



Lynne Neagle AC / AM Cadeirydd / Chair
National Assembly for Wales
Children and Young People's Committee

17 February 2017

Dear Lynne

Changes to the curriculum in Wales

I would like to thank the Children, Young People and Education Committee for reviewing the implementation of Professor Graham Donaldson's Review report *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*.

I would also like to thank you for your letter dated 26 January which highlights your findings to this point.

Education reform is our national mission and I will remain focused on ensuring that the reform programme is implemented well and in a timely way, learning from what works in Wales and across the world. At this point, we are still at a relatively early stage of implementation.

I take the Committee's point that the vision laid out for us by Professor Donaldson is conceptual in some aspects. However, the Government has been clear in laying out both the direction of travel and the methodology for getting us there. Learning the implementation lessons from other jurisdictions has been central to the adoption of this approach. This is why at the heart of the implementation methodology in Wales is a network of practitioners and other expert partners; to avoid the implementation problems experienced in other countries.

The approach is also intended to ensure that the outcomes of our reforms are fully owned and understood by the education sector as a whole and by the teaching profession in particular. At the root of this is our goal of developing a self-improving system. That is a deliberate step away from the top-down approach of the past, where the Government directs, instructs and sanctions, to one where it provides strategic leadership, facilitation and support. However, it also means that we cannot know every detail of what the final curriculum will look like at this stage and I recognise that some stakeholders will find the new approach uncomfortable to begin with.

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Gohebiaeth.Kirsty.Williams@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Kirsty.Williams@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

I was heartened by the Committee's agreement with and support for this approach to reform and I look forward to working with you to providing constructive challenge to the process at key points in the reform journey.

My responses to your specific observations are detailed below:

Implementing Professor Donaldson's vision

The Committee believes this new phase of engagement will be crucial and that the Welsh Government should do more to provide a clearer picture of how things are developing since Professor Donaldson's report was published. The regional consortia and local authorities, as the 'middle tier' which the Cabinet Secretary referred to in Committee, could have a role in communicating this.

I agree with the Committee on this point and will be working with our delivery partners to address this in the coming months. We are due to receive and then publish the Review Report from the OECD by the end of February and will then be in a position to publish our refreshed strategic delivery plan in March.

I will also shortly be publishing the outcomes of the initiation phase of the curriculum design work, which included the development of high-level strategic principles for the next phase of the work. These design principles formed the basis of a clear brief for the Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) design phase of the process, which began in January, and are an important marker in terms of the progress that has already been made.

Strategic Leadership from the Welsh Government

The Committee noted that 'over the coming months' the Cabinet Secretary will be 'reaffirming and re-emphasising, with all of [the Welsh Government's] key delivery partners, [their] collective leadership role in delivering the vision' provided by Successful Futures. The Committee believes this will be timely and recommends the Cabinet Secretary considers whether a clearer strategic steer and direction is needed from the Welsh Government, perhaps in conjunction with regional consortia.

I have made it clear that education reform is our national mission. The goal of this mission is a world-class education system geared to equip our children and young people to thrive amid the challenges and opportunities of the 21st Century.

I agree that we should be working in conjunction with regional consortia and that is what we have been doing. They are key partners in ensuring that the strategic vision is shared and understood. I believe that we are collectively ready for the next stage of development work and the draft report from the OECD has confirmed to me that we are on the right track and need to continue on this path. In line with this, I will be refreshing our strategic delivery plan, *Qualified for Life*, with a view to publishing a revised document in March and that will reaffirm the vision. It will give focus to the reform agenda and ensure that everything we are doing in education is fully aligned with *Successful Futures*. Our partners, including the regional consortia have been fully involved with developing this document.

Clarity and purpose of Pioneer Schools' roles

The Committee notes the Cabinet Secretary's expectation that, as the process moves into Strand 2, Pioneers should 'feel that they are clearer about what is required of them than may have been the case for Strand 1'. The Committee believes that the Welsh Government should proactively ensure that this expectation is borne out.

