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# Research into Assessment Practices in the Foundation Phase: Final Report

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# Research into Assessment Practices in the Foundation Phase: Final Report



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## **Glossary**

Acronym/Key word

Definition

ALN

Additional Learning Needs

ALNCo

Additional Learning Needs Coordinator

AoLE

Areas of Learning and Experience

CfW

Curriculum for Wales

eFSM

Eligibility for Free School Meals

HLTA

Higher Level Teaching Assistant

TA

Teaching Assistant

## **Executive Summary**

- i. Miller Research, in conjunction with Old Bell 3 and Meurig Roberts, was commissioned to undertake research to examine the use of assessments in the Foundation Phase of schooling.
- ii. The purpose of the research is to examine the impact of assessment, including the Foundation Phase Profile and the personalised assessments in Reading and Numeracy (Procedural), on teaching and learning during the Foundation Phase, and the extent of integration of these assessment tools into practice. By exploring the reflections of practitioners on key questions around assessment, the research is intended to provide the Welsh Government with insight from the practitioners interviewed to inform decision-making and potentially identify areas in need of more support and resources.
- iii. Twenty case study schools were engaged to carry out fieldwork. Schools were selected to cover a broad range of factors, including geographic location, language, size, and the number of learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM).
- iv. A total of 76 education practitioners and parent governors were interviewed, in addition to the 18 stakeholders interviewed as part of the scoping phase of the research.

## **Key Findings**

### *Alignment with Foundation Phase Pedagogical Principles*

- v. Practitioners reflected positively on the alignment between the Foundation Phase Profile and the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase. This was principally because: the baseline and end-of-phase assessments could be carried out mostly through observation. There were, however, many instances across the majority of schools of practitioners describing having to set up specific tasks, sometimes at a desk, in order to assess particular skills that

were not as easily observed through play. The key factors driving practitioners to use focused tasks were the complexity and nature of the skill being assessed, with this becoming more of an issue in older years within the Foundation Phase, and time pressures on practitioners.

#### *Extent of use of the Foundation Phase Profile*

- vi. Beyond the statutory period of use in the first six weeks of the reception year, the Foundation Phase Profile was used by a quarter of the case study schools (five). Five schools had developed their own internal assessment systems, with the remaining ten using alternative software packages.
- vii. Despite the majority of schools not using the Profile beyond the reception year, this, it appears, is not a reflection of the quality of the Profile but is largely a consequence of the availability of alternative packages, which provide an accessible platform that can be accessed through mobile devices.
- viii. The majority of the internally developed systems used by schools were based on the Foundation Phase Profile, with practitioners describing having made a number of changes to better suit their needs, which included:
  - Breaking down outcome levels into smaller incremental steps
  - Focusing more on disposition to learning as opposed to only skills.
- ix. Overall, there was a mixed picture as to the direction of travel with take up of the Foundation Phase Profile within the schools, with two schools having recently moved away from using alternative software packages at the suggestion of a local authority and regional consortium respectively, with one having returned to using the Profile, and the other having developed their own system.

#### *Quality and Utility of the Foundation Phase Profile*

- x. Practitioners overall were positive about the quality of the Foundation Phase Profile, noting that the Compact Profile provides a good account of learners' overall ability, and includes a sufficiently wide range of skills to observe and assess. It was described as being useful for setting targets and for identifying next steps.
- xi. The Compact Profile was better suited to assessing some areas than others, with more "black and white" abilities being easier to assess than more "subjective" areas, such as those within the Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity ladder.
- xii. The most common minor criticisms raised regarding the Foundation Phase Profile included it being too time consuming, too much of a tick-box process, and not being tailored enough to the individual learner.

#### *Identifying Learners with Special or Additional Learning Needs*

- xiii. While not developed to support the identification of developmental issues in individual children, the Foundation Phase Profile could help to identify learners with additional learning needs. It is used widely to collect evidence on potential developmental issues alongside a range of resources available to practitioners. The Profile was therefore described as a good starting point, and a useful tool for tracking issues. The limiting factor for identifying learning difficulties was that statements within the Foundation Phase Profile were in some instances too broad and vague.

#### *Foundation Phase Profile and Language*

- xiv. Learners in Welsh medium schools from largely English-speaking homes experienced some language difficulties, with practitioners noting that baseline assessment outcomes can be lower due to unfamiliarity with the language of instruction.

- xv. There was concern from a small number of Welsh medium and bilingual schools that this might affect parents' perceptions of their decision to choose Welsh medium schooling, but others had found that parents were understanding once this issue was explained to them.

#### *Communicating Foundation Phase Profile Assessments to Parents*

- xvi. Seven schools passed on baseline outcomes to parents, usually through end-of-year reports and parents' evenings. Of the remaining schools, the majority only used baseline outcomes for internal use.

#### *Assessment Practices in the new Curriculum for Wales*

- xvii. Practitioners overall felt positively about the new Curriculum for Wales; however, a number of concerns were raised regarding assessments. These included the breadth of the Progression Steps<sup>1</sup>, the need for more guidance material for assessment and a common assessment framework, and the potential for barriers to inter-school cooperation and collaboration.

### **Online Personalised Assessments**

#### *Personalised assessments guidance*

- xviii. A key finding of the research is that the majority of schools have not necessarily embraced the guidance accompanying personalised assessments in full, with many not taking advantage of the flexibility afforded.
- xix. The extent to which practitioners are integrating personalised assessments with Foundation Phase practice is mixed, with some aspects of the guidance provided to practitioners taken on board, with

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<sup>1</sup> While it is not intended that learners are assessed against progression steps under the new curriculum, a number of practitioners spoke about assessing against progression steps.

others followed less closely. The key points relating to adherence to the guidance were as follows:

#### Adherence to the guidance

- The vast majority of practitioners were following guidance on encouraging learners to take breaks during the assessments (all but one school).
- Nearly half of the schools interviewed had used, or intended to use personalised assessments twice within the academic year to establish a baseline for the learners and understand change over time through carrying out a second assessment later in the year.

#### Non observance of the guidance:

- There was a mixed picture with a small number of schools opting to carry out personalised assessments in circumstances resembling test conditions, appearing to be a carry-over from the delivery of paper-based tests.
- There was also a mixed picture regarding *when* schools chose to schedule personalised assessments with around half of the schools still scheduling assessments within narrow windows, usually due to the school's scheduling practices which appear to be a legacy of adhering to requirements for the paper-based tests.
- Around half of the schools still intended to use the assessments only once in the academic year, citing a lack of value of the outcome data, and impacts on the wellbeing of learners as reasoning.

