

## Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

### The Welsh Advisory Group for SEN

#### Introduction

WAGSEN was established to provide advice and offer guidance on all matters relating to the field of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Wales.

The group was first constituted in July 1998 and was reformed in April 2002. The membership consists of representatives from both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The terms of reference as agreed by the group are to:

- work alongside the All Wales Steering Group in considering strategies for regional SEN planning and provision,
- advise the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning on the development of specific SEN policy objectives,
- consider performance in the key areas addressed in the Learning Country,
- advise on and monitor the development of the proposed SEN tribunal for Wales.

#### Since its reformation the group has considered the following matters:

- Acknowledging Need – Welsh medium and bilingual services for children and young people with special educational needs
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Strategy
- Educational Psychology Services
- Resuscitation Study
- Sensory impairments – presentation by SENSE Cymru
  
- Speech and Language Services for Children and Young People aged 0-19 years
- Provision for Children and Young People with Hearing Impairments(HI) (including RNID work on children aged 0-2 years and HI provision for children aged 2+)
- Audit Commission Reports – SEN a Mainstream Issue

## Statutory Assessments and Statements

- Planning Duties – Increasing Access for Disabled Pupils
- Promoting Children’s Mental Health
- Guidance on Inclusion
- National Steering Group updates

**The following sub groups have been established to commence work from September:**

Finance

Welsh Language

SEN Training

The National Steering Group for Special Educational Needs in Wales (NSGW)

The NSGW was established to take the SEN agenda forward at both an operational and strategic level. The group is constituted of Assembly Officials and Development Officers for SEN.

In April 2002 two Development Officers for SEN were appointed, a further two officers were subsequently employed as of June 2002. Since this time one officer has left to take up a new post. The three remaining Development Officers have been seconded to work for the Welsh Assembly Government for a three year period to March 2005.

Each development officer has a specific remit, often aligned to their own area of expertise and specialist knowledge.

The development officers are currently working on a number of priority tasks such as:

- The review of speech and language services for children and young people in Wales;
- Provision for children and young people with sensory impairment, including hearing impairment, visual impairment and multi-sensory impairment;
- The education of children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders;
- SEN validated training;
- The education of children with special health needs;
- Guidance on Inclusive Education
- Guidance on the education of children who are more able and talented;
- Transition planning arrangements (autumn 2003); and
- Welsh medium SEN provision (autumn 2003).

## Evidence

The Welsh Advisory Group for Special Educational Needs thinks that it is crucial to ensure the best possible development opportunities for all children and young people in Wales. While those children and young people are being educated, it is essential for the settings, schools and colleges to be alert to incipient problems so that:

- They are identified early;
- Interventions are arranged as soon as possible; and
- Any necessary assessments are undertaken as soon as possible and over time and in the contexts that are appropriate and necessary.

The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales (2002) sets out a specification of a system for doing all of this. However, the extent to which all the procedures specified have been adopted varies from school to school across Wales. The application of the Code of Practice needs to be more uniform across the country.

In general terms there are also major difficulties engaging both LEA and other services in true multi-disciplinary work to support the teaching of our children and young people, in the language of the child or family (especially those from bilingual, Welsh, or from other ethnic backgrounds). The services that have major shortfalls in staffing are:

- Educational Psychology Services
- Speech and Language Therapy Services
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Other health funded therapy or specialist services.

We would wish to ensure that educational decisions are not based on an underlying assumption that a medical model (i.e. that special educational needs are problems ‘within children’) applies. We would prefer the Committee to ensure a different model is adopted in education, by all services, that shows an understanding that a child’s progress at school can be affected by many, interacting factors, which implies that systemic solutions are likely to be needed as well as some kind of intervention with an individual child.

Decisions taken need to take account of the Welsh Assembly Government’s overarching agenda for Children and Young People as set out in the Children and Young People’s strategy.

The issues that we wish to raise are based on the assumption that the Welsh Assembly Government wishes education in Wales to be as inclusive as possible.

Below, we identify what we consider to be important issues for the Committee to consider.

## Early identification

### Audit Commission report 'Special Educational Needs – A mainstream issue' (2002) para 33:

"Developing teachers' skills at recognising what is and what is not a special educational need could help to ensure a more consistent approach to identifying needs."