We launched Strand 2 - AoLE design and development - at our national conference in Llandudno last month. This national event also included the additional 25 schools from across Wales that I announced in January.

All Pioneer Schools in Strand 2 have been allocated one of the six AoLEs (Expressive Arts, Health and Well-Being, Humanities, Languages, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy and Science and Technology). We have arrangements to make sure there is clarity of role and purpose, including:

- The schools from the first phase of development feeding back the results of their work to their colleagues. These schools are now also part of the AoLE groups;
- A core brief for the schools, along with clear tasks;
- The Pioneer Schools have been tasked with developing a draft framework for each AoLE by June 2017 and a series of workshops for each AoLE have been established, with clear outcomes outlined, to guide us to delivery this objective.

Working arrangements between the Welsh Government and regional consortia to develop the new curriculum are very effective. We have regional consortia leads for each AoLE who will work alongside Welsh Government officials to share the facilitation of the Pioneer School working groups.

The shared ownership of developing the new curriculum will enable us to make sure that all schools are supported at a national and regional level to design the new curriculum.

Lessons from other countries

The Committee believes that curriculum design and development in Wales should be informed by, but not simply replicate, experiences in other countries, for example Scotland. The Committee notes the Cabinet Secretary said there are some specific differences between implementation in Wales and Scotland and that curriculum design here is part of a 'holistic reform programme'. We welcome the development of the curriculum in conjunction with the other two 'pillars' of education reform, as the Cabinet Secretary called them, initial teacher education and professional development and learning. The Committee would welcome further information from the Welsh Government on what it sees as the differences in approach between Wales and Scotland.

I am committed to learning from the experiences of other countries. A key lesson for me from Scotland and from elsewhere across the world is that you cannot change one aspect of the education system without looking very closely at how the rest of the system connects into and supports the changes you are making. If you do not do this there is a real danger that the elements you have not looked at will stifle the changes you are trying to achieve.

This is why the Welsh Government has committed to a holistic reform programme for education focusing on curriculum, assessment and accountability arrangements, alongside professional development and Initial Teacher Education. We are committed in particular to carrying out reform of the curriculum and our assessment arrangements in tandem. In Scotland the approach has been more linear.

Another key lesson from other countries is that it is during implementation that reform flounders. As described, this is why we have engaged with practitioners and the wider sector from the outset and why practitioners are at the heart of developing the curriculum through the pioneer schools approach. Together we are working with national and international experts in a planned way to develop a broad, balanced, inclusive and challenging curriculum. The approach in Scotland, whilst iterative, seems to have been less inclusive in terms of its design principles.

In addition, Wales has a stronger middle tier, which the OECD criticised Scotland for in their report last year. In Wales, local authorities and their regional consortia have been involved in programme planning from the outset and are working with Welsh Government and schools to support the approach to education reform.

Synergy between curriculum design and teachers' professional development and initial training

The Committee believes the next 12 to 18 months will undoubtedly be critical to the development work on curriculum and professional learning. The Committee will wish to monitor the progress of the Pioneer Schools involved in developing the professional learning offer and also note that there will be a consultation before summer 2017 on new professional teaching standards. Teachers must be ready to deliver the new curriculum, therefore the Welsh Government must ensure curriculum design and professional development are successfully developed in tandem.

I can confirm that these strands of work are being planned, managed and delivered in tandem. They are managed within the same governance structure and the key interdependencies between them have been mapped and the actions in place to manage them are subject to ongoing scrutiny and review.

The Professional Learning Pioneer schools have been central to developing the new Professional Teaching Standards working with Professor Mick Waters. The new standards have been designed to align with the new curriculum and assessment arrangements and are a key element of the change programme that will support the profession in preparing for their future role. The new standards will provide a focus for initial teacher education and for career-long professional learning.

