Comisiynydd Plant Cymru
Children's Commissioner for Wales

What is it like to be a disabled child in Wales in 2024? What do we know, and what do we need to know?

Author: Dr Liz Stones

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the existing knowledge base around the experiences of children and young people with disabilities in Wales to illuminate evidence gaps and potential areas for meaningful research. Throughout this report, the term 'disability' is used to encompass physical, sensory, and learning disabilities.

Section 1: Ambitions for Wales Disability Analysis comprises a deep dive analysis into the survey responses provided by children who identify as disabled during the 2023 Ambitions for Wales (AfW) consultation conducted by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (CCfW).

In the AfW survey, children and young people were asked to identify if they consider themselves disabled, if they did not, or if they were 'unsure'. Both children and young people who identified as disabled reported lower levels of happiness and higher levels of unhappiness associated with going to groups and clubs compared to their non-disabled peers, and going to school is more frequently associated with unhappiness for disabled children compared with non-disabled children.

Children aged 7-11 with disabilities worry more than non-disabled children about every category provided in the survey, except Covid-19 and tests/exams. They worry a lot more about going to school, how they look, having enough to eat, and having somewhere to live. Children with disabilities are more likely to worry about bullying across all settings listed in the survey (school, home, clubs, online, streets, transport) compared with children who do not identify as disabled, except for school, where they worry slightly less. However, bullying in the home is reported more than twice as frequently by children with disabilities. 22.5% of youth who identify as disabled report that they 'never' talk to a trusted adult to make themself feel happy, compared with 16.2% of non-disabled youth. Young people aged 12-18 with disabilities worry more than non-disabled children about every category provided, except our planet and tests/exams. They worry a lot more about bullying, having enough to eat, how they and their family treat each other, having somewhere to live, going to school, and their family having enough money.

Young people who identify as disabled are more likely to have experienced bullying in general and across all the settings listed in the AfW survey, and they feel less safe across all settings and, in particular, in school, in their neighbourhood, and on public transport. In particular, they are more likely to be bullied on public transport, online, and on the street. Disabled young people reported feeling less heard and respected across all settings, particularly at the community level. Despite these differences, children and young people with disabilities highlighted similar priorities for the Commissioner as participants who did not identify as disabled.

The AfW dataset provides valuable insights into the experiences of children and young people with disabilities in Wales and illuminates potential areas for further investigation in the context of a systematic knowledge deficit about this group. Additional research is needed to explore the experiences and concerns of children and young people with disabilities in greater depth.

Section 2: Review of the Evidence Base overviews the existing research and evidence investigating the experiences of disabled children in Wales, exploring their experiences, opportunities, challenges, and barriers to inclusion and participation.

Informed by the Social Model of Disability, the report investigates how children and young people with disabilities are disabled by societal barriers, including social and cultural attitudes, features and characteristics of the physical and built environment that prevent or mitigate equal access, information and communication barriers, and organisational barriers that do not accommodate the needs of disabled people. The analysis is also informed by the related 'pillars of independent living', environmental and individual factors that allow disabled people to have control over their own lives, self-determination, equal opportunities, and self-respect.

Section 2 summarises current legislation and available data relating to children and young people with disabilities in Wales, discussing the Welsh Government's Framework for Action on Independent Living as well as research reports and publications investigating the experiences of disabled people in Wales authored the Welsh Government and its agencies, Welsh Parliament Committees, local councils, academia and civil society organisations.

The report then provides an overview of the methods and findings of research into inequalities in access to services, summarising a range of reports informed by the testimony of families, professionals, and young people concerning the implementation gap between the vision of care that informs policy and practice, and parents', carers and children's experiences of navigating complex systems to access support, gaps in service provision, and inadequate communication or inaccessible information. The report acknowledges the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and response on healthcare provision in Wales, and discusses particular challenges faced by young people with learning difficulties.

The report documents mechanisms contributing to ongoing disparities in educational provision and outcomes for disabled learners and summarises recent research in this area. It acknowledges that research conducted with children and young people remains limited, with most studies reliant on quantitative attainment data and/or primary data from parents, carers, and adult professionals, and in some cases from older children at the threshold of transitioning from education. This is informed by a 2024 report exploring differences in access to education and childcare for children and young people with disabilities published by the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Welsh Government.

Disparities in employment and income are discussed, reflecting on the transition from education to employment for young people with disabilities. This section is informed by a 2025 Welsh Government report summarising the findings of an inquiry into the Disability Employment Gap. Available research demonstrates that disabled students have fewer opportunities for apprentices and employment opportunities, can expect to earn a lower income, and are more likely to be unemployed than their non-disabled peers. Young people have been consulted to some extent about their needs and priorities. Still, there is little first-hand evidence of their experiences of the work placements, apprentices or the reasonable adjustments made to support them into employment, or of their experiences of the impacts of employment on independent living and financial security as well as confidence, health, socialisation, and well-being.

The report summarises challenges around the accessibility and availability of transport in Wales, reflecting on the impact of mobility constraints on children's socialisation, access to education, employment, services, and mental health. Issues around the accessibility of public transport are frequently raised during research with disabled people, including physical and informational barriers, yet the evidence base around the experiences of children and young people remains limited.

Finally, challenges affecting making and maintaining friendships and relationships are examined, including the barriers to social inclusion and learning social skills, and discusses research exploring experiences of bullying among children and young people with disabilities. Children and young people with disabilities are more likely to experience bullying, with supporting findings emerging from the AfW consultation. Friendships are essential for well-being and mental health for all children and young people, and this is an under-researched area of investigation with children and young people with disabilities despite the well-recognised barriers that hinder the ability of children and young people with disabilities to form and maintain friendships.

Section 3: Knowledge Gaps summarises key actionable insights and opportunities to contribute to improvements in methodologies to support researchers and agencies in working effectively with children with disabilities and ensuring their perspectives and voices are represented in the evidence base. Recommendations for action include:

1. Raise awareness of participatory methods for research with children with disabilities, particularly children with learning disabilities and younger children, to ensure their voices are more systematically included in research and consultations.
2. Promote peer research and role model youth engagement in the design and analysis of research studies about young people.
3. Explore how children understand disability and self-identify as disabled and promote standardisation to enhance the evidence base, recognising the high numbers of children and young people who responded 'unsure' to the disability question in the AfW survey.
4. Investigate households' experiences in which children and parents have disabilities to understand the particular challenges they face in accessing services, education, employment, travel, socialising, etc.
5. Acknowledge children's contributions to research outcomes, highlight where previous research informed policy decision-making, and acknowledge the

contributions of children with disabilities to the political process to catalyse greater engagement in political processes over the longer term.

This section also discusses emerging thematic opportunities for further research to amplify the voices and showcase the experiences and priorities of children and young people with disabilities.

1. Access to transportation is widely cited as a barrier to inclusion and participation, impacting a range of opportunities for children and young people with disabilities in Wales. Further research could investigate the extent to which existing legislation considers and responds appropriately to the needs of children and young people with disabilities in Wales, and what changes could be made to enhance provision for these users and their families.
2. The evidence suggests that in Wales and across the UK, systematic inequalities in educational provision and outcomes remain, and academic environments and pedagogy are not always appropriate for learners with disabilities and neurodiverse students. Further research may be needed to amplify the voices and experiences of children and young people with disabilities and advocate for appropriate action to be taken.
3. Young people with disabilities face ongoing barriers to employment. Still, there remains limited first-hand evidence around disabled young people’s experiences of work placements, apprenticeships, or the reasonable adjustments made to support them into employment, and this could be a timely opportunity for further enquiry into the lived experiences of young people with disabilities.
4. Further research and successful case studies about friendship and socialisation could provide evidence of good practice and harvest testimony supporting the outcomes of increased opportunities and capacities for friendships and relationships among children and young people with disabilities.
5. Emerging findings about household dynamics for children and young people with disabilities may signal hidden challenges at the household level regarding respectful relationships and bullying in the home. Sensitively designed research could explore the experiences of children and young people with disabilities in their family settings.

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Acronyms

AfW	Ambitions for Wales
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
BSL	British Sign Language
CCfW	Children's Commissioner for Wales
DEG	Disability Employment Gap
DRILL	Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning
EHRC	Equality and Social Justice Committee
EOTAS	Educational Otherwise than at School
EYST	Ethnic Youth Support Team
FAS	Family Affluence Scores
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
IDA	Individual Development Plan
PLASC	Pupil Level Annual School Census
NCMH	National Centre for Mental Health
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
RPB	Regional Partnership Board
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SHRN	School Health Research Network
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WED	Welsh Examinations Database

Overview of the Report

This report investigates the existing knowledge base around the experiences of children and young people in Wales to illuminate potential areas for meaningful research.

Section 1 of the report comprises a deep dive analysis into the survey responses provided by children who identify as disabled during the 2023 Ambitions for Wales (AfW) consultation, including identifying any differences across their experiences.

Section 2 comprises a summary overview of the existing research and evidence investigating the experiences of disabled children in Wales, supporting a robust analysis of 'what do we need to know?' Underpinned by the social model of disability, this Situational Analysis investigates the evidence base concerning the experiences, opportunities, challenges, and barriers to inclusion and participation faced by children in Wales.

Section 3 illuminates key knowledge gaps about disabled children's lives in Wales, informed by the analysis of the AfW survey data and the review of existing research presented in the second section.