#### *Usage of Personalised Assessments by Practitioners*

- xx. There was a correlation between schools that used the online personalised assessments in a more flexible manner and the positivity of their sentiment towards the assessments.
- xxi. Some of the case study schools appeared to have effectively integrated personalised assessment with Foundation Phase practice,

with these schools using the assessments as intended and as set out in the guidance, meaning:

- The assessments were used flexibly by either small groups or individuals.
  - Learners were able to use tablets with which they were familiar.
  - Learners were provided with regular breaks to break up the assessment period.
  - These schools either carried out or intended to carry out the assessments twice a year.
- xxii. The majority of schools however, to varying degrees, had not fully embraced the guidance and flexibility afforded by the personalised assessments.
- xxiii. The picture as to the use of assessment outcomes is also mixed. Most schools expressed reservations about the value of the feedback and reports, discussing inconsistencies between outcome data and their judgement of certain learners (for example, where they considered that learners could have achieved ‘fluke’ results by selecting answers at random).
- xxiv. Practitioners considered that assessment data was of most use in identifying skills gaps across classes as a whole, which practitioners then used to plan teaching for future cohorts.
- xxv. Some issues were raised by practitioners regarding the practicalities of carrying out the personalised assessments, which included the following:
- There were a small number of instances where learners struggled with using IT hardware (computer mouse)<sup>2</sup>.
  - Challenges with learners’ IT competency were raised by nine practitioners across six schools, particularly in relation to the reading personalised assessments, with the requirement to move

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<sup>2</sup> Schools are encouraged to allow users to take the personalised assessments using whatever device they are most comfortable with, e.g., tablets or laptops, and therefore use of a mouse is not necessarily required.

between windows to read text then answer questions. This was said to be challenging for some learners.

- The literacy skills of a number of learners were too low to enable them to understand some questions in the procedural numeracy personalised assessments. Practitioners raised the point that an option to listen to the questions would help learners.

xxvi. Practitioners did however reflect positively on the reduction in marking with the move from paper-based tests to personalised assessments.

#### *Barriers to Implementation: Cultural change*

xxvii. It is clear from interviews carried out that barriers remain to embedding the guidance and ethos of personalised assessments within the majority of schools, with the cultural shift yet to be made by many schools away from the practices established previously through paper-based testing towards a more flexible and informal approach afforded by the personalised assessments.

xxviii. Barriers to using the personalised assessments more flexibly were in some instances caused by scheduling practices employed by schools in order to schedule tests and assessments, with decisions over scheduling made centrally by management.

xxix. Other schools continued to hold assessments during the same period as the old paper-based tests in May out of habit.

#### *Communication of Personalised Assessments to Parents*

xxx. In order to avoid placing pressure on learners, it was commonplace for schools to not communicate the scheduling of online personalised assessments with the parents and guardians of the learners. Schools are not required to inform parents of scheduling.

xxxi. Results from personalised assessments largely remained for internal use, but a small number of schools had shared outcome data with

parents. Schools are required to share feedback and progress in the personalised assessments with parents and carers.

#### *Use of Assessment Feedback and Data*

- xxxii. Many practitioners interviewed were sceptical about the appropriateness of online personalised assessments as a means of accurately capturing the ability of a Foundation Phase learner.
- xxxiii. Issues flagged by practitioners include problems with some learners' literacy impacting their ability to read questions within the procedural numeracy assessment, resulting in some outcomes and scores appearing to be out of line with teacher expectations. More than a quarter of practitioners considered the assessments superfluous to ongoing teacher assessment.
- xxxiv. There were examples given where the data from the assessments has been used positively for both individual learners and classes as a whole, however the data was regarded as most useful in instances where outcomes highlight issues for the class as a whole in identifying elements that were most in need of development.

#### *Online Personalised Assessments and Learners' Wellbeing*

- xxxv. Practitioners on the whole felt that the online personalised assessments were better for learner wellbeing than paper-based tests. A small number of practitioners also reflected positively on the fact that the assessments let learners move at their own speed.  
  
The use of computers and tablets allowed teachers to present the assessments as a "quiz" instead of a "test." There were however a small number of learners across nine schools that struggled with the IT demands of the assessment, either due to difficulties using a mouse and keyboard, or difficulties in moving between windows on the screen during the reading personalised assessment.

- xxxvi. While the adaptive nature of the online personalised assessments has led to a positive experience for most learners, it has resulted in a negative impact on some learners' wellbeing, with higher achieving learners more likely to become stressed due to facing challenging questions, sometimes covering topics beyond those covered in the classroom. Practitioners explained that they downplayed the assessments to learners to avoid causing stress or worry.<sup>3</sup>
- xxxvii. Despite most schools allowing breaks, the majority of schools reported instances of learners spending long periods carrying out the assessments.<sup>4</sup>
- xxxviii. The use of personalised assessments in the Foundation Phase was also viewed by most practitioners as being not necessarily aligned with the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase, with a small number stating that any formalised assessment was incompatible.

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<sup>3</sup> The guidance accompanying personalised assessments encourages practitioners to explain to learners that they will face some challenging questions.

<sup>4</sup> The guidance encourages practitioners to use their judgment in ending assessments for learners who are taking a long time.

# Part 1 – Introduction and Methodology

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Miller Research, in conjunction with Old Bell 3 and Meurig Roberts, was commissioned to undertake research to examine the use of assessments in the Foundation Phase of schooling.
- 1.2 The purpose of the research is to examine the extent of integration of the Foundation Phase Profile and online personalised assessments into practice, as well as their impact on teaching and learning during the Foundation Phase. By exploring the reflections of practitioners on key questions around assessment, the research is intended to provide the Welsh Government with data and insight to inform decision-making and identify areas in need of more support and resources.
- 1.3 The research covers the planning, administration, and implementation of assessments in the Foundation Phase, the extent of integration of assessments into practice and planning (including the baseline and end of phase assessments, and the personalised assessments), the perceived effectiveness of various assessment methods and systems, the usefulness of data provided by assessment tools, their impact on learners, barriers to good practice, and looking forward, how assessments will be impacted by the new Curriculum for Wales. The research has a focus on the Foundation Phase Profile and online personalised assessments.

### *Foundation Phase*

- 1.4 Introduced in 2010, the Foundation Phase is the statutory curriculum for 3 to 7-year-olds in Wales. It encourages learners to be creative and imaginative, making learning more enjoyable and effective while addressing their developmental needs.
- 1.5 The Foundation Phase places great emphasis on children learning by doing. Young people are given more opportunities to gain first-hand

experiences through play and active involvement rather than by completing exercises in books.

