology.

Research tool design

Topic guides and interview questions for representatives from different sectors, learners and parents were designed by Arad with input from Welsh Government officials and stakeholders. The interview themes were informed by the theory of change for the ALN system, set out in the [scoping report](#) for the ALN evaluation (Welsh Government, 2023). Interview schedules broadly followed the themes of Chapter 3 of this report, and questions were tailored to respondents from different sectors. The research tools are included in Annex B of this report.

Sample

Six local authority areas were selected for inclusion in the area studies sample. These local authorities were selected on the basis of criteria including:

- geography: one each from the north-west, north-east, mid and west, southern valleys, a southern city and a southern non-city
- LHB coverage: local authorities were located within five of the seven LHBs
- percentage of learners with ALN or SEN
- percentage of learners with IDPs
- population of learners
- percentage of Welsh speakers

The full set of criteria are set out in Annex A.

The sample for the area studies included representatives from schools, early years settings, PRUs and FEIs as well as local authorities and local health boards. Research participants primarily worked within the six local authorities although some of the research participants worked across more than one local authority area (e.g. those in FEIs and LHBs).

Furthermore, a small number of replacement participants were selected from schools or PRUs in neighbouring local authorities in cases where a participant from one of the six local authorities initially selected was not able to take part. A sample of learners from 5 of the 6 local authorities and parents from 4 of the 6 local authorities also took part in the research.

Fieldwork

Fieldwork was carried out with a total of 93 practitioners and professionals from schools, early years, PRUs, FEIs, local authorities and local health boards.

- a total of 35 senior leaders, ALNCoS, practitioners and support staff from a total of 16 schools and 3 PRUs
- 8 senior leaders, ALNCoS, practitioners and support staff from 6 FEIs
- 6 practitioners from 6 non-maintained early years providers
- 27 professionals from 6 local authorities
- 17 professionals from 5 local health boards

A total of 31 learners from 9 settings across 5 of the 6 local authorities selected took part in small group discussions at their setting. Most of the learners who took part had an IDP (27 out of 31). The 31 learners included:

- 3 learners from 2 primary schools (Year 6)
- 12 learners from 3 secondary schools (Years 7, 8 and 9)
- 6 learners from one special school (Year 9, 12, 13 and 14)
- 3 learners from one PRU (Year 7, 10 and 11)
- 7 learners from 2 FE colleges

A total of 9 parents across 4 of the 6 local authorities selected took part in interviews. Parents were invited by their setting to complete a short online expression of interest form to take part in an interview and were then contacted by the research team to arrange this. All of the parents felt that their child needed extra support to learn and all but one of the parents had a child who had an IDP. The sample of parents included:

- 6 parents who had children in primary schools (Years 2-6)
- 4 parents who had children of secondary school age (Years 7-9)
 - Some parents had more than one child with ALN

Most fieldwork with practitioners and professionals was carried out in one-to-one interviews, but some participants from the same organisation were interviewed in pairs or small groups depending on their preference and availability. Most fieldwork with learners was carried out in small groups, with the ALNCo or TA present. All interviews with parents were carried out one-to-one.

Table 1 shows the number of school, early years, PRU, FEI, local authority and local health board research participants from each sector and type of setting.

Table 1. Number of research participants from each sector and type of setting

Sector	Number of settings / organisations participating	Number of senior leaders and ALNCo participants	Number of practitioners and support staff	Total number of individual research participants
Schools and PRUs	19	31	4	35
Primary schools	7	10	1	11
Welsh-medium	3	4	1	5
English-medium	4	6	0	6
Secondary and all-through (3-16/18) schools	7	12	2	14
Welsh-medium	2	2	1	3
English-medium	5	10	1	11
Special schools	2	3	0	3
PRUs	3	6	1	7
FEIs	6	7	1	8
Early years providers	6	6	0	6
LAs	6	-	-	27
LHBs	5	-	-	17
Total	42	44	5	93

The 27 research participants from local authorities included senior managers and officers in a variety of roles. These are presented in the table below.

Table 2. Number of local authority research participants by type of role/area of work

Type of role and/or area of work	Number of research participants
Inclusion managers and officers*	12
Early years ALN lead officers	5
ALN or ALN quality managers or officers	4
Educational Psychologists	3
Looked after children co-ordinators or officers	2
Post-16 learning	1
Total	27

*Includes access and inclusion, inclusion and progression, engagement and community, sensory service, behaviour, supporting learning, education welfare service

The 17 research participants from LHBs included professionals in a variety of roles.

Table 3. Number of LHB research participants by type of role/area of work

Type of role	Number of research participants
Speech and Language Therapist	5
Designated Education Clinical Lead Officer (DECLO)	4
Physiotherapy or paediatric physiotherapy	4
Health Visitor	1
Consultant Paediatrician	1
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services	1
Nursing	1
Total	17

Recruitment

Within each local authority, Directors of Education and/or Heads of Inclusion were invited to participate in an initial discussion about the research. These professionals were asked to provide contact details for 3-4 individuals in roles related to implementing the ALN system including educational psychologists, EY ALNLOs, heads of inclusion (or equivalent roles). Following this, individuals were invited to participate in interviews.

In local health boards, DECLOs were invited to take part in an interview, and were asked to pass on an invitation to participate in the research to other LHB representatives working in the relevant local authority in services including Speech and Language Therapy, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Occupational Therapy, Community Paediatrics and Nursing. Following this, individuals were invited to participate in interviews.

Schools were selected to participate based on a sampling framework which was designed to ensure an appropriate representation of schools by phase/sector (primary, secondary, special, PRU) and language medium (Welsh-medium and bilingual, English-medium). In addition to these criteria, schools were selected to ensure an appropriate spread according to the percentage of learners with ALN/SEN (an indicator of overall levels of ALN in the school), IDPs (as an indicator of the extent to which their learners had transferred to the ALN system) and eFSM (as an indicator of socio-economic deprivation). At least three schools in rural areas and three with local authority designated special classes were also included in the sample.

Lists of schools and settings in the six local authorities were used to randomly select schools, initially by phase and language medium. The selected list of schools was then reviewed against the overall sampling criteria (including the percentage of learners with

ALN/SEN, IDPs and eFSM). When the overall list of schools did not satisfy the criteria, alternative schools or settings were selected until all criteria were satisfied.

Seven of the schools and PRUs that were initially selected were unable to take part and other schools or PRUs who met the criteria were contacted instead. In one instance a school or PRU that was unable to take part was replaced with a one from a neighbouring local authority.

Analysis

Notes from the interviews and group discussions were prepared by the researchers, using the questions in the interview guides to organise these. A sample of 26 interview notes were reviewed by the research team to develop a series of initial codes for thematic analysis. Notes were selected at random within each sector, while ensuring almost equal local authority coverage and representation of each school type and setting. This sample included representatives from each of the six local authorities, five LHBs and around half of the schools, PRUs, early years settings and FEIs. Initial codes were developed by researchers largely based on responses to the questions on “Overall progress in implementing the ALN system” in the interview guides. Researchers reviewed and coded the interview notes and then met to compare the codes and themes identified from this initial sample. All interview notes were then reviewed by researchers and labelled with these codes (i.e. sentences or paragraphs within each set of notes were labelled with ‘codes’ such as ‘collaboration - working well’) to enable commonly reported themes to be highlighted. The research team met regularly during this process to discuss the emerging themes and any new themes which had not emerged in reviewing the initial sample. The findings in this report set out the most frequently occurring themes emerging from the analysis.

The following descriptors have been used within Chapters 3 and 4 of this report to distinguish between participants from different sectors:

- ‘Participants’ - used when discussing all or several sectors together
- ‘Local authority or LHB representatives’ - used when referring to these specific sectors
- ‘School, FEI and/or PRU representatives’ - used when referring to senior leaders and practitioners from these specific settings

The descriptors ‘health professionals’ and ‘school/PRU/FEI practitioners’ are also used when referring those who work in these sectors, but these terms are not used to describe research participants.

Methodological limitations

In interpreting the findings presented in this report, it is important to bear in mind some of the limitations of the methodology.

The research is based on relatively small samples of participants who agreed to take part or, in the case of parents, expressed interest in participating, which means that results are not statistically robust and cannot be generalised to the population. For example, parents who had concerns or had negative experiences may have been more motivated to take part. The research methodology sought to ensure that an appropriate spread of local authorities, settings and organisations and individuals took part. However, the sample was not intended to be representative of the population of practitioners and professionals.

The reliance on self-reported data as well as differences in research participants' interpretation and understanding of the questions should also be considered. The findings are based on participants' subjective views, for example of what they considered to be working well or less well in implementing the ALN system, rather than more systematic, objective and validated measures. Participants' self-reported views could have been influenced by factors such as the timing of the fieldwork (e.g. particular issues and challenges they were facing at the time) or failure to recall pertinent information which could lead to the exaggeration or under-reporting of issues.

It is important to bear in mind that the qualitative nature of the fieldwork means that not all interviewees commented on all of the issues discussed in the report. This means that, if most interviewees noted that they felt an aspect of the system was working well, it does not necessarily imply that some felt this aspect of the system was not working well. This should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings.

3. Findings

This section provides a summary of findings from fieldwork carried out as part of the local authority area case studies. It presents the most prominent and frequently raised themes emerging from discussions with schools and settings, FEIs, local authorities and local health boards.

These are presented under headings that correspond to the topics explored during semi-structured discussions across the six local authority area case studies. These are:

- Overall progress in implementing the ALN system
- Individual development Plans (IDPs) and planning processes
- Additional Learning Provision (ALP)
- Statutory roles
- Collaboration and information sharing
- Disagreements and the appeals process
- Bilingual system
- Wider system factors

Overall progress in implementing the ALN system

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to overall progress made in implementing the ALN system. Research participants were asked to summarise:

- their general reflections on what had worked well in terms of the overall progress made in implementing the ALN system
- what had worked less well, including any barriers to implementation and unintended consequences

Collaboration

In relation to implementation of the ALN system, most participants across local authorities, FEIs, early years settings and LHBs, as well as some school representatives, considered that collaboration between practitioners and professionals, both within and across sectors, was working well. Most local authority representatives provided examples of where collaboration was working well such as:

- the implementation of multi-agency networks (e.g. early years networks helping to identify ALN earlier and improve transition processes)
- improved collaboration between local authorities and FEIs (e.g. through more regular meetings between local authority post-16 officers and FEI ALNCoS)
- improved collaboration between local authorities and LHBs (through engagement between local authority representatives and DECLOs)
- improved collaboration between ALNCoS both within and across school clusters

Some school representatives referred to examples where collaboration was working well, such as cluster working between ALNCoS and/or partnership working with local authority and LHB representatives. FEI representatives echoed the views of local authorities that collaboration was improving between them and also referred to improved collaboration with schools as part of their transition processes. Most LHB representatives referred to a general improvement in collaboration between the education and health sectors and some also referred to DECLOs facilitating improved collaboration between professionals within their LHB.

Person-centred practice (PCP)

Local authority and school representatives mentioned person-centred practice (PCP) as an aspect of the ALN system that was working well overall and felt it was having a positive influence on relationships between schools, learners and parents. Some schools felt the emphasis on PCP was promoting a more inclusive system overall.

Systems, templates and professional learning

Most local authority and LHB representatives felt that the systems that had been put in place for implementing the ALN reforms (e.g. online IDP systems, standardised forms and/or templates, professional learning for staff, regular network or panel meetings) were becoming embedded and helping to improve awareness and understanding of ALN in their organisations. School and FEI representatives reported that these implementation systems had improved practitioners' understanding of ALN and ALP through training and PCP processes.

Workload and capacity

Almost all participants reported that there were pressures on staff and organisational capacity to implement the ALN system, mainly because of challenges related to funding and an increased workload for practitioners as a result of implementing the ALN system. Most

local authorities referred to challenges associated with funding and felt that there were increased costs associated with implementing the system, for example in terms of staff time, engaging with parents, managing dispute resolution processes and the need, in some cases, to access legal advice. Some local authority representatives reported that their organisation had secured grants to support specific new posts to support implementation of the ALN system but were concerned about the sustainability of this funding. All school and FEI representatives felt that the workloads of ALNCOs and other practitioners had increased and attributed this to the administrative responsibilities of preparing IDPs, arranging PCP meetings and increased engagement with parents as part of planning and review processes. Some schools also referred to a reduction in staff capacity, particularly Learning Support Workers (LSW). Representatives of early years settings had positive views on the ALN system, particularly planning processes and the role of the EY ALNLO but also felt that there were additional workload pressures associated with implementing the ALN system (for example, in preparing for and supporting PCP meetings).

Timeframes

Some local authority and school representatives referred to challenges in meeting statutory deadlines, particularly in securing the input of all relevant practitioners and professionals within the time limits. Local authority representatives reported that this could be particularly challenging in cases where new evidence was submitted several weeks into the process, thereby limiting the time they had to respond and/or seek their own advice or input from others (e.g. health professionals) if needed.

Definitions of ALN and ALP

Some participants across all sectors reported that there were challenges relating to the clarity of definitions of ALN and ALP. Local authority, FEI and LHB representatives considered that there was variability in the quality of IDPs across schools and local authorities and that there were different interpretations and understanding of what constituted ALP and what was considered to be reasonable 'universal' or 'targeted' provision.^[Footnote 4]

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and planning processes

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to IDPs and planning processes. Research participants were asked their views on embedding PCP as part of planning processes, the development and maintenance of IDP documents, and IDP review processes.

Embedding person-centred practice as part of planning processes

Participants in all local authority areas, and from across all sectors, were mostly positive about the PCP approach to meetings to support the preparation and review of IDPs. Evidence from discussions with local authority representatives indicated there was agreement with the principles and core aims set out in the Code and that meetings were

[4] These terms are not defined in the ALN Act or the ALN Code.

being conducted in a way that reflected the PCP approach. Local authority representatives also felt that the approach was consistent with, and supported, a move from targets to person-centred outcomes, capturing learners' needs and aspirations. This was echoed by representatives of schools, early years settings and FEIs who were mostly positive about their experiences of PCP meetings. PCP meetings were reported by school and FEI representatives to be effective in involving learners in discussions about their needs and informing the development of IDPs in a meaningful way. School representatives reported that there was sufficient and appropriate guidance set out in relation to PCP, and that they were able to access relevant training and professional learning.

LHB representatives valued opportunities to attend PCP meetings, noting that they were a valuable part of the IDP planning process and provided opportunities for health professionals to establish relationships with schools and with families. LHB representatives also reported that their involvement supported the development of more detailed and meaningful outcomes for learners within IDPs.

