



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

# Qualitative research with practitioners on preparations for curriculum and assessment reforms, 2022 (summary)

Interviews with senior leaders and practitioners to help understand their experiences and challenges in preparing for curriculum reform.

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# Introduction

This report presents findings of qualitative research with 48 senior leaders and practitioners in schools and PRUs carried out by Arad Research on behalf of the Welsh Government in late autumn 2021, which examined schools' preparations for the roll-out of Curriculum for Wales (CfW). It follows on from a [Preparations for Curriculum and Assessment Reforms 2022](#) survey report published in January 2022 and provides more detail and depth to inform policy and support for schools.

## Methodology and analysis

Interviewees were selected from among those who responded to the Preparations for Curriculum and Assessment Reforms 2022 survey (conducted in June and July 2021) and opted to be re-contacted. The focus of these interviews was to understand individual school experiences in more detail and, in particular, to learn what elements of curriculum realisation were working well and less well.

The findings presented in this report draw on analysis of 48 interviews: 35 with senior leaders and 13 with practitioners. A purposive sample of interviewees were recruited to ensure the inclusion of a variety of schools and settings:

- types of setting (primary, secondary, all-through, special, PRU)
- language medium (Welsh-medium, English-medium, bilingual, dual stream)
- survey respondents who felt their school was well-placed to design their own curriculum by September 2022 as well as those who did not feel this

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# Headline findings

## Overall progress

The vast majority of senior leaders and practitioners reported that they had made progress in their curriculum preparations between the summer of 2021, when the survey was undertaken, and late autumn 2021. Schools had begun planning and trialling new approaches in more detail, and there was evidence of greater joint-working and networking activity between schools. Many senior leaders and practitioners reported that they had set out milestones during the current academic year to be ready to begin roll-out from September 2022. The findings therefore demonstrated an increased momentum in schools' activity, compared with the situation reported by schools at the end of the previous school year. A very small number of interviewees felt that their school had received very little or no support to aid preparations for curriculum reform and, consequently, had made little progress in their planning.

## Findings relating to specific aspects of curriculum preparation

Schools are taking action to develop their engagement and understanding of curriculum reform. Most senior leaders and practitioners described a variety of actions their school had taken to develop practitioners' understanding of CfW in greater depth. These included developing their own internal guidance materials and arranging professional learning activity.

Schools continue to make progress with their curriculum planning. In many schools, senior leaders had assigned or recruited members of staff to be Area leads; these individuals were responsible for leading a collective effort, working alongside colleagues to develop curriculum plans across the Areas. Most senior

leaders interviewed noted that time constraints and the disruption caused by the pandemic had, however, impacted on their curriculum preparations.

Most schools reported an increase in the amount of collaboration and school-to-school networking activity, much of it led by the Welsh Government and regional consortia (for example, through the **National Network for Curriculum Implementation**) and regional networks.

Some senior leaders underlined the need for a gradual and iterative approach to all aspects of the reform process, adapting and improving the curriculum as opposed to beginning afresh and making wholesale change.

Most senior leaders and practitioners reported that they were keen to ensure learners are able to contribute in meaningful ways to curriculum design. Many had involved learners in developing their school's curriculum vision and interpreting the four purposes.

Most practitioners noted that they had begun to have more informal discussions about curriculum planning and pedagogy. However, engagement with the reforms was reported to be uneven in some schools: in these schools practitioners perceived that discussions and decisions about curriculum reforms were taking place among senior leaders without practitioners being fully involved. Practitioners in secondary schools were less likely than those in primary schools to report that they felt aware of curriculum reform activity in their school.

Many senior leaders and practitioners continued to report a lack of clarity around key aspects of the reform process. Notably, they reported a lower level of understanding and lack of practical support for schools in developing their approaches to assessment and progression. Many interviewees expressed concern about the relationship between approaches to assessment and future accountability and school inspection arrangements. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of ensuring a consistent understanding of

assessment arrangements in order to support learner progression between primary and secondary schools. Many interviewees indicated that they were awaiting further guidance on assessment to help clarify these matters.

Most interviewees in secondary schools felt that a lack of clarity on the future shape of qualifications at age 16 was a barrier to understanding and engaging with curriculum change.

The quality and quantity of information and guidance received by schools was a prominent theme raised by both senior leaders and practitioners during interviews. Some felt that national guidance provided sufficient information on the reforms. Some, however, felt that the guidance they had received lacked the necessary detail to help them design and plan their curriculum, noting that they would like to access examples of what an effective design or planning process entailed.

Many senior leaders and practitioners also reported that a lack of reassurance about actions they were taking in preparation for the new curriculum was impacting on confidence and impeding progress.

Some senior leaders expressed concern that the education workforce, both in their own school and in general, lacked experience and skills to design a new curriculum. Senior leaders' also noted concerns about a lack of confidence among staff. This was more evident in the interviews conducted in autumn 2021 than in the survey data collected in summer 2021, and was more prevalent among senior leaders in secondary schools.

There were mixed views on the professional learning that senior leaders and practitioners had accessed to support curriculum reform. Some felt that the support delivered was valuable and helped develop their understanding of Curriculum for Wales. Other interviewees noted that professional learning had not focused sufficiently on practical examples to support their preparations for curriculum reform. Some senior leaders and practitioners noted that they had not

accessed as much professional learning as they had wanted, and expressed the need for further access to professional learning opportunities.

Most interviewees recognised that continuous review, reflection and evaluation were likely to be critical elements of the reform process over the coming years. Most senior leaders and some practitioners reported being unclear about how to evaluate the extent to which curriculum delivery supports learner outcomes.

Most senior leaders interviewed referred to the additional costs incurred by schools in preparing for curriculum reform. The costs reported most frequently by schools related to: the time spent out of the classroom by teachers to plan and design the curriculum; additional staffing costs relating to new posts being created or additional responsibilities taken on by staff; and professional learning linked to curriculum preparation. Senior leaders reported that these costs were met either directly through additional Welsh Government support for curriculum preparation or by drawing from school budgets.

## Issues for consideration

The qualitative research carried out with schools in autumn 2021 suggests that the key areas for further support at the time for Welsh Government and middle tier partners were:

- The need to address the time constraints that have limited the ability of some schools to progress preparations for the new curriculum. What more can be done to allow schools time and space for planning and design activity linked to the new curriculum?
- Uneven engagement: How can senior leaders in schools be supported to ensure that more staff are engaged in curriculum planning and design activity, particularly in secondary schools?
- Enhance the skills and confidence: What further action can be taken to boost the skills and confidence of the workforce to contribute meaningfully to

curriculum design?

- Increase and enhance the quality of available support: Could further support be provided to aid schools' curriculum preparations and provide reassurance about the suitability and direction of curriculum realisation? This could include supporting materials, exemplifying effective approaches to design or planning.
- Access to professional learning with a focus on practical support: How can access to professional learning be enhanced? Could the existing professional learning offer be adapted to include a greater focus on practical support to aid curriculum planning and design?

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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