

Where does ALN reform in Wales leave specialist colleges?



Kirsten Jones, Natspec's Wales Policy Director and Vice-Principal of Coleg Elidyr, reflects on what ALN Transformation in Wales means for specialist colleges and Welsh students with more complex needs.

The Welsh Government is transforming provision for children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 creates a new bi-lingual statutory context for children and young people aged 0-25 with additional learning needs (ALN). This replaces the special educational needs (SEN) framework and the assessment and planning for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) in post-16 education and training. ALN Transformation is occurring alongside significant education reform in Wales that sees a move away from a subject-based curriculum to six 'areas of learning and experience'. Aimed at reducing attainment gaps through skills and competencies-based outcomes, the reforms are intended to promote collaboration and cross-disciplinary curriculum development and design.

While the Act is driven by the principles of inclusivity and being person-centred, it would be foolhardy to pretend this is uncontested good news for young people with high needs and their families. A lack of independent advice and guidance, the devolution of the funding of placements to local authorities and an under-developed emphasis on the quality of provision will be all too familiar to readers experienced in English SEND reform. We can now see these issues reflected as risks in Wales. Our fears are that despite its aspirations, ALN Transformation will, in reality, promote an inequitable system for post-16 education and training opportunities for Welsh young people. We also fear the doors will be widened for scarce resources to be drained by legal costs as those parents resilient enough to challenge inequalities do so.

While implementation of the ALN reforms has been put back to September 2021, it certainly is not going away. So, as specialist providers of further education and training, we must accept that change is coming and focus on determining what our role should be in supporting successful ALN Transformation. For example, how we can support local authorities who have historically had no responsibilities in this area to develop an understanding of post-16 options over and above those of mainstream further education colleges?

Moreover, we must be able – in necessarily cost-driven climates – to demonstrate the quality of outcomes local authorities can expect from their investments and show how placements with them ultimately reduce costs to the public purse. This will undoubtedly be of interest to budget-holders tasked with managing limited resources. The more we can do to evidence value for money and challenge misconceptions of specialist providers as expensive and detached, the better. If we can better inform decision-makers, whether collectively or as individual organisations, this will no doubt be of benefit to the life chances of young people with autism and learning difficulties and disabilities. Thinking about how we can evidence associated social returns on investments will be equally important. This includes reductions in stress for young people and their families, increasing parents' availability for work, enhanced well-being outcomes including reductions in hospital admissions and improved physical and mental health.

We could also be promoting a more fair-minded understanding of what is meant by 'inclusive education'. Inclusive education does not necessarily mean that all recipients of education and training attend the same institutions. It is important that we work with local authorities so that they can see the quality of specialist provision and how the holistic person-centred outcomes we offer enable individuals to live more inclusive adult lives. Unless we do so, there is a real danger that specialist colleges will be seen as excluding young people from their communities.

Equally we should demonstrate how many of the young people we work with have already experienced exclusion and that the inclusive approaches we use, such as Total Communication environments and on-site multi-disciplinary interventions, lead to levels of inclusion that many may have never experienced. We need to clarify how the provision of safe and trusted environments where young people learn to self-regulate and manage sensory-processing challenges, can revolutionise individuals' understanding of themselves and their engagement with others. Specialist colleges must be able to demonstrate to local authorities that they have a strong track record of providing individuals with the skills they need to purposefully plan and prepare for their own futures. Critically, we must be able to show impact and outcomes.

Unless we are able to put forward clear evidence that specialist provision can make a positive difference for young people that cannot be achieved elsewhere, there is a danger that local authorities may cease Individual Development Plans (IDPs) at the point where a mainstream Further Education College says it cannot meet individuals' needs. In effect, young people will be denied further education because their needs cannot be met by a mainstream provider. By promoting our positive outcomes, we can play our part in ensuring the life chances of some of our most vulnerable young people are not limited in this way.

By working collaboratively and identifying and articulating our services and unique specialisms, we can encourage local authorities to see us as a resource for not just one local area but nationally. We must help local authorities to see that young people's choices should not be

limited to what is available in a young person's domicile local authority, as is happening in some areas in England, but should be driven by the individual's wants, needs and aspirations, in line with the spirit of the ALN reforms.

There are other ways in which we can position ourselves as positive contributors. We could do more to support progression-planning and to ensure that local authorities are fully informed of individuals' achievements, wants and needs, which is likely to lead to more positive long-term outcomes for young people. (This would also help us face down the criticism that placements at specialist colleges take people away from their communities and make their re-integration difficult.)

As mainstream further education colleges accept young people with higher needs than they may historically have done, our sector has much to offer them. If we take a smart approach, we don't need to sell – or give away – the family silver; instead we can collaborate in a way that is mutually beneficial. For example, we might share our expertise to help build common assessment mechanisms. These would support all stakeholders and help identify when a specialist college is best-placed to meet individuals' education and training needs. We could also lead work on a shared approach for benchmarking pre-entry level learners, allowing us all to better measure progress made by individuals through non-accredited learning. This kind of contribution can only bolster specialist colleges' reputation as leaders in person-centred approaches.

While the challenges are tangible and significant, nonetheless, we have before us a very real opportunity to support the Welsh Government in the achievement of its aims of an inclusive, person-centred and bi-lingual system to support children and young people with additional learning needs. Importantly we share the common purpose of improving outcomes and increasing life chances through leading more inclusive lives. We can and should embrace the opportunities that these changes bring and ensure that we assert ourselves as key players in the new ALN landscape.