Some local authority and school representatives explained that it could be difficult to secure the engagement of health professionals at PCP meetings, which was felt to have an adverse effect on the quality of IDPs at times, or led to delays in producing IDPs. This was recognised by LHB representatives, who noted that clinicians and others were not always able to attend PCP meetings, because of other competing demands on their time and the knock-on effects on other work if they were to attend all PCP meetings. There was a perception among some LHB representatives that time at PCP meetings was not always managed efficiently and that there was not enough focus during meetings on the child's or young person's needs and their intended outcomes. Some LHBs explained that they did not receive sufficient notice to attend PCP meetings or to provide information to feed into meetings.

Representatives from across the different sectors also reported challenges associated with PCP meetings, such as them often being very time-consuming and impacting negatively on workload. However, these representatives also spoke of the importance of ensuring time is available for learners and parents to share information and their perspectives.

IDPs

Participants across all sectors felt that IDPs were a positive development and an important part of helping to ensure that ALP better meets learners' needs. The process of involving learners in discussions about their needs was considered to support the development of plans that were more tailored to the individual child (compared with previous Statements under SEN). Participants felt that this focus on involving learners, and setting out their needs, intended outcomes and aspirations in IDPs meant that they had greater value than previous plans.

Local authority representatives underlined the importance of ensuring there were robust processes in place to oversee and support the quality of IDPs. Over time, quality assurance processes were reported to have improved, which some local authorities felt was helping to address variability in the quality of IDPs. Local authority representatives reported they had shared guidance documents and developed good practice templates to help schools complete IDPs and identify ALP.

Schools and FEIs emphasised that IDPs were prepared by staff who knew the learner and, by working closely with parents as part of the process, the plans were effective in identifying ALP that met learners' needs. IDPs were viewed by many school representatives as providing a holistic account of the individual child and the additional support required to help them achieve their potential.

Representatives of early years settings reported they felt their role in supporting the development of IDPs was clear. Early years setting representatives were aware of who their EY ALNLO was and felt able to contact them directly or through regular meetings or networks they attended. Early years settings reported that a learner's needs could be identified after they had enrolled, and practitioners at the setting would then discuss this with parents and their EY ALNLO. Early years setting representatives reported they could then meet the learner's parents to discuss their needs, monitor the learner over a period using the early years profile, draft a one-page-profile with targets and monitor progress against this after a few weeks. Early years setting representatives also reported they could refer the child to the EY ALNLO so that their needs could be considered further by the local authority, with local authority professionals able to visit the setting to observe the learner if needed.

Some representatives of early years settings reported that they had hosted PCP meetings with representatives of the local authority and parents. Representatives of early years settings reported that they had provided evidence to support the development of IDPs as well as monitoring progress against IDP targets, reporting this back to their EY ALNLO. Some early years setting representatives reported that they were using their local authority's online IDP system to upload information on learners' progress against IDP targets.

In spite of the overall support for IDPs, research participants expressed concern associated with some aspects of the new system. Local authority representatives noted there were inconsistencies in how ALN was being identified and in the provision set out in IDPs between schools and across Wales.

Schools in several local authority areas noted that IDPs do not always capture the wider context for learners with more complex needs and sometimes included irrelevant or unclear outcomes. Some LHB representatives made similar points, suggesting that the format of IDPs was at times 'too rigid'. Some interviewees from LHBs noted that at times health outcomes and IDP outcomes were not always aligned: LHB representatives explained that they identified outcomes based on clinical need which may not always reflect the intended learning outcomes set out in IDPs.

A recurring observation from representatives of all sectors was that the development of IDPs has created a substantial additional workload for staff. In particular, school representatives reported that the statutory timescales presented challenges for ALNCoS and other staff and that completing IDPs, including for learners with more complex needs, had placed considerable pressure on ALNCo capacity. Some schools noted that this was impacting the quality of plans or leading to variable quality. Representatives of early years settings explained that contributing to the development of IDPs and monitoring against targets was time-consuming but that they felt it was beneficial to the children they worked with.

Reviews

School representatives referred to the importance of effective and timely review processes and also noted how the option to review IDPs, in advance of the statutory 12-month deadline, enabled them to be responsive to ongoing changes to learner needs. Participants from schools and LHBs reflected on how the planning for reviews could be efficiently managed due to relatively long lead-in times and structured processes. Health participants reflected on how the timescales for PCP review meetings enabled schools to give advance notice of meetings to health professionals who reported challenges in being able to attend these meetings at shorter notice. However, health participants also emphasised that it could still be difficult to attend review meetings due to time constraints and limited capacity to both attend meetings and prepare information for inclusion in IDPs. This was further compounded by a lack of clarity amongst some LHB representatives about whether review meeting attendance was mandatory.

Representatives from schools, FEIs and LAs noted that in general their sectors were working well together, enabling reviews to be conducted effectively. However, some schools did also highlight that poor information sharing processes between sectors sometimes led to delays in holding timely and comprehensive reviews. This included delays by local authorities in sharing information with schools about school requests for reconsideration of decisions, such as delays in acknowledging receipt of requests, or delays in the production of LA-maintained IDPs.

It was reported by some FEIs representatives that not all learners over the age of 16 consent to having their parents attend review meetings. These participants noted that in such cases this was often challenging for parents to adjust to, having previously been used to attending PCP meetings alongside their child.

Additional Learning Provision (ALP)

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to ALP. Research participants were asked about their views on:

- consistency in the interpretation and understandings of ALP

- whether sufficient ALP was available to meet learner needs
- whether there was sufficient knowledge and skills to deliver ALP within the ALN system.
- whether there were any barriers to the delivery of ALP.

Consistency in interpretation of ALP

In each of the local areas included in this study, participants from each sector noted variation and inconsistency in understandings of ALP. They highlighted that differing interpretations of ALP could affect approaches to securing appropriate provision and the setting of targets in IDPs. Some local authority representatives spoke of responding to this challenge by developing provision maps and tools to guide schools when planning provision. These local authority representatives noted that the tools supported quality assurance processes and had been developed through regional collaboration. They recognised that the interpretations of ALP that had informed the tools may not be consistent with approaches in other regions.

Both school and FEI representatives reported that there was inconsistency between settings in defining ALP and stated that guidance was needed to help clarify this. Representatives from both of these sectors highlighted how ALP in one setting would be regarded as 'universal provision' in another, highlighting variance in how ALP is defined and delivered in practice. Some schools reflected on how parents could have high expectations regarding ALP and noted that variances in ALP between settings could therefore be hard for parents to comprehend. In addition, LHB representatives reported a lack of clarity in defining what ALP secured by an NHS body constitutes, and they felt that schools lacked understanding of the range of ALP secured by an NHS body which is available, beyond 1:1 support.

Both school and FEI representatives reported a lack of consistency in where ALP is recorded in IDPs, with some of these participants highlighting how they were attempting to rectify this through their cluster work. In addition, participants from all sectors reported working collaboratively within their clusters and regions to agree consistent approaches to ALP definitions and provision where possible.

Some local authority representatives noted that legal departments had struggled to interpret the definition of ALP within the Code and further expressed concern that there appeared to be different opinions regarding the definition of ALP between Estyn, the Welsh Government and The Education Tribunal, leaving them potentially vulnerable in cases which are litigated.

A few school representatives highlighted inconsistencies between the health and education sectors about whether some learner needs were educational or health related, leading to differences of opinion over the identification of suitable ALP. These participants noted that when there is overlap between medical and educational needs, for instance regarding mental health, it was unclear which sector ought to be providing ALP.

Sufficiency of ALP to meet needs

Participants from all local authority areas felt that, in general, there was sufficient ALP to meet most learner needs, however some school representatives reported that budget and time constraints hindered their ability to deliver ALP that was comprehensive and frequent enough. Several school representatives also emphasised that the increased complexity of some learners' needs presented challenges in their ability to support these learners effectively. Notably, local authority and school representatives reported significant challenges in accessing specialist provision due to a lack of availability, highlighting how this negatively impacted on their ability to meet the needs of some learners, particularly those requiring more complex provision and support. In addition, some school representatives emphasised how they had developed a range of ALP to meet a variety of needs, commonly delivered through a graduated response.

There were mixed views from LHB representatives regarding the sufficiency of ALP secured by an NHS body. Some felt there was adequate resourcing and availability of this ALP in their region whilst other LHB representatives highlighted specific challenges regarding capacity, with examples including difficulties in providing adequate ALP via CAMHS and therapies, such as speech and language. Connected to this, some LHB representatives expressed concerns about 'over-promising' ALP in IDPs and raising parent/carer expectations which led them to adopt a cautious response to the recording of ALP on IDPs instead. These LHB representatives observed that this could lead to parents feeling that their child's needs were not being fully met.

Knowledge and skills to deliver ALP

Representatives from local authorities, schools and LHBs felt that in general there was sufficient knowledge and skills to deliver ALP. Some local authority representatives reported they had invested in professional learning for their staff and had put in place designated teams to oversee ALP, at additional cost. Some school representatives noted their staff were well trained and experienced, although they also reported that there were challenges in securing adequate input from Learning Support Workers because of a lack of capacity.

Barriers to delivery of ALP

School and FEI representatives described several barriers to the effective delivery of ALP such as increased workloads due to meeting complex needs, a lack of staff capacity, and inadequate spaces due to the limited physical environment of their premises. Some schools also highlighted how they spent significant time administering processes under the ALN system, which they noted prevented them from trialling new approaches to ALP.

The lack of availability of Welsh-medium specialists to provide ALP, such as speech and language therapists, was noted as a concern by representatives across all sectors, with

observations that this could potentially lead to inequity in the provision of services for those who preferred to received ALP in Welsh.

ALP in early years settings

Representatives of early years settings described adjustments they had been able to make to their provision for children with ALN. Some early years setting representatives said they had accessed grants for equipment to support learners with ALN, and some had accessed support or professional learning from local authority staff. Early years setting representatives reported that staff capacity was the main challenge they faced in providing ALP, particularly given the staff-to-learner ratios that they needed to maintain for all children.

A few local authority and school representatives requested further guidance and support on ALP from the Welsh Government to enable them to better meet learner needs, with examples including the provision of Welsh ALP toolkits, good practice ALP case studies and clearer ALP definitions.

Statutory roles

This section outlines the findings in relation to statutory roles, namely the ALNCo, EY ALNLO, and DECLO. Research participants were asked about their views on what was working well in relation to implementing their role as an ALNCo, EY ALNLO, or DECLO, and what challenges they had encountered. Research participants were also asked about the clarity of roles and responsibilities across the system, and the impact of the ALN reforms on workforce capacity and staff well-being regarding ALNCos.

ALNCo

Most participants across the local authority, school and FEI sectors expressed concern about the workload associated with the ALNCo role. Some school and FEI representatives underlined that this was having a negative effect on the ALNCo's ability to spend time on strategic work, the quality of IDPs, and the quantity and quality of time spent with learners themselves. Some participants explained that this was especially a concern for ALNCos with additional teaching or senior leadership responsibilities. Many local authority, school and FEI representatives noted that ALNCos felt overwhelmed and overburdened by administrative tasks in their role, and several ALNCos explained that they would often work into their evenings and weekends to complete the tasks required of them. Consequently, some of these participants expressed concern about the wellbeing and work-life balance of ALNCos.

Some participants noted that there was a high turnover of ALNCos. For example, local authority and FEI representatives referred to instances where the high workload and lack of

work-life balance has led ALNCOs to resign, and that employers had encountered difficulty in rehiring for the role.

Local authority, FEI and school representatives explained that some schools and FEIs had implemented roles in addition to the statutory ALNCO, such as 'assistant ALNCO' or 'shadow ALNCO', whereas other schools had shared ALNCO roles. Some schools explained that implementing an additional ALNCO role has helped to manage the workload and support continuity.

Some local authority representatives noted that there were established ALNCO cluster meetings, and that they had developed strong peer networks among ALNCOs. Local authority representatives noted that training they had delivered to ALNCOs had been well received, and this was echoed by ALNCOs themselves. Some local authority representatives suggested that ALNCOs who were new to their role were adapting better to the ALN system than longer established ALNCOs previously familiar with the SEN system, because they were more likely to ask questions on aspects of the system with which they were unfamiliar.

EY ALNLO

Local authority representatives expressed positive views about the role of the EY ALNLO. For example, some participants noted that there is good collaboration between the local authority, schools and the EY ALNLO. However, participants expressed concern at the high workload and the resources available for the role. For example, one local authority explained that they have developed an EY ALN Liaison Officer role alongside the EY ALNLO, to assist with transitions and liaising with settings and parents, due to the high workload.

Early years setting representatives had positive views on the support and advice they received from EY ALNLOs. All early years setting representatives reported that they were able to contact their EY ALNLO when needed. Some reported having regular scheduled meetings about specific learners and some reported being in touch with their EY ALNLO on a weekly, or more frequent, basis.

DECLO

Most participants expressed positive views regarding the role of the DECLO. Representatives from local authorities, FEIs and LHBs noted that the DECLO role was highly valued and was essential in facilitating the relationship between the LHB and other sectors.

Some LHB representatives noted that DECLOs were responsible for raising awareness of the ALN Code and delivering training relating to the ALN system within their LHB. For example, some LHB representatives explained that their DECLO had created short guidance videos relating to aspects of the ALN system, and that this had been helpful for them.

Many local authority and LHB representatives expressed concern that the remit of the DECLO role was too large for one person. For example, representatives in LHBs and local authorities indicated that it was unrealistic for the DECLO to be able to cover all locations across multiple local authorities.

Collaboration and information sharing

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to collaboration and information sharing since implementation of the ALN system. Research participants were asked their views on whether collaboration between professionals and sectors had improved since the implementation of the ALN reforms.

Collaboration with local authorities

Participants across different sectors expressed mixed views in relation to their relationship with local authorities. Generally, representatives from schools felt that they had a good relationship with their local authority, which was attributed to the good level of support they received (e.g. advice, professional learning). For example, one school representative noted that their local authority had delivered an online session where they went through each chapter of the ALN Code.

LHB representatives explained that their relationship with local authorities was good, overall, and had improved due to the DECLO role. However, LHB representatives also noted that a lack of consistency in approaches across local authorities (e.g. different departmental or workforce structures, different arrangements for sharing information), caused difficulties in maintaining communication with all local authorities. This difference in relationships across local authorities was echoed by FEIs representatives, who stated that they had a good working relationship with some local authorities, but not all.

Collaboration with schools/Early Years settings - education

Local authority representatives expressed positive views relating to their relationship with early years settings. These positive relationships were attributed to the effectiveness of early years panels or forums and good links with health visitors, which have helped to support the early identification of ALN. The role of the EY ALNLO was valued by local authority representatives, particularly in providing support for transition from early years to school settings.