The work of the Children's Commissioner for Wales (CCfW) is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and informed by the commitment to protect and promote rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Furthermore, the analysis of the primary data collected through the Ambitions for Wales survey, the broader review of existing reports and publications, and the emerging recommendations presented in this report are informed by the No Wrong Door policy and the Welsh Government's Learning Disability Delivery and Implementation Plan 2022-2026.

Section 1: Ambitions for Wales Disability Analysis

1.1 Method

The CCfW investigated the experiences, concerns, and hopes of children, young people, parents and carers, and professionals who work with children in 2023. This large-scale 'Ambitions for Wales / Gobeithion i Gymru'[1] Consultation was designed to let participants share their experiences and contribute their views around key thematic areas relevant to children in Wales. The survey design was inclusive, with related activities developed for children under 7 years old, children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD), a BSL version, and resources for children with additional learning needs, to ensure these children and young people could have their voices heard.

The main Ambitions for Wales report describes the methods in detail, including the survey design, structure, tools to widen accessibility, and dissemination strategy.

1.2 Sample Characteristics

Eight thousand eight hundred thirty children and young people responded to the survey or completed the related activities. Overall, 6.4% of children and young people (combined) who responded to the written Ambitions for Wales survey identify as disabled, and a further 14.9% reported that they are 'not sure' whether they are disabled. In total, 311 participants aged 7-11 identify as disabled, and 213 participants aged 12-18 identify as disabled.

Across the whole sample of all children aged 7-11 who participated in the Ambitions for Wales survey, 6.3% of boys and 4.2% of girls identify as disabled. Almost a quarter (22.7%) of participants who identify with neither gender (n=75) identify as disabled.

Within the sample of disabled children aged 7-11, 52.9% identify as boys and 36.4% as female, with 4.9% identifying as neither gender and 5.8% preferring not to say.

Among the whole sample of young people (aged 12-18), those identifying as male were twice as likely (10.7% of the sample) to identify as disabled than those identifying as female (5.1%). Among respondents who identify as neither male nor female (n=94), one-third (33.3%) identify as disabled. Within the sample of disabled young people aged 12-18, 47.0% identify as male, 33.8% as female, 15.5% as neither, and 3.8% prefer not to say.

Across the entire sample of respondents, 87.1% chose to answer the survey in English, and 12.9% responded in Welsh. Welsh respondents were highest (17.3%) among younger children (aged 7-11) compared to young people aged 12-18, of whom 2.9% selected the Welsh version. Fewer children with disabilities responded in Welsh: 12.2%

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[1] Stones, L. 2023. Ambitions for Wales: The survey results and analysis of the experiences and hopes of children, young people, parents and carers and professionals in Wales, and their priorities for the Commissioner. Children's Commissioner for Wales.

of children and 1.4% of young people. Respondents with higher Family Affluence Scores (FAS) were more likely to respond in Welsh.

It is important to note that the sample size varies by question in many cases, as survey participants opted to respond to some questions and not others. For this analysis, their responses were analysed only if they responded to both the disability question and the second variable of interest.

1.3 Results

The results sections are structured thematically, presenting results for children and young people who identify as disabled, with a comparative analysis of the responses provided by children and young people who do not identify as disabled. The core categories of the survey included what makes them feel happy, worries and concerns, experiences of bullying and abuse, and suggested priorities for the Commissioner to improve their lives.

1.4.1 Health and Happiness

All participating children were invited to reflect on activities that make them feel happy; this section compares the responses of children who identify as disabled and those who do not across the two age categories.

Children aged 7-11 years

Children (7-11) responded similarly when asked what they do to feel happy regardless of disability, most frequently spending time with family and friends. However, going to school was more frequently associated with unhappiness for disabled children compared with non-disabled children.

Both children (7-11) and young people (12-18) with disabilities reported lower levels of happiness and higher levels of unhappiness associated with going to groups and clubs compared to children and young people who did not identify as disabled.

Young people aged 12-18 years

Among older young people (aged 12-18) overall and those without disabilities specifically, the most popular responses for the question about being happy included going to school, spending time with family, engaging in hobbies, and spending time online. For young people with disabilities, the most striking difference was going to groups, which was less frequently associated with happiness and more frequently associated with unhappiness.

Similar trends emerged around activities that do not make them happy. Among 12–18-year-olds overall, 22.3% of respondents report that they ‘never’ go to groups or clubs to make them happy, with minimal differences between genders. Within this group, 39.3% of youth who identify as disabled report that they ‘never’ go to groups or clubs to make them happy, compared with 25.0% of non-disabled youth. The next most frequent activity ‘never’ associated with making them happy was talking to trusted adults. 22.5% of youth who identify as disabled reported that they ‘never’ talk to a trusted adult to make themself feel happy, compared with 16.2% of non-disabled youth.

1.4.2 Worries and Concerns

All participating children were asked about their worries and concerns; this section compares the responses of children who identify as disabled and those who do not across the two age categories.

Children aged 7-11 years

The most frequent worry identified by all surveyed children aged 7-11 overall, and those who identify as both disabled and non-disabled, was our planet. Children who identify as non-disabled also frequently worry about tests and exams and getting a job, while children who identify as disabled highlighted their own mental and physical health more frequently than external markers of success.

	Most frequently identified concerns among children who identify as disabled.	**Most frequently identified concerns among children who do not identify as disabled.**
1	Our planet	Our planet
2	Their mental health	Tests and exams
3	Their physical health	Getting a job
4	Getting a job	Their mental health

Children with disabilities worry more than other children about most categories, except COVID-19 and tests/exams, where responses are similar. Most strikingly, children with disabilities worry more than non-disabled children about:

- **Going to school.** Over two-thirds (68.6%) of children with disabilities worry about going to school, compared with less than half (45.3%) of children who do not identify as disabled.
- **How they look.** Two-thirds (66.7%) of children with disabilities worry about how they look, compared with less than half (48.1%) of children who do not identify as disabled.
- **Having enough to eat.** 59.2% of children with disabilities worry about having enough to eat, compared with 43.2% of children who do not identify as disabled.
- **Having somewhere to live.** 62.4% of children with disabilities worry about having somewhere to live, compared with 48.1% of children who do not identify as disabled.

Young people aged 12-18 years

For this age group, a range of response options were provided, revealing issues that young people ‘always’, ‘frequently’, and ‘sometimes’ worry about. Responses were recoded as yes/no for clarity and speed of analysis.

The most frequently identified concerns are the same across young people who identify as disabled and those who do not, but young people with disabilities are more frequently concerned about all of the issues identified in the survey except our planet (7.7% fewer are concerned about this) and test/exams (8.6% fewer).

The most striking differences are:

- 65.2% of young people with disabilities are worried about bullying, compared with 50.2% of those who do not identify as disabled. 16.9% of young people with disabilities are ‘always’ worried about bullying, compared with 5.4% of non-disabled youth.
- 37.6% of young people with disabilities are worried about having enough to eat compared with 24.2% of non-disabled youth.
- 65.2% of young people with disabilities are worried about how they and their family treat each other, compared with 42.5% of non-disabled youth.
- 34.3% of young people with disabilities are worried about having somewhere to live compared with 23.8% of non-disabled youth.
- 75.7% of young people with disabilities are worried about going to school compared with 67.8% of non-disabled youth. 22.8% of youth with disabilities ‘always’ worry about this, compared with 12.1% of non-disabled youth.
- 59.9% of young people with disabilities are worried about their family having enough money compared with 50.3% of non-disabled youth. 18.3% of youth with disabilities ‘always’ worry about this, compared with 6.3% of non-disabled youth.
- 34.8% of disabled children ‘never’ worry about how they and their family treat each other, compared with 57.5% of non-disabled children.

1.4.3 Bullying and Abuse

All participating children were asked about their experiences of bullying and abuse, where they felt safe and unsafe, and the extent to which adults ask for their opinion and care about what they say. This section compares the responses of children who identify as disabled and those who do not across the two age categories.

Children aged 7-11 years

Over half (57.8%) of surveyed children aged 7-11 worry about bullying and abuse. Children with disabilities are only slightly more likely (60.1%) to worry about bullying than children who do not identify as disabled (57.4%). Overall, around a third (30.1%) of child respondents report having experienced bullying or been treated differently because of who they are, and 29.6% are not sure.

- In all settings listed in the survey (school, home, clubs, online, streets, transport), children with disabilities report higher rates of bullying, except for school, where it is slightly lower.
- The most striking difference in the location of bullying is at home. Children with disabilities were more than twice as likely to report bullying at home (25.9%) compared with children who do not identify as disabled (12.0%).

Children were also asked to what extent adults ask for their opinion and care about what they say in various contexts. Minor differences emerge between disabled and non-disabled children.

- Children aged 7-11 with disabilities were more likely to report that adults ‘always’ or ‘sometimes’ treat them respectfully in clubs, and more likely to indicate that politicians and adult professionals who help them (like doctors, social workers and police) listen to them compared with children who do not identify as disabled.
- Children aged 7-11 with disabilities were less likely to report that adults listen to what they say in school and at home compared with children who do not identify as disabled.

Children aged 7-11 were also invited to reflect on the locations where they feel safe. Fewer children with disabilities feel safe across all settings compared with children who do not identify as disabled.

The most striking differences are:

- 19.1% of children with disabilities never feel safe in their town or village, compared with 9.1% of non-disabled children.
- 13.5% of children with disabilities never feel safe at school, compared with 4.3% of non-disabled children.
- 23.4% of children with disabilities never feel safe on the bus, school bus, or train, compared with 15.4% of non-disabled children.