- 1.6 The Foundation Phase curriculum is delivered as a progressive framework to meet the diverse needs of all learners, including those who are at an earlier stage of development and those who are more able. Children should move on to the next stages of their learning when they are developmentally ready and at their own pace.
- 1.7 The seven current statutory Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) in the Foundation Phase Framework are:
- Welsh language development (for settings and schools where English is the main medium of communication)
  - knowledge and understanding of the world
  - creative development
  - personal and social development, well-being, and cultural diversity
  - language, literacy, and communication skills
  - mathematical development
  - physical development.
- 1.8 For each area of learning the educational programme sets out what learners should be taught, and the *outcomes* set out the expected standards of learners' performance.

#### *Assessment in the Foundation Phase*

- 1.9 Assessment is guided by the Foundation Phase Profile, an assessment tool that aligns assessment at the age of 3 through to the end of the phase. The Profile also supports a national assessment of all learners to establish a baseline of learners' abilities and development in four Areas of Learning within the first six weeks of entry into Reception Year (commonly known as the baseline assessment).

- 1.10 There are two parts to the Profile – a Compact and Full Profile. Each supports assessment of children’s learning and development against a series of skill ladders that are exemplified through guidance.
- 1.11 The *Compact Profile* is designed for use as a baseline assessment in Reception Year (the school year in which a child turns 5) and focuses on a specific set of skill ladders.
- 1.12 The *Full Profile* is designed to support assessment throughout the Foundation Phase and at the end of Year 2. It includes a wider range of skills than the Compact version that support assessment as a learner moves through the Foundation Phase to give a fuller picture of development. It may also be used to provide more detailed information on learners for whom there are concerns, regardless of age.
- 1.13 While practitioners (including in non-maintained nursery settings which deliver early education) are encouraged to use the Profile right through the phase, only the baseline assessment is statutory.

### *Curriculum for Wales*

- 1.14 From September 2022, the Foundation Phase Framework will be replaced by the Curriculum for Wales. The Curriculum for Wales guidance aims to help each school design its own curriculum, enabling their learners to develop towards the [four purposes](#) of the curriculum – the starting point and aspiration for every child and young person in Wales. The new curriculum establishes a continuum of learning from ages 3 to 16 through the removal of key stages 2, 3 and 4 and Foundation Phase. The desire to reflect the Foundation Phase principles through the new 3-16 curriculum means that while changes in terminology and structure will be inevitable, the key pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase will continue to be a key driver in development, such that significant changes in approach will not be required.

- 1.15 Under Curriculum for Wales, schools will be responsible for designing and planning their own assessment arrangements. Therefore, schools and practitioners will be given more freedom in designing their assessment arrangements, in line with the statutory guidance on Supporting Learner Progression: Assessment provided which is part of the Curriculum for Wales framework.

#### *Online Personalised Assessments*

- 1.16 [National Reading and Numeracy Tests](#) were introduced in 2013 for use in maintained schools in Wales from Foundation Phase up to Year 11. The National Reading and Numeracy Tests, which are statutory for all learners in years 2-9 in maintained schools in Wales, were initially paper-based tests administered in schools annually (at the end of April/beginning of May). They comprised an hour-long Reading test, a 30-minute test of Numeracy (Procedural), and a 30-minute test of Numeracy (Reasoning). The Reading test assessed comprehension and higher order reading skills. Numeracy (Procedural) focused on numerical facts and procedures; the tools needed to apply numeracy. Numeracy (Reasoning) assessed how learners applied numerical reasoning to solve problems.
- 1.17 A [2017 report by Estyn](#) found that in “many schools, processes for assessing literacy and numeracy are too complicated and time consuming. They focus on collecting a large amount of information rather than analysing pupil progress over time or identifying specific areas for development. In too many cases, assessment is used as a process to follow and is not diagnostic enough to inform future planning or ‘next steps’ for pupils”.
- 1.18 The possibility of using adaptive testing was explored in the [Successful Futures Report](#), which recommended the use of innovative and interactive approaches to assessment. The Welsh Government therefore introduced online personalised assessments which were rolled out from the autumn of 2018 with Numeracy (Procedural),

followed by Reading (Welsh and English) assessments in autumn term 2019. Due to Covid-19, Numeracy (Reasoning) went live in autumn 2021 instead of 2020 as originally intended.

1.19 The move online has been made for a number of reasons. It seeks to better support learner progression, to bring assessments closer to the approach to supporting individual learner progression set out in the new Curriculum for Wales. The move online also aims to take advantage of the improved user experience for learners and teachers that online assessments can offer. Personalised assessments in Wales were designed to provide the following features:

- The assessments are adaptive - questions are selected based on the responses to previous questions, and this adjusts the level of challenge for each learner.
- Learners can work through the assessments at their own pace and take breaks if required.
- The online assessments provide feedback that can help learners develop their skills through understanding what they can do, the things they may need to work on, and their next steps.
- There is no 'test window;' it is statutory for learners to take one assessment in each subject during the academic year, but an optional second use is also available. Timing is flexible and at schools' discretion.
- Assessments are formative, aimed at providing information on learners' skills to support progression.
- Schools can schedule assessments for small or large groups, and on different devices (PCs, laptops, tablets), depending on their preferences and facilities.
- Marking is automatic and schools can access reports on individuals and groups the day after assessments are taken.

1.20 This approach, which replaces structured formal paper-based testing with flexible formative assessments, is intended to help alleviate

concerns raised by [Estyn in 2017](#) about assessment in Foundation Phase which found “many schools feel pressurised to prepare pupils formally for national reading and numeracy tests, contributing to wide variations in foundation phase practice. This is frequently at the expense of the development of pupils’ creative and physical skills.”

### *Implementation*

- 1.21 A feasibility study was commissioned in order to assess schools’ ability to move from paper-based tests to an online adaptive assessment.
- 1.22 Teachers have been engaged in the on-going development of the online personalised assessments through teacher panels, in which the material used within the assessments was reviewed by teachers, with changes made based on feedback. Each of the three strands of the personalised assessments (procedural numeracy, reading, and reasoning numeracy) have undergone trialling with a large sample of schools in two stages – linear and adaptive – with changes made based on the findings from the trials.
- 1.23 Guidance has been published on the online personalised assessments in order to help schools administer the assessments. This includes an [administration handbook](#) which sets out the statutory requirements, a detailed step by step [School User Guide](#) as well as [information for parents and carers](#). Training materials such as [pre-recorded webinars](#) are also available to practitioners, as well as a helpdesk facility.
- 1.24 Schools are advised that they can carry out personalised assessments in each subject up to twice per year and are required to carry them out at least once. The personalised assessments can be scheduled at any time throughout the academic year, with schools able to decide to carry out assessments for individual learners, small groups, or entire classes.