Representatives of early years settings described examples of collaboration improving between them and their local authority. Examples included regular ALN 'clinics' where early years setting practitioners were able to meet with their EY ALNLO to seek their advice as well as being able to contact their EY ALNLO directly with queries. Some representatives of early years settings reported that collaboration was improving between settings through

network meetings arranged by their local authority, which they and other representatives of early years settings valued. However, some early years setting representatives reported that there were no such local network meetings. These early years setting representatives felt these types of opportunities would be beneficial to discuss practice relating to ALN, as well as any issues they were facing.

School representatives outlined the good relationship they had with other schools, particularly those in their cluster. They noted that collaboration had improved and that there were plenty of opportunities to network with other schools and share experiences and good practice (e.g. through ALNCo cluster meetings).

Conversely, LHB representatives interviewed expressed more mixed views in relation to their relationship with education settings. Barriers to effective collaboration included issues related to the timings of meetings, a lack of capacity to enable LHB representatives to attend meetings, different understanding of Section 20 referrals and different interpretations of ALP. ^[Footnote 5]

LHB representatives reflected on the difference in the length of time in which LHB professionals are required to respond to section 65 requests from local authorities compared with the length of time schools are required to prepare an IDP with input from health professionals. ^[Footnote 6] LHB representatives explained that local authorities could make section 65 requests to an LHB, receive responses within the six-week deadline and take account of the LHB's response in preparing a local authority IDP within 12 weeks. LHB representatives contrasted this with schools, who had to prepare IDPs within 35 days and to whom LHBs did not have to respond within a statutory timeframe. LHB representatives noted that this created challenges for schools who wanted the input of health professionals when preparing a school IDP but were dependent on LHB professionals' capacity and local arrangements.

LHB representatives reported that there were misunderstandings between health professionals and school practitioners which act as a barrier to collaboration between them. For example, LHB representatives felt that they had a different interpretation of the definition of ALP to schools, and that there was a lack of understanding amongst school practitioners around the duties relating to section 20 referrals. LHB representatives explained that because only local authorities can make the statutory requests, health professionals only complete section 2c for local authority maintained IDPs. However, LHB representatives noted that some school practitioners had asked them why the LHB had not completed section 2c for school maintained IDPs. LHB representatives believed these

[5] If a child or young person in mainstream school or college has ALN and possibly health related needs, a local authority or an FEI if they are post-16 can ask the LHB or NHS trust, whether there is: 'any treatment or service which is likely to be of benefit in addressing the ALN of a child or young person.' (Section 20 of the ALN Act). If the LHB identifies a treatment or service that's appropriate for the child or young person, it must describe the treatment or service in the child's IDP and if the LHB identifies a 'treatment or service' which would benefit the child or young person, it must provide it. (Section 20(5) and Section 21(5) of the Act).

[6] The ALN Act (section 65) provides that where a local authority requests help or information from other bodies, including another local authority, an NHS body or an FEI (amongst others), in the exercise of any of their ALN functions, that body must comply with the request.

misunderstandings could be perceived by schools as a lack of engagement from LHB representatives.

LHB representatives acknowledged they had a lack of capacity to enable them to attend PCP meetings but also noted that it could be effective to attend when they are able to do so. LHB representatives reflected that they would like to receive more notice from schools to attend PCP/review meetings.

Collaboration with FEIs

Generally, schools and local authority representatives interviewed considered that they had a good relationship with their local FEI. Local authority representatives noted that relationships with FEIs had been enhanced by post-16 steering groups, ALN forums and the role of post-16 coordinators in some areas. However, despite improvements in relationships with FEIs, local authority representatives did acknowledge some lack of clarity around protocols for schools and FEIs in relation to transition at post-16. In some cases this is being addressed by local authorities through the amendment of guidance documents for schools to include information on how schools should prepare for their learners' transition to FE.

Collaboration with health professionals

Participants in all sectors expressed mixed views in relation to their relationship with health professionals. Generally, representatives from local authorities felt that they had a good relationship with health professionals and that the role of the DECLO has helped to improve these links. However, local authority representatives noted that misalignment of timescales between LHBs and local authorities could be a barrier to health professionals' involvement in PCP meetings.

School representatives reported mixed views in relation to their relationships with health professionals. In some cases, school representatives described having effective working relationships with certain health professionals, such as consultants, CAMHS, educational psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs). However, school representatives explained that they felt health professionals did not always attend meetings or that medical input into planning and review process was not always timely. These inconsistencies in the involvement of health professionals were seen by school representatives as a challenge to developing good relationships with LHB representatives. Another challenge identified by school representatives was related to referral mechanisms. School representatives perceived the nature of school practitioners having to use a general inbox for communication with health professionals as inefficient and felt that it would be more efficient if they were able to directly contact the relevant health professionals.

FEI representatives generally felt they had developed good relationships with health professionals and that regular meetings with the DECLO were helpful. A similar view was

expressed by LHB representatives, who noted that the DECLO role had been beneficial in supporting relationships between LHBs and FEIs representatives.

Early years setting representatives expressed mixed views on their collaboration with health professionals. Some described effective working relationships with health visitors in identifying potential ALN in children prior to enrolment at their setting, which helped them prepare staffing and other arrangements, while others felt that some children's ALN were not identified as early as they could be.

Online systems: data sharing systems

Research participants emphasised the importance of online systems for efficient and effective data sharing, both between and within sectors. Most participants interviewed noted that online systems exist, particularly for data sharing within sectors and in many cases for data sharing between sectors too. In some cases, it was felt that where online systems are used to share data between sectors, these systems help clarify roles and improve the quality of IDPs. Furthermore, LHB representatives explained that online systems aid information flow, ensuring the correct team replies to requests and enables managers to monitor input to IDPs.

However, most sectors acknowledged issues or limitations with current online systems, such as issues with sharing or transferring information via online systems, rigidity of systems and issues accessing systems. For example, whilst some school and LHB representatives explained that parents had access to some online systems, they noted that digital illiteracy could be a barrier to access. Also, in terms of access issues, LHB representatives explained that not all health professionals had access to online systems used by their LHB to record section 65 and section 20 requests and distribute to the relevant department.

Transition

Representatives of early years settings explained that there were inconsistencies in the amount of information they received about learners with ALN, or who may have ALN, before they enrolled at their setting. Early years setting representatives said they occasionally received information about a learner's needs prior to enrolment, either through a health visitor, the EY ALNLO or a parent/carer. In other cases, a learner's needs could be identified after they had enrolled, and practitioners at the setting would then discuss this with parents and their EY ALNLO.

Representatives of early years settings reported that they worked closely with school practitioners to support effective transition to compulsory education. Early years setting representatives noted that they asked teachers to attend their setting to meet with learners with ALN prior to transition, or to attend reviews with the EY ALNLO, where possible. Early

years setting representatives also noted that they sought to ensure that key workers of learners with ALN attended the school with them as part of the transition process.

School representatives noted that there are increasingly more children transitioning from an early years setting to school who have been identified with ALN before transitioning. Whilst school representatives interviewed felt they mainly received early notification of learners with ALN via early years providers, they also explained that an increasing number of learners have been identified as having ALN just before they transition and so no IDP has been put in place prior to transitioning. This results in the school having to hold a PCP meeting and write an IDP for a learner upon transitioning from an early years setting to school in a short period of time, with no prior knowledge of the child.

FEIs and secondary school representatives reported experiencing challenges in relation to transition for learners with IDPs from primary to secondary school or school to post-16 settings. FEI and secondary school representatives reflected that they don't always have access to learner IDPs before they start at their setting. FEIs and secondary schools reported that there were inconsistencies in the quality of the IDPs they received for learners transitioning in to their setting. Furthermore, FEI representatives explained that the content of IDPs were not always relevant for post-16 learning because they tended to reflect school-based needs and did not take into account changes in independence or maturity of learners at post-16.

Early planning was identified by FEI representatives as being important to ensure smooth transitions from school to FE, and these practitioners emphasised that good links with schools facilitated this. Local authority representatives interviewed echoed this view by highlighting the importance of providing post-16 transition plans in a timely manner .

Schools and FEI representatives reported that they valued having effective review processes in place during transition phases (between schools; between schools and specialist provision including mainstream and special schools or pupil referral units; or between schools and FE). They emphasised that positive relationships between sectors and effective collaboration, such as FEI staff being invited to school review meetings, enabled smoother planning and transitions for ALN learners. Positive collaboration was also noted by these participants as being helpful for information sharing as well as relationship building with parents and learners. However, FEI representatives highlighted that they were not always invited to school review meetings because FE was only a potential destination for learners at the time the reviews were conducted. FEI representatives noted that this limited their access to timely information that would inform their planning for post-16 learners. However, some schools noted that whilst they made efforts to engage with FEIs and invite them to review meetings, they did not always attend.

Disagreements and appeals

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to disagreements and the appeals process. Research participants were asked their views in relation to whether they felt the ALN system to be less adversarial than the previous SEN system (early years

settings were not asked about this) and were asked to reflect on any emerging trends in their local area or setting regarding the reasons behind any disagreements and appeals.

Views on whether the ALN system is less adversarial

Participants in local authorities, schools, FEIs and LHBs reported mixed experiences regarding the extent to which the new ALN system has led to a less adversarial approach to resolving disagreements. While representatives from some local authority areas and schools noted improvements through earlier discussion and collaboration with families, others reported an increase in formal disputes, legal challenges and appeals.

Representatives from two local authorities reported a notable increase in the number of appeals and tribunal cases in their areas since the reforms. They also reported an increase in the number of parents using legal representation to challenge decisions in these two areas. These cases were described as time-consuming and resource-intensive and were said to be diverting staff away from ongoing work with families and schools. Across the six local authority areas there were concerns that there was an increase in requests for local authorities to review or reconsider decisions, or to take over IDPs. This was said to place growing pressure on resources and required more time for discussions with parents and LHB partners which can lead to delays.

Representatives of schools and settings also reported a range of experiences in relation to disagreements. Representatives in some settings described having had no formal disputes, with disagreements resolved through informal discussions with parents. However, others described being involved in appeals and highlighted the considerable emotional and time burden they experienced. Some representatives from settings across the six local authorities perceived that the reforms and the introduction of IDPs had raised parental expectations of what could be provided to learners, which in turn had contributed to a rise in appeals and legal challenges.

Some LHB representatives also reported increasing involvement in disputes and appeals, particularly in responding and providing evidence in response to reports from private healthcare providers submitted as part of tribunal proceedings. LHB representatives considered this to be a significant challenge, with concerns raised about the time required to contribute, sometimes with no previous contact or knowledge of the learner. Again, there were concerns about the impact that this could have on the capacity of health professionals. However, many LHB representatives interviewed said it was too early to assess whether the system had become less adversarial as they had not yet been involved in appeals, or only in a very small number of cases. There remained uncertainty about how much experience of the appeals process they were likely to have in future.

Despite the challenges raised, there were several examples of more collaborative approaches across sectors. The use of PCP approaches in particular was reported to support earlier dialogue, helping parents be engaged and potentially reducing the likelihood of appeals. School representatives described working closely with families to explain the system and manage expectations, although this was acknowledged to be time-consuming and not always successful.

Trends and reasons for disagreements

Participants across sectors identified a number of emerging trends and underlying causes of disagreement within the new ALN system. These included differing interpretations of ALP, rising parental expectations, and the growing use of legal representation.

Local authority representatives noted that disputes often focussed on decisions about the type or level of ALP to be provided, or on decisions not to place learners in specialist provision. The use of private health reports to contest local authority decisions was also reported. Local authority representatives described a lack of clarity around the use and status of certain tools, such as one-page profiles, which had led to confusion and uncertainty among schools and families which could lead to more disagreements.

School representatives referred to a range of reasons for disagreements, many of which they linked to rising expectations among parents. Examples included parents being dissatisfied with the setting and the ALP from the outset because they disagreed that the setting was suitable for their child. Other issues included disputes over the wording and level of detail in the IDP, or disagreement with the decision to move a learner from a previous statement of SEN to universal provision. There was a perception among some school representatives that the fear of reaching tribunal could lead schools to agree to IDPs even where they may not be needed in order to avoid a formal disagreement. Some also noted a common misconception among parents that having an IDP guaranteed additional funding or one-to-one support, which may further contribute to disagreement. Representatives from one school that had experienced a tribunal case involving solicitors described the process as particularly adversarial, with staff feeling under significant pressure throughout.

LHB representatives also noted challenges, particularly where they were asked to respond to private reports submitted as part of tribunal proceedings. Some expressed concern about the time required to contribute to legal processes, which distracted from clinical work. A small number of representatives suggested that certain sections of the IDP should not be appealable to tribunal, given the implications for health service capacity while others highlighted a lack of clarity around the role of LHBs in the appeals process, due to the limited number of tribunal cases to date to provide guidance.

Bilingual system

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to bilingual capacity and provision. Research participants were asked their views on the progress they had made with implementing a bilingual ALN system (early years setting representatives were not asked about this).

Bilingual capacity and provision

The experiences and views shared by schools and settings relating to bilingual provision were understandably shaped by whether they were working in a Welsh-medium or bilingual setting and also by the communities they serve.

Most Welsh-medium schools and settings serving areas with large numbers of Welsh-speaking families (including special schools) reported that they had sufficient capacity to be able to deliver ALP in Welsh and were generally able to accommodate the needs of learners requiring support in Welsh or bilingually. Welsh-medium schools did however identify challenges they had encountered. Representatives in two schools reported examples of learners who had transferred from Welsh-medium to English-medium education in order to access support for autism. Welsh-medium schools also noted that there were fewer resources available in Welsh to support provision in some areas, particularly resources to support reading and literacy interventions and resources for learners with dyslexia. These schools noted that resources being used to support Welsh-medium ALP were often out-dated. One secondary school, for example, suggested that there is a need for a Welsh-language diagnostic reading test that can be used for learners in Years 7-9. Schools also referred to a shortage of Welsh-speaking speech and language therapists. A special school in an area with a high percentage of Welsh-speakers reported that they struggle to recruit staff with Welsh language skills.

English-medium schools noted that the question of bilingual ALP was not an issue for them as they had not received requests for such provision. In a small number of isolated cases, a special school and a PRU noted that they were not in a position to offer bilingual provision (this was in contrast to the situation in schools and settings serving more naturally bilingual communities where Welsh-medium provision was delivered). A special school in a predominantly English-speaking area noted that they support autism provision in a Welsh-medium primary school, providing specialist capacity in that and in other mainstream schools.