Young people aged 12-18 years

Young people were asked whether they have ever been bullied or abused because of who they are. Overall, almost a third (30.3%) of young people reported that they have experienced bullying or abuse. This increases to nearly two-thirds for young people with disabilities; 59.1% of young people who identify as disabled report having experienced bullying.

Young respondents also shared the locations where they have experienced bullying. The most frequent was at school for both young people with disabilities and those who do not identify as disabled, with similar rates reported. However, young people with disabilities reported higher levels of bullying across all other locations specified in the survey. The biggest differences were:

- 18.2% of young people with disabilities who had experienced bullying reported experiencing bullying on public or school transport compared with 7.8% of young people who do not identify as disabled.
- 40.5% of young people with disabilities reported experiencing bullying online compared with 32.7% of young people who do not identify as disabled.
- 13.2% of young people with disabilities reported experiencing bullying on the street or in their town or village compared with 5.7% of young people who do not identify as disabled.

Young people were also asked to what extent adults ask for their opinion and care about what they say in various contexts. Disabled young people feel less heard across all settings, in particular at the community level:

- 45.9% of young people who identify as disabled report feeling heard in their community, compared with 56.7% of young people who do not identify as disabled.

Older children were also invited to reflect on the locations where they feel safe. Disabled young people feel less safe across all settings.

- 17.4% of young people who identify as disabled report never feeling safe at school, college, or university compared with 6.4% of young people who do not identify as disabled.
- 14.8% of young people who identify as disabled report never feeling safe in their neighbourhood compared with 4.7% of young people who do not identify as disabled.
- 22.3% of young people who identify as disabled report never feeling safe on a bus, school bus, or train compared with 13.9% of young people who do not identify as disabled.

1.4.4 Making life better

All participating children were invited to share their priorities for the Commissioner to improve their lives.

Children aged 7-11 years

Younger children were asked, “What would make children's lives better?” Priorities were similar for disabled and non-disabled children overall, although children with disabilities more frequently selected ‘free buses and trains’ and ‘more help with feelings and wellbeing’. Children with disabilities less frequently prioritised ‘try to stop bullying’, ‘help families to get the things and money they need’, and ‘all children treated the same and equal’. Given the constraints of the survey data, it is impossible to elaborate on the reasons for the choices.

Young people aged 12-18 years

Young people were also invited to share their suggestions for what would make young people’s lives better. The most frequent responses overall, and for young people with disabilities, were to help families to get the things and money they need (46.4%), more mental health support (44.6%) and tackling bullying and hate crime (43.6%). As with younger children, across all categories, the results were similar for young people who identify as disabled and those who do not.

1.4 Limitations

The AfW survey was designed and administered to capture the experiences and priorities of children and young people across Wales, capturing a wide range of demographic data for analysis. However, it did not focus specifically on disability, and as a result, there are limitations in the analysis of these data that preclude generalising these findings.

In particular, limitations concern the lack of granular information about the nature of the disabilities experienced by participants. Participants were not asked for any information about the nature of their disability, and as such, the sample may include a diverse range of physical and mental disabilities. It is, therefore, impossible to disaggregate the dataset, explore their varied experiences, or investigate any particular disabilities in depth.

Interestingly, many (14.9%) of the children and young people who participated in the Ambitions for Wales survey responded ‘unsure’ to the disability question. There may be various reasons, and we lack the contextual information to understand why they were unsure and how children conceptualise disability in their own experience. We could hypothesize that this group may include children who wear glasses or other sensory aids, those who are seeking or have secured diagnoses such as ADHD or autism, and perhaps those with temporary injuries such as broken bones, among other reasons. It is also worth considering that parents and caregivers may not always openly share diagnoses with the children in their care. Accordingly, some children may be unaware of their diagnoses.

However, it is a unique dataset, and the analysis of these data offers valuable insights into the experiences of children and young people with disabilities in Wales and illuminates potential areas for further investigation in the context of a systematic knowledge deficit about this group.

Section 2: Review of the Evidence Base

2.1 Theoretical Approach

The Welsh Government's overarching approach is defined by its commitment to the social model of disability, and this model also underpins the present report. Accordingly, this Situational Analysis investigates the evidence base concerning the experiences, opportunities, challenges, and barriers to inclusion and participation children in Wales face. The Social Model of Disability proposes that the oppression, exclusion, and discrimination faced by people with disabilities are not an inevitable consequence of disability but are caused instead by the way society is run and organised. People with disabilities are therefore 'disabled' by the barriers operating in society that exclude, discriminate, and disadvantage them. Key disabling barriers from a Social Model approach include:

1. Attitudinal barriers: The social and cultural attitudes and assumptions about people with impairments that explain, justify, and perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion.
2. Physical barriers: Features and characteristics of the physical and built environment that prevent or mitigate equal access.
3. Information/communication barriers: These may include text in inaccessible formats, lack of interpreters, or excessively technical messaging.
4. Organisational barriers: Professional or educational settings and management practices that do not accommodate disabled people.

The analysis is also informed by the related 'pillars of independent living', also known as the 12 basic rights of disabled people. Independent Living is possible through the combination of various environmental and individual factors that allow disabled people to have control over their own lives, self-determination, equal opportunities, and self-respect:

1. Appropriate and accessible information;
2. An adequate income;
3. Appropriate and accessible health and social care provision;
4. A fully accessible transport system;
5. Full access to the environment;
6. Adequate provision of technical aids and equipment;
7. Availability of accessible and adapted housing;
8. Adequate provision of personal assistance;
9. Availability of inclusive education and training;
10. Equal opportunities for employment;
11. Availability of independent advocacy and self-advocacy;
12. Availability of peer counselling.

Recognising that the needs of children and young people may differ from those of adults, the foundational conditions of genuine independent living nevertheless provide a valuable framework for the analysis of the existing evidence base and the identification of knowledge gaps around the experiences and challenges faced by young people living with disabilities in Wales. Some of these pillars are recurring themes throughout the evidence base and were raised as concerns by children and young people who participated in the AfW consultation (accessible information, health and social care provision, transport, education, and employment). However, some are infrequently mentioned in relation to children and young people with disabilities, for example, access to the environment, the adequacy of technical aids and personal assistance, and the availability of peer counselling.

2.2 Overview of legislation and available data

The Welsh Government has published statements of policy and practice for people with disabilities, including learning disabilities. The Welsh Government's Framework for Action on Independent Living[2] (2013) identified key interconnected priority areas for action, including advice and information, advocacy, personal care and support, person-centred technology, employment, housing, transport, and access to places. The framework was reviewed during a series of meetings, engagement events, and an online survey that took place in 2017, as well as a consultation on the framework and action plan undertaken in late 2018. While some young people with disabilities were included in the consultation, younger children did not participate. The framework sets out how Wales is fulfilling its obligations under the UNCRPD and also highlights the role of key legislation, including the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014), the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015), the Equality Act (2010), the Health and Social Care Act (2008) and the Health and Social Care (Quality and Engagement) (Wales) Act (2020) which came into force on 1st April 2023. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018) is a new statutory framework to change the separate systems for SEN and learning difficulties and /or disabilities in further education and create a single system for supporting learners up to 25 with ALN. This has created a unified legislative framework integrating assessment, planning, and monitoring support for learners with ALN and improving systems for providing information and advice and resolving concerns. The Welsh Government has also published the Learning Disability Strategic Action Plan[3], a strategic agenda for developing and implementing learning disability policy from 2022-2026, with an accompanying delivery plan that prioritises health, social services, independent living, education, employment, housing and transport.

The UK Equality Act (2010) defines disability using the medical model – disabled people are defined as people with certain conditions or limitations on their ability to carry out typical day-to-day activities. However, the principles informing the Framework for

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[2] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[3] Welsh Government. 2022. Learning Disability Strategic Action Plan 2022 to 2026: Our plan for developing and implementing learning disability policy from 2022 to 2026. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2022/5/2/1653395411/learning-disability-strategic-action-plan-2022-2026.pdf

Action[4] and the requirements for employers and service providers to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to their policies and practices to reduce preventable inequalities align with the social model of disability, aiming to mitigate barriers preventing disabled people from participating in society equally with non-disabled peers.

The powerful slogan, *“Nothing About Us Without Us”,* has been used by the disability rights movement for decades. It advocates for full participation in the development of policy and social and economic opportunities for, by, and with persons with disabilities. Participation is a right granted under the UNCRC (article 12) and one of the foundational principles guaranteed by the UNCRPD. The Welsh Government is committed to ensuring that children and young people have opportunities to actively participate in decision-making at local, regional, and national levels in Wales. Mechanisms include school councils, youth forums, and Cymru Ifanc /Young Wales[5]. The seven National Participation Standards[6] in Wales are also used to support agencies and organisations working with children and young people to ensure that children and young people are part of the design, delivery, and evaluation of services.

There are a reasonable number of research reports and publications investigating the experiences of disabled people in Wales, authored by the Welsh Government and its agencies (e.g. Equality and Human Rights Commission, Care Inspectorate Wales), Welsh Parliament Committees (e.g. Children, Young People and Education Committee) and local councils across Wales (e.g. Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committees). The experiences of children and young people are often discussed. Still, they are rarely included directly in the data collection process. Population Needs Assessment is a statutory duty under Part 2 of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, requiring Local Authorities and Local Health Boards to form a partnership to conduct the assessment. Annual School Census data for pupils aged 5 to 15 in primary, middle, and secondary schools can be accessed at the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC)[7], which maintains up-to-date data on the number of children registered with additional learning needs, including those with Individual Development Plans (IDAs). GCSE and A-level outcomes for learners can also be accessed through the Welsh Government's Statistics and Research Series Examination Results platform[8] and through Stats Wales[9].