- 1.25 The [School User Guide](#) provides practitioners with a comprehensive guide on how to administer personalised assessments with learners. Guidance is provided on setting up the assessments and familiarising learners with the types of questions that they will see. Guidance is also given on how to manage learners taking the assessments, which includes guidance on rest breaks and when practitioners may decide to stop assessments that they consider may be taking an unreasonable length of time, and how to answer questions from learners.
- 1.26 The assessments do not have a set time duration and they allow learners to work at their own pace. Practitioners are expected to use their professional judgement in regard to length and frequency of breaks, as well as how long to allow the assessment to run before concluding it. The guidance also recommends that practitioners give particular consideration to learners in Years 2 and 3, providing rest breaks and assessing when to end an assessment.
- 1.27 Guidance also makes practitioners aware that assessments are not designed to reflect the particular expected ability for the year group of the learner; instead, their adaptive nature means that learners will encounter questions that adjust to their skill level regardless of their year group. This will result in some learners encountering topics that they have yet to cover in the classroom
- 1.28 The School User Guide provides a checklist for practitioners, setting out the flexibility available to schools when carrying out the personalised assessments. This includes allowing learners to take the assessments throughout a school day and enabling practitioners to use their discretion as to when to take breaks, and length of those breaks.

### *Report Structure*

- 1.29 The report is divided into three parts, with part one encompassing the introduction and methodology, part two focusing on the Foundation

Phase Profile, and part three covering online personalised assessments. The report will therefore continue as follows:

- Part One – Introduction and Methodology
  - Section 2 sets out the methodology for the research, including an explanation of the sampling framework used, and an overview of the fieldwork carried out.
  
- Part Two – Foundation Phase Profile: Detailed Findings
  - Section 3 provides an outline of practitioner reflection on assessment in general.
  - Section 4 covers the findings on the Foundation Phase Profile. It explores practitioners' views on the Compact and Full Profiles, other assessment methods that they use in conjunction with or instead of the Foundation Phase Profile, and other general views and feedback on assessment practices in the Foundation Phase.
  
- Part Three – Online Personalised Assessments: Detailed Findings
  - Section 5 sets out practitioners' reflections on the online personalised assessments.
  
- Section 6 sets out conclusions from the research and a series of recommendations for Welsh Government and other stakeholders.

## **2. Methodology**

2.1 This section sets out the methodology used in carrying out the research.

### *Scoping Stage*

2.2 Eighteen stakeholders<sup>5</sup> were spoken to as part of the scoping phase, either through individual interviews or group workshops. The stakeholders included Foundation Phase Leads and other key personnel in the four Regional Consortia, representatives of Local Authorities responsible for the Foundation Phase, and representatives from Estyn.

### *Sample selection*

2.3 Twenty schools were engaged with to carry out fieldwork. Schools were selected so as to provide a wide reach across several factors, including geography, language, size, and the number of learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM). Schools were also selected based on evidence of having carried out personalised assessments prior to 2021, with the final sample including six schools that had carried out assessments in 2020 or 2019.

2.4 Schools were sought across twenty Local Authorities in Wales to ensure an even geographic spread. Due to minor challenges in recruitment within some Local Authorities due to pressures caused by Covid-19, the final sample of schools represent seventeen Local Authorities across Wales, with the four Regional Consortia represented as well as Ceredigion and Powys.

2.5 Schools were also selected based on the medium of teaching, with schools categorised as either Welsh language, English language, or

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<sup>5</sup> These included the following Regional Consortia: GWE, ERW, Central South, EAS. Stakeholders in Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, Ceredigion County Council, and ESTYN were also interviewed.

bilingual in instances where there is a dual stream provision or English with significant Welsh.

2.6 Eligibility for free school meals was categorised as either low, medium, or high, with the thresholds set as follows:

- Low <9%
- Medium 10-19%
- High >20%

2.7 This categorisation is based on conversations held with practitioners and stakeholders, with the “high” categorisation representing school above the Wales average for FSM eligibility based on pre-pandemic data.<sup>6</sup>

2.8 Categorisation for school size is based on the following thresholds:

- Small > 100
- Medium 101-250
- Large >251

2.9 The twenty schools that have been engaged with are set out in the table below.

**Table 2.1: Sample of case study schools**

Local Authority /Consortium	Language <sup>7</sup>	eFSM eligibility	School size
<b>EAS</b>			
Caerphilly	Welsh	Medium	Large
Blaenau Gwent	English	High	Medium
Monmouthshire	English	Low	Medium
Newport	English	High	Large
Torfaen	English	Medium	Medium
<b>Central South</b>			
Merthyr Tydfil	English	Low	Medium
RCT	Bilingual (DS)	Medium	Large
RCT	Bilingual (EW)	High	Small

<sup>6</sup> eFSM average in Wales recorded as 19.9%: [Schools' census results: April 2021 \(provisional\)](#). Average eFSM in Wales taken from 2019 figures as eFSM data from schools sourced from 2018 (pre-pandemic) dataset.

<sup>7</sup> Bilingual categorised as follows: DS = Dual Stream. EW = English with significant Welsh. TR = Transitional (Welsh is the language of the day-to-day business of the school. High priority is given to creating a Welsh ethos).

Cardiff	Welsh	Low	Medium
Cardiff	English	High	Large
GWE			
Wrexham	English	Low	Medium
Flintshire	Welsh	High	Small
Conwy	Bilingual (EW)	High	Small
Gwynedd	Welsh	Medium	Medium
Gwynedd	Welsh	Low	Small
Partneriaeth			
Carmarthenshire	Bilingual (TR)	Medium	Medium
Swansea	Welsh	Low	Large
Mid and West Wales Partnership			
Ceredigion	Welsh	High	Large
Powys	Bilingual (DS)	Low	Medium
Local Authorities			
Neath Port Talbot	English	High	Large

- 2.10 In order to engage with schools and to recruit for fieldwork, all Regional Consortia were contacted, and Local Authorities such as Powys, NPT, and Ceredigion not within Regional Consortia at the time were engaged with separately. In most cases, Regional Consortia contacted schools on behalf of the research team. Contact details for schools that had agreed to take part in the research were then passed to the research team. An initial conversation was held with the headteacher, deputy head, or Foundation Phase Lead, in which arrangements were made to conduct field work with practitioners in the school.
- 2.11 As part of the fieldwork, in-depth individual or group interviews were carried out with a range of practitioners at each school, including members of senior leadership, Foundation Phase Leads, teachers in the Foundation Phase, higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs), teaching assistants (TAs), and any other relevant personnel. Between the twenty schools, 76 practitioners were interviewed (see Table 2.2, and see Annex A for full breakdown of the number of practitioners spoken to by type of school). In the table below, practitioners that held

multiple roles have been categorised by their most senior role. For instance, classroom teachers that were acting Foundation Phase Leads have been categorised as the latter.

