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Formative Evaluation of the Pioneer School Model

Executive Summary

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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Formative Evaluation of the Pioneer School Model: Final Report

Arad Research, in association with ICF Consulting Limited

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For further information please contact:

Rhian Davies

Social Research and Information Division

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

Tel: 0300 025 6791

Email: Rhian.davies45@gov.wales

Executive summary

Introduction and aim of the evaluation

- The Welsh Government commissioned Arad Research, in association with ICF Consulting, to undertake a formative evaluation of the Pioneer School model. Research as part of the evaluation began in July 2016 and continued until February 2018. The evaluation aimed to understand how the model is being delivered and to capture any learning that can inform subsequent stages of delivery.
- Professor Graham Donaldson's 2015 report, *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*, considered the fundamental purposes of education and recommended curriculum and assessment arrangements that can best fulfil those purposes.¹ The Pioneer School model is at the centre of designing and implementing these new curriculum and assessment arrangements.
- *Successful Futures* also recommended that "separate and independent evaluation arrangements should be established to monitor the effectiveness of the change structure and the new curriculum arrangements in relation to improvements in the quality of learning and performance."² This formative evaluation covers the first of these elements – the effectiveness of the change structure. Its focus is on the effectiveness of the structures put in place to support the development of new curriculum arrangements.

The Pioneer School Model

- *Successful Futures* highlighted the need to create 'a curriculum which supports and enables world-class teaching and learning in the twenty-first century'.³ Professor Donaldson proposed the cross-curriculum themes of literacy, numeracy and digital competence, with progression steps replacing key stages. Six Areas of Learning and Experience were proposed as a structure for the new curriculum.
- *Qualified for Life: A curriculum for Wales, a curriculum for Life* (Welsh Government, 2015) sets out plans for developing and implementing the new curriculum in Wales, emphasising the principle of subsidiarity to encourage local ownership and responsibility for curriculum development. The Pioneer Schools model, as initially devised, centred around three work streams: i. Curriculum and Assessment including

¹ Donaldson, G. (2015) *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales* <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/150225-successful-futures-en.pdf>

² Ibid., p. 94.

³ Ibid., p. 19.

Areas of Learning and Experience; ii. Professional Learning; and iii. the Digital Competence Framework (DCF).

- The implementation plan for the development of the new curriculum consisted of a collaborative process between Welsh Government, Regional Consortia and school-based practitioners. The model has also involved engaging with key strategic partners in education and academic experts. The DCF was the first element of the new curriculum to be developed, focusing on developing digital skills to be applied in a range of subjects and scenarios. It was developed by a small network of Digital Pioneers and made available to all schools in September 2016.
- Delivery of the model has been structured around distinct, yet interlinked, strands of activity: During Strand 1, Pioneer Schools and their representative practitioners developed a set of principles for the curriculum; strand 2 focused on high level AoLE design; during Strand 3, which began in late 2017, all Pioneers have begun to work together to develop a common framework across all AoLEs to be applied across the curriculum.
- Professional Learning Pioneers have carried out a range of activities as part of the implementation of the Pioneers Schools model. They were central to the development of the new Professional Teaching Standards and Professional Learning Pioneers have been involved with the OECD-led 'Schools as Learning Organisations' project.

Forward plan for the roll out of the new curriculum and qualifications arrangements

- In September 2017, the Education Secretary set out a revised timeline for introducing the new Curriculum for Wales, coinciding with the publication of *Education in Wales: Our National Mission*.⁴ The revised timetable is based on a proposed statutory roll out of the new curriculum to schools from 2022 to give the teaching profession and schools more time to help develop, and prepare for, the changes. The new curriculum will be introduced from nursery to Year 7 in 2022, rolling into Year 8 in 2023, Year 9 in 2024, Year 10 in 2025 and Year 11 in 2026. All schools will start to use the new curriculum and assessment from 2020, to allow them to move towards full roll-out in 2022.

⁴ Welsh Government (2017c). *Education in Wales: Our national mission. Action Plan 2017-21*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Methodology

- A mixed method approach was adopted for the process evaluation to answer the research questions. The approach incorporated elements of action research and placed an emphasis on collecting and sharing feedback from practitioners and partners in real-time. As a result, findings have been shared with Welsh Government on a regular basis during the evaluation through a combination of informal presentations and summary papers.⁵ This has supported a flexible approach to planning fieldwork during the evaluation, with regular discussion about the most appropriate research methods to elicit the breadth and depth of evidence required.
- The evidence and conclusions of the evaluation are based on the following research methods:
 - Interviews with stakeholder organisations to scope the evaluation methodology and approach to data collection;
 - Qualitative research (including school visits and telephone interviews) with Digital Pioneers;
 - Telephone interviews with a sample of 32 Curriculum and Professional Pioneer Schools, randomly selected (focusing on Strand 1 activity);
 - Telephone interviews with a further 20 Curriculum Pioneers that had joined the model in January 2017 (focusing on Strand 2 activity);
 - 15 case study school visits and two telephone interviews to collect additional in-depth data from a wider range of school representatives that have informed case studies included as annexes to this report;
 - A short questionnaire circulated to staff in those schools visited to consider awareness and influence of Pioneer activity at a whole-school level;
 - An electronic survey of all Pioneer Schools, eliciting 110 responses from Pioneer leads;
 - Analysis and reporting throughout the evaluation process through a combination of internal (unpublished) rapid feedback papers and published reports. The findings of previously published reports are summarised in chapter 4 of this report.