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[4] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[5] Cymru Ifanc /Young Wales is a Children in Wales initiative, funded by Welsh Government. Information can be found here: https://www.childreninwales.org.uk/children-young-people/young-wales/

[6] Welsh Government. 206. Safonau Cyfranogiad Cenedlaethol dros Blant a Phobl ifanc/ Children and Young People’s National Participation Standards. See for example: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/Bilingual-Participation-Standards-poster2016.pdf

[7] Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC). Accessed from: www.statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census

[8] Statistics and Research Series: Examination results. Accessed from: https://www.gov.wales/examination-results

[9] Stats Wales. Accessed from: www.statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue

University-based research networks have also produced insightful research and analysis, which have informed the Welsh Government's policy decision-making. For example, researchers from Cardiff University explored the 'supported employment' model and assessed the extent to which it could help more learning disabled and autistic young people to secure paid work in Wales[10]. The team's findings influenced Welsh Government policy and their decision to invest £10m to launch a project called 'Engage to Change'[11] that provided employment support to 1,070 young people with a learning difficulty, learning disability, and/or autism over 7 years. Learning Disability Wales and the National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) at Cardiff University formed a partnership called Influencing and Informing, taking forward the policy, research, and legacy work of the Engage to Change project, and advocating for a Wales National Job Coach Strategy.

Research on children and young people with disabilities often focuses on particular issues, including housing, social care, health and wellbeing, education, and employment. It includes all kinds of special educational needs (SEN)/ additional learning needs (ALN), life-limiting conditions, and disabilities. Historically, many available studies rely on secondary statistical data and desk reviews or rapid reviews. This resulted in studies being recycled and reused for years or even decades, creating an echo chamber effect without adding meaningful analysis to the knowledge base. However, recent Welsh Government supported reviews have implemented extensive consultations with professionals, local authorities, communities of practice, parents and carers, and in some cases also with young people[12]. Service provider case files are sometimes reviewed to inform the analysis; for example, one study by the Care Inspectorate Wales in 2021[13] noted that direct engagement with children and families was inhibited by Covid-19 restrictions and used case files accordingly. Methodologically, studies informed by primary data sometimes use online survey questionnaires using multiple choice, fixed option formats. It is often unclear whether accessible formats were available or whether a Welsh language option was provided.

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[10] Cardiff University School of Medicine. ND. Supporting learning disabled and autistic young people into employment. Accessed from: www.cardiff.ac.uk/medicine/research/impact/supporting-learning-disabled-and-autistic-young-people-into-employment.

[11] Engage to Change. Accessed from: www.engagetochange.org.uk/

[12] See for example:

Children, Young People and Education Committee. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?

Equality and Social Justice Committee. 2025. Anything’s Achievable with the Right Support: Tackling the Disability Employment Gap.

Welsh Government. 2018. Learning Disability Improving Lives Programme. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/learning-disability-improving-lives-programme-june-2018.pdf

[13] Care Inspectorate Wales. 2021. Let me Flourish: National review of early help, care and support and transition for disabled children in Wales. Accessed from: www.careinspectorate.wales/sites/default/files/2021-11/211129-national-overview-report-disabled-children-en.pdf

These surveys use self-reported data from children accessed through their schools or from service providers, parents and caregivers, and local authorities[14].

Despite the stated commitments of the Welsh Government and the increasing inclusion of children and young people in decision-making fora in Wales, direct engagement with children and young people with disabilities remains inconsistent, and younger children and children with learning disabilities rarely participate in consultations. In most cases, children and young people with disabilities are included as research participants, responding to pre-selected thematic areas and research priorities determined by adult professionals without participating in the design or evaluation of research studies. An exception, and the only research study that appears to have engaged young people with disabilities as active research participants, was the innovative 2015-2020 UK-wide Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning (DRILL) Building Bridges peer research project [15]. This National Lottery Community Fund-supported programme was led by disabled people, for disabled people. Research was conducted by trained young people with lived experience of learning disability, collecting qualitative data from young people with learning disabilities aged 14-28.

2.3 Access to Services

Previous CCfW reports and publications have illuminated the particular experiences and challenges faced by children and young people with disabilities and their families when seeking support for various needs. Testimony and case studies reveal how families of disabled children must navigate complex systems to access support and can fall through gaps where there are no services to meet their needs. In some cases, they have been referred to the wrong providers and placed on long waiting lists for inappropriate services[16]. CCfW research suggests that in most areas of Wales, children and young people experiencing distress with mental health, emotional wellbeing, and behavioural issues are waiting too long to get the help they need and are being ‘bounced’ between services without clarity around who is responsible for their care. The Commissioner and her team believe that services should align with the needs of families and that early support and intervention is the best approach to prevent the development of more serious problems.

The Welsh Government’s Right to Independent Living Framework notes that “disabled people … should be able to achieve their potential in all areas of life, supported by an easily accessible health and social care system”[17]. In some cases, the accessibility of

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[14] See for example: Care Inspectorate Wales. 2021. Let me Flourish: National review of early help, care and support and transition for disabled children in Wales. Accessed from: www.careinspectorate.wales/sites/default/files/2021-11/211129-national-overview-report-disabled-children-en.pdf

[15] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[16] Children’s Commissioner for Wales. 2020. No Wrong Door: bringing services together to meet children’s needs.
Making Wales a No Wrong Door Nation - how are we doing? 2022. Children’s Commissioner for Wales.
A No Wrong Door Approach to Neurodiversity: Book of Experiences. 2023. Children’s Commissioner for Wales.

[17] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living: Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

services remains challenging for people with disabilities in Wales. This review of evidence of inequalities in access to healthcare services for disabled people in Wales found disparities in life expectancy, health literacy, accessible communications, and mental health services, among others[18]. Despite being more likely to have additional healthcare needs, such as poor mental health, disabled young people are unable to access services until the situation is more severe, even at crisis point.[19] This finding is supported by the testimony of families, professionals, and young people across the evidence base. Accessing diagnoses can be complex and time-consuming, often delaying the process when needed for services, including education. Delays are partly due to professional capacity, lack of resources and guidance, and Covid-19 impacts. A population-level analysis found that there are higher rates of suicide amongst the disabled population compared to those who are not disabled[20].

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a disproportionate impact on disabled people[21][22]. Recognising that health and social services responded to enormous challenges during the pandemic and its aftermath, many barriers remain, and children and families still face stressful challenges and long delays in meeting their critical service needs. Parents, carers, and professionals in the AfW survey responses frequently cited these challenges[23] and remain a recurring theme across the evidence base relating to access to services for children and young people with disabilities in Wales.

Research participants in Wales have also reported that brief healthcare appointments are unsuitable for young people with learning difficulties, and noted that some specialist health services have been particularly difficult to access by young disabled people, e.g., sexual health[24]. Research has also identified protective factors and reasonable adjustments in health promotion and education, including primary and secondary health care, e.g., using easy read communications for annual health checks and increasing the number of learning disability liaison nurses in the hospital[25]. Parents and carers repeatedly listed access to services like adequate speech and language

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[18] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living: Framework and Action Plan.
For evidence relating to young people aged 16+ see also: Welsh Government. 2015. Review of evidence of inequalities in access to health services in Wales. Accessed at: https://gov.wales/review-evidence-inequalities-access-health-services-wales.

[19] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living: Framework and Action Plan.
from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[20] Office for National Statistics. 2021. Sociodemographic inequalities in suicides in England and Wales: 2011-2021. Accessed from: www.ons.gov.uk

[21] Welsh Government. 2021 Locked out: liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19.

[22] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2024. Coronavirus and Me: Understanding how disabled children and young people have experienced the pandemic in Wales. Accessed from: https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/experiences-of-disabled-children/

[23] Stones, L. 2023. Ambitions for Wales: The survey results and analysis of the experiences and hopes of children, young people, parents and carers and professionals in Wales, and their priorities for the Commissioner. Children's Commissioner for Wales.

[24] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living: Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[25] Welsh Government. 2018. Learning Disability Improving Lives Programme. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/learning-disability-improving-lives-programme-june-2018.pdf

therapy and occupational therapy as initiatives to enhance accessibility and inclusion in education[26]. In March 2023, Freedom of Information requests revealed that wait time for assessment for autism and/or ADHD ranged between 47 and 166 weeks across Wales[27].

Despite the shift in Wales towards models of integrated care that promote closer links between social care, preventative community-based services, and health care provision, parents and carers of children with a learning disability continue to report mixed experiences of care and support services. The findings of a 2024 research project commissioned by Improvement Cymru describe an implementation gap between the vision of care that informs policy and practice and parents', carers and children's experiences of it.[28]. This primary research project used FGDs and interviews to explore the experiences and perspectives of parents and carers of children with a learning disability. This research highlighted the importance of rights and needs-based provision, the role of the parent or carer as an advocate, the importance of coordinated services across health and social care, and the importance of (adult) participation in processes affecting families.

Housing is also highlighted as a challenge for families with disabled members, and children and young people with physical disabilities have experienced particular difficulties finding housing that meets their needs, especially in the private rented sector in Wales[29]. There is also a reported lack of suitable local residential placements for disabled children and young people in Wales, and in particular for children with complex needs[30]. This can result in placements out of the child or young person's county, or even out of the country in England or Scotland, with implications to maintaining relationships with family and friends and school placements. Recommendations to address this include increasing housing options and the development of new models of supported housing and integrated housing health and social care solutions[31].