The Digital Competence Framework (DCF), which was essentially fast-tracked and made available last September has also been an early area where the Professional Learning Pioneer schools are working jointly with Digital Pioneer schools to develop a high-level professional learning approach for the DCF, working closely with consortia and Estyn. The initial collaboration has been very positive and will ensure a seamless link between the DCF and the professional learning to support it. As the first part of the new curriculum to be made available, this will provide valuable insight for the future professional learning approach to the AoLEs.

A new OECD pilot group focused on developing 'Schools as Learning Organisations' (SLO) is also well underway. This group comprises both Curriculum and Professional Learning Pioneers. Pilot schools are currently reviewing reflective tools and instruments developed by the OECD to implement the SLO approach in Wales. These schools will initially focus on developing their own self improvement capacity prior to supporting other pioneer schools and their partners to effectively develop as learning organisations.

We are working with regional consortia to establish arrangements to ensure that professional learning pioneers are working with the AoLE groups to develop approaches to support emerging professional learning needs. Regional consortia have presented robust professional learning action plans which outline how pioneers and their partners are supporting their work to develop a range of professional learning activities to embed the new curriculum in schools.

We are currently discussing with Estyn an evaluation of the quality of professional learning provision currently being developed by consortia with pioneer schools. This review will also provide scope to reflect how new professional learning provision will equip practitioners to embed the new curriculum.

Initial Teacher Education and Training

The Committee notes that Professor Furlong's review of Initial Teacher Training found that the current arrangements are not sufficient to prepare teachers to deliver the new curriculum envisioned by Successful Futures. We welcome the Welsh Government's action to reform the initial education and training programmes and believe this should be strongly informed by the process of curriculum design as work on both of these agenda progress further.

My focus is to make sure that the education reform programme is implemented well. The teaching profession can only make its proper contribution to raising standards of education in our schools, as set out in *Successful Futures*, if our Initial Teacher Education (ITE) offers our future teachers the skills, knowledge and appetite to lead the change required.

My officials have continued a programme of stakeholder engagement. On 13 July 2016 HEIs were invited to discuss progress and development of new Professional Teaching Standards with Professor Mick Waters. The new Professional Teaching Standards will be the cornerstone of a new teacher professionalism not only for initial teacher education but for career-long professional learning.

I made a statement on the ITE Change Programme in September when I also announced the formal consultation on the ITE Accreditation Criteria and proposals for enhanced functions of the Education Workforce Council (EWC). This consultation commenced on 26 September and closed on 14 November. A full analysis of responses was published on 12 January.

Officials wrote to all HEI's on 09 December formally inviting them to submit a Statement of Intent to offer ITE programmes under the new arrangements by 06 January. They were asked to identify their revised programmes, their potential partnerships and detail their planned approach to delivery of high quality 1-year postgraduate and 3-year undergraduate ITE programmes of study. Ten Statement of Intent responses have been received.

My officials invited all HEIs to a meeting on 13 January which was chaired by Professor John Furlong. The meeting provided an opportunity for early feedback on proposed changes to the accreditation criteria following the consultation and set out the process and timescales for the next steps.

The central purpose of ITE reform is to improve the quality of provision delivered and better prepare our future teachers to develop the skills to teach, so that learners learn. I recognise that the timeline for delivery of the ITE reform programme is tight. Over the past few weeks, the ITE Expert Forum have considered all Statements of Intent and conducted face to face meetings with all that have submitted a statement, giving early feedback to inform next steps.

The Order which transfers the function of accreditation from HEFCW to the Education Workforce Council was laid in January with the debate scheduled for 14 February. Following the coming into force of Regulations in March, the EWC will write to all Partnerships that submitted a Statement of Intent detailing the timeline and requirements should they intend to submit ITE programmes for accreditation by 01 December 2017.