Evaluation findings and recommendations

The Pioneer School model

- The approach being taken to transform the curriculum in Wales is innovative and represents a new way of working for all partners involved. At the heart of the Pioneer School model is a commitment to empower and support teachers to develop the new curriculum. This is being driven by a network of Pioneer Schools across Wales, led

⁵ <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/formative-evaluation-Pioneer-school-model/?lang=en>

by Welsh Government and supported by Regional Consortia and other key partners across the Welsh education system. The formative evaluation of the Pioneer School model has found that the vision for the new curriculum, set out in *Successful Futures*, is supported and understood by all partners involved.

The Pioneer School model has succeeded in securing strong support for the vision set out in *Successful Futures* among those schools engaged in the process and among strategic partners. Ultimately, however, all schools in Wales have a part to play in delivering a successful Curriculum for Wales.

Recommendation 1:

There is a need for more concerted action and engagement with all Partner Schools throughout Wales to a) raise awareness of progress through the Pioneer School model, communicating progress and milestones to date; and b) ensure Partner Schools understand and are committed to the vision for the new curriculum set out in *Successful Futures*.

Building on work to date, regional consortia should ensure they draw on the knowledge and experiences of the existing Curriculum Pioneer network in their engagement and professional learning work with schools and settings.

- The implementation of the Pioneer School model has, by necessity, been an evolving and iterative process. It has required schools and other strategic partners (including Welsh Government, Regional Consortia, Estyn, Qualifications Wales and HE representatives) to work in an agile and flexible way. The readiness on the part of strategic partners to respond and adapt structures and functions during the process has been a clear strength of the model.
- Pioneer School representatives – senior managers and other practitioners engaged in the process – are enthusiastic about their experiences of being involved in the curriculum reform process. There is a clear sense of ownership and responsibility associated with being a Pioneer School. This feeling of commitment and ownership associated with being involved in the Pioneer School model also extends to those individuals involved through the work of strategic partners.
- The Pioneer School model has not been a uniform programme of activities and events being implemented in a consistent manner. It is multi-faceted and complex change management model that is being shaped and informed by schools and other partners in a wide range of ways. Experiences of the model have therefore, understandably, been varied.

- *Successful Futures* recommended that the principle of subsidiarity be applied to reform arrangements by ensuring that teachers have ownership of the process within a national framework of support. The evaluation has found that it took time to ensure appropriate balance between practitioner ownership and strategic support and direction. Over time, strategic leadership has improved, with a greater emphasis on shared responsibility for co-constructing the new curriculum arrangements between all partners involved. The evaluation has found that measures taken to strengthen the role of Regional Consortia, in particular, have helped ensure better coordination and coherence across the model.

In view of the complexity of the model, ensuring that all partners are clear about their functions and expected contributions is likely to be an on-going challenge, requiring continuous scrutiny.

Recommendation 2:

Strategic governance groups (led by the Operational Delivery Board) should continue to monitor and review the way in which the roles and responsibilities of all partners are being delivered, using the Core Brief as a reference point and revisiting roles where necessary. The key issue will be to ensure clear delineation between i) strategic management functions, ii) coordination, support and implementation and iii) curriculum development and testing.

- While there is support for the model, partners recognise the risks and challenges inherent in the Pioneer School model. These are largely rooted in the challenges of ensuring coherence and consistency throughout a complex and long-term change management project. The challenges include (but are not limited to): coordinating activity across a large number of diverse schools; ensuring that there is continuity and progression in curriculum design built into the model across different strands of activity; managing working partnerships across organisations; communicating progress and ensuring buy-in among Partner Schools; and reconciling curriculum development with the assessment framework. The process to date has identified and provided a forum for discussing these risks and challenges. As the content of the new curriculum is developed in more detail, more detailed risk analysis and mitigation measures are likely to be required in respect of these matters.

Increased focus has been placed over time on seeking to ensure greater coherence *within* the delivery of the Pioneer School model. As the content of the new curriculum is developed, tested and refined questions about the coherence and unity of the new arrangements become ever more important.