Overall, despite a strong commitment to equitable service provision from the Welsh government, access to services remains inconsistent for people with disabilities in Wales. The evidence base reveals how families of children and young people with disabilities often struggle to access the help they need, with the majority of the

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[26] Welsh Parliament. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee Engagement Findings. Accessed from: https://senedd.wales/media/vu4bjot1/disabled-access-to-education-and-childcare.pdf

[27] Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into 'Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?' 2023.

[28] Jones, Dawn. 2024. 'It sounds really good in theory': Exploring parents' and carers' experiences of accessing care and support services for their child with a learning disability. Wrexham University /Welsh Government.

[29] Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee. 2022. Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan Population Needs Assessment.

[30] Care Inspectorate Wales. 2021. Let me Flourish: National review of early help, care and support and transition for disabled children in Wales. Accessed from: www.careinspectorate.wales/sites/default/files/2021-11/211129-national-overview-report-disabled-children-en.pdf

[31] Welsh Government. 2018. Learning Disability Improving Lives Programme. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/learning-disability-improving-lives-programme-june-2018.pdf

evidence reflecting testimony from parents, carers, and professionals. The voices of young people are less frequently amplified. The outcomes of deficits in service provision for the families of children and young people with disabilities are well documented, and the AfW survey findings suggest that children and young people also worry about their physical and mental health as well as meeting their basic needs (e.g. having enough to eat, having somewhere to live). Information and communication barriers are frequently cited as prevalent, and studies highlight the importance of involving parents and carers in processes affecting their families.

2.4 Education

The Independent Living Framework calls for educators to encourage and support disabled children to aspire and achieve academic qualifications to pursue their chosen careers. The report calls for more to be done to integrate children into mainstream schools, providing early support for disabled children and their families to ensure readiness for education and an inclusive environment to support the acceptance and inclusion of disabled children. Evidence is emerging that the school environment is not conducive to disabled and neurodivergent children. Oversized class capacity, harsh lighting, busy display boards, and crowded spaces are not conducive to creating suitable learning environments for children in general and can be particularly challenging for children with disabilities[32]. The Right to Independent Living Framework also recommends that disabled children benefit from various learning styles (tactile, auditory, visual) and adopting flexible, person-centred approaches tailored to individual needs, and proposes inclusivity league tables for schools and colleges and quicker transitions to vocational programs where academia poses barriers[33]. During FGDs, 79% of participating parents raised concerns around the adequacy of support and resources available for disabled young people, particularly in college settings[34]. Parents also raise concerns about disabled children and young people who fell into a ‘grey area’, who are not eligible for a specialised setting but struggle in a mainstream setting[35].

The Children, Young People and Education Committee was established by the Senedd to look at policy and legislation and to hold the Welsh Government to account around key issues, including children and young people; education; and health, care services, and social care as they relate to children and young people. The Committee published a detailed report in 2024 exploring differences in access to education and childcare for children and young people with disabilities[36]. The report aimed to understand how children and young people who are neurodivergent and /or have physical, sensory, or

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[32] Children, Young People and Education Committee. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee Engagement Findings

[33] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living. Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[34] Children’s Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

[35] Welsh Parliament. ND. Sparkle: Focus Group. Children, Young People and Education Committee.

[36] Welsh Parliament. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee.

learning disabilities can access all aspects of education and childcare. Evidence was collected through a public written consultation open to anybody, with participants also supported to submit video testimony or meet with staff, who then transcribed their contributions. Oral evidence sessions were also held, culminating in a session with Welsh Government Ministers. The Committee's Citizen Engagement team also held over 40 family interviews with parents, carers, and sometimes children and young people from across Wales[37]. An Online Advisory Panel was established with over 15 parents, carers, and young people to inform key research questions and the draft report. The Committee also visited five schools and a nursery and held FGDs with parents and carers. The report found that,

> *"A significant number of children and young peoples' right to an education is being denied throughout Wales. This is having an impact on their educational attainment, opportunities and emotional and mental well-being. The impacts extend to the wider family... Good quality provision is too patchy and reliant on committed individuals.[38]"*

This comprehensive report provides an overview of the legislative and policy context and addresses early years, pre-school, mainstream and special school provision, as well as before- and after-school clubs and holiday provision. It presents case studies of positive and negative experiences and addresses different needs. The report explores inequalities of access, school resources, staff training and knowledge, access to teaching, bullying, Welsh medium provision, and more. It also discusses the impacts on mental health, well-being, and educational outcomes, as well as parental employment and income and impacts in the broader family. Barriers to inclusive provision are discussed, as well as access to information and choices and specific provisions for different types of disabilities. The report concludes with 32 detailed, evidence-informed, actionable recommendations for the Welsh Government.

Other published data has revealed significant disparities in educational attainment between disabled and non-disabled children in Wales, with the educational attainment for disabled learners in Wales also falling behind England and Scotland. The most comprehensive review of equality and human rights in Wales, published in 2023 by the Equality and Human Rights Monitor, found that the education attainment gap between disabled and non-disabled children has widened since the last report in 2018[39].

According to the Welsh Government's Action on Disability Framework Report, in 2017, only 20.6% of children with ALN achieved at least five A*-C GCSEs, compared to 66.6%

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[37] Welsh Parliament. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Engagement Findings. Children, Young People and Education Committee. Accessed from: /https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s146050/Family%20Interviews%20-%20Engagement%20Findings%20-%20Final.pdf

[38] Welsh Parliament. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee. P23.

[39] Equality and Human Rights Commission. 2023. Equality and Human Rights Monitor: Is Wales Fairer? Accessed from: www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/2023/Is%20Wales%20Fairer%20Equality%20and%20Human%20Rights%20Monitor-%20English-%20accessible%20PDF.pdf

of children without ALN.[40] This report also highlighted specific drops in attainment rates among different disability categories between 2016/17 and 2018/19, indicating varied challenges faced by different groups of disabled learners. Children with moderate learning difficulties experienced the largest fall in attainment rates during this period. Children with behavioural, emotional, and social difficulties saw their attainment rates also decline significantly, dropping from 57.2% to 39.5% within the same timeframe. 15.0% of disabled people in England and 17.0% of disabled people in Wales obtained no qualifications during this period[41]. Stats Wales[42] also provides data on student enrolment rates by gender, disability, and level.

UK Census data[43] provides figures from the most recent Census in 2021 but does not specifically identify trends among children and young people. The Census found that over a quarter (27.5%) of disabled people had no formal qualifications, compared to 16.7% of non-disabled people. While there were small differences in the highest level of qualifications achieved between non-disabled and disabled people whose day-to-day activities were limited a little, disabled people whose activities were limited a lot were much more likely to hold no formal qualifications. 37.1% of disabled people whose activities were limited a lot had no formal qualifications, compared to disabled people whose day-to-day activities were limited a little (20%) and non-disabled people (16.7%). Disabled people whose activities were limited a lot were also less likely to have achieved a qualification at Level 4 or above (17.0%) compared to those whose activities were limited a little (28.7%) and non-disabled people (34.1%). There was little difference between disabled and non-disabled people in terms of the ‘Other’ education category, which includes apprenticeships and vocational or work-related qualifications. Disabled people whose activities were limited a lot were the most likely to have achieved a qualification in this category (8.2%), closely followed by disabled people who were limited a little (8.0%) and nondisabled people (7.9%).

The evidence also suggests that disabled young people often lack involvement in shaping their educational paths. This lack of participation can lead to limited choices during educational transitions, potentially impacting their ability to access higher education opportunities, and more importantly, missed opportunities to unleash their potential based on their unique interests, strengths, and aspirations. Consultations conducted by Action on Disability suggest they are often not involved in education

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[40] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living. Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[41] UK National Statistics. 2019. Accessed from: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilityandeducationuk/2019

[42] StatsWales. Accessed from: https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Higher-Education/Students/Enrolments-at-Welsh-HEIs/enrolments-by-gender-disability-level-mode

[43] UK Census. 2021. Accessed from: https://www.gov.wales/disabled-peoples-outcomes-health-housing-education-and-economic-status-census-2021-html

reviews, indicating a gap in proactive planning and decision-making[44]. Consultation underpinning the Action on Disability Framework has also highlighted limited progression routes for young disabled people into further education, volunteering, or employment. It noted challenges such as lack of work experience opportunities and limited progression options post-school, leading to feelings of limited support and opportunities[45]. A 2018 study by the CCfW investigating transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities supports this, finding that of 99 young people with learning disabilities surveyed, only seven reported being involved in education reviews[46]. In the same study, only 28 out of 71 young people felt they had received advice about what to study in college, and approximately 50% had met with Careers Wales and talked about their future.

Young people with learning disabilities who participated in the Building Bridges peer research project also reported having limited access to college courses and apprenticeships due to a lack of qualifications for vocational study. Of 85 participants, none had accessed work-related courses, such as traineeships, apprenticeships, or other vocational study[47]. The peer research team noted that schools use traditional teaching methods to focus on high academic achievement, while children who think and learn differently are disadvantaged and potentially prevented from reaching their full potential. This leads to young people with learning disabilities and other challenges having difficulties accessing GCSE and BTEC qualifications, which are considered a necessity for young people to attend sixth form or college and ultimately to secure employment[48].

