

# **Additional Learning Needs in Further Education Colleges**

October 2024

# Table of Contents

<b>Additional Learning Needs in Further Education Colleges</b> .....	2
<b>Context</b> .....	2
<b>What was working well?</b> .....	4
<b>General challenges</b> .....	5
<b>Relationships with local authorities</b> .....	6
<b>Professional learning</b> .....	8
<b>Embedding ALN into wider college systems including quality assurance</b> .....	9
<b>Identifying additional learning needs and other vulnerabilities</b> .....	9
<b>English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)</b> .....	9
<b>Additional learning provision for learners who have Welsh as their first language</b> .....	10
<b>Other government-funded learners with ALN</b> .....	10
<b>Spotlights on interesting and effective practice</b> .....	11
<b>Self-reflection questions for colleges</b> .....	12

# Additional Learning Needs in Further Education Colleges

Insights report – September 2024

## Our main findings

- Many colleges reported improved relationships with local authorities in relation to ALN
- Many colleges had strong or improved transition arrangements for learners with ALN
- Overall, colleges were experiencing an increase in workload linked to support for learners with ALN
- Variation in ALN administrative systems across Wales remains a challenge

## Context

During the spring and summer term 2024 an Estyn inspector with experience in supporting learners with additional learning needs (ALN) joined link inspector visits to all further education (FE) colleges across Wales. During each visit, they met with key staff to discuss [ALN reform](#)<sup>1</sup> and how implementation was progressing in each college. The findings of these visits informed this report.

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<sup>1</sup> ALN reform was introduced when the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill was passed by the National Assembly for Wales in December 2017. The legislation received Royal Assent in January 2018 and became the [Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018](#) ('the Act': National Assembly for Wales, 2018). The Act made provision for a new statutory framework for supporting children and young people with ALN.

The ALN Act and wider ALN Transformation Programme aims to transform the separate systems for special educational needs (SEN) in schools or pupil referral units (PRUs) and learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) in further education to create a unified system for supporting learners from 0 to 25 with ALN.

Overall, colleges reported that they are at varying stages in implementation of the [ALN act](#). Further, each college was supporting different cohorts with a varying range of additional learning needs. For example, most colleges supported learners with more complex additional learning needs on independent living skills courses and a minority had an established strong relationship with an independent specialist college to enhance provision in partnership.

Nearly all the colleges we visited reported an increase in learners with ALN as well as mental health and anxiety-based difficulties since the pandemic. In addition, a few colleges reported an increase in learners joining who were previously home-educated and so there is limited information available about any additional learning needs.

Many of these colleges ran multiple types of provision which were impacted by the ALN reforms where learners are on the roll of the college. These included [Jobs Growth Wales+](#), youth employability programmes and [junior apprenticeships](#)<sup>2</sup>. In a few instances, provision for more complex learners, typically registered as independent specialist colleges, was initially delivered through a mainstream college before the subsidiary institution registers with the Welsh Government.

These arrangements were further complicated by the geography of Wales. Nearly all colleges needed to build relationships and develop information sharing with more than one local authority. A very few also developed information sharing arrangements with English local authorities. Colleges also reported variability in their relationships

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<sup>2</sup> These are government funded courses for pupils of statutory school age, for example, Junior Apprentices are young people who are struggling to remain in the school environment but demonstrate a flair for vocational learning.

with local secondary schools based on whether they were the main provider of tertiary education in that area.

We completed our [first thematic report of ALN reforms](#) in September 2023, which focused on implementation of the ALNET Act in schools and local authorities. While the focus of the review did not include post-16 settings, we did leave one recommendation for local authorities in relation to post-16: to develop and publish their strategy for post-16 learners with ALN.

Within the 2023 ALN thematic report, we found that local authority strategies for post-16 ALN provision are at a very early stage of development. Those local authorities that had appointed dedicated post-16 officers reported that they were developing stronger strategic partnerships with further education providers. The knowledge that local authorities had of independent specialist colleges was less secure, and consequently their engagement with them was more limited. As a result, local authorities were not able to make informed decisions about the full range of additional learning provision across the post-16 sectors.

## **What was working well?**

Generally, many colleges reported improved relationships with local authorities in relation to additional learning needs. Many had improved their relationships with local schools and additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCoS) within these settings. As a result, they were invited more often to the annual reviews of prospective learners before they joined the college.

Many colleges had strong or improved transition arrangements for learners with additional learning needs. As a result, learners were better prepared for arrival at colleges. These transition arrangements included events such as accessible open days or quiet evenings.