Further education institutions referred to having received no requests from learners for ALP through the medium of Welsh. FE representatives in three out of the six areas reported having academic and support staff in place with the Welsh language skills to be able to offer support to learners with ALN should the need arise. FEIs in other areas noted challenges they had encountered in seeking to recruit Welsh-speaking staff, particularly support staff.

Local authority representatives reflected on efforts they were taking to ensure that there was sufficient bilingual capacity within their teams to be able to respond to learner needs. This included making arrangements to ensure that newly advertised specialist posts are identified as 'Welsh essential'. In some local authorities, representatives noted that the limited numbers of Welsh-speaking staff in key posts left them in a vulnerable position and that they were at risk of failing to meet statutory duties if Welsh-speaking staff members moved on or were on an extended period of absence. A number of local authority representatives reported a shortage of educational psychologists with Welsh language skills.

LHB representatives outlined their capacity to respond to requests for services and provision through the medium of Welsh. LHB representatives noted the responsibilities that they have to deliver services in Welsh under legislation and explained that they have developed provision to meet these duties. Nevertheless, LHB representatives raised questions about the equity of provision in Welsh and English – in particular access to resources. For example, there is no equivalent in Welsh for the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF) assessment, which is used to assess a child's communication and language development. Also, echoing points raised by school representatives, local health boards noted that it can be difficult to recruit speech and language therapists with Welsh language skills.

Wider system factors

This section outlines the findings of the research in relation to wider system factors which included:

- whether there were additional costs associated with implementing the ALN system
- whether funding processes were transparent (only local authority and school representatives were asked about this)
- workforce development and professional learning needs
- the alignment of the ALN reforms with other education and health strategies
- changes in the number of learners with ALN/SEN (only local authority and school representatives were asked about this)

Costs associated with implementing the ALN system

Across all sectors, most interviewees reported that there were additional costs related to implementing the ALN system. Local authority representatives referred to the costs of appointing staff to administer processes relating to IDPs as well as other new roles (e.g. early years, post-16 or looked after children ALN officers). Local authority representatives also referred to the costs of establishing new systems (e.g. online IDP systems) and the costs of training staff to use these systems. Some local authority representatives reported that they had accessed ALN grants which had supported implementation but were concerned about the sustainability of this funding.

Schools referred to the additional costs of appointing staff to new roles to support planning processes and/or to enable the school to release their ALNCo to undertake activities relating to the administration of IDPs (e.g. attending PCP meetings, writing IDPs). Some referred to reductions in the number of LSWs coupled with an increasing number of learners with more complex needs, with higher associated costs to meet these needs. All schools perceived there to be increasing funding pressures on schools generally.

Representatives of early years settings felt there were additional costs associated with implementing the ALN system, generally related to the additional time spent by staff on administrative processes relating to planning and monitoring progress against IDP targets.

Most FEI representatives referred to examples of increased costs associated with implementing the reforms. These costs related to appointing new staff (e.g. IDP officers, ALN managers or assistant ALNCoS) to undertake administrative tasks relating to planning and IDPs. Some FEI representatives reported receiving additional funding from Welsh Government and noted that this was not sufficient to meet the additional costs.

LHB representatives referred to the costs of appointing DECLOs and administrative support as well as the opportunity costs of LHB professionals attending training relating to the ALN system. Some LHB staff felt there were additional administrative costs associated with the time taken to process Section 20 referrals, although some also said that these processes could potentially reduce duplication over time.

Transparency of funding processes

There were mixed views among local authorities and schools about the transparency of funding processes. Some local authority representatives felt that funding mechanisms were unclear, while others felt they had become more transparent. Some local authorities were in the process of changing their funding formulae in an effort to improve transparency. The views of school representatives were similarly mixed, some felt that funding was allocated in a transparent way while others were unclear about how funding was allocated for ALN and some felt that their local authority should delegate more ALN funding to schools.

Workforce development and professional learning needs

All local authorities referred to professional learning they had put in place for their own officers and schools but also emphasised the need for ongoing workforce development. Some local authority representatives referred to training audits they had undertaken or asked schools to complete to understand their workforce's professional development needs as well as training packages they had developed (e.g. for early years settings). Priority areas for future professional development activity identified by local authorities were interpreting the ALN Code and Act and definitions of ALN and ALP, with some reporting a need to remain aware of emerging issues based on Tribunal decisions and their implications for practice.

All schools referred to professional learning their staff had received, including training delivered by the local authority and other schools, and generally had positive views on this. Most schools referred to difficulties releasing staff to attend training because of a lack of capacity and the costs of arranging suitable cover. Some schools referred to further professional learning they would like in relation to:

- definitions of ALN and ALP, particularly distinguishing between ALN and other needs that did not require ALP

- ALP and other targeted provision that could ordinarily be provided (often referred to as ‘universal’ provision)
- quality assurance of IDPs
- emotional-based school avoidance

Representatives of early years settings referred to examples of professional learning they had accessed through their EY ALNLO and others. This included training on definitions of ALN, on teaching maths to learners with ALN, autism, trauma informed practice, speech and communication, and using the online IDP system. Early years setting representatives echoed the views of school representatives that it could be difficult to release staff to attend training. Some early years setting representatives felt more funding for attending training on specific types of ALN such as autism and ADHD would be beneficial.

All FEIs referred to regular training on ALN that they delivered to practitioners in their own institutions as well training delivered by health professionals relating to specific types of need. Some FEI representatives suggested that further professional learning could be provided to support their practitioners’ in understanding the definition of ALP, particularly what was defined as provision that could ordinarily be provided (referred to as ‘universal’ provision) and what was ALP.

LHB representatives referred to training and professional learning materials (e.g. videos) that had been provided by DECLOs. Some LHB representatives reported a need for training on specific aspects of the ALN system including PCP approaches, definitions of ALP, writing intended outcomes for IDPs and clarity on the differences between IDPs and Individual Healthcare Plans.

Changes in the number of learners with ALN

Local authority representatives reported that there was a perception that increasing numbers of learners needed additional support to learn, and that the ALN of learners were increasingly complex, however this was not reflected in the official data which showed a decline in the numbers with ALN/SEN. Some local authorities considered that some learners with SEN under the previous system were not defined as having ALN under the new system because schools were now supporting them through their ‘universal’ provision that was available to all learners. Some local authority representatives reported increasing numbers of learners being identified with possible ALN in the early years and that this may not yet be reflected in official statistics.

School and PRU representatives reported mixed experiences in relation to changes in the number of learners with ALN in their settings. Some reported a fall in numbers and attributed this to learners who were previously on school action and school action plus not meeting the definition of ALN and therefore not having IDPs under the new system. Others reported an increase in the number of learners with ALN in their school.

Some school representatives raised concerns that learners who may have ALN could be ‘missed’ because of a lack of capacity to identify ALN and provide ALP in schools. Some

school representatives were concerned that some learners who were previously receiving school action or school action plus, did not have an IDP and therefore were not getting the same level of support they had previously received. Some school representatives suggested that uncertainty about definitions of ALN and ALP, coupled with concerns about a lack of capacity to put ALP in place, meant that schools were hesitant to create IDPs for some learners.

Alignment of ALN reforms with wider policies

Local authority, school and early years setting representatives reported that the ALN and curriculum reforms were aligned in terms of their ethos and aims, particularly the focus on individualised learning and learner-centred approaches. Local authority representatives also noted that achieving the aims of both reforms was difficult in practice because of a lack of staff capacity. These views were echoed by school representatives, several of whom referred to reductions in the number of LSWs. Some school representatives reported that having fewer LSWs meant that they found it harder to include some learners in mainstream classes and therefore were more reliant on smaller group provision such as nurture groups for some learners. Some representatives of early years settings felt that that learner-centred approaches in the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) aligned better with the ALN system than the previous Foundation Phase. These early years setting representatives explained that they considered there to be a greater focus on adapting practice to meet learners' needs in CfW compared with the Foundation Phase, which they felt placed more emphasis on tracking progress against developmental milestones.

4. Findings from fieldwork with learners and parents

This section provides a summary of findings from fieldwork carried out with learners with ALN and parents of learners with ALN as part of the local authority area case studies. It presents the most prominent and frequently raised themes emerging from discussions with learners and parents.

Learners' views

Learners were asked a series of questions about their experiences at their education setting, the support they received, their PCP meeting, suggested improvements to their education setting, and their future goals.

Experiences of the education setting

Learners were asked how they felt about their school/college experience as well as what they enjoyed most or least about school or college. Generally, learners provided positive responses to these questions, with some providing mixed views.

Learners in primary school settings generally said that they enjoyed school and had positive views about their teachers. Some expressed a preference for activities such as drawing, using digital resources and having free time. Primary learners explained that they are sometimes able to learn new things and other times find it difficult. Learners mentioned some examples of what they had learnt, noting that they had learnt new facts from project work on particular topics such as facts about specific geographic areas.

Learners in secondary schools expressed more mixed overall views about their enjoyment of school but generally thought their teachers were friendly and engaging. Secondary learners reported that they preferred the delivery of interactive and practical lessons such as cooking, woodwork, singing, drama, and art. Examples of subjects that learners found less interesting were maths and science. Learners explained that they knew they were making progress, or moving forward, in their learning when they felt fully engaged and were keen to learn more. Several learners noted that they found loud noises difficult to cope with and that larger classes could feel chaotic, loud, distracting and stressful to them. Thus, learners preferred smaller classes because they felt there were fewer interruptions and fewer pupils requiring the teachers' attention.

Learners in FE colleges generally expressed positive views on their college experience. Learners reported they were learning new things, felt physically safe in their learning environment, felt well supported and that college staff were generally helpful, particularly when they helped learners to break things down to make learning easier. Learners enjoyed the independence that the college offered them compared with their school setting, which was reported to have enabled them to become more confident in themselves and feel encouraged and motivated in their learning. However, one learner felt that at the point of enrolment, more information and clarity around what their course would entail would have been helpful.

Support for learning

Learners were asked what support they received to help them learn as well as their views on this support.

Learners in primary schools said they received the right amount of help that they needed. Examples of support mentioned by learners included having a one-to-one TA who could help explain learning to them, and/or opportunities to take a break from class or have 'quiet time' when they needed it .

Learners in secondary schools said they received a wide range of different types of support, including the following:

- Access to a quiet space when needed
- Learning in smaller classes
- Access to an ALN support hub
- 'Talkabout' sessions where learners can speak with the ALNCo or TA about anything they might be worried about
- Outdoor learning such as designing and building structures and gardening activities
- School trips
- Opportunities to remain in the same classroom for lessons rather than move classes for different lessons
- Extra time to type on the computer

Generally, learners in secondary schools felt that they received a good level of support and were able to talk to staff about what they needed. However, some learners felt that sometimes teachers were not able to give them their full attention when they were interrupted by other pupils. Some learners felt that they were sometimes told off by teachers rather than being listened to.

Learners in FE colleges also said they received a wide range of different types of support, including the following:

- Teachers taking the time to explain tasks clearly
- Use of headphones to help focus
- Availability of support staff for learners to talk to
- Access to a quiet space when needed
- Tailored, targeted sessions (often weekly) on topics learners find difficult (e.g. spelling and writing)
- Sessions which focused on the emotional needs of learners (e.g. managing emotions, handling difficult social situations)
- Access to a wellbeing hub

Generally, learners in FE colleges felt that they received the help they needed. One learner noted that they would like more information about the course content and timetable because knowing when topics were being covered would be helpful for them.

IDP and PCP meetings

Where appropriate, learners were asked about the IDP and PCP meeting. ^[Footnote 7] Most learners were not aware of their IDP. Therefore, discussions focused on their experiences of their PCP meeting.

Around half of learners interviewed either did not remember a PCP meeting taking place or could not remember what was discussed during the meeting. This tended to be the case for learners in primary and some in secondary school settings. Of those learners who were able to recall the PCP meeting – some of these learners were in a secondary school setting and some were in an FE college setting – learners generally they felt they had been listened to during the meeting and felt they had been “part of the conversation”. Furthermore, in some cases learners believed that the outcome of the PCP meeting had had an impact on the support they received. For example, one learner noted that following the meeting they received more help with spelling and writing and attended a weekly session to support them with this. Another learner commented that targets were discussed during the meeting which, since the meeting, had been monitored and this has enabled progress to be tracked.

However, in a small number of cases learners who remembered the PCP meeting taking place expressed a less positive experience. For example, one learner in an FE college setting reported that their course teacher, who they were expecting to be at the meeting, did not attend. Two learners noted that they did not notice any changes following the meeting.

Wellbeing

Learners were asked whether they felt happy at school/college, whether they had someone to talk to if they had any problems or somewhere to go to relax and have a break when needed.

Learners in primary school settings generally reported that they felt happy in school and that if there was anything that they found difficult or challenging, they felt they could access help from their teachers.

Learners in secondary schools also generally felt happy in school, though their views were more mixed than those of primary school learners. Secondary learners explained that there was somewhere they could go (e.g. an ALN hub or nurture group) or someone they could talk to (e.g. teacher/ALNCo) if they needed to. However, one learner said they sometimes

[7] Before meeting learners, ALNCoS were asked whether learners would be likely to be aware of their IDP, whether they would recognise the term PCP or IDP meeting and whether they would be likely to be able to recall the meeting. Researchers then tailored the questions to learners appropriately.

felt self-conscious and like they were being judged by other pupils. One learner felt that teachers listened to their concerns, but that they did not feel that teachers took any actions to alleviate these.

Learners in FE colleges also said they knew they had someone they could talk to if they needed. They reported feeling safe and emotionally supported and had access to a space they could go to if they needed a break (e.g. wellbeing and relaxation rooms).

Suggested improvements

Learners were asked whether they had any suggested improvements that would help them learn better at school/college.

Learners in primary school settings did not offer any suggested changes that would help them learn better at school. Some learners in secondary school settings suggested changes to interventions to help prevent or address bullying, specifically suggesting that bullying signs should be placed in more prominent places across the whole school. Other suggestions included reduced hours in school, online learning, equal treatment for all pupils, more privacy, and spaces they could go to be on their own – either their own space in a classroom or outside.

A few learners in FE college settings suggested they would like to receive more information about their course, so that they would be more aware of what to expect (e.g. what is happening and when). Other suggestions from a few learners included consequences for students who misbehave, healthier food options in the canteen, and reduced hours in college.

Future goals

Learners were asked what career path they wanted to pursue when they left school/college and whether their education setting supported them to pursue their future goals.

Learners in primary and secondary school settings were mostly unsure of what they wanted to do when they finished school or the career they wanted to pursue. Learners in FE college settings tended to explain that, for now, they simply wanted to continue studying in college. Learners in one college setting explained that their college had provided opportunities to help them understand their options for future career pathways. For example, the college offered meetings and hosted 'what's next' fairs and open days attended by other colleges and organisations. The college has also signposted learners to further learning opportunities. Learners suggested they would welcome support from college staff to help them complete their applications for further study.