During FGDs conducted by the Children, Young People and Education Committee, parents described having to fight for their child's right to access education while their experiences and opportunities remain limited compared to their non-disabled peers[49]. They also noted that disabled children and young people are prevented from developing and reaching their aspirations and securing meaningful employment later in their lives. During FGDs conducted with parents of disabled children, parents also noted a lack of understanding among staff of certain behaviours and that emphasis is placed on academics over support with social aspects. Parents suggest that schools are not fully aware of the range of disabilities due to lack of training and that issues are exacerbated due to lack of expertise and consistent staffing. The shortage of staff trained in self-care and toileting needs has hindered many children with disabilities from attending

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[44] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living. Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[45] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living. Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[46] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

[47] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[48] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[49] Welsh Parliament: Children, Young People and Education Committee. ND. Sparkle: Focus Group.

mainstream education and leads to reduced education hours for disabled children[50]. Parents and caregivers often highlight the importance of individual staff members in determining how welcoming, inclusive, and accessible a school is, rather than the policies and practices underpinning the education system[51] [52].

The Welsh Government has made progress in establishing oversight mechanisms to review the extent to which policy and legislation are implemented to provide all children and young people with access to appropriate quality education, but available statistical data shows that inequalities in educational provision and academic outcomes remain. The 2024 report[53] published by the Children, Young People and Education Committee exploring differences in access to education and childcare for children and young people with disabilities provides a comprehensive overview of the current situation, recognising that challenges remain despite the progress made. In particular, providing early support for disabled children and their families to ensure readiness for education, an inclusive environment to support acceptance addressing attitudinal barriers, practical support for physical self-care needs, as well recognising and supporting different learning styles and communication needs. Research conducted with children and young people remains limited, with the majority of studies reliant on quantitative attainment data and primary data from parents, carers, and adult professionals and in some cases from older children at the threshold of transitioning from education.

2.5 Opportunities for Employment

In 2025, the Welsh Government published a report summarising the findings of an inquiry into the Disability Employment Gap. The report draws on evidence collected from individuals with lived experience, charities, policy-makers, campaigners, academics, frontline staff and others via a written consultation, focus groups and one-to-one interviews with disabled people and oral evidence sessions in person and on Zoom. The report notes that between 2015-16 and 2023-24, the Disability Employment Gap in Wales has declined from 35.4 percentage points to 30.9 percentage points. However, it is consistently higher in Wales than elsewhere in the UK, and there remain considerable variations between local authority areas[54]. The report notes that only 4.8% of people with learning disabilities are in work, and estimates that the average cost of reasonable adjustment to the employer is only £75 per employee. People with disabilities that participated in the FGDs highlighted barriers to employment, including negative attitudes towards disabled people as well as the physical challenges posed by the build environment.

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[50] Children, Young People and Education Committee. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee Engagement Findings.

[51] Welsh Parliament: Children, Young People and Education Committee. ND. Sparkle: Focus Group.

[52] Children, Young People and Education Committee. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee Engagement Findings.

[53] Welsh Parliament. 2024. Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare? Children, Young People and Education Committee.

[54] Equality and Social Justice Committee. 2025. Anything's Achievable with the Right Support: Tackling the Disability Employment Gap. Welsh Government.

The Framework for Action on Independent Living highlighted opportunities for employment as a key issue identified by disabled people, aligning with the priorities of the Welsh Government. The 2019 report notes that, *"not all disabled people are able to work in paid employment; however, all should have the opportunity to lead meaningful lives"*[55]. Employment not only supports independent living and financial security but can improve confidence, health, and well-being. The social networks formed through being in work are valued highly and contribute to well-being.[56]

Employment was the most important aspiration for young people with learning disabilities interviewed about transitioning to adult services, according to the Don't Hold Back Report.[57] It also emerged as a strong concern for children, including children with disabilities, across the Ambitions for Wales data (See section 1 of this report). However, the employment gap for young disabled people in Wales is still prevalent; young people with disabilities, in particular those aged 19-24, are more likely to be not in employment, education, or training (NEET) than those without disabilities.

The Welsh Government's 2022 plan for employability and skills[58] aims to help people upskill, access fair work and thrive, for a more equal Wales. The plan details the establishment of a network of Disabled People's Employment Champions to support businesses with the recruitment and retention of disabled people and the publication of guidance for employers. The report details the Welsh Government's commitment to invest in and strengthen the whole system approach to delivering the Young Persons Guarantee to make it easy for everyone under the age of 25 to access an offer of work, education, training, or self-employment. The Government commits to tackling the gap between disabled and non-disabled young people who are NEET, recognising that 19.7% of disabled young people aged 16-18 were NEET over a three-year period to September 2021, which rises to 40.0% for those aged 19-24, this compares to 6.8% and 9.4% respectively for non-disabled young people. In 2025, this figure has fallen to around 36% of disabled people aged 19-24 NEET, compared to less than 10% of those without a disability.[59] The 2023 Equality and Human Rights Monitor report also found that disabled adults are less likely to be employed than non-disabled adults. While the disability employment gap narrowed from 39.6% in 2013/14 to 36.2% in 2019/20, the earnings gap is worsening. Disabled workers earned 15.1% less in 2019/20 compared to 8.0% less in 2013/14.

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[55] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan. P20. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf.

[56] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living. Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[57] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

[58] Welsh Government. 2022. Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: A Plan for Employability and Skills. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-05/stronger-fairer-greener-wales-plan-employability-and-skills0.pdf

[59] Welsh Government. 2025. Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): October 2023 to September 2024.

While supported employment, apprenticeships, and on-the-job learning opportunities are promoted and supported by the Welsh Government, research suggests that many disabled young people are not aware of these or cannot access them. In the research informing the Don't Hold Back report, no young people mentioned supported employment, apprenticeships, or on-the-job learning, and researchers found that most could not enter apprenticeships due to not having entry requirements and colleges not providing part-time apprenticeships.[60] Similar evidence of inflexibility as a barrier to apprentices was presented to the Equality and Social Justice Committee that recommends, "greater flexibility into the eligibility criteria of key support programmes for disabled applicants."[61] It is important to support young people with disabilities to benefit from the Welsh Government's Young Persons Guarantee to access an offer of work, education, training, or self-employment. Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, has also commissioned research to collate good practice across Wales, the UK and globally on improving diversity to inform the future Apprenticeship Programme, due to commence in 2027.

The 2025 Disability Employment Gap report examines the transition from education to employment and cites concerns raised by the NCMH, DSA, EYST Wales, and others that,

> *Disabled students miss out on opportunities due to a lack of advice or are pigeon-holed into a narrow range of subjects and sectors that can more easily accommodate reasonable adjustments*[62].

Whilst the Don't Hold Back report found that many young people had work experience via their school in years 12 and 13 (aged over 17), this was usually within specialist volunteer placements or in segregated environments rather than in the community. The report also found that many participating disabled young people have experienced negative or unfair experiences with work, including issues such as not being paid, low pay, long trial periods with no job at the end, or too many working hours and being fired when the pressure is too much.[63]

During the consultations supporting the 2025 review, the Equality and Social Justice Committee (EHRC) Cymru, Public Health Wales, Ethnic Youth Support Team (EYST) and the Down's Syndrome Association identified employer reluctance and a lack of suitable placement opportunities as core challenges. Mencap Cymru further highlighted the

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[60] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

[61] Equality and Social Justice Committee. 2025. Anything's Achievable with the Right Support: Tackling the Disability Employment Gap. Welsh Government.

[62] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan. P20. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf p43

[63] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

need to accept lower levels of attainment in Maths and English to enhance accessibility for apprentices with disabilities[64].

Overall, the evidence shows that employment rates for disabled people in Wales remain lower than elsewhere in the UK, although the figures show improvement over the past decade. Barriers include attitudes as well as constraints in the build environment, access to information, and organisational barriers in professional settings.

However, the Welsh Government is making meaningful progress in supporting young people with disabilities to access work experience placements and apprentices and to increase diversity in the workforce. While challenges remain, there is a strong body of recent, relevant evidence identifying core issues, and the Welsh Government is taking steps to support disabled young people and to encourage businesses to recruit and retain them through the publication of guidance for employers and supporting policies and programmes. Young people have been consulted to some extent about their needs and priorities, although there is little first-hand evidence of their experiences of the work placements, apprentices or the reasonable adjustments made to support them into employment and this could be a fruitful area for further enquiry.

2.6 Travel and Mobility

Another core challenge facing children and young people with disabilities in Wales concerns transportation and the impact of mobility constraints on children's socialisation, access to education, employment, services, and mental health overall.

Accessibility and availability of public transport was the most frequently raised issue during engagement sessions with disabled people in Wales, including young people, conducted by Action on Disability in support of the Right to Independent Living Framework[65]. Disabled people noted that not being able to get about in the local community and further afield impacts their ability to secure employment, attend personal and professional appointments, access leisure and public services, and meet up with family and friends, contributing to loneliness and social isolation.

The CCfW report 'Don't Hold Back' also concludes that transportation poses a profound barrier for young people with learning disabilities to socialise and access services and opportunities. Their concerns include the cost, availability, and accessibility of transportation, including access to clear, understandable information on times and routes, and support to build their confidence with travelling[66].

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[64] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan. P20. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf p45

[65] Welsh Government. 2019. Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living. Framework and Action Plan. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-09/action-on-disability-the-right-to-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan.pdf

[66] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

Research conducted during the Building Bridges peer research project aimed to investigate the conditions and contexts in which young people with learning disabilities develop and maintain friendships and explored barriers and mitigating factors associated with social isolation. The study also highlighted how challenges associated with using public transport were compounded by the geographical distance between children and young people attending specialist schools, and noted that these barriers hinder the development of friendships and community participation[67].