Most colleges report that they have a secure well-being offer which also supports learners with ALN during their time at college. For example, they offered access to counselling, well-being drop in sessions, referrals to specialist services and a range of well-being workshops. A minority reported that strong links between well-being, safeguarding and ALN teams supported learners to be successful in their studies.

The majority of colleges felt that they have a strong understanding of the needs that they can and cannot meet. Where colleges had said no to a prospective learner, this was typically due to health and safety concerns, for example in relation to challenging behaviour and the use of physical intervention, rather than due to specific additional learning needs.

## General challenges

Overall, colleges were experiencing an increase in workload linked to support for learners with ALN. The majority of colleges reported that an increase in individual development plans (IDPs) and [person-centred practice](#)<sup>3</sup> had significantly increased their workload. A minority of colleges reported a negative impact on workload and relationships due to parental expectations about ALN provision. Further, the majority of colleges had seen an increase in the number of learners who needed exam access support. A few colleges had changed staffing structures to meet this need. Nearly all colleges anticipated a further increase in ALN -related workload over the next few years.

Variation in ALN administrative systems across Wales remains a challenge. For example, the majority of colleges reported that electronic systems to support information sharing were challenging or underdeveloped.

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<sup>3</sup> This approach aims to put learners at the centre of all that we do, ensuring they are involved in decisions about their education.

Many colleges were developing a common electronic system to manage IDPs. However, only a few colleges used the same system as their host local authority. Too often, colleges continued to receive paper-based copies of key documents and spend time manually inputting these into their own systems. A minority of colleges reported challenges due to different ALN processes across the different local authorities they work with. As a result, they had to adapt their own processes and systems to gather relevant information.

Around half of colleges reported that recruiting suitably skilled staff to support learners with ALN was a challenge. In some instances, it was difficult to find Welsh-speaking staff. In others, recruitment was hard as roles were grant funded and so not permanent. Smaller colleges reported that it was particularly challenging to ensure that they had the right range of specialist staff, especially where there is uncertainty about whether a learner will join the college and require certain support. Larger colleges reported staffing created challenges in ensuring an equity of offer for learners with ALN over large geographical areas.

## **Relationships with local authorities**

Many colleges reported improvements in their relationships with placing authorities since the ALN act was introduced. A very few report that they had developed positive relationships which allowed them to plan collaboratively for future cohorts. Around half of colleges reported that local authorities provided specialist services to support learners, for example visual impairment services or specialist teachers, despite some confusion about whether this support should continue as learners transition from school into college. However, a minority of colleges felt that placing authorities did not have a strong understanding of the needs which could be met by the college.

The majority of colleges reported that they had improved their relationships with ALNCos in local schools, and as a result were increasingly attending learners' annual

reviews before they joined the college. However, this was not consistent practice across Wales, or even within local authorities. This meant that, in a few instances, colleges were unable to access the IDPs of new learners until they enrolled at the college, often due to misunderstandings about data protection regulations.

## **Meeting the needs of a wider range of learners**

A few colleges had developed new courses to meet a wider range of needs. These were typically for those learners who struggled to engage in, and attend, education, for example, learners with autism spectrum condition or anxiety.

A few colleges reported developing links with local authorities to meet the complex medical or therapeutic needs of learners with ALN on independent living skills (ILS) courses. For example, local authorities provided access to speech and language services to support learners on ILS courses. As a result, in these regions, learners who might have previously attended independent specialist colleges had, in some cases, enrolled at their local FE college.

## **Individual development plans (IDPs)**

There was significant variation in the number and proportion of learners on roll in each FE college during the academic year 2023-24 with an IDP. Generally, colleges report that this variability is largely due to whether or not learners arrive at college with an IDP.

Colleges reported that different learners with similar ALN may or may not arrive at college with an IDP. This variation was reported within, and across, different local authorities.



Only a few colleges reported having developed an IDP for a learner who arrived at college without one but they felt had ALN, and not all college leaders were consistently confident in the processes to do this. Further, around half of colleges reported variability of the quality of IDPs of new learners, which do not consistently reflect meaningful outcomes for the post-16 sector. For example, that link to skills development not aligned to the courses learners are following or which do not consider the difference in provision at a college compared to a school.