**Table 2.2: Practitioners and parent governors interviewed**

Role	Total	Notes
Headteachers	8	
Deputy / Assistant Headteachers	9	Of these, one was also a Year 1 teacher, one was a Year 2 teacher, and two were assessment coordinators.
Foundation Phase Leads	9	Of the Foundation Phase Leads, three were Year 2 teachers, two were Year 1 teachers, two taught Years 1 and 2, one taught a Foundation Phase classroom of Years 1, 2 and Reception, and one taught Reception.
Year 2 Teachers	9	One Year 2 teacher was also an ALNCo.
Year 1 Teachers	3	
Reception Teachers	7	
Nursery Teachers	5	
Teachers of multiple school years (Nursery, Reception, and Years 1 and 2)	8	One teacher of multiple school years was also an ALNCo.
Higher Level Teaching Assistants	7	
Teaching Assistants	3	

Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators (ALNCo)	3	One ALNCo held other teaching roles within the school beyond the reception year.
Other	1	Year 6 teacher and assessment lead
Parent Governors	4	
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	

### *Parent Governors*

- 2.12 In addition to practitioners, four parent governors were also interviewed to gather the thoughts of governors that have a degree of strategic oversight over decisions taken regarding the Foundation Phase, while also having currently or previously had a child in the Foundation Phase. The parent governors were recruited through the case study schools, with recommendations for suitable governors to speak to made by school administrations.
- 2.13 Recruiting parent governors proved difficult due to a general sense among the case study schools that they were not especially well positioned to comment on the Foundation Phase Profile or the personalised assessments. One parent governor, for example, noted that through their role they were more aware of information about assessments in older school years beyond the Foundation Phase due to the fact that a play-based approach was prioritised among the Foundation Phase years in line with its intended pedagogical principles.

## Part 2 – Foundation Phase Profile: Detailed Findings

### 3. Assessment in the Foundation Phase and the Foundation Phase Profile

#### *Practitioner Reflections on Purpose of Assessment*

3.1 Practitioners identified a number of related rationales underpinning the purpose and value of assessment. These included:

- Establishing a baseline, or a starting point.
- Gathering information on learner preferences, such as what interests them, whether the child learns better indoors or outside.
- Identifying next steps for the learners:
  - Where do they need to make progress?
  - Who do they need to challenge?
  - How should learners be grouped?
- Identifying areas in which learners need additional attention and support, and making decisions on interventions. Assessments enable practitioners to spot learners who are coasting, enabling them to challenge more able learners.
- Assessing improvements in order to make comparisons against previous assessment data or information. The added value of the teaching and learning can be tracked and demonstrated.

#### *Best Methods of Assessment*

3.2 Practitioners unanimously identified observation as the best means of carrying out assessments. It was described as being able to provide “rich evidence” on what the learners are able to do independently, and the extent to which they are utilising learned skills in real life contexts.

3.3 Continuous assessment as an ongoing daily practice was also noted by the majority of practitioners as important. Based on examples given, this involves observation of the learner on a daily basis as well

as the use of more hands-on practices, such as assessing what is in learners' workbooks, assessing through interacting verbally with the learner, and using planned assessments to gauge skill levels.

- 3.4 Four practitioners argued that teachers' expertise needs to be trusted to make assessments based on ongoing observation, and that they and other practitioners (such as HLTAs and TAs) have a good awareness of a learner's ability through their daily observations and interactions with the learner. A small number of practitioners specifically described ongoing teacher assessments as more accurate than the Foundation Phase Profile assessments.
- 3.5 Relying on previous written assessment scores was also flagged as an issue by one practitioner, as they highlighted that carrying judgements forward could provide a misleading picture. They felt that it was better to allow practitioners to rely on their own judgements of what they see day-to-day. A practitioner explained that while an assessment was accurate at the time, they often saw marked improvements within a short space of time:
- “with boys you often see such a jump with them, as so much of it is down to maturity.”
- 3.6 A number of practitioners pointed out that rapid developmental changes occur within Foundation Phase age children, emphasising the importance of continuous assessment.

## 4. The Foundation Phase Profile

### Practitioner Reflections on the Foundation Phase Profile

#### *Alignment with Foundation Phase Pedagogical Principles*

- 4.1 Practitioners and stakeholders on the whole found the Foundation Phase Profile to align well with the pedagogical principles underpinning the Foundation Phase.
- 4.2 Stakeholders within Regional Consortia and Local Authorities were very positive on its alignment with Foundation Phase pedagogical principles provided that assessments were carried out appropriately. One Local Authority Foundation Phase Lead praised the fact that it was done “with children ... not done to them.”
- 4.3 Primarily, the positive reflection on this question from practitioners was due to the fact that the Foundation Phase Profile, and the assessments carried out as part of the baseline and end-of-phase assessments, are largely based on observation. The vast majority of practitioners felt that if done right as part of day-to-day work, then the assessment through observation was in-keeping with Foundation Phase pedagogical principles. As described by practitioners, assessment through observation often involves setting up a task to be carried out, such as setting up activities where particular skills can be assessed, or putting things into “learning areas” or areas of provision for the learners.
- 4.4 A number of practitioners described the ideal approach as a scenario in which the learners do not know that they are being assessed. All practitioners described the baseline assessment as being mostly possible to carry out through observation.
- 4.5 However, all but two practitioners noted that *some* activities in which learners have to be assessed could not necessarily be observed through play, with learners as a result having to carry out a limited number of focused tasks, sometimes at a desk, through which skills can be evidenced.

- 4.6 While two practitioners claimed that focused tasks in which the learner was required to sit at a desk and complete a piece of work was avoidable through creatively finding ways to assess skills in other ways, the majority found such tasks unavoidable. Practitioners did however emphasise that the use of formal tasks was limited to only the skill areas where observation was less feasible as a means of assessment.
- 4.7 Examples of the kind of skills that were hard to assess through observation include writing, recognising shapes and patterns, forming numbers, the understanding of mathematical concepts like temperature, and times tables<sup>8</sup>. Skills in mathematics were described as a problem in particular by five practitioners, as it is not always natural for learners to demonstrate maths skills as part of play.
- 4.8 For the learner, these focused activities sometimes involve sitting at a table in order for a certain ability or skill to be assessed. This was described as an issue as some learners had not previously engaged in focused activities in which they have to sit at a table and perform a concentrated task. One practitioner did note that some learners became stressed with focused tasks:
- “When the learner is in a focused assessment task – it is stressful for the learner, they can be panicky when they don’t want to get it wrong.”
- 4.9 As a result of the unfamiliarity with more formal focused tasks, a small number therefore felt that the true ability of the learner may not be accurately displayed through the focused task.
- 4.10 Four practitioners pointed out that aspects of the learners’ development such as Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity and Physical Development could be observed more easily than areas such as Mathematical Development. It was in the assessment of these hard-to-observe skills where these and some

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<sup>8</sup> These skills are found in ladders in the Full Profile, and not in the compact profile.

other practitioners felt the pedagogical principles to be less aligned with practice in the Foundation Phase.