Transport to college and work placements can also be a barrier to education and employment. Children and young people with learning disabilities (and others) who are unable to use public transport independently remain reliant on parents and caregivers for access to services and social activities, inhibiting their socialisation opportunities and increasing pressure on families. For families without access to a car or who are unable to provide transportation due to other commitments, tax services can be prohibitively expensive[68]. The importance of transport in rural areas and a lack of reasonable adjustments (e.g., on buses and taxis) were highlighted.[69]

In 2017, CCfW published an update on the 2014 'Full Lives: Equal Access?' report[70], which highlighted concerns about wheelchair access for secondary school pupils in Wales. The report made recommendations to the Welsh Government to update their guidance on access for disabled pupils and to ensure that all Local Authorities and schools were complying with their duties under the Equality Act 2010. The review found improvements in the accessibility strategies and plans in place but noted that local authorities are not routinely consulting with children and their families when drawing together their strategies despite a statutory duty to do so. However, the report found encouraging evidence of cases where schools have worked closely with children and their families to assess and meet their individual needs, with clear benefits for schools, local authorities, and families. CCfW encourages all local authorities to consider their accessible provision through a Children's Rights Approach and proposes 'The Right Way'[71], a principled and practical framework for working with children to ensure that every child has full access to education provision and facilities, grounded in the UNCRC. The CCfW report presents case studies from across Wales related to the five principles of a Children's Rights Approach and how they apply to ensuring that children and young people who have physical access requirements receive their right to an education[72]. Each case study exemplifies one the key principles: Embedding children's

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[67] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[68] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

[69] Welsh Government. 2018. Learning Disability Improving Lives Programme. Accessed from: www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/learning-disability-improving-lives-programme-june-2018.pdf

[70] The Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Full Lives: Equal Access. A follow up report on wheelchair accessibility in schools in Wales.

[71] A full explanation of these principles and how they apply to the education system can be found in the guide: The Right Way: A Children's Rights Approach to Education in Wales.

[72] The Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Full Lives: Equal Access. A follow up report on wheelchair accessibility in schools in Wales.

rights, Equality and non-discrimination, Empowerment, Participation and Accountability. The report also draws wider insights and provides actionable recommendations to embed good practices more widely.

Overall, the evidence suggests that transportation and mobility constraints have a significant impact on families and children and young people with disabilities' opportunities for socialization, access to education, employment, services, and mental health overall. Issues around the accessibility of public transport are frequently raised during research with disabled people, including physical and informational barriers, and the evidence base around the experiences of children and young people remains limited.

2.7 Making and maintaining friendships

In research conducted directly with children and young people, challenges associated with making and maintaining friendships emerge as a key priority. The evidence suggests that disabled children and young people face multiple and interconnected barriers to socialization, including practical issues around mobility and organisation, as well as difficulties in making and maintaining friendships.

During the Building Bridges peer research study, disabled children and young people consistently reported experiencing limited socializing opportunities outside of school. Although they desired such friendships, more practical and emotional support and communication skills were needed to build their capacity to make and maintain them. During this peer research, young people highlight the importance of support to manage their emotions, understand others, and learn how to navigate conflict appropriately. Practical help includes the logistics of organizing and travelling to meet-ups, managing spending, and time management. Communication skills include using phones and the internet to keep in touch, booking taxis, and knowing how to socialize[73].

Support from parents, social workers, advocates, and activity/youth leaders, were mentioned as key enablers[74]. Despite the statutory guidance published by the Welsh Government in 2018 outlining measures to ensure increased access for disabled pupils, including participation in school trips as a key measure, parents of disabled young people reported that their children lack access to residential opportunities through school.[75]

Examining transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities, CCfW research also suggests that young people wanted help to make friends and manage

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[73] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[74] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[75] Children, Young People and Education Committee. 2023. Do Disabled Children and Young People have equal access to education and Childcare? Engagement Findings. Welsh Parliament.

friendships[76]. Evidence from Australia[77] and Canada[78] suggests that children and young people with a learning disability are shown to participate in fewer activities, less frequently, than their peers without a learning disability, and also tend to have fewer friends.

During the Building Bridges peer research study, young people with learning disabilities reported that parents and carers can be overprotective and present a barrier to creating friendships. They note that parents can be too involved in their social lives, not allowing children the independence to develop friendships on their own. Young people also felt that parents didn't recognize or accept their romantic or sexual relationships[79].

Physical barriers that can prevent young disabled people from accessing friends can be mitigated through engaging in online spaces; however, young disabled people navigating the online social landscape face a unique set of complexities when it comes to forming friendships. While the internet offers a platform for connection that can mitigate geographical barriers and provide access to like-minded peers, it simultaneously presents challenges such as the prevalence of cyberbullying, a lack of meaningful interaction, and concerns about online safety. The Building Bridges peer research study highlighted how social media and online gaming have dual outcomes: increasing isolation and disconnection for some while enabling others to create and maintain friendships despite limited mobility and socialization options. They also noted that parents can be restrictive of social media use due to safety worries[80].

Fostering friendships is a crucial aspect of life for disabled young people and an under-researched area of investigation despite its significance for well-being and mental health. The existing evidence base reveals a range of barriers that hinder the ability of children and young people with disabilities to form and maintain friendships. The insights from the Building Bridges peer research study highlight the pressing need for targeted support in emotional and practical skills, as well as effective communication strategies, to help these young individuals navigate their social worlds and form and maintain meaningful connections with others.

2.8 Bullying

In 2017, CCfW published Sam's Story, a report exploring children and young people's experiences of bullying in Wales[81]. The report highlighted several key messages

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[76] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2018. Don't Hold Back: Transitions to adulthood for young people with learning disabilities.

[77] Merrells, J., Buchanan, A., & Waters, R. (2018). The experience of social inclusion for people with intellectual disability within community recreational programs: A systematic review. *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability*, 43(4), 381-391.

[78] Taheri, A., Perry, A., & Minnes, P. (2016). Examining the social participation of children and adolescents with Intellectual Disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder in relation to peers. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 60(5), 435-443.

[79] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[80] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf

[81] Children's Commissioner for Wales. 2017. Sam's Story: Listening to children and young people's experiences of bullying in Wales.

emerging from dialogues with children, young people, and professionals that remain highly relevant for the experiences of children and young people with disabilities. These include the perception of 'difference', including disability, among a range of intersectional characteristics, and 'isolation' and the protective role of friendship networks in reducing the risk of bullying and supporting children who experience bullying. As discussed in the previous section, children and young people with disabilities often struggle to make and maintain friendships, and this increases their vulnerability to bullying.

All children and young people have the human right to safety from abuse and neglect and protection from harm (UNCRC, article 19). The Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales) (2014) and The Wales Safeguarding Children Procedures (2019) set out how all agencies and professionals should work together to safeguard and promote children's welfare, supported by practical guidance developed by Safeguarding Boards across Wales. The Welsh Government has published guidance for parents and carers, families, schools, governing bodies, local authorities, and organisations who work with school children and young people to help with well-being and safeguarding issues[82]. Despite this, the Anti-Bullying Alliance reports that *"disabled young people and those with SEND are significantly more likely to experience bullying - including online bullying - than their peers. Children who have learning disabilities and autism are particularly at risk"*[83]. The Alliance provides a helpful overview of the evidence, including a 2015 study[84] examining the prevalence of school bullying in early childhood (age 7) and adolescence (age 14), drawing on the statistical analysis of nationally representative data from the Millennium Cohort Study and Next Steps (formerly known as Longitudinal Study of Young People in England). The study found strong evidence that children and young people with long-standing limiting conditions such as muscular dystrophy or mobility difficulties, as well as those with SEN were at a higher risk of bullying victimisation. The association between disability and bullying remained even when other characteristics known to influence bullying (e.g. school performance, socio-economic circumstances) were taken into account. Children and young people with disabilities and additional needs relating to physical, sensory, cognitive, or communication impairments may experience intersectional vulnerabilities due to stigma and negative attitudes coupled with inequalities in access to information, services, and resources. It is particularly critical to understand their experiences and challenges to ensure their rights are met.

During the peer research conducted for the Building Bridges project, high rates of bullying were reported among young participants with learning disabilities. This included verbal (name calling and derogatory language), physical (more common for

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[82] Welsh Government. 2019. Challenging Bullying. Rights, respect, equality: guidance for parents and carers. www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-11/rights-respect-equality-guidance-for-parents-and-carers.pdf

[83] A review of evidence can be found here: https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/at-risk-groups/sen-disability/do-children-send-experience-more

[84] Chatzitheochari, S., Parsons, S., & Platt, L. 2015. Doubly Disadvantaged? Bullying Experiences among Disabled Children and Young People in England. Sociology, 50(4), 695-713. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515574813 (Original work published 2016)

boys than girls), rumours and lies spreading (more common with girls than boys), manipulation, exploitation and hate crime, and cyber bullying. Participants explicitly highlighted their disability as the reason for bullying, and many reported changing schools as a result. Participants described how bullying reduced their self-esteem, increased their social isolation, and undermined their engagement in social activities and community areas. Peer researchers (also young people with disabilities) reflecting on participant responses identified a lack of understanding about the nuances of genuine friendship, with confusion around emotions and feelings towards bullying behaviour[85].