Recommendation 3:

There is a need to ensure that, running in parallel with curriculum development processes, robust risk management processes are in place. Arguably the most significant challenge identified during the delivery of the Pioneer model thus far is ensuring alignment between new curriculum arrangements and assessment frameworks, particularly beyond Key Stage 3.

The implementation of the model at national level

- Pioneer Schools were initially unclear about their overall responsibilities in contributing to the *Successful Futures* vision and there was a continued lack of clarity during much of Strand 1 activity. This was a cause of frustration for some Pioneers, who felt that their initial engagement with the model lacked clear milestones and definite outputs to guide them. As a result, it often took many months for Pioneers to understand fully the responsibilities of being a Pioneer School and what was expected of them.
- Activity during Strand 2 provided more concrete milestones and outputs that gave Pioneers a clearer sense of expectation, purpose and direction. By Strand 3, Pioneer Schools generally reported having a good understanding of their contribution to the development of the new curriculum and the specific outputs they were working towards. This indicates that communication of roles and the delivery plan could have been considerably clearer from the beginning of the model's implementation.
- The Pioneer model has been underpinned by working groups tasked with developing the new curriculum. During Strand 1 Strategic Design Groups lacked a sufficiently clear focus. Pioneer Schools were reporting being unsure how the outputs from the groups would be taken forward to inform successive phases of the process. Strategic partners felt that the output from these groups was variable in terms of content, depth and quality and that quality assurance processes were not fully developed at this stage. Additional external expertise was brought into to support the work of these groups.

- During Strand 2 a clearer structure and approach was taken, with better defined outputs and timescales established to support AoLE groups. This provided greater focus and helped ensure a greater sense of progress. The joint facilitation of AoLE groups by Welsh Government and Regional Consortia representatives was widely viewed as an important development that led to improved communication and coordination within these groups.
- During the evaluation Pioneers reported concerns about the pace of development, particularly during Strand 1 and early Strand 2. Changes in personnel and representation on some groups had contributed to this as had a tendency among some groups to repeat and revisit discussion points. It would appear that the slower progress made during the early phases of the implementation plan impacted on overall delivery timelines for successive strands of activity.
- The Pioneer School model has placed an emphasis on using international research and expertise to support curriculum development. This has been a clear strength of the model, providing opportunities for practitioners to engage with internationally renowned experts.

Recommendation 4:

There is a need to continue to provide opportunities for schools to engage with universities, research centres and experts in curriculum development as the more detailed curriculum development activity progresses. This includes fostering partnerships between schools and HEIs in Wales to help build capacity and expertise in the field of curriculum research.

- During the early phases of implementation, monitoring and accountability arrangements were inconsistent and under-developed. There was a broad consensus that there was room to improve monitoring arrangements and strengthen the accountability built into the model. Monitoring arrangements have been strengthened over time, with Regional Consortia requiring regular reports on Pioneer Schools' activity.

Coherence and interaction between Pioneers and strategic partners

Collaboration between Pioneer groups

- Pioneer Schools and key strategic partners have recognised that ensuring synergy across the curriculum, professional learning and digital strands of activity is vital. The Pioneer School model has provided opportunities for Pioneer Schools to gather and

share learning in the form of national events and conferences. The model has also facilitated increased coherence between the curriculum and digital strands with the invitation for Digital Pioneers to join the AoLE groups.

- Despite these opportunities for integration, there has generally been a lack of structure in place to facilitate collaboration and ensure coherence across the curriculum, professional learning and digital strands of activity. In particular, there have been challenges associated with establishing how the new curriculum and professional learning could be developed in tandem.
- Pioneer Schools reported a lack of awareness of activities taking place across the curriculum, professional learning and digital activity areas with which they are not directly involved. They also reported a lack of opportunities to collaborate on Pioneer activity across these areas. As such, ensuring coherence across the wide variety of Pioneer activity was identified as a priority for future activity by Pioneer Schools.
- Regional Consortia have increasingly provided opportunities for Pioneer Schools to collaborate with other Pioneers outside the national working groups. However, Pioneer Schools expressed mixed views about the success of such opportunities in facilitating a sufficient understanding of the work of other Pioneer Schools.

Recommendation 5:

During the next phases of implementation of the model, Welsh Government should ensure greater coherence and stronger links between the work of Curriculum Pioneers and Professional Learning Pioneers. Welsh Government and regional consortia should report by end the end of 2018 on how Curriculum and Professional Learning Pioneers are working together as a network and how that network is engaging with all schools and settings to build knowledge and understanding of the new curriculum ahead of its release for feedback in April 2019.