## **Professional learning**

Nearly all colleges reported a strong focus on professional learning to support staff to best meet the needs of all learners. Leaders felt that there has been significant investment in whole college training on implementing ALN reforms as well as in relation to specific needs. For example, colleges reported delivering training from introduction to master's level in a range of areas including dyslexia, autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), inclusive practice, speech and communication support and positive behaviour.

In the best cases, leaders reported evaluating the impact of this significant investment, for example, through learning walks or learner surveys for those learners with ALN. A few colleges were proactive in identifying the different needs in each department and planning relevant training in response to this. However, too often, colleges did not evaluate the impact of training or consistently ensure that staff had engaged meaningfully in professional learning opportunities available to them.

## **Embedding ALN into wider college systems including quality assurance**

Nearly all colleges report that they have amended core policies to ensure that they consider the additional learning needs of learners, for example, in codes of conduct and attendance policies.

However, our visits highlighted that the evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in relation to learners with ALN was too variable across Wales. Where this was most effective, leaders evaluated the support for learners with ALN during learning walks, considered their specific feedback through surveys and used relevant data, for example on course achievement and completion.

## **Identifying additional learning needs and other vulnerabilities**

Most colleges used admissions information to identify the most vulnerable learners, those at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) or those who self-identify as having had ALN at any time. However, colleges depended on learners, local authorities or the local schools providing this information, which didn't always happen.

Due to close working with local authorities, a minority of colleges were able to identify those learners who had previously been identified with SEN, but who did not currently have an IDP and monitor their success.

## **English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)**

Overall, colleges provided these learners with the same ALN support as other learners, where an ALN was identified. A minority of colleges reported that they had not yet had

any ESOL learners with additional learning needs. Colleges reported that often it was challenging to identify ALN in ESOL learners due to diagnostic tools only being available in English.

## **Additional learning provision for learners who have Welsh as their first language**

The provision of additional learning support through the medium of Welsh was too variable across Wales. A few colleges reported that no learners have requested support through the medium of Welsh.

Generally, a few colleges reported having Welsh speaking support available for learners with ALN as well as bilingual resources. However, across Wales colleges reported that often diagnostic tools for ALN were not available in Welsh and appointing staff with suitable Welsh language skills was a challenge.

## **Other government-funded learners with ALN**

Typically, the legal status of these learners varies between colleges due to registration differences, and as a result their ALN support is variable across Wales. Typically, these include [Jobs Growth Wales+](#) youth employability programmes and [junior apprenticeships](#). In a few colleges, these learners benefit from the same ALN support as their peers studying on further education courses. However, in other colleges these learners are not officially enrolled with the college and so they are not legally entitled to the same support as FE learners. Where this support is most effective, the college has a clear vision and set of values to ensure that all learners benefit from equal access to extra support where needed.

## Spotlights on interesting and effective practice

The following examples shine a spotlight on emerging effective practice related to colleges developing aspects of ALN provision.

**Transition:** One college has introduced a monthly forum for local authorities, Careers Wales and other relevant partners to meet with external stakeholders and the college staff to discuss the possible progression routes for individual learners before they enrol with the college to ensure that the college's ALN provision is clear.

**Transition:** One college has developed virtual reality experiences for learners so that they can see the college virtually, in a quiet way as part of their transition into college.

**Tracking additional learning provision:** One college has developed an online system to track all support and spending on additional learning provision. This allows leaders to track spending and also evaluate future needs.

**ESOL:** One college uses ILS staff with expertise in ALN to support with the assessment of ESOL learners with ALN and develops a meaningful IDP.

**Supporting learners on other Welsh Government funded courses:** One college lead for this area meets the school, parents and prospective learners to gather information. This is done through three meetings prior to that learner joining the course. A recruitment panel will then review the individual and how they fit with the dynamics of the group. Work based assessors have been trained on supporting with needs such as autism and behaviour to ensure adjustments can be made when assessing. Early enrolment is offered to Junior Apprentices to get used to the college. Junior Apprentices programmes have a learning coach who follows them around the college, supervises them on site and attends all lessons.

## Self-reflection questions for colleges

1. How do you ensure a productive relationship with local authorities to support current learners and plan for future cohorts?
2. How do you evaluate the quality of teaching and learning experiences for learners with additional learning needs across all provision?
3. How do you plan for professional learning in relation to ALN? How do you evaluate the impact this has on learners?
4. Do all learners have equal access to ALN support? Does this include those learners on the roll of the college on other government funded provision, ESOL learners or learners whose first language is Welsh?
5. How do you ensure that new learners have IDPs which are relevant to their course of study and future aspirations?