Despite commitment and action by the Welsh Government, negative social and cultural attitudes towards disabilities persist, and children and young people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by bullying. This is likely to be exacerbated by the difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships discussed previously. The AfW findings presented in Section 1 also indicate that participating children with disabilities most frequently report bullying in the home compared with children who do not identify as disabled, and children with disabilities also feel less safe across all settings compared with non-disabled peers. Further research is needed to understand the experiences of young people with disabilities and to identify effective intervention points and strategies.

Section 3: Knowledge Gaps

3.1 Methodological opportunities

Raise awareness of participatory methods for research with children with disabilities

There is a reasonable body of evidence around the challenges and needs of children and young people with disabilities in Wales, but their voices are often missing from the research. Secondary analyses of national stats and Census data have effectively revealed widespread trends, while consultations with parents, carers, service providers and other professionals offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of families and the current challenges they face. Consultations with children and young people with disabilities remain limited, with the exception of adolescents on the threshold of adulthood. Most consultations with children use one-to-one discussion formats or small group FGDs, but methods are not systematically reported, and it's often unclear to what extent appropriate inclusive and participatory methods were used. Survey questionnaires administered through schools, with support from teachers for younger children, appear to be a reasonably effective approach with high response rates of around 75%, according to available data.

There appear to be significant and systemic methodological knowledge gaps around working with young children to understand and report on their lived experiences.

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[85] Butler, V. and Thomas, G. 2020. Young people and friendships: What matters to us? The Building Bridges Project. https://www.drilluk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/young-people-and-friendships-what-matters-to-us.pdf)

Available evidence suggests that despite the stated commitments of the Welsh Government, in practice, the research community has limited capacities to engage directly with children and young people with disabilities for research purposes. This is particularly relevant for children with learning disabilities and younger children (under 11s), who are rarely represented in the evidence base beyond the CCfW's research. However, the available research reports and knowledge products do not articulate these gaps explicitly or acknowledge this dearth as a methodological limitation.

Promote/ role model youth engagement in research

Youth engagement in research design, identifying key research questions, and analysis of the findings also remains limited across all sectors and thematic areas; young people are frequently not consulted on, or participating in, research design and research question development, nor data analysis and awareness raising around the findings.

However, the approach adopted by the Building Bridges peer research project in engaging young people to inform the research objectives and facilitate the data collection is promising and invites opportunities to address these systematic exclusions. Developing approaches to working with children with disabilities as peer researchers and raising wider awareness and advocacy around the standardisation of this model as good practice could offer a valuable contribution to the knowledge base and catalyse impact across the sector and beyond. If these insights could contribute to the development of practical guidance to support the implementation of the National Participation Standards for working with children and young people with disabilities, systemic changes could be catalysed across the research community. This approach would also contribute to some of the critical thematic areas identified in the existing evidence: supporting agency and amplifying voice, developing social and professional skills, providing opportunities for socialisation, and capacities potentially contributing to future careers. Including a Training of Trainers component (capacitating experienced youth researchers to train their replacements at the point of aging out) could also contribute to the sustainability of the model and the continuous development and refinement of good practices and embedded learning.

Explore how children understand disability and self-identify as disabled and promote standardisation to enhance the evidence base

The high numbers of children and young people who responded 'unsure' to the disability question in the AfW survey illuminates a potentially huge challenge informing the validity and reliability of the available data around children with disabilities across the evidence base, and is important to address in standardised guidance for research targeting children and young people with disabilities.

If children and young people are unsure whether or not they are disabled, the implications for both internal and external research studies are potentially profound. We may be systematically under-representing children with disabilities or silencing the voices of children with particular types of disabilities. It is, therefore, important to understand who self-identifies as disabled and who does not, and why such high numbers of children are unsure if they should classify themselves as disabled for the purposes of research studies. This could also be an interesting and valuable area for further research.

Children and parents with disabilities

Within the scope of the AfW consultation, it was not possible to investigate the experiences of families in which both the parent or carer and the child or children have disabilities. It was also not possible to cross-reference responses provided by participating children and young people and those provided by parents and carers to understand the situation from the perspectives of multiple respondents within the same household. The evidence base presented in Section 2, therefore, does not discuss the experiences of different types of households, and it also appears to be under-researched across the evidence base. It seems likely that households comprising both disabled children and disabled parents or carers could face particularly complex challenges in accessing services, education, employment, travel, socialising, etc. It is, therefore, advisable to explore the experiences and amplify the voices of these families, as they appear to be under-represented in the evidence base.

Acknowledge children’s contributions to research outcomes

If further research is planned, it is highly advisable to ensure that it is closely aligned with actionable outcomes and that child and youth participants are informed of the outcomes catalysed and appreciated for their participation in the research. To maintain appetite for, and ownership of, research, it is essential to provide accessible summaries of research outcomes to all participants, including children and young people with disabilities. It is also advisable to highlight where previous research informed policy decision-making and to acknowledge the contributions of children with disabilities to the political process to catalyse greater engagement in political processes over the longer term.

3.2 Thematic opportunities

Thematically, the existing body of evidence is reasonably diverse. Compelling evidence of inequalities already exists, supported by powerful and compelling personal testimony from affected families. Research studies tend to illuminate similar challenges and identify similar recommendations for action across thematic areas, indicative that greater alignment is needed between the evidence generated and policy decision-making in general.

Mobility and transport

Transportation is an emerging actionable area of influence with potentially widespread impacts for children and young people with disabilities. A recurring theme across the evidence base (but infrequently an explicit objective of studies) concerns the barriers to mobility facing young people with disabilities. The AfW survey data also suggests that young people with disabilities are less likely to feel safe in public spaces, including public transport. Access to transportation is widely cited as a barrier to inclusion and participation, impacting opportunities for socialization and leisure, access to services, and opportunities for employment and education for children and young people with disabilities in Wales, with further implications for mental health and well-being.

While cost and availability affect all children and families, accessibility presents further (preventable) barriers constraining the mobility of children with disabilities. In this regard, it may be advisable to investigate the extent to which existing legislation considers and responds appropriately to the needs of children and young people with disabilities in Wales, and what changes could be made to enhance provision for these users and their families.

Education

The evidence suggests that in Wales and across the UK, educational environments and pedagogy are not always appropriate for learners with disabilities and neurodiverse students. Children and young people with disabilities (and those without, according to the findings of the AfW consultation[86]) are struggling to engage in decision-making processes throughout their schooling and face limited opportunities to pursue and develop aspirations. The AfW findings also suggest that children with disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled peers to be unhappy in school, and both children and young people with disabilities also more frequently worry about going to school.

This has profound implications for their future careers, financial stability, friendships, and well-being. The 2024 Children, Young People and Education Committee Report exploring differences in access to education and childcare for children and young people with disabilities reveals enduring inequalities and develops actionable recommendations for further action by the Welsh Government. Further research may be needed in support of these recommendations.

Apprenticeships and employment

The 2025 Welsh Government on Disability Employment Gap provides compelling evidence that people with disabilities face ongoing barriers to employment, including negative attitudes towards disabled people as well as the physical challenges posed by the build environment.

However, there remains limited first-hand evidence around disabled young people’s experiences of work placements, apprenticeships, or the reasonable adjustments made to support them into employment. This could be a timely opportunity for further enquiry into the lived experiences of young people with disabilities.

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[86] Stones, L. 2023. Ambitions for Wales: The survey results and analysis of the experiences and hopes of children, young people, parents and carers and professionals in Wales, and their priorities for the Commissioner. Children’s Commissioner for Wales.

Making and Maintaining Friendships

Across the evidence base, disabled children and young people, and their families and carers, frequently express their desire to have more opportunities and support to develop and maintain friendships and to recognise and address bullying, requesting practical help, increased opportunities for emotional support, and improved communication skills. In the AfW survey data presented in Section 1, young people with disabilities are more likely to worry about their mental health compared with non-disabled peers. Safety remains a concern for parents and carers, both in physical spaces and online, and this can constrain the freedom of children and young people with disabilities to pursue friendships as well as romantic relationships. Bullying remains particularly problematic for children and young people with disabilities, and the evidence suggests that friendships and social networks can reduce incidences of bullying.

Further research and successful case studies could provide evidence of good practice, and harvest testimony in support of the outcomes of increased opportunities and capacities for friendships and relationships among children and young people with disabilities.

Relationships within families

The analysis of data from children and young people who identify as disabled across the AfW dataset (acknowledging the limitations of that evidence base for this purpose) illuminated unexpected findings around household dynamics and bullying within the home. Analysis of the demographic data in the AfW dataset also reveals a correlation between young people who identify as non-binary and those who identify as disabled, although due to the small sample size of this group, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the correlation with bullying. These are sensitive areas for research and are not themes that have been highlighted in other studies conducted with children and young people with disabilities in Wales. It may, therefore, signal hidden challenges at the household level regarding respectful relationships and bullying in the home. There is insufficient information to conclude the meaning of these findings, however.

When children experience bullying at home, this is likely to have a detrimental impact on their emotional well-being and self-esteem, which in turn may prevent them from meeting their full potential socially and academically. It is, therefore, imperative that those caring for disabled children and young people are given the tools and resources to support their social and emotional well-being. The testimony and survey data collected from parents and carers during the AfW consultation also suggests that they face considerable challenges in accessing support for themselves and the children in their care, which is likely to contribute to frustration and stress for affected families. Sensitively designed research would be needed to explore the experiences of children and young people with disabilities in their family settings.