

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Special Needs Referral Schemes and the Welsh Language

Background

Welsh-medium Special Needs Referral Schemes operate within the voluntary sector in most Local Authorities in Wales. They are managed by Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin or by the Mudiad in partnership with other agencies. Most of the Schemes were established in the early days of the All Wales Strategy, with the aim of enabling young children with special educational needs to benefit from positive early years experiences in their local cylch meithrin.

All Schemes employ a Coordinator, who has responsibility for establishing and maintaining links between the family and cylch meithrin, and also between the cylch and professionals working within the community, for example physiotherapists, educational psychologists, health visitors, speech and language therapists and social workers.

The level of support offered by the scheme to the family, child and cylch will depend on individual needs and circumstances but can include:

- an extra helper in the cylch
- transport to and from the cylch
- payment of fees
- specialist equipment
- training

Some schemes managed by Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin in partnership with other agencies arrange placements and support in a variety of settings including cylchoedd meithrin.

Service Provision and Funding

In the early years most Schemes received their funding almost exclusively through the All Wales Strategy, subsequently their core funders have been Social Services Department in most Local Authorities.

Many Schemes' funding base was broadened as a result of the Sure Start Initiative, which enabled them to extend their target group to include children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Recently the

new Cymorth fund which now includes Sure Start funding is used in many Local Authorities to increase and extend the services of Referral Schemes. Some Schemes have also received additional funding from sources such as Health Authorities, National Lottery, BBC Children in Need and other local and national grant giving trusts.

Currently in excess of 300 children are supported in cylchoedd by Referral Schemes, with disabilities/ special needs which include:

- hearing impairment
- Cerebral Palsy
- Downs Syndrome
- speech and language difficulties
- socialisation difficulties
- emotional and behavioural difficulties
- physical disabilities
- visual impairment
- heart conditions
- Autism

The success of the Schemes since their establishment, together with awareness of the benefits of early intervention for pre-school children with special educational needs has created an every increasing demand for the service. This in turn has led to a situation in some parts of Wales where children referred to Schemes are having to be placed on a waiting list for the service. Law yn Llaw, the Scheme which operates across the former Mid-Glamorgan, is having to hold unacceptably long waiting lists in Rhondda / Cynon /Taf, Bridgend and Caerffili. Numbers of children currently on the waiting lists are in excess of 100. Insufficient funding to provide a service to all referred children causes an ever-increasing problem towards the end of each financial year. In some areas Law yn Llaw is only able to support, in the current financial year, children who were referred in the previous year. This has a snowballing effect, which causes increasingly long waiting lists year on year. In practical terms waiting lists mean that some children with special educational needs miss out completely on pre-school early years provision. For some children, it can mean that they are denied their only opportunity to participate and be assessed in a Welsh medium mainstream setting. All children on waiting lists would be considered children in need within the terms of the Children Act 1989 and should therefore be entitled to a service.

Other Areas of Concern

- Due to funding restrictions the vast majority of children with special needs are supported in cylchoedd on a 2 session per week basis. This does not provide equality of opportunity for all children. It poses significant difficulties for parents and children, especially for those children who fall within the autistic spectrum.
- There has been a reduction in some areas in the number of voluntary sector groups available to provide placements due to factors such as a change in the balance between LEA and early years

provision in other sectors, and also the difficulties some groups have experienced recently in meeting the new care standards.

- In some Local Authorities where funding for the education of 3 year olds is not available to the non-maintained sector, children with special needs/disabilities who require early years education through the medium of Welsh can be adversely affected. If it is felt by parents/professionals that the most appropriate provision to meet the needs of the individual child is the local cylch meithrin, rather than travelling up to 5 miles to the nearest Welsh medium school, the parent will have to pay for the provision.
- In areas where funding for the education of 3 year olds is available for 5 sessions/10 hours per week in the non-maintained sector, Referral Schemes, due to financial constraints, are only able to provide extra support for 2 sessions per week. This means that children are not able to take up the placement in the cylch meithrin for the remaining 3 sessions per week.
- Significant numbers of children attending cylchoedd have a speech or language delay. Many of these children are on long waiting lists to see a speech and language therapist. The acute shortage of Speech and Language Therapists who are able to provide a service through the medium of Welsh is a cause for grave concern at all levels of Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin – and its Referral Schemes.

Key areas for action

- To remove barriers which prevent children with special educational needs from attending their local cylch meithrin.
- To ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to attend a cylch meithrin on a 5 session per week basis.
- To ensure that parents have a choice of appropriate provision and that they are not financially worse off by choosing a cylch meithrin rather than nursery provision within the maintained sector.
- To ensure that pre school children who require support through the medium of Welsh have equality of access to specialist services and therapies, for example Welsh-medium speech and language therapy.
- Cylchoedd providing a service for children with special education needs need information, guidance and training on implementing the Special Needs Code of Practice. Currently copies of the Code of Practice have not been made available to cylchoedd across Wales – this issue needs to be addressed as quickly as possible. Training on the Code of Practice which is specific to early years settings in the non-maintained sector needs to be offered consistently, effectively and accessibly across Wales.