Parents' views

Overview

The nine parents who took part in this study described a wide mix of experiences of the ALN system. Some parents talked about strong relationships with schools and ALNCoS, especially in special schools, where communication was reported to be frequent and person-centred planning was felt to be working well. Others, however, described delays in securing IDPs, uncertainty about processes, and IDPs that did not fully reflect their child's needs. Several parents said the ALP set out in the IDP was too broad or focused mainly on behaviour and believed that key elements were not delivered because of staffing shortages, lack of space, or limited resources in mainstream schools.

A number of parents described having to push repeatedly for assessments, for an IDP, and/or for provision, sometimes making formal complaints or turning to external advocacy for help. Coordination across education, health and other services was often described as inconsistent, leaving parents feeling that they were the ones facilitating communication between organisations. Some felt their child's placement was not appropriate, or that their child's needs meant that they fell "in between" mainstream and specialist provision. Parents in Welsh-medium settings also reported limited access to Welsh-speaking specialists.

Overall, parents valued the input of school staff and referred to staff who communicated clearly with them, involved them in planning and supported their child's needs, but many felt the system was difficult to navigate and that support did not always match their child's needs.

The parents who participated in this research represented a varied set of circumstances across the four local authority areas. Their children ranged in age from age 6 to 13 years and they were educated across a wide mix of settings including mainstream primary and secondary schools, English and Welsh-medium schools, special schools, and a PRU. In some cases, parents spoke about their experiences related to more than one of their children, each with ALN. Across the sample, children received different types of ALN support. Some had school-based IDPs, others had local authority-maintained IDPs, and one child had no IDP despite the parent feeling that they should. Children's needs varied and parents reported autism, ADHD, demand-avoidance, sensory issues, dyslexia, anxiety, emotional-based school avoidance, and complex behavioural or communication difficulties. Parents also described different routes to identification, from early diagnoses pre-school to situations where needs were not recognised or were misunderstood until the situation deteriorated or exclusions occurred.

Parents' Experiences of the IDP Process

Parents described a wide range of experiences with the IDP process, ranging from very smooth to very challenging.

In some cases, parents said that the schools led the process well: for example, one parent explained that the school had prepared the IDP, sought their views through a form and a meeting, and worked collaboratively to agree the plan, which they found clear and straightforward.

However, many parents reported a more negative experience which included delays, requests for an IDP being ignored, unclear processes, rewriting parts of the IDP themselves, meetings being cancelled or having to push repeatedly for an IDP to be created or updated. Some described submitting complaints or Freedom of Information requests to obtain information.

Parents reported variations in the quality of their child's IDP. Some parents felt their child's plan was thorough, reflective of needs, and helped their child get the support they needed, particularly in specialist settings. Others described IDPs that they felt were vague, lacked detail about the ALP to be provided, or was missing information. A few parents felt the IDP reflected what was possible for the school to deliver in terms of staffing and resources rather than what their child actually required. Parents' and learners' involvement in the IDP process and the PCP meetings was also reported to be mixed. Some felt fully included and able to share views during meetings, while others felt their contributions were only partially reflected, or that the child's views were not well supported or understood.

Views on Additional Learning Provision (ALP)

Opinions of the ALP recorded in the IDP ranged from very positive to very negative. Some parents, and particularly those with children in specialist settings, felt provision was well matched to need, highlighting autism-specific teaching, small classes and good sensory support. Others reported that their child received ALP that placed too much focus on behaviour, ALP that was too limited (such as half-day timetables), inconsistently delivered or not sufficiently tailored to their child's needs. Parents also reported that staffing levels and available space often shaped what could be provided, meaning planned small-group work or supported visits to reintegrate their child in an education setting did not always happen. In several cases, parents felt the ALP did not do enough to support their child's learning or academic progress.

Most parents reported that their child was not receiving ALP secured by an NHS body (sometimes called 'health ALP'). Of those whose children were receiving health ALP, provision included Occupational Therapy (OT) and SLT support. One parent reported that their child received NHS OT support delivered within the school. Another parent whose child had received SLT noted they were discharged from the service on the basis that the school should be able to support the child's level of SLT need.

Of the two parents interviewed that had children in a Welsh-medium school, only one was a parent of children receiving ALP. That parent reported significant challenges. They noted that they thought there was a shortage of Welsh-speaking staff and that most specialist support, including outreach provision, wellbeing interventions, and disclosure meetings, was delivered in English. This parent felt this inconsistency undermined the coherence of the support provided, with the system tending to "default to English".

Experiences of Communication and Support

Many of the parents reported feeling listened to, able to share their views and hold discussions with school about their child's needs. However, parents also reported time delays between discussing their child's needs and support being put in place, with some noting that securing appropriate ALP was sometimes a lengthy process and that they felt this did not always lead to effective support being implemented.

One parent whose child did not have an IDP expressed strong dissatisfaction regarding their child's needs not being met. They noted resourcing challenges in their child's school, particularly the lack of one-to-one time with a TA, a reliance on group sessions to support learners with ALN and children needing to wait for support. In addition, concerns regarding teachers not having the time to effectively plan and implement support were also expressed. Such challenges were thought to be compounded by staffing issues and teachers having additional duties and responsibilities within the school besides teaching.

Parents were asked about the extent to which they felt different services (such as education, health and social services) worked together effectively to meet their child's needs. All parents who had experience of collaboration between these services reported negative experiences. These parents noted a lack of communication and coordination amongst the different sectors, which had led to them "going round in circles with different agencies" and "having to be a bridge" between services. Furthermore, these parents indicated that this lack of communication and collaborative working impacted on the support their children received. Parents referred to examples such as delays in information being passed between organisations or reports not being shared.

Transitions Between Education Settings

Nearly all parents interviewed reported that their child had transitioned between educational settings, including between the following settings:

- primary to secondary school
- mainstream to special school
- mainstream to a specialist resource base or EOTAS provision
- an education setting in England to Wales

Parents' views on transition processes were varied, with some reporting that transitions between settings had gone well, whilst others noted they had experienced difficulties.

Of the parents who reported positive transitions, enhanced initial support to ensure a smooth transition, was identified as an enabling factor and an important benefit of their children having moved between settings. Most parents also reported being happy with the level of communication between themselves and each educational setting, noting that this enabled smooth transitions. However, some parents did not feel that the settings themselves, and in some cases the local authority, communicated well with each other or worked together effectively during the transition phase.

Not all parents reported positive experiences in new settings after transitions had occurred. One parent noted that, whilst their child, had settled in well to their new placement after moving from mainstream primary to a special school, they themselves were concerned about whether either of these settings was suitable for their child. This view was reflected by some other parents who expressed dissatisfaction with the provision in new settings. One parent noted that they had decided to remove their child from school due to their needs not being met. Another parent reported that they felt provision in the new setting was constrained by the resources and staff that were available, rather than being driven by their child's needs.

Numerous other factors were noted by parents as having negatively impacted on transitions between settings. These included:

- A perceived lack of understanding of their child's needs or staff being unfamiliar with a child's IDP in the new setting
- staffing shortages in new settings leading to ALP not being delivered
- transport difficulties with new settings being further away, particularly special schools
- little information shared on alternative provision for parents to make informed decisions

Furthermore, parents whose children had transitioned between different language settings felt that Welsh-medium support, delivered in Welsh language schools, was under-resourced compared to English-medium settings.

Parents' Understanding of the ALN System

Parents were asked whether they felt they understood the ALN system and if it had been clearly explained to them, for example, by an education practitioner, health professional, or support/advocacy organisation.

Most parents reported that they had found the system difficult to understand and navigate, particularly the ALN Code and processes, and different roles and responsibilities across the sectors (for example, the involvement of health professionals). Parents also reported that terminology and acronyms used in the ALN system could be confusing. A few parents reported that they had worked in education themselves and still found the system difficult to understand. These parents expressed concern for others who were trying to navigate the system without similar prior knowledge.

Some parents reported that they had not received any support and had to seek out information themselves to improve their understanding of the system. Others noted that they had received help which had been very beneficial. This included regular contact and explanation from ALNCos in their child's school and support from advocacy organisations.

Some parents perceived that educational settings were not always able to help and guide parents around the ALN system as they lacked relevant knowledge and understanding themselves, for instance about the ALN Code, leaving parents feeling unsupported.

A small number of parents interviewed had experience or recollection of the previous SEN system. One parent believed that the IDP was more individualised than their child's earlier Statement of SEN. Another parent felt that the transition to an IDP had made little practical difference because their child remained in the same specialist setting and support continued largely unchanged.

Challenging Decisions and Appeals

Parents' experiences of understanding and using their rights to challenge decisions varied considerably. A small number felt well informed, for example one parent noted that their child's IDP was routinely issued with clear written information about appeal routes and available support services, though they had not needed to use these. Others, however, reported having to research their rights independently, as they felt schools and local authorities had not explained the processes to them. Several parents described learning about their rights only through external organisations such as SNAP Cymru, or through their own professional knowledge or personal networks.

Six of the parents interviewed had challenged decisions about their child's ALN support or placement, including one who had taken their case to tribunal. Another parent had considered going to tribunal but was deterred by the anticipated costs of involving solicitors. One parent described challenging multiple decisions relating to their child's placement and IDP content; this parent explained that communication between the school and the local authority had been inconsistent, with each placing responsibility on the other and that, as a result, the process felt adversarial rather than collaborative. Another parent reported that

they had not received a response to formal requests for an IDP, and that they had to repeatedly ask for a response before eventually receiving support from advocacy services.

Across these cases, parents commonly described delays, unclear communication, and a lack of proactive guidance from statutory services.

Parents' Views on What Was Working Well and Less Well

Parents were invited to share their thoughts on which aspects of the ALN system they felt were working well. The principles that underpin the ALN system were welcomed by parents, alongside more holistic and inclusive approaches to teaching and support being possible through the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales.

Some parents reported strong relationships between parents and schools, with some reporting they had developed good links with teaching staff who they felt were committed to supporting their children. Several parents had positive views about their school's ALNCo and the important role they play in communicating with parents.

Parents were asked their thoughts on aspects of the ALN system they felt were not working well and needed to be improved. Poor communication and a perceived lack of consultation was raised, with examples of little communication between parents and school / local authority mentioned. One parent felt the school offered limited resources for home learning.

The varied approaches across different local authorities was also raised by parents, with a view that there should be a standardised approach across Wales through a national offer. Parents also reported poor coordination between services with some describing delays, missed deadlines, and a sense of being passed between the school and local authority with no clear ownership of decisions.

Parents were invited to provide additional comments on their views of the ALN system and their experience of it. Parents felt that teachers sometimes lacked knowledge and understanding of the ALN system, with concerns expressed that this meant some teachers did not know how to best support children with ALN.

Some parents felt there was a need for greater variety in the range of subjects available within schools, noting that this could benefit and better support children with ALN. Several examples were provided, such as cooking and gardening, as well as an increased focus on physical activity, health, and fitness. One parent of a child in primary school reported that PE lessons in their child's school were sometimes cancelled and they described a lack of opportunities for their child to participate in sports, due to limited physical space, despite their child finding enjoyment in sports-based learning.

Parents also expressed their desire to see more school-based after school clubs and trips, noting that these help to improve social interactions for children with ALN. Barriers were reported however, which parents felt prevented these activities from taking place. For example, a parent described how their child's rural school location made school trips difficult to undertake, further noting that they felt staff were already overstretched and unable to commit to running extracurricular activities.

5. Summary of key findings

The summary below is based on the findings presented in Chapter 3. In interpreting this summary, the limitations of the methodology (see Section 2) should be taken into account, notably the sample sizes and potential risk of sample bias.

Overall progress in implementing the ALN system

Collaboration between practitioners and professionals, both within and across sectors, was considered to be an aspect of the ALN system that was generally working well. Examples included multi-agency networks, collaboration between local authorities, FEIs and LHBs and collaboration between ALNCos within and across school clusters.

Person-centred practice was also considered to be working well and having a positive influence on relationships between schools, learners and parents and creating a more inclusive system.

Participants reported that systems that had been put in place for to support the implementation of the ALN reforms (e.g. online IDP systems, standardised forms and/or templates, professional learning for staff, regular network or panel meetings) were contributing to improved awareness and understanding of the ALN system.

Almost all participants reported that there were pressures on staff and organisational capacity to implement the ALN system, mainly because of challenges related to funding and increased workloads on practitioners as a result of implementing the ALN system.

Meeting statutory deadlines was reported to be a challenge in some cases, particularly in securing the input of all relevant practitioners and professionals within the time limits.

Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and planning processes

In each of the local areas included in this study, the PCP approach was generally viewed positively by representatives from all sectors. Participants from all sectors welcomed the involvement of learners in discussions about their needs and the opportunity to involve them meaningfully in the development of IDPs.

Representatives from all sectors highlighted that IDPs and planning processes had led to substantial additional workload for staff including, but not limited to, ALNCos.

The engagement of health professionals in IDP planning processes and PCP meetings was noted by all sectors to be a particular challenge, often due to time constraints and their limited availability.

IDPs were viewed by schools and FEI participants as being holistic and were felt to play an important role in ensuring that learner needs, intended outcomes and aspirations were meaningfully captured.

Concerns relating to the quality of some IDPs were noted by local authority and school representatives. These concerns related mainly to inconsistencies in the identification of ALN, ALP and learner outcomes highlighted. Some local authority and school representatives also reported a lack of information being included in some IDPs on wider-contextual factors that were relevant to learners with more complex needs.

Participants felt that the long lead-in time for reviews positively benefitted planning processes.

Additional Learning Provision (ALP)

Participants from each sector in all areas noted variation and inconsistency in understandings and interpretations of ALP, including ALP secured by an NHS body. They highlighted that this variance could affect approaches to securing appropriate provision and the setting of targets in IDPs.

Participants from all sectors reported working collaboratively within their clusters and regions to agree consistent approaches to ALP definitions and provision where possible, with school and FEI representatives feeling that guidance to clarify the definition of ALP would also be helpful.

Participants from all local authority areas felt there was sufficient ALP to meet most learner needs, although some school representatives noted that resource constraints, such as funding and time pressures, hindered their ability to deliver ALP effectively. LHB representatives also noted challenges in providing ALP via CAMHS and therapies due to capacity issues.

Local authority and school representatives reported significant challenges in accessing specialist provision for learners requiring more complex ALP and support due to a lack of availability.

Representatives from local authorities, schools and LHBs generally felt there was sufficient knowledge and skills to deliver ALP, with some local authorities designating teams to oversee ALP and investing in professional learning for their staff.