*Challenges for the alignment between the Foundation Phase Profile and Foundation Phase pedagogical principles*

- 4.11 Certain time and resource pressures were described by a small number of practitioners as impacting the extent to which assessments could be carried out through observation. A stakeholder from a Regional Consortium and former teacher noted that time pressures impact the extent to which assessments could be carried out in such a way as to align with the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase. They explained that when teachers are under pressure, their options to avoid asking learners to sit down and do tasks can be affected.
- 4.12 The size of classrooms and the ratio of practitioners to learners was explained by two practitioners as a reason why some tasks had to be set up as desk work in order to be assessed. One of these practitioners described that they were sometimes unable to wait until a learner could show a particular skill through play due to having up to 30 learners in a classroom. One Year 2 teacher described that in their classroom, twenty learners will need to be occupied while she observes ten, and the availability of another practitioner does affect how much observation they are able to do.
- 4.13 Several practitioners did note that it was easier to avoid having to set up focused tasks when there were several practitioners to hand, all observing the classroom. This provides more of an opportunity for a practitioner to observe a learner carrying out a particular skill through play.
- 4.14 Seven practitioners made the point that the tension between assessments and Foundation Phase pedagogical principles were different at different years within the Foundation Phase. As one stakeholder from a Regional Consortium noted, it is in Year 2 that

assessment and pedagogical principles clash the most, as evidence is needed from tasks that are harder to assess through play and observation. A Foundation Phase Lead, using an example, explained that a learner is unlikely to show you their understanding of negative temperature during play. The year 2 classroom was also described by these practitioners as having fewer adults than younger years, resulting in less of an opportunity to observe learners during activities.

- 4.15 Four practitioners raised the six-week statutory window for carrying out the baseline assessment as a pressure, with one practitioner describing this pressure as a barrier to more observation-based forms of assessment. A reception teacher explained that a learner may have had a bad night's sleep and are not at their best, but due to the tight timeframe in which the baseline assessment is to be carried, they are often unable to wait until a more suitable time.
- 4.16 One practitioner felt that with learners becoming more used to using screens at a young age, they did not play as much at home, and were more non-communicative with their fellow learners. This presented further barriers to observing skills and abilities through play.
- 4.17 Another practitioner pointed out that a particular challenge to carrying out assessment through observation was that some learners are more likely to be interested in activities through which they can be observed, whereas for some learners, "you have to take the book to them."
- 4.18 A number of practitioners made the point that their many years of experience as a teacher now allowed them to better plan assessments as part of activities, whereas at the start of their career, the process felt more like formalised assessments where they followed tick-boxes. By now, they know in advance what evidence they want to see from each activity, and how to weave assessments into activities that are more play-based.

## Use of the Foundation Phase Profile

### *Use of the Foundation Phase Profile in Nurseries*

- 4.19 Fourteen of the twenty schools had nursery provision as part of their setting, with twelve of these carrying out some form of baseline assessment within the nursery year using either the Foundation Phase Profile or another commercially available assessment package. Practitioners at some of these schools described only using certain ladders within the Profile, such as the Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity. One further school carried out their own assessment in nursery based on an internally developed assessment system.

**Table 4.1: Use of assessment systems in nurseries**

Assessment system in use in nursery	Number
Use Foundation Phase Profile in nursery	4
Use other commercially available assessment system in nursery	8
Use internally developed assessment system in nursery	1
Don't carry out baseline assessment in nursery	1
Schools without nurseries	6

- 4.20 One school described their reasoning for carrying out a nursery baseline assessment, explaining that in their catchment area, learners came in at a particularly low level, and it was useful to see the progress that learners had made throughout the year.
- 4.21 Other schools described the use of the Foundation Phase Profile in nursery as being beneficial for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the learners, and also beneficial for supporting

provision and organising outside agencies where additional support may be needed.

- 4.22 A number of these schools with nurseries that did use the Foundation Phase Profile described only using parts of it, with one school explicitly stating that they started off using the Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity aspects while the learners are new to the setting, and are then able to assess against more skills as time goes on. Some of these schools used an online assessment tracking or recording platform to carry out the baseline assessment in nursery. A number of nurseries also used another software package that focused on speech and language alongside the Foundation Phase Profile in order to assess speech and language development.
- 4.23 One of these twelve schools noted that when carrying out baseline assessments in the reception year, they did not look at the baseline data from nursery until after the assessments had been carried out. This allowed them to compare data from the two years, and not be guided by previous data collected. However, the other schools with nurseries did use the data from nursery to inform discussions between nursery and reception teachers.
- 4.24 Of the two schools with a nursery that do not use the Foundation Phase Profile, the stated reasons were, respectively, time constraints involved in using the compact profile, and the absence of a qualified teacher or HLTA to carry out the assessments. The latter of these two schools had instead developed their own booklet-based assessment approach based heavily on Foundation Phase Profile.
- 4.25 Two schools without a nursery had a close working relationship with a local childcare setting and were aware that they carried out their own assessments, but did not look at these results. The reason given by one of these schools for not using that data is that they wanted to carry out their own assessments, and not base their assessments on data from the childcare setting. They also found that a learner's

abilities will have slipped over summer, with the nursery assessment not always reflecting the current picture.

- 4.26 One school without a nursery did use data from their on-site but not-incorporated nursery, and found it helpful in preparing for the arrival of new children. Similarly, another school that used an online assessment tracking platform to carry out its assessments through the profile were able to access data on the children starting in the reception year through that online platform. The children's accounts would come with them from their nurseries. While this school did look at this data, they still carry out their own baseline assessments.
- 4.27 A further school described how their Foundation Phase Lead had developed very good relationships with the team in their on-site, but non-incorporated childcare setting, and that they have regular discussions and joint observations whilst children are still in attendance at the childcare setting to agree upon outcome levels awarded, before children transfer up to reception. There is a common approach to assessing learners as a result. The school does use this data to support learners, not least as the Foundation Phase Lead will have met the children during the term leading up to their joining the school and will have gained an insight into their needs.