Collaboration and interaction between the three tiers of the Welsh education system

- Our National Mission identifies the three tiers upon which the Welsh education system is designed. (Tier 1 is the Welsh Government; Tier 2, Intermediary partners, including Estyn, Regional Consortia, Qualifications Wales, the Education Workforce Council and higher education; Tier 3 is schools). The evaluation has found that, overall, working relationships between the tiers have improved during the process. Initially there was a sense that roles were not sufficiently clear and that there was little coordination of activity. However, as Strand 2 progressed there were concerted

efforts by Welsh Government and Regional Consortia to work more closely together on elements of strategic planning and delivery. There has been an increased emphasis on a co-constructed approach involving all three tiers of Wales' education system and a move away from the emphasis on 'Pioneer Schools leading and shaping the detailed design of the new curriculum'. Evidently, Pioneer Schools remain at the heart of the process, however this evaluation has found that the shift towards a more collaborative and co-designed approach has served to improve the overall delivery of the model.

The implementation of the model at school-level

- There is a growing body of evidence that Pioneer Schools are increasingly integrating new approaches into their planning and teaching practices. However, the extent to which new approaches to planning and teaching practices are embedded as whole-school approaches varies across the Pioneer Schools. This reflects a variation in the preparedness of each Pioneer School to test significant alterations to their planning and teaching practices.
- The range of new approaches being introduced by Pioneer Schools includes:
 - starting to integrate *Successful Futures* principles into their planning and teaching practice;
 - upskilling teachers in response to the Professional Teaching Standards and new curriculum arrangements;
 - testing time-limited, cross-curricular projects;
 - increasing collaboration between teachers in lesson planning;
 - altering curriculum structures to move towards an AoLE structure;
 - amending staff roles and responsibilities; and
 - placing a greater emphasis on pupil-centred approaches.
- Primary Pioneer Schools have been more able to test whole-curriculum or whole-school approaches than secondary Pioneer Schools. Foundation Phase curriculum and pedagogy has traditionally resembled *Successful Futures* principles more closely than other key stages and secondary Pioneer Schools find their Pioneer activities more constrained by assessment and qualification arrangements.
- There is growing evidence that Pioneer Schools are starting to self-evaluate their school-level Pioneer activity, but such evaluation is variable and inconsistent across Pioneer Schools. Variation in the nature and extent of Pioneer activity, alongside variation in evaluation activities, occasionally causes concerns amongst Pioneers about the direction in which their school is heading as they do not have an overview of how their activities compare to those of other Pioneer Schools.

- Involvement in the curriculum reform process has been valuable for the professional development of those practitioners involved. Pioneer Schools have generally valued the opportunity for staff to innovate and use their expertise to develop and test new approaches and there is evidence of teachers making changes to their teaching practice as a result of being a Pioneer School.

Engagement of Partner Schools

- To date, Pioneer Schools' engagement with Partner Schools has been fairly limited, often due to a lack of clarity about the expectations placed on Pioneers in terms of cascading information to Partner Schools. Pioneer Schools have also felt unprepared to communicate curriculum changes to Partner Schools while the curriculum was still in development and queried the extent to which Partner Schools were prepared to engage with the curriculum reform process during early stages. Engagement has often been limited to keeping Partner Schools informed of developments through existing engagement mechanisms such as cluster meetings.
- However, there is now evidence of increased Pioneer School engagement with Partner Schools as Pioneer Schools feel more able to communicate tangible developments with Partner Schools. Examples of engagement include: Inviting schools to observe new teaching approaches; sharing information through joint INSET days with cluster schools; working across clusters to map out the four purposes of the curriculum across different subject areas; and collecting input from Partner Schools to inform developments.
- Mechanisms are now being established at cluster and regional level to ensure Partner Schools are kept up to date with developments. Regional Consortia are supporting school clusters to establish systems for cascading information within each cluster and Pioneer Schools have identified engagement with Partner School as a priority for future Pioneer activity.
- This formative evaluation of the Pioneer School model has focused on the development, implementation and evolution of a new approach to delivering education reform. The evidence collected illustrates that this has been a valuable and constructive process for those involved, both Pioneer School representatives and other strategic partners. Many learning points have been identified during the implementation process to date, with these frequently being acted upon to inform changes to delivery structures, roles and governance arrangements. The implementation of the model has been characterised by continuous critical reflection and refinement. Partners across all tiers of the education system in Wales have valued the learning opportunities it has offered.

- It is worth noting that the evaluation has drawn to a close at a point in time when activity is accelerating as the focus shifts towards developing curriculum content. Looking ahead, there are implications within the evaluation findings for the next phase of curriculum development. They include (but are not limited to): the need for more systematic engagement with Partner Schools; ensuring all parties are clear about their functions as content is developed, tested and refined; ensuring consistency and coherence in the support available to schools in different regions. The evaluation team wishes all partners well as they continue to work towards realising the ambitious vision set out in *Successful Futures*.