School and FEI representatives noted barriers in delivering ALP, such as increased workloads, a lack of staff capacity, and inadequate physical environments. Challenges were also noted in all sectors regarding securing Welsh-medium specialists to provide ALP, potentially leading to inequity amongst learners.

Representatives from early years settings noted their main challenge regarding providing ALP was staff capacity due to requirements of staff-to-learner ratios.

Statutory roles

Participants generally viewed the statutory roles of the ALNCo, EY ALNLO and DECLO positively. The roles and responsibilities of each statutory role were generally well-understood, and participants appreciated that the roles could facilitate collaboration both within and between sectors and settings.

Participants across all sectors expressed concern about the workload of individuals in the statutory roles. For ALNCOs and EY ALNLOs, participants noted that the workload was heavily administrative, and that this had a negative effect on their ability to complete other necessary tasks. In some schools/settings, the heavy workload was reported to have led to a high turnover of staff and negative effects on well-being. For DECLOs, participants indicated that the remit of the role is too large for one person.

Some settings had introduced additional ALNCo or EY ALNLO support roles, or created shared roles, to alleviate the burden of a heavy workload on one individual.

Collaboration and information sharing

Generally, collaboration between practitioners and professionals across different sectors was reported to be working well by representatives interviewed across the different sectors.

Factors that were reported to enable good working relationships between sectors included levels of support provided by local authorities to schools and FEIs; the introduction of the DECLO role; early years panels and forums which had supported the early identification of ALN; opportunities for schools to network with other schools; post-16 steering groups; and effective online data sharing systems.

Factors that were reported to act as barriers to effective collaboration between sectors included lack of capacity, particularly amongst LHB practitioners, to input into IDPs or attend PCP meetings; different interpretations of the definition of ALP between sectors; lack of consistent approaches, across local authorities in particular; and a lack of understanding amongst school practitioners around the duties relating to section 20 referrals.

Online systems were seen as important to enable efficient and effective data sharing, both between and within sectors. Representatives across the different sectors reported that online systems had helped to clarify roles, improve the quality of IDPs and aid information flow between and within sectors.

Disagreements and appeals

Participants across local authorities, schools, further education institutions and health boards reported mixed experiences in relation to disagreements and appeals. Some participants noted that earlier collaboration with families had led to improvements, while others described an increase in formal disputes, appeals, and legal challenges. These

cases were reported to be time-consuming and placed pressure on staff and resources, particularly in areas where parents increasingly sought legal representation.

Schools and settings varied in their experiences, with some resolving disagreements informally, while others faced significant emotional and administrative burdens due to appeals.

Health board representatives also reported increasing involvement in tribunal cases, often responding to private healthcare reports. However, many felt it was still too early to identify clear trends in disagreements.

Participants identified several underlying causes of disagreement within the ALN system, including differing interpretations of ALP, rising parental expectations, and increased use of legal representation. Disputes commonly centred on decisions about the type or level of ALP, placement in specialist provision, and the content of IDPs.

Some school representatives expressed concern that fear of tribunal proceedings could lead to agreeing to IDPs unnecessarily. Misunderstandings about what IDPs set out, such as parents' assumptions around funding or one-to-one support, also contributed to tensions.

Health board staff raised concerns about the time demands of legal processes and the lack of clarity around their role in appeals. Despite these challenges, there were examples of more collaborative approaches, particularly where person-centred planning supported early dialogue and helped manage expectations.

Bilingual system

Most Welsh-medium schools and settings serving areas with large numbers of Welsh-speaking families reported that they had sufficient capacity to be able to deliver ALP in Welsh and meet their learners' needs. Some challenges were reported, specifically fewer resources to support reading and literacy interventions and resources for learners with dyslexia.

Local authorities and LHBs described their efforts to ensure that they had sufficient bilingual capacity to meet the needs of learners but did highlight some shortages. A lack of Welsh-speaking capacity was reported in some sectors, specifically speech and language therapists and educational psychologists.

English-medium schools and FEIs noted that they had not received requests for ALP through the medium of Welsh. Some FE representatives reported having academic and support staff in place with the Welsh language skills to be able to offer support to learners with ALN while others noted challenges they had encountered in seeking to recruit Welsh-speaking staff, particularly support staff.

Wider system factors

Interviewees reported that there were additional costs related to implementing the ALN system, specifically for appointing staff to administer processes relating to IDPs, new staff roles, online IDP systems and professional learning. Schools, early years settings and FEI representatives reported additional costs related to releasing their ALNCo to undertake activities relating to the administration of IDPs.

There were mixed views among local authorities and schools about the transparency of funding processes. Some felt that funding mechanisms were unclear, while others felt they had become more transparent.

Participants across all sectors reported having accessed professional development opportunities relating to the ALN system. Participants identified priority areas for future professional learning which included training on definitions of ALN and ALP, writing IDPs and training on specific types of ALN.

Participants reported that some learners with SEN under the previous system (particularly school action and school action plus) were not defined as having ALN under the new system because schools were now supporting them through provision that could ordinarily be provided (often referred to as 'universal' provision).

Local authority, school and early years setting representatives reported that the ALN and curriculum reforms were aligned in terms of their ethos and aims, particularly the focus on individualised learning and learner-centred approaches. However, participants felt that achieving the aims of both reforms was difficult in practice because of a lack of staff capacity.

Views of learners

Learners generally had positive views on their school or college experiences, with most reporting that they enjoyed school or college and felt they were learning new things and making progress in their learning. Secondary learners had more mixed views than those in primary and FE settings but still provided examples of things they enjoyed at school. Learners generally appreciated the help they received from teachers/staff and enjoyed lessons with a more practical focus (e.g. cooking, woodwork, singing, drama, and art).

Learners described receiving a wide range of types of support with their learning, including one-to-one support from a TA, access to quiet spaces, access to staff or spaces to talk about any concerns, learning in smaller classes, regular tailored or targeted learning sessions, outdoor learning, school trips and digital resources. Learners generally felt they received the support they needed in school or college.

A small number of secondary and college learners could recall a PCP meeting taking place. These learners generally felt they had been listened to, with some recalling that they had received more help after the meeting. A small number of learners had less positive experiences, such as a teacher not attending the meeting as anticipated, or no changes

being made following the meeting. Learners generally reported feeling well-supported and that they had access to staff should they wish to discuss any concerns.

Views of parents

Parents reported considerable variation in their experiences of the ALN system, ranging from highly positive to very challenging. While some parents described strong relationships with schools and ALNCoS, particularly in specialist settings where communication was frequent and planning was consistent, others reported delays in securing IDPs, uncertainty about processes and plans that did not fully capture their child's needs.

Views on IDP quality and the delivery of ALP were similarly mixed. A number of parents felt that IDPs were vague, insufficiently detailed, or shaped more by the staffing and resource constraints of schools than by the needs of the child. Parents in Welsh-medium settings also raised concerns about limited access to Welsh-speaking specialists, with some reporting that support defaulted to English.

Parents frequently highlighted challenges in communication and coordination, both with schools and across education, health and social care. Several described having to "bridge the gaps" between services, experiencing delays in information sharing, or having to make repeated requests for information. Parents also noted difficulties navigating the ALN system, which was seen as complex and not helped by variable understanding among school staff, and the need to find out information themselves. Several said they had relied on advocacy organisations for guidance and were grateful for the support received.

Annex A: Profile of the sample

This section includes additional information on the profile of the sample (See Chapter 3).

Sampling approach for area studies based in six local authorities

Six local authorities were selected based on the following criteria.

Criterion 1: Geography: one local authority from six geographic regions of Wales.

- North-west (NW): Ynys Môn, Gwynedd, Conwy
- North-east (NE): Denbighshire, Wrexham, Flint
- Mid and west (MW): Ceredigion, Powys, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire
- Southern valleys (SV): Torfaen, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Merthyr Tydfil
- Southern city (SC): Swansea, Cardiff, Newport
- Southern non-city (SNC): Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend, Monmouthshire, Vale of Glamorgan

Criterion 2: Local authorities covering at least four of the seven LHBs

- Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (responsible for NHS services covering Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen)
- Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (responsible for NHS services covering Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire and Wrexham)
- Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (responsible for NHS services covering Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan).
- Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (responsible for NHS services covering Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf)
- Hywel Dda University Health Board (responsible for NHS services in Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire)
- Powys Teaching Health Board (responsible for NHS services in Powys)
- Swansea Bay University Health Board (responsible for NHS services in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot, as well as some specialist regional services)

Both the north-east and north-west regions are covered by Betsi Cadwaladr LHB.

Criterion 3: Percentage of all learners who have ALN or SEN

- Include at least two local authorities with a higher percentage of learners with ALN (15.0% or more) than the overall percentage for Wales (13.2 per cent)
- Include at least one local authority with a similar percentage of learners with ALN (11.5%-14.9%) to the overall percentage for Wales (13.2 per cent)
- Include at least two local authorities with a lower percentage of learners with ALN (below 11.5%) than the overall percentage for Wales (13.2 per cent)

Criterion 4: Percentage of learners with ALN who have IDPs (the categories below are broad because of the variation between local authorities, ranging from 5% to 44%).

- Include two local authorities with a higher percentage of ALN learners with IDPs (over 26% of those with ALN) than the overall percentage for Wales (18.9 per cent)
- Include two local authorities with a similar percentage of ALN learners with IDPs (12.0-25.9% of those with ALN) to the overall percentage for Wales (18.9 per cent)
- Include two local authorities with a lower percentage of ALN learners with IDPs (below 11.9% of those with ALN) to the overall percentage for Wales (18.9 per cent)

Based on data from Pupil Level Annual School Census for 2022/23: summary data by local authority (pupils aged 5 to 15 in primary, middle or secondary schools)

Criterion 5: Size (based on the number of learners)

- Include at least one local authority with a higher number of learners (over 12,000) than the Wales average (9,109)
- Include at least one local authority with a number of learners (7,000-11,999) near to the than the Wales average (9,109)
- Include at least one local authority with a lower number of learners (0-6999) than the Wales average (9,109)

Based on data from Pupil Level Annual School Census for 2022/23. See [Pupils by local authority, region and school governance](#)

Criterion 6: Percentage of Welsh speakers

- Include at least one local authority with a higher percentage of Welsh speakers (over 27%) than the overall percentage for Wales (17.8 per cent)
- Include at least one local authority with a lower percentage of Welsh speakers (below 14%) than the overall percentage for Wales (17.8 per cent)

Based on 2021 Census data

Selecting local authorities

Within each of the six geographic regions (criterion 1 above), local authorities were randomly ranked, and the first local authority was selected from each region. This list of six local authorities (one per region) was then reviewed to verify whether each of the criteria above were satisfied across the whole sample. If a local authority within a given region did not satisfy one or more of the criteria, then this local authority was excluded from the selection and the next local authority from this region was selected until all criteria could be met across the six selected areas.

Selecting schools

The research aimed to engage with school representatives in four settings in each local authority: one primary, one secondary or all-through school, one FEI which served the local authority and one special school or PRU. Schools and settings were selected based on the sampling criteria below with the aim to engage 24 settings including:

- 12 schools
 - 6 primaries
 - 2 Welsh-medium/dual stream
 - 4 English-medium
 - 6 secondaries / all-through
 - 2 Welsh-medium/bilingual
 - 4 English-medium
- 6 FEIs
- 3 special schools

- 3 PRUs.

At least three schools in rural areas and three with local authority designated special classes (according to PLASC data) were also included in the sample.

In addition to the above criteria, schools were selected to ensure an appropriate spread according to the percentage of learners with ALN/SEN (an indicator of overall levels of ALN in the school), IDPs (as an indicator of the extent to which their learners had transferred to the ALN system) and eFSM (as an indicator of socio-economic deprivation).

Published data from the 2023 PLASC on the percentage of learners with ALN/SEN was available for 377 of the 405 schools in the six local authorities selected for the area studies. Across all six local authorities, the data showed that:

- In 30% of these schools, fewer than 4% of learners had ALN/SEN (defined as low for this research)
- In 38% of these schools, between 4% and 14% of learners had ALN/SEN (defined as medium for this research)
- In 32% of these schools, more than 14% of learners had ALN/SEN (defined as high for this research)

Published data from the 2023 PLASC on the percentage of learners with IDPs was available for 226 of the 405 schools in the six local authorities selected for the area studies. Across all six local authorities, the data shows that:

- In 40% of these schools, there were no learners with IDPs (defined as low for this research)
- In 27% of these schools, 0.1-3.0% of learners had IDPs (defined as medium for this research)
- In 33% of these schools, more than 3% of learners had IDPs (defined as high for this research)

Published data from the 2023 PLASC on the percentage of learners eFSM was available for 367 of the 405 schools in the six local authorities selected for the area studies. Across all six local authorities, the data shows that:

- In 35% of these schools, fewer than 15% of learners were eFSM (defined as low for this research)

- In 37% of these schools, between 15% but fewer than 28% of learners were eFSM (defined as medium for this research)
- In 28% of these schools, more than 28% of learners had IDPs (defined as high for this research)

The sample sought to ensure that at least 3 of the mainstream schools that were recruited were within each of the low, medium and high categories.

Table 4. Number of research participants from schools with specific characteristics relating to ALN and eFSM

Category	Target number of mainstream schools	Actual number of mainstream schools engaged
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Percentage of learners with ALN/SEN

Low (0-4.0%)	At least 3	3
Medium (4.1-14%)	At least 3	3
High (14.1% or above)	At least 3	8

Percentage of learners with IDPs

Low (None)	At least 3	3
Medium (0.1-3.0%)	At least 3	5
High (3.1% or above)	At least 3	6

Percentage of learners eFSM

Low (0-15.0%)	At least 3	6
Medium (15.1-28.0%)	At least 3	3
High (28.1% and above)	At least 3	5

Initial discussions with Directors of Education and/or Heads of Inclusion explored whether there were factors which should influence whether specific schools or settings should be invited to participate or not (e.g. recent senior leadership changes within schools or settings, other planned research or inspection activity affecting specific schools or settings).

Annex B: Research tools

ALN Evaluation Topic Guides

Introduction

The Welsh Government has commissioned Arad to undertake an evaluation of the ALN system over the next four years. Part of this evaluation involves six area studies, involving qualitative research with practitioners in schools, PRUs and FEIs, professionals in LAs and LHBs as well as parents/carers and learners and young people. We intend to conduct two rounds of interviews in these areas, with as many as possible of the same individuals taking part in a second round of interviews

We are very grateful to you for taking part in the research. Your participation in the evaluation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time. A privacy notice has been provided to you when you were invited to take part and we would be happy to share this with you again if required. None of the information you provide to the evaluation will be attributed to you or your organisation, and you will not be named in any publications or reports.