#### *Use of Foundation Phase Profile by Schools and Practitioners*

- 4.28 Of the twenty schools engaged with, all carried out the baseline assessment at the beginning of the reception year in line with statutory requirements.
- 4.29 Five of the twenty schools used the Foundation Phase Profile beyond the required statutory period of the first six weeks of the reception year. Ten schools used commercially available assessment packages. The five remaining schools used their own internal system, developed by the school, sometimes in conjunction with an external evidence recording programme. Some of these internal systems were heavily based on the Foundation Phase Profile.

**Table 4.1: Breakdown of use of assessment systems**

Assessment systems used by schools	Number
Foundation Phase Profile	5
Other assessment package	10
Internal system	5

- 4.30 In all, three of the twenty schools stated that they use the *Full Profile* of the Foundation Phase Profile in its base format<sup>9</sup>, with one school specifying that it is only used in Year 2 for end of phase assessments. One school stated that the Full Profile was generally reserved for instances in which practitioners needed a deeper understanding of potential additional learning needs.
- 4.31 One school that used the Full Profile throughout the Foundation Phase preferred it to the compact profile as it was more comprehensive and better at assessing skill levels. They noted that the compact profile did not cover skills such as writing their name or identifying letters, and did not focus sufficiently on skills expected to be covered during reception year.
- 4.32 In one school that used an online assessment recording platform, the deputy head and Foundation Phase Lead explained that the compact profile was insufficiently detailed and was therefore of limited usefulness. They described the compact profile as too language-based, which could present challenges to assessing the learners. This school has developed their own internal system in which the compact profile has had the necessary extra elements added to it, which was now being phased in alongside the use of the Full Profile.

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<sup>9</sup> Base format meaning without having been adapted by the school, or not used through an intermediary programme or platform such as those that record data through an online system.

### *Use of the Foundation Phase Profile in Years 1 and 2*

- 4.33 Of the schools engaged with, five explicitly stated that they used the Foundation Phase Profile in its base format beyond the statutory period in the reception year.
- 4.34 Ten other schools engaged with the Foundation Phase Profile through the use of an online assessment recording platform, sometimes using more than one platform or package. For the purposes of clarity, in this report, the use of separate online assessment recording platforms will be categorised separately from those schools that use the Foundation Phase Profile in its base format.
- 4.35 Of those ten schools using online assessment platforms, three also used internally developed assessment systems alongside the package, with a further fourth school also using a system in conjunction with GWE which tracked learner performance using a colour-coded assessment of skill levels against targets. Generally, practitioners described using online assessment platforms as less time-consuming than using the Compact or Full Profile in their base formats.
- 4.36 The five schools that did not use the Foundation Phase Profile in its base format for Years 1 and 2, nor an online assessment platform based on the Foundation Phase Profile, had developed their own internal assessment system for the Foundation Phase (addressed below), in some instances alongside the use of digital platforms that recorded data and enabled practitioners to share evidence with parents. Four of these internal systems developed by the schools were heavily based on the Foundation Phase Profile, having been developed using the outcomes of the Profile. One of these schools had very recently moved away from using an online platform based on the Foundation Phase Profile on the advice of their Regional Consortium, and had developed an internal system, used in conjunction with a different online package used only as an aid to capture and collect assessment evidence.

- 4.37 Another school that did not use the Foundation Phase Profile in Years 1 and 2 had previously used it, but found that the time commitments that it involved made it infeasible. They explained that practitioners had far more time with the learners in the reception year in order to complete the Profile through observation, and practitioners in Years 1 and 2 had less time to spend with learners, reducing the appeal of the Foundation Phase Profile. The data collected in Years 1 and 2 was also more short-lived, as from Key Stage 2 onwards a different assessment system was used. This particular school had since developed their own internal assessment system for use with Years 1 and 2.

*Alternatives to the Foundation Phase Profile Used by Practitioners*

- 4.38 One school was in the process of moving away from the use of the Foundation Phase Profile. They had been encouraged by their Regional Consortium to adopt an assessment system more in-line with the new Curriculum for Wales. Their assessment system as yet had no title, and was based on a series of Microsoft Word documents with assessment headings corresponding to themes within the Curriculum for Wales. This was used in conjunction with online evidence collecting platform in order to record evidence.
- 4.39 The practitioners from this school that were interviewed described this system as follows:
- “[It is] more focused on what individuals are able to do and what individual next steps are – more personalised than previous approaches where the focus was on ticking off age-related outcomes.”
- 4.40 The use of an evidence recording and sharing platform allowed for evidence to be uploaded in the form of videos and photos. Parents are able to view these, and practitioners were hopeful that this would allow parents to become more engaged in their child’s development.

- 4.41 Another large school had established their own internal assessment processes which were heavily based on the Foundation Phase Profile, but which addressed what they saw as specific weaknesses within it. The school felt that while the Profile documents included useful information, teachers felt that the steps within the Foundation Phase Profile needed to be broken into more manageable targets. For example, the Profile requires that a learner can count to 100, and the school's internal system breaks this into steps of counting to 20 and 50 so as to measure progress incrementally, not only at the ultimate milestone. The practitioners at the school felt that this approach gave them a more detailed breakdown of where the learners are in their development.
- 4.42 Practitioners at this school described the forms as being much more useful to them than the Profile, as it provided more manageable targets for practitioners to be able to observe. They did however describe the Compact Profile as a useful framework to work with.
- 4.43 This system is based on forms which are completed at the beginning of the school year, and each term, the progress of the learners is measured against the Foundation Phase Profile framework to see where they have reached with literacy and numeracy.
- 4.44 One medium sized school in a rural area had developed their own assessment practice, which had moved away from "assessment for assessment's sake" towards a focus on "personalised learning at the pupil level." The rationale behind the assessment system was that the quality of learning processes should be assessed, rather than monitoring learner outcome levels. In practice, this means that the school no longer sets weekly spelling tests for learners but rather work with each learner to identify words that they need to learn to spell correctly.
- 4.45 The school felt that a significant weakness of the current assessment system across the Foundation Phase is that the approaches are

designed to assess skills too narrowly, with assessments not considering the learner's disposition to learn, only their ability.