Relationship with assessment and accountability

Assessment

The Committee noted that the Cabinet Secretary described the scenario as not a choice between which comes first out of 'a chicken and an egg' but 'chicken and egg at the same time because we have to develop both elements'. We do not disagree but see this as a considerable challenge. The Committee would welcome further information from the Welsh Government on how exactly it proposes to successfully manage curriculum reform with changes to assessment and accountability at the same time. This is even more important given there are different views amongst the unions and the consortia about where assessment fits in to the process. The Committee believes the Welsh Government needs to resolve any such misunderstandings or tensions, which otherwise pose a risk to successful implementation.

In my previous letter, I stated that curriculum and assessment are interdependent and must be viewed as a package that requires close coordination. Countries that have introduced curriculum reform but have failed to heed this requirement have done so to the detriment of their aspirations.

I find it very difficult to understand why the head teacher and school leader unions would want to shoehorn the new curriculum into a pre-developed assessment system when we have the opportunity to construct both systems side-by-side, thereby ensuring alignment. To quote Dylan Wiliam, "assessment is a good servant, but a terrible master"; we do not want to be in a situation where the curriculum is compromised by the confines of assessment requirements.

We have agreed that formative assessment should be an essential and natural part of the teaching process and that it should be given priority in the arrangements we implement. We have also agreed the purposes of education and have established the characteristics we value for our children and young people and what we want for them as citizens of the 21st century. As we enter the next phase of the reform agenda Pioneer Schools, mindful of the assessment principles that have been developed, will start to determine the design of each of the AoLEs.

Working alongside them, researchers from the University of Glasgow and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) will engage with learners and practitioners to develop a shared conceptualisation and understanding of curricular progression. Together, they will identify what is necessary (in terms of threshold knowledge and understanding, skills, attributes and capabilities) to ensure that children and young people's learning does indeed progress meaningfully.

Throughout the development work, the Curriculum and Assessment Group will act as a critical friend, providing support and challenge throughout the process. This group is made up of academics that have spent many years driving system reform both in and outside of Wales and will be joined by the Pioneer steering group. I have every confidence that their overview and input will ensure that the curriculum and assessment arrangements we introduce will be fit for purpose and that they will be constructively aligned.

Accountability

The Cabinet Secretary said the Welsh Government is considering how to change accountability measures to minimise unintended consequences, such as inhibiting innovation. The Committee recognises that there is little value in hastily changing accountability measures now only to then change them again for the new curriculum. However, we believe the Welsh Government needs to strike an appropriate balance between adjusting accountability measures now so that Pioneer Schools feel free to get on and do their work, and working on more long-term one-off lasting reforms that dovetail with the new curriculum.

Successful Futures makes a number of recommendations that offer a different vision for accountability according to the four purposes. In moving to an environment where key decisions are taken at the local level, it is vital that distorting effects that can arise from external performance and reporting requirements are avoided. This will entail a move away from the Welsh Government gathering information about children and young people's performance on a school-by-school basis for accountability purposes and renewed emphasis on assessment for learning as an essential and integral feature of learning and teaching.

Schedule for implementation

The Committee notes the Welsh Government plans to share initial thinking on the proposed structure of each AoLE during autumn 2017 and will wish to return to the specific issue of whether implementation is on schedule later this year.

I will keep the Committee informed of progress and welcome its ongoing commitment and contribution to education reform.

Contingency planning

The Committee welcomes the involvement of the profession in designing the new curriculum and commends the innovative nature of the Pioneer Schools Network. We very much hope it is successful, although we are concerned about the consequences should this model fail to deliver the desired output: the availability of a new, clearly structured, modern fit for purpose curriculum by September 2018. The Committee believes the Welsh Government should undertake some contingency planning and ensure there is sufficient resilience within the programme to mitigate this risk.

The ambition in *A curriculum for Wales – a curriculum for life* is that the new curriculum “could be available to schools as early as September 2018”. Much work needs to be done in conjunction with Pioneer Schools and we will keep this date under review as work on each AoLE progresses. These reforms are hugely important for our school children and as such I am determined to take the time necessary to get them right.