(i) For Schools/Settings

Section 1: Overall progress in implementing the ALN system

- 1. How would you summarise overall progress in implementing the ALN system?**
 - What are your general reflections on what is working well?
 - What has worked less well so far? Have you experienced any barriers to implementing the ALN system? Have the reforms led to any unintended consequences?

Section 2: Implementation of specific aspects of the ALN system

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

- 2. To date, what effect have the reforms to the ALN system had on the quality of planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?**
 - Is the ALN system – specifically arrangements to support IDPs – improving planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?
 - In what ways are the needs, views, wishes and feelings of learners and young people at the heart of the planning process?
 - How is your approach / IDP process communicated to parents/carers and learners/young people?
- 3. What is working well in relation to processes and arrangements to support IDPs in your school/PRU?**

- What would you say are the critical / key elements in ensuring that IDPs are developed in line with the requirements set out in the ALN Code?
 - Are there challenges to getting IDPs in place for each learner and young person who needs one? If so, what are the main challenges faced in your school/**PRU**?
 - Are there challenges in meeting the timescale requirements for producing IDPs, as set out in the ALN Code?
- 4. Do you feel that there is clarity in terms of the roles, responsibilities, and functions of each partner across the system and how they are expected to work together to support IDPs?**
- In your experience, how well are partners across the system collaborating to support IDP processes?
 - Are you/colleagues able to access appropriate professional learning to support carrying out IDP processes?
 - Is there sufficient resource / capacity available in your school and/or LA to support the IDP process specifically?
 - How are decisions made about cases in which responsibility for preparing an IDP is transferred from a school/setting to the local authority?
- 5. How effectively are IDP review arrangements currently working?**
- 6. ALNCo specific questions (to be asked of ALNCoS only)**
- Thinking about your ALNCo role specifically, what is working well in relation to implementing the ALNCo role in your school/PRU? Have you faced any challenges?
 - What additional staff resources are available to support you with your ALNCo responsibilities? What support do they provide?

Additional learning provision (ALP)

- 7. To what extent is there a consistent interpretation of ALN and ALP in your school/PRU, the local area and across the system more widely?**
- How helpful is the ALN Code in ensuring that ALN and ALP are being interpreted consistently?
 - Is sufficient advice and guidance available to practitioners and professionals to help identify ALP that is consistent with the definition and provisions set out in the Code?
 - **Is there any additional advice or guidance that you feel would be beneficial?**
- 8. To what extent is your school/ PRUs able to provide a range of ALP that meets the needs of children and young people?**
- Are there challenges in meeting particular types of ALN in your school/setting and the local area?

9. In your experience, do practitioners in your setting currently have the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to identify ALN and support the delivery of ALP in your school/ PRU?

- Is there any particular type of professional learning or guidance you feel is needed to ensure that leaders and/or practitioners across the system are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support learners and young people with ALN?

Collaboration and information sharing

10. To what extent has the transformation programme work improved collaboration and sharing of knowledge between professionals and sectors?

- In what ways has this been achieved? (e.g. through the creation of new statutory EY ALNLO, ALNCO, DECLO roles)

11. Has collaboration between professionals and sectors improved since the ALN reforms have been implemented?

- To what extent is your school/ PRU collaborating effectively with others, both in your cluster and outside of your cluster (e.g. through other networks)?
- When required, are education, health and social services able to work effectively together to deliver person-centred support to children and young people?
- What have been the enablers / barriers to collaboration and multi-sector working?

Appeals process

12. Based on experiences in your school/ PRU, do you think that the reformed ALN system is less adversarial than the previous SEN system?

- Please give reasons for your answer. Are there fewer disagreements with parents and carers? If so, why/what changes have led to this?
- Are disagreements resolved earlier? If so, why/what changes have led to this?

13. To date, are any apparent trends emerging regarding the reasons behind disagreements and appeals? (such as disagreements over ALN identified, or disagreements over the ALP outlined in the IDP)

A bilingual system

14. How is your school/ PRU progressing with implementing a bilingual ALN system? (ask where relevant depending on type of school/PRU)

- Is there sufficient capacity/resource/expertise for learners' and young peoples' needs to be met in the Welsh language in your school/ PRU:
 - a. With regards to the IDP process?
 - b. With regards to the provision of ALP?
 - c. With regards to communicating with parents and carers?

15. (Where relevant) Is there sufficient support, guidance and resource in Welsh-medium schools/ PRUs for the effective implementation of the ALN system?

Section 3: Inputs and wider system factors

16. Are there any additional costs to your school/ PRU which are associated with implementing the new ALN system (i.e. costs which were not previously incurred under the SEN system)?

- If so, are these financial costs (e.g. of ALP) or costs in terms of staff time (e.g. attending meetings)?
- Do you feel that the way in which funding is allocated to support the ALN system is transparent?
- Are there any changes that you think would be beneficial to the way that funding is allocated or administered, either by the Welsh Government or by the LA?
- Does the funding your school / PRU receives allow you to meet the needs of ALN learners as identified in IDPs?

17. Earlier we spoke about professional learning regarding IDPs. In addition to this, are there other workforce development needs relating to the ALN system which your school / PRU has identified or responded to?

18. Have there been any concerns raised about a negative impact on workforce capacity and staff well-being in light of the ALN reforms, particularly regarding ALNCos?

19. How well aligned are the ALN reforms with wider strategies and priorities in education and health, including the CfW reforms?

- **What are your reflections on the impact of the parallel implementation of the curriculum and ALN reforms?**

Section 4: Specific schools/ PRU questions

20. Are you involved in any ALN-specific networks (local/regional/national) which have assisted you in implementing the ALN reforms?

- To what extent do these networks support the sharing of good practice, practitioner confidence and skills development?

21. To what extent does the ALN system support transition arrangements between educational settings (such as mainstream/specialist provision/FEI) and are there any challenges associated with transitions?

- **(Probe in relation to transitions between phases, sectors, LAs and cross-border where applicable)**

22. Welsh Government data shows a Wales-wide fall in SEN/ALN pupil numbers since the introduction of the ALN act. Have there been any notable changes

in (name of school/ PRU) in relation to the numbers of learners and young people identified as having SEN or ALN?

- If so, what might account for this increase / decrease?

Section 5: Any other comments

As part of the evaluation, we are hoping to speak with learners and young people to understand the impact of the ALN reforms from their perspective. Are there any specific considerations we should take into account when speaking with learners and young people, and do you have any suggestions about the best way(s) for us to engage with them?

Are there any other comments you wish to share on the ALN reforms and implementation in your school/ PRU?

(ii) For FEIs

Section 1: Overall progress in implementing the ALN system

1. How would you summarise overall progress in implementing the ALN system?

- What are your general reflections on what is working well?
- What has worked less well so far? Have you experienced any barriers to implementing the ALN system? Have the reforms led to any unintended consequences?

Section 2: Implementation of specific aspects of the ALN system

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

2. To date, what effect have the reforms to the ALN system had on the quality of planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?

- Is the ALN system – specifically arrangements to support IDPs – improving planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?
- In what ways are the needs, views, wishes and feelings of learners and young people at the heart of the planning process?
- How is your approach / IDP process communicated to parents/carers and learners/young people?

3. What is working well in relation to processes and arrangements to support IDPs in your FEI?

- What would you say are the critical / key elements in ensuring that IDPs are developed in line with the requirements set out in the ALN Code?
- Are there challenges to getting IDPs in place for each learner and young person who needs one? If so, what are the main challenges faced in your FEI?

- Are there challenges in meeting the timescale requirements for producing IDPs, as set out in the ALN Code?

4. Do you feel that there is clarity in terms of the roles, responsibilities, and functions of each partner across the system and how they are expected to work together to support IDPs?

- In your experience, how well are partners across the system collaborating to support IDP processes?
- Are you / colleagues able to access appropriate professional learning to support carrying out IDP processes?
- Is there sufficient resource / capacity available in your FEI and local area to support the IDP process specifically?

5. How effectively are IDP review arrangements currently working?

6. ALNCo specific questions (to be asked of ALNCoS only)

- Thinking about your ALNCo role specifically, what is working well in relation to implementing the ALNCo role in your FEI? Have you faced any challenges?
- What additional staff resources are available to support you with your ALNCo responsibilities? What support do they provide?

Additional learning provision (ALP)

7. To what extent is there a consistent interpretation of ALN and ALP in your FEI, your local area and across the system more widely?

- How helpful is the ALN Code in ensuring that ALN and ALP are being interpreted consistently?
- Is sufficient advice and guidance available to practitioners and professionals to help identify ALP that is consistent with the definition and provisions set out in the Code?
- Is there any additional advice or guidance that you feel would be beneficial?

8. To what extent is your FEI able to provide a range of ALP that meets the needs of young people?

- Are there challenges in meeting particular types of ALN in your FEI and your local area?

9. In your experience, do practitioners currently have the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to identify ALN and support the delivery of ALP in your FEI?

- Is there any particular type of professional learning or guidance you feel is needed to ensure that leaders and / or practitioners across the system are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support learners and young people with ALN?

Collaboration and information sharing

10. To what extent has the transformation programme work improved collaboration and sharing of knowledge between professionals and sectors?

- In what ways has this been achieved? (e.g. the creation of new statutory EYALNCO, ALNCO, DECLO roles)

11. Has collaboration between professionals and sectors improved since the ALN reforms have been implemented?

- When required, are education, health and social services able to work effectively together to deliver person-centred support to children and young people?
- What have been the enablers / barriers to multi-sector working?

Appeals process

12. Based on experiences in your FEI, do you think that the reformed ALN system is less adversarial than the previous SEN system?

- Please give reasons for your answer. Are there fewer disagreements with parents and carers? If so, why/what changes have led to this?
- Are disagreements resolved earlier? If so, why/what changes have led to this?

13. To date, are any apparent trends emerging regarding the reasons behind disagreements and appeals? (such as disagreements over ALN identified or disagreements over ALP, as outlined in the IDP)

A bilingual system

14. How is your FEI progressing with implementing a bilingual ALN system?

- Is there sufficient capacity/resource/expertise for learners' and young peoples' needs to be met in the Welsh language in your FEI:
 - a. With regards to the IDP process?
 - b. With regards to the provision of ALP?
 - c. With regards to communicating with parents and carers?

Section 3: Inputs and wider system factors

15. Are there any additional costs to your FEI which are associated with implementing the new ALN system? (i.e. costs which were not previously incurred under the SEN system)?

- If so, are these financial costs (e.g. of ALP) or costs in terms of staff time (e.g. attending meetings)?
- Do you feel that the way in which funding is allocated to support the ALN system is transparent?
- Are there any changes that you think would be beneficial in the way that funding is allocated or administered, either by the Welsh Government or by the LA?
- Does the funding your FEI receives allow you to meet the needs of ALN learners and young people as identified in IDPs?

16. Earlier we spoke about professional learning regarding IDPs. In addition to this, are there other workforce development needs relating to the ALN system which your FEI has identified or responded to?
17. Have there been any concerns raised about a negative impact on workforce capacity and staff well-being in light of the ALN reforms, particularly regarding those with ALN-specific roles such as ALN Managers, ALNCos?
18. How well aligned are the ALN reforms with wider strategies and priorities in education and health?

Section 4: Specific FEI questions

19. With the transfer of post-16 responsibility from Welsh Government to LAs, have any issues arisen which may impact equitable access to education and training for this cohort of learners and young people? For example, regarding support and guidance, access to funding.
 - o What is working well so far?
 - o Have there been specific difficulties?
20. To what extent does the ALN system support transition arrangements between educational settings (such as mainstream/specialist provision/FEI) and are there any challenges associated with transitions?
21. Are you involved in any ALN networks (local/regional/national) which have assisted you in implementing the ALN reforms?
 - o To what extent do these networks support the sharing of good practice, practitioner confidence and skills development?

Section 5: Any other comments

As part of the evaluation, we are hoping to speak with learners and young people to understand the impact of the ALN reforms from their perspective. Are there any specific considerations we should take into account when speaking with learners and young people, and do you have any suggestions about the best way(s) for us to engage with them?

Are there any other comments you wish to share on the ALN reforms and implementation in your FEI?

(iii) For Local Authorities (LAs)

Section 1: Overall progress in implementing the ALN system

1. How would you summarise overall progress in implementing the ALN system?

- What are your general reflections on what is working well?
- What has worked less well so far? Have you experienced any barriers to implementing the ALN system? Have the reforms led to any unintended consequences?

Section 2: Implementation of specific aspects of the ALN system

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

2. To date, what effect have the reforms to the ALN system had on the quality of planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?

- Is the ALN system – specifically arrangements to support IDPs – improving planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?
- In what ways are the needs, views, wishes and feelings of learners and young people at the heart of the planning process?
- **(If interviewee has responsibility for, or is involved in, processes associated with LA maintained IDPs)** For LA maintained IDPs, how is your approach / process communicated to parents/carers and learners/young people?

3. What is working well in relation to processes and arrangements to support IDPs in your local authority, and what systems are in place to support this?

- What would you say are the critical / key elements in ensuring that IDPs are developed in line with the requirements set out in the ALN Code?
- Are there challenges to getting IDPs in place for each learner and young person who needs one? If so, what are the main challenges faced in your LA?
- Are there challenges in meeting the timescale requirements for producing IDPs, as set out in the ALN Code?
- Do you have an online IDP system and, if so, how effectively is this working currently?

4. Do you feel that there is clarity in terms of the roles, responsibilities, and functions of each partner across the system and how they are expected to work together to support IDPs?

- In your experience, how well are partners across the system collaborating to support IDP processes?
- Are you/colleagues able to access appropriate professional learning to support carrying out IDP processes?
- Is there sufficient resource / capacity available in your local area to support the IDP process specifically?
- How are decisions made about the cases in which responsibility for preparing an IDP is transferred from a school/setting to the local authority?

5. How effectively are IDP review arrangements currently working?

Additional learning provision (ALP)

- 6. To what extent is there a consistent interpretation of ALN and ALP in your local area and across the system more widely?**
- How helpful is the ALN Code in ensuring that ALN and ALP are being interpreted consistently?
 - Is sufficient advice and guidance available to practitioners and professionals to help identify ALP that is consistent with the definition and provisions set out in the Code?
- 7. To what extent are schools and settings able to provide a range of ALP that meets the needs of children and young people?**
- Are there challenges in meeting particular types of ALN in your local area?
- 8. In your experience, do practitioners currently have the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to identify ALN and support the delivery of ALP in schools and settings?**
- Is there any particular type of professional learning or guidance you feel is needed to ensure that leaders and/or practitioners across the system are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support learners and young people with ALN?