- The needs of children vary along a continuum. Some children will have fewer, or lesser, needs that can readily be met by their parents and/or their classteachers. At the other extreme will be children who have needs for:
  - major educational support;
  - support for health needs; and
  - support for social / family needs.
- Early identification is about helping a child as soon as is possible.
- Appropriate assessment and intervention are part of a changing cycle that continues on the basis of: assess, plan, do, review, assess.
- Assessment seeks to identify something that is different for a particular child.
- It is relatively easy to identify early when a child has a recognised medical need such as a syndrome or a disability. However, for children who have complex and challenging needs, it is important that similar processes and elements of multi-agency support are available, equitably, across Wales.
- It is harder to identify learning difficulties early when a child has emotional or social difficulties.
- Home Advisory Services (HAS teams) do not usually have an education person as part of the team – we think that they should.
- There is a major issue of different culture, language and understanding between personnel from Health and Education backgrounds.
- 'Multi agency' should mean that all people who are appropriate are involved – this puts an onus on all agencies to consider all the needs of a child (health, education and social/emotional) and engage the appropriate personnel.
- Parental views must be considered and early identification of problems may be traumatic for them.
- If parents have needs of their own (about the problems their child experiences) they should have support available to them from voluntary agencies or Parent Partnership Services or other services.
- There is a need for early identification to consider different perspectives.
- Issues around early identification apply at any point of the continuum and may appear different at the two extremes (e.g. a teacher with an enquiring mind may clarify that a child has an incipient learning difficulty. A child with profound and multiple learning difficulties is likely to be identified by Health personnel before the age of two years, so well before getting to an early years setting or school).
- Identification (of need) is not the same as diagnosis (e.g. of a disability).

- The staged approach to early identification in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales is appropriate for the majority of children (see paras 4:9-4:14, 5:20-5:23, 6:22-6:25).
- Early identification of needs affecting the majority of children is most likely to occur in a class with a good teacher who has an open, enquiring mind.
- Teachers need to be assisted by systems that can respond appropriately as soon as a problem is identified.
- Teachers who do not have open, enquiring minds will need training and supervision.
- To support teachers with their enquiries into the learning needs of their pupils, each school needs to have well developed systems, that reflect the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales that encourage the early identification of any barriers to learning. Such a system would also involve the pupils' views of their situations and possible solutions to learning problems.

## **Early intervention**

- Schools need to establish methods of clarifying intervention needs for a child where a Health determined approach may not be appropriate.
- A key worker helps to coordinate support and avoid fragmentation and duplication which helps the parents to understand what is happening for their child. A key worker can also empower parents and help them to shoulder their responsibilities.
- For all children multi-disciplinary coordination is crucial to ensure that the holistic needs of the child are met in a balanced and cohesive way. This particularly applies for children with severe and complex needs.
- Whenever a school identifies a need for multi-disciplinary involvement, there should be an early meeting to clarify issues and actions as soon as possible. Current staffing levels often mean this is not possible at present.
- Getting help to a child as soon as possible is the key aim.
- The amount of intervention should be proportionate to the identified needs.
- Only a minority of children should ever require a Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN Code of Practice for Wales, paras 7:1, 7:6).
- We need to remember that a Statement is rarely a means of arranging early intervention. More emphasis should be made on the actions that should be taken at Early Years Action, Early Years Action Plus, School Action and School Action Plus and by ensuring that multi-disciplinary support is available without recourse to a Statement of Special Educational Needs.
- Early identification and intervention will not necessarily lead to a 'fix'.
- Early intervention will need to be reviewed and readjusted according to ongoing assessment.
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## **Assessment**

- This can be a one-off piece of work, done by a teacher or person from a support agency, though this is rarely effective – "...assessment should not be regarded as a single event but as a continuing process" (SEN Code of Practice for Wales, paras 5:11, 6:10 and see the sections about the 'graduated response' paras 4:9-4:14, 5:20-5:23, 6:22-6:25).

- In the early years, teachers will be using skill-based assessment instruments, probably linked to desirable outcomes for children in early years settings and early learning objectives. These are likely to be modified by the move to the new Foundation Phase.
- For most school age children assessment in school is likely to be an ongoing process:
  - teachers marking a pupil's work;
  - weekly reading and/or spelling tests;
  - etc.
- Some pupils' needs will dictate a multi-disciplinary assessment. They are likely to be a minority of children (SEN Code of Practice for Wales, para 7:1).
- Different agencies mean different things by the word 'assessment'.
- In educational terms, assessment does not lead to diagnosis but to a way forward in clarifying an intervention and its success.

The crucial element that is needed to ensure that early identification and early intervention (with any assessment) happen is that a school is well led with a clear system for assisting pupils to overcome any obstacles to their learning. The schools will seek, and act on, the views of the pupils, of their own learning needs. An explanation of this system will be made to parents, regularly, so that they have confidence that the school will meet the needs of all the children who attend. As part of this system, each school will ensure that parents are made aware of the support that is available from the local Parent Partnership service.

WAGSEN has not been able to identify examples of good practice from across Wales in time for this response, but we know that there are such examples. WAGSEN hopes, therefore, that the Committee will facilitate further improvements to enhance the opportunities and practice in early identification and early intervention across the age ranges and types of educational setting in Wales.

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**January 2004. Further contributions or comments were received from: Maggie Bowen, Bob Grover, Denise Inger, Andrea Miller, Gareth Price and Mair Watkins.**