I appreciate the concerns expressed by the Committee and wish to re-assure Members that there is, and always has been, contingency space built into our delivery planning. My ambition is that by 2021 every school will be using the AoLEs as part of the new curriculum to support learning and teaching. Pioneer Schools are at the heart of the design and development process. They are testing ideas with their fellow professionals to ensure that what is developed is workable and the model will be based on a strong ethos of school-to-school working. I will keep the Committee advised of any significant changes to the timetable.

Whilst I recognise the Committee’s concerns regarding our approach to curriculum and assessment design, Pioneer Schools are not being asked to deliver the new arrangements on their own. They are at the heart of an all-Wales partnership that includes local authorities, regional consortia, Estyn, FEIs, HEIs and many more.

As previously mentioned, I have also brought together a group of highly regarded experts in curriculum planning and assessment to work alongside and in support of the Pioneer Schools. The members of the Curriculum and Assessment Group have national and international experience of educational reform. Their role is to assist with the design of the new curriculum and assessment framework so as to ensure the new curriculum remains true to the principles in *Successful Futures*; and to support the implementation of the reforms set out in *A Curriculum for Wales: a Curriculum for Life*.

As the work has progressed we have continuously and collectively appraised where we are and what we need to change in order to strengthen implementation. For example, a review of progress in the autumn resulted in our appointing additional Pioneer Schools to help support the work on AoLE design.

I will continue to listen to our practitioners and delivery partners and will use the flexibility and contingency space available to me if I need to do so.

Curriculum content

The Committee believes such issues would sit suitably within the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience and urges for this to be actively considered as the design of the AoLE progress into more detailed stages. We also recognise the calls for greater teaching of Welsh history, and indeed regional and local history, and believe this should be considered in the design of the Humanities AoLE. The Committee acknowledges that there will be further opportunities for commenting on content of the AoLE as this emerges more clearly later this year.

I welcome the Committee’s understanding of where we are in the curriculum design process. As Strand 2 of this work progresses and the AoLEs are beginning to take shape, we will move to a new phase of engagement to ensure that all our stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to and understand what they look like and how they fit together. Strand 2 will identify those areas of the curriculum which require greater attention in Strand 3 (detailed AoLE development) as well as the expertise to develop those appropriately.

Working with Pioneer Schools and regional consortia we will share documents with stakeholders and schools as early in the development process as possible.

Legislative and transitional arrangements

Legislation

The Committee believes that decisions over the level of legislation used to establish the new curriculum will require careful consideration. Any primary legislation will require adequate time to be introduced, scrutinised and enacted, which all needs to be built into the timescale.

In terms of legislation, decisions over the level of legislation to be used to establish the new curriculum will be subject to careful consideration and consultation with Members of the Committee and stakeholders. It is anticipated that the necessary legislation will need to be in place by September 2021. I too will want to ensure that adequate time is built into the timescale allowing for introduction, scrutiny and enactment, and taking into account the timescales for the development of the new curriculum.

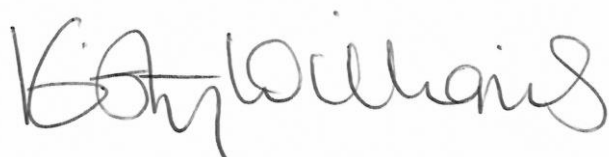
Implications for young people taking qualifications during transition

The Committee urges the Welsh Government to carefully consider the implications for young people in the current school system and the potential for adverse impact from being caught between two, quite different, versions of curricula. This is particularly a risk for pupils currently in secondary schools who will be taking GCSEs before, during, and immediately after the transition period. We welcome the fact this is receiving ongoing attention and urge that this continues in earnest.

I welcome the Committee highlighting the importance of ensuring children and young people in the current school system are not disadvantaged by the changes we are making.

During the design phase we will continue work with Pioneer Schools and Qualifications Wales to reflect on what these changes may mean for learners who are part way through a course of study leading to a qualification and to ensure that students taking new qualifications are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged compared to those who took the legacy qualification.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams'.

Kirsty Williams AC/AM

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education