Collaboration and information sharing

- 9. To what extent has the transformation programme work improved collaboration and sharing of knowledge between professionals and sectors?**
- In what ways has this been achieved? (such as the creation of new statutory EY ALNLO, ALNCO, DECLO roles)
- 10. Has collaboration between professionals and sectors improved since the ALN reforms have been implemented?**
- Are education, health and social services able to work effectively together to deliver person-centred support to children and young people?
 - What have been the enablers / barriers to multi-sector working?

Appeals process

- 11. Based on experiences in your local area, do you think that the reformed ALN system is less adversarial than the previous SEN system?**
- Please give reasons for your answer. Are there fewer disagreements with parents and carers? If so, why/what changes have led to this?
 - Are disagreements resolved earlier? If so, why/what changes have led to this?
- 12. To date, are any apparent trends emerging regarding the reasons behind disagreements and appeals?** (such as disagreements over ALN identified or disagreements over ALP, as outlined in the IDP)
- 13. Has the LA taken over maintaining IDPs due to disagreements?**
- Is there sufficient resource/capacity to do this?

- Does this present challenges for the local authority? (such as training/knowledge of staff, communicating with parents)

A bilingual system

14. How is the local authority progressing with implementing a bilingual ALN system?

- Is there sufficient capacity/resource/expertise for learners' and young peoples' needs to be met in the Welsh language in your local authority:
- With regards to the IDP process?
- With regards to the provision of ALP?
- With regards to communicating with parents and carers?

15. Is there sufficient support, guidance and resource in Welsh-medium schools/settings for the effective implementation of the ALN system?

Section 3: Inputs and wider system factors

16. Are there any additional costs to your LA which are associated with implementing the new ALN system? (i.e. costs which were not previously incurred under the SEN system)?

- Are these additional costs reflected in the funding allocations provided by Welsh Government to LAs?

17. Evidence points to the existence of concerns around the transparency of funding allocations to support the ALN system. For example, Estyn (2023) reported a lack of clarity amongst school leaders in relation to how local authorities determine budgets for ALN. What are your reflections on this? Do you think any changes could be made to improve schools' understanding of how funding for ALN is allocated to your LA, and by your LA?

18. Earlier we spoke about professional learning regarding IDPs. In addition to this, are there other workforce development needs relating to the ALN system which the local authority has identified or responded to?

19. Have there been any concerns raised about a negative impact on workforce capacity and staff well-being in light of the ALN reforms, particularly regarding those with ALN-specific roles such as ALN Managers, ALNCos?

20. How well aligned are the ALN reforms with wider strategies and priorities in education and health, including the CfW reforms?

Section 4: Specific LA questions

21. Since the ALN reforms have been introduced, have there been changes to how the local authority works with FEIs in securing equitable access to education and training for post-16 ALN learners and young people?

- What is working well?
- Have there been difficulties?

22. Under the ALN reforms, responsibility for post-16 specialist placements will transfer from Welsh Government to local authorities. How far along are you with planning and implementing this transition? Do you foresee any particular challenges with this transfer:

- With regard to engaging with Independent Special Post-16 Institutions?
- With regard to the funding of this provision?

23. Welsh Government data shows a Wales-wide fall in SEN/ALN pupil numbers since the introduction of the ALN act. Have there been any notable changes in your LA in relation to the numbers of learners and young people identified as having SEN or ALN?

- If so, what might account for this increase / decrease?

Early years (including role of EY ALNLO)

24. How would you describe progress to date in coordinating the local authority's functions in relation to the ALNLO cohort, i.e. provision for ALN system for children under compulsory school age who are not attending maintained schools?

- How are the structures and systems working within the local authority to support the ALNLO cohort? What is working well? Have you faced any challenges?
- Is there clarity among those who work with the ALNLO cohort in relation to the two aspects of the EY ALNLO role – the inward facing and outward facing roles?
- What arrangements are in place to support the preparation and maintenance of IDPs for the ALNLO cohort? How well are these arrangements working to date?
- Are there sufficient resources in place in the LA to manage referrals of children in the ALNLO cohort who may have ALN?
- How does the LA / the EY ALNLO work with others to facilitate or support the early identification of needs?
- How does the LA / the EY ALNLO support children in transitioning smoothly into maintained schools?
- How effective are partnerships and collaborative working arrangements with others who work with the ALNLO cohort (e.g. with health professionals, schools, third sector, social care, umbrella organisations etc)? Are there any examples of good partnership working to support the ALNLO cohort? Are there any aspects where partnership working could be improved?

Section 5: Any other comments

Are there any other comments you wish to share on the ALN reforms and implementation in your local authority?

(iv) For Local Health Boards (LHBs)

Section 1: Overall progress in implementing the ALN system

1. How would you summarise overall progress in implementing the ALN system?

- What are your general reflections on what is working well?
- What has worked less well so far? Have you experienced any barriers to implementing the ALN system? Have the reforms led to any unintended consequences?

Section 2: Implementation of specific aspects of the ALN system

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

2. To date, what effect have the reforms to the ALN system had on the quality of planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?

- Is the ALN system – specifically arrangements to support IDPs – improving planning and provision for learners and young people with ALN?
- In what ways are the needs, views, wishes and feelings of learners and young people at the heart of the planning process?
- What involvement do you have with parents/carers and learners/young people regarding IDP processes?

3. What is working well in relation to processes and arrangements to support IDPs in your LHB?

- Are there challenges to LHBs contributing to IDPs, when required? If so, what are the main challenges faced in your LHB?
- Are there challenges for the LHB in contributing to IDPs in a timely way that enables other organisations (e.g. schools, FEIs, LAs) to meet the timescale requirements for producing IDPs, as set out in the ALN Code?
- How are invitations to attend PCP meetings to develop or review IDPs managed by the LHB? Is there a particular approach taken to determining whether it is appropriate for LHB staff to attend a PCP meeting?
- What are your reflections on the role of health professionals in attending PCP meetings?

4. Do you feel that there is clarity in terms of the roles, responsibilities, and functions of each partner across the system and how they are expected to work together to support IDPs?

- In your experience, how well are partners across the system collaborating to support IDP processes?

- Are you/colleagues able to access appropriate professional learning to support carrying out IDP processes?
 - Is there sufficient resource / capacity available in your LHB to support the IDP process specifically?
- 5. How effectively are IDP review arrangements currently working?**
- Are you given sufficient time to contribute to IDP review meetings?
- 6. DECLO specific questions (to be asked of DECLOs only)**
- Thinking about your DECLO role specifically, what is working well in relation to implementing the DECLO role in your LHB? Have you faced any challenges?
- 7. How are section 20 referrals (referrals by LAs or FEIs to the LHB) managed by the Local Health Board?** ^[Footnote 8]
- In your experience, to what extent is there a consistent approach taken to making section 20 referrals (i.e. in terms of who is involved in making the referral)
 - What are your reflections on how well the section 20 referral process is working in your LHB?
- 8. Are there any specific challenges faced by your LHB in securing ALP?** (such as availability of provision). Please note that this question refers to ALP to be secured by the LHB.
- 9. How are section 65 requests (requests for help or information) made and what is the process in the LHB for responding to such requests?** ^[Footnote 9]
- a. Are you given sufficient time to respond to section 65 requests?
 - b. To what extent is the new ALN system making a difference to the way in which information is shared between bodies in supporting the needs of children and young people with ALN?
- 10. Do you have any other comments or reflections on the duties placed on LHBs under the Act?**

Additional learning provision (ALP)

- 11. To what extent is there a consistent interpretation of ALN and ALP in your LHB, local area and across the system more widely?**

[8] If a child or young person in mainstream school or college has ALN and possibly health related needs, a local authority or an FEI if they are post-16 can ask the Local Health Board or NHS trust, whether there is: 'any treatment or service which is likely to be of benefit in addressing the ALN of a child or young person.' (Section 20 of the ALN). If the health board identifies a treatment or service that's appropriate for the child or young person, it must **describe the treatment or service** in the child's individual development plan (IDP) and if the health board identifies a **'treatment or service' which would benefit the child or young person, it must provide it.** (S20(5) and S21(5) of the Act).

[9] To foster better working relationships and practices, the ALNET Act (section 65) provides that where a local authority requests help or information from other bodies, including another local authority, an NHS body or an FEI (amongst others), in the exercise of any of their ALN functions, that body must comply with the request.

- a. In your experience, are there consistent interpretations amongst different sectors? (e.g. schools, local authorities, Further Education, early years)
- b. How helpful is the ALN Code in ensuring that ALN and ALP are being interpreted consistently?
- c. Is sufficient advice and guidance available to practitioners and professionals to help identify ALP that is consistent with the definition and provisions set out in the Code?

Collaboration and information sharing

12. To what extent has the transformation programme work improved collaboration and sharing of knowledge between professionals and sectors?

- a. In what ways has this been achieved? (e.g. the creation of new statutory EYALNLO, ALNCO, DECLO roles)

13. Has collaboration between professionals and sectors improved since the ALN reforms have been implemented?

- a. Are education, health and social services able to work effectively together to deliver person-centred support to children and young people?
- b. Is data / information shared adequately amongst partners?
- c. What have been the enablers / barriers to multi-sector working?

Appeals process

14. Based on experiences in your LHB, do you think that the reformed ALN system is less adversarial than the previous SEN system?

- a. Please give reasons for your answer. Are there fewer disagreements with parents and carers? If so, why/what changes have led to this?
- b. Are disagreements resolved earlier? If so, why/what changes have led to this?

15. To date, are any apparent trends emerging regarding the reasons behind disagreements and appeals? (such as disagreements over ALN identified or disagreements over ALP, as outlined in the IDP)

16. Are parents/carers or young people using NHS: Putting Things Right to raise issues relating to ALP delivered through health bodies?

- o Does the LHB promote NHS: Putting Things Right as a way to raise issues relating to ALP? Are there any emerging issues from the implementation of NHS: Putting Things Right which could be valuable considerations for the ALN system?

A bilingual system

17. How is the LHB progressing with implementing a bilingual ALN system?

- o Is there sufficient capacity / resource / expertise for learners' and young peoples' needs to be met in the Welsh language:
 - a. With regards to the IDP process?
 - b. With regards to the provision of ALP?

- c. With regards to communicating with parents and carers?

Section 3: Inputs and wider system factors

18. Are there any additional costs to your LHB which are associated with implementing the new ALN system? (i.e. costs which were not previously incurred under the SEN system)?

- If so, are these financial costs (e.g. of ALP) or costs in terms of staff time (e.g. attending meetings)?
- Do you feel that the way in which funding is allocated to support the ALN system is transparent?
- Are there any changes that you think would be beneficial in the way that funding is allocated or administered, either by the Welsh Government or by the LA?

19. How well aligned are the ALN reforms with wider strategies and priorities in education and health, such as A Healthier Wales or NHS: Putting Things Right?

Section 4: Specific LHB questions

20. In your experience, do health professionals currently have the necessary awareness, knowledge, understanding and skills to support the ALN system?

- a. Has your LHB engaged in any specific workforce development to support practitioners in this area?
- b. Is there additional professional learning or guidance you feel is needed to ensure that leaders and/or practitioners in health are well equipped to support learners and young people with ALN?

21. Are there particular issues or challenges which the LHB must consider when engaging with multiple LAs in relation to the ALN system?

- If so, what is working well?
- If so, what could be improved?

Section 5: Any other comments

Are there any other comments you wish to share on the ALN reforms and implementation in your LHB?

(v) For Early Years Settings

Section 1: Understanding settings' engagement with the ALN system

1. **Do you have children in your setting who have been identified as having additional learning needs?**
 - If yes, are their ALN usually identified before they start attending the setting? If so, by whom and when?
2. **What process do you follow / would you follow if you believe a child may have ALN?**
3. **What involvement have you had with the EY ALNLO in your local authority?**

- Do you have a designated person or people in your setting responsible for liaising with the Early Years ALNLO?
- (If no involvement with EY ALNLO) Is there any reason you have not had involvement with the EY ALNLO? Would you know how to contact the EY ALNLO, if needed?

Section 2: Knowledge and understanding of the ALN system

- 4. In your experience, do practitioners in your setting currently have the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to identify ALN and support the delivery of ALP in your setting?**
 - Is there any particular type of professional learning or guidance you feel is needed to ensure that you/your staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support children below compulsory school age with ALN?
- 5. Have you / have staff at your setting received any training or guidance related to the ALN reforms? (e.g. training on working with parents, supporting children with ALN, the IDP process.)**

Section 3: Implementation of specific aspects of the ALN system

Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

- 6. Have you had any experience of the IDP process? (e.g. been asked to support the preparation of Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for children in your setting?)**
 - IF YES – what are your reflections on the process?
- 7. Are you clear about what is required and expected of you as a setting to support the development of IDPs?**
 - What is your role in supporting the local authority to prepare an IDP?
(*prompts*: providing information, attending meetings, discussing a child's needs with parents etc)
 - Is there sufficient time/capacity available in your setting to support the IDP process?

Additional learning provision (ALP)

- 8. What effect, if any, have the reforms to the ALN system had on the quality of planning and provision for children under compulsory school age who have ALN?**
- 9. To what extent is your setting able to provide and support ALP that meets the needs of children?**
 - Can you describe any specific (anonymous) examples of ALP that children have required?
 - Are you /Were you able to support / provide the ALP?

- Are there challenges in meeting particular types of ALN in your setting?

Transition to other settings/schools

10. How does the transition to the primary phase (or to other EY settings) work for children with ALN?

- How is the child and their family supported?
- Is the Early Years ALNLO from the local authority involved in the transition process?

11. (If not already covered by responses to questions 1-2) How does the transition in to your setting work for children with ALN?

- Are children's ALN typically identified before they start at your setting? If so, by whom? (e.g. Health Visitor, EY ALNLO)

Section 4: Inputs and wider system factors

12. Are there any additional costs to your setting associated with implementing the new ALN system (i.e. costs which were not previously incurred under the SEN system)?

- If so, are these financial costs (e.g. support, training or resources) or costs in terms of staff time (e.g. attending meetings)?

13. Are you involved in any ALN-specific networks (local/regional/national) which have assisted you in implementing the ALN reforms?

- To what extent do these networks support the sharing of good practice, practitioner confidence and skills development?

Section 5: General reflections and comments

14. What are your general reflections on the new ALN system?

- What, if anything, has improved or is working well?
- What has worked less well so far? Have you experienced any barriers to implementing the ALN system? Have the reforms led to any unintended consequences for you as a setting or for the children you support?

Are there any other comments you wish to share on the ALN reforms and implementation in your setting?