- 4.46 The headteacher of the school described the system as follows:
- “If you are teaching kids to bake a cake, you should be assessing how you're going about it, what are they learning during the process not the quality of the finished cake. It doesn't really matter if the cake has collapsed or has burnt ... what's important is that kids have learnt how to measure ingredients, to learn from what's gone wrong, what would they do differently next time.”
- 4.47 The school still undertook an end-of-phase assessment, which is based on evidence gathered over the course of the year, recorded using an online assessment evidence-gathering platform.
- 4.48 This online evidence-gathering platform for recording assessment evidence is used daily by the school and learners. Each learner has their own account, accessed via Hwb, which they use to upload weekly targets and share with parents. Across the Foundation Phase a practitioner will upload these targets on behalf of the learner. These targets are presented visually (e.g., a photograph or video which includes the learner and their target) or in writing. The targets are reviewed weekly and where they have been achieved, photographic/video evidence is uploaded to a learner's digital portfolio within the online platform. Parents are able to see these targets and achievements, and this has been found to result in increased engagement and support from home to achieve the target. According to the practitioners spoken to at the school, the format of the online platform used is in keeping with a play-based approach in that a recording/photo of a piece of work can be taken and uploaded to the system to evidence achievements.
- 4.49 A stakeholder from a Local Authority with oversight on the Foundation Phase noted that very few of the schools in their area used the Foundation Phase Profile beyond the statutory period of the first six weeks of the reception year. This was despite their recommendations

that schools return to the profile again and again based on their belief that the profile document is “such a useful tool to inform how to fill in gaps, keep observing and assessing on ongoing basis.”

*Reflections on the Quality and Utility of the Foundation Phase Profile*

- 4.50 Practitioners overall were positive about the quality of the Foundation Phase Profile in supporting the assessment of learners’ development and learning. The vast majority of practitioners, when discussing the Foundation Phase Profile, were referring to the baseline assessment, and the use of the Compact Profile.
- 4.51 Three schools used the Full Profile in its base format, with one further school stating that the use of the Full Profile was generally reserved for instances in which practitioners needed a deeper understanding of a learner’s ability, often when there were indications of additional learning needs. One practitioner described the Full Profile as follows:
- “If you wanted to know a little bit more in areas of child development then it can be useful. It is a resource where appropriate. It’s pointless for everyone as it would take away from induction and good quality teaching.”
- 4.52 As it goes into more depth, the Full Profile was described by one practitioner as being useful on a case-by-case basis for identifying health and well-being issues, especially amongst learners that were behind in social and emotional development.
- 4.53 A stakeholder from a Regional Consortium explained that while some of the teachers they worked with preferred the Full Profile because of its depth and outlining of next steps, time was the biggest barrier to its use. They did however note that they felt that practitioners were missing out by not using the Full Profile.
- 4.54 The majority of practitioners interviewed noted that the Compact Profile was very good at finding out learners’ starting point in terms of skills and abilities, and that it offered a wide enough range of skills to

observe and assess. Practitioners in six different interviews noted that the Compact Profile was good at deriving a starting point for the learners, and was also described as being useful for identifying the targets for learners to focus on, and for helping to decide the areas on which to next focus. One practitioner described it as allowing learners themselves to tell teachers what they need. Another practitioner noted that the Profile was good at showing next steps, but that there was always the danger that the box could be ticked, and the teacher moves on without the skill being embedded. They added that it was the teacher's professionalism that was essential to knowing when to consider a skill acquired, and when to move on to the next step.

- 4.55 On the whole, practitioners felt that the Compact Profile was able to provide a true reflection of the learner across the areas of the Foundation Phase. One practitioner made the point that the baseline may be particularly useful for new teachers, who have not yet developed the observation skills of more experienced practitioners.
- 4.56 The baseline assessments do inform planning, with many practitioners explaining that they use the data to tailor their teaching. One practitioner gave a recent example where they found one class not as strong in maths, which then shaped their planning for teaching. One large rural school described how they use the data from the Foundation Phase Profile longitudinally in order to capture weaknesses across school years in areas such as verbal communication or mathematics. This data was also used to form intervention groups or to decide on the provision of additional resources to address groups with certain weaknesses.
- 4.57 The topic of using the Foundation Phase Profile for planning intervention or focused groups was raised in five individual or group interviews, with these practitioners stating that the information was useful to decide on the grouping of learners for further intervention. One of these practitioners noted that the baseline data was included in discussion with class teachers around the provision of support and

resources, but that other further assessments by teachers were also taken into account.

- 4.58 A small number of practitioners noted that the Compact Profile was better suited to assessing some skills than others, with assessments in areas such as Mathematical Development, Language, Literacy and Communication, and Physical Development providing a more accurate representation of the learner's development than the Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity area. The former areas were described as more "black and white," and therefore less "subjective" than Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity. Some practitioners noted that descriptors for Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity were too vague, with too much room for misinterpretation. One Foundation Phase Leader had found that it was possible for two learners who are at the same outcome level to vary considerably in their development.
- 4.59 The most commonly raised issue with the Foundation Phase Profile, and the Compact and Full Profiles was that they were time consuming to carry out. The first six weeks of reception year was described as highly pressured for teachers, with the focus on completing the Compact Profile taking away from teaching. Four practitioners raised issues with the six-week window in which baseline assessments have to be carried out. The principal source of the concern related to the need to allow the learners to settle, and that carrying out baseline assessments took time away from getting to know the learners.
- 4.60 One of these practitioners stated that the assessment took time away from the wellbeing focus, with teachers having missed opportunities to work with learners who were unsettled.
- 4.61 One school had a policy of carrying out the baseline assessment in the reception year within 3-4 weeks, despite the statutory period being six weeks, otherwise "there is a tendency that the observation work takes up the whole first half term."

- 4.62 Another issue flagged was that there is a tension between the requirement to carry out the baseline assessment within six weeks of the start of reception year and the need to allow the learners to settle in. Practitioners emphasised the importance of having time to settle in before carrying out assessments, with one group of practitioners agreeing that the baseline assessment gives a better picture of the learner once they have had time to settle.
- 4.63 Twenty-two practitioners did state that the Foundation Phase Profile generally did not tell teachers anything that they did not already know. One stated that they rarely referred back to the profile data after the baseline assessment.
- 4.64 Four practitioners stated that the Compact and Full Profiles could be too much of a tick-box process, with one of these referring specifically to the Full Profile. When discussing needing to use experience and judgement in order to ensure that learners are assessed correctly, a teacher noted that “you really had to have your teacher head on, because you could be ticking those boxes ... and before you know it, you’ve got a reception age child in the first term of school and they’re practically outcome four.”
- 4.65 Three practitioners stated that they did not use the Foundation Phase Profile beyond the reception year because they found it to be not tailored enough for any individual learner.

#### *Use of Foundation Phase Profile Beyond Year 2*

- 4.66 Half of all schools engaged with identified the change from outcomes in the Foundation Phase to levels in Key Stage 2 as an issue due to the different system of measures, with two practitioners stating that this change reduced the value of assessment data collected through the Foundation Phase Profile. A Foundation Phase Lead in one small school wondered what was the point of end-of-phase assessments as learners start fresh in Key Stage 2. One school in particular explained that the difference in terminology was not helpful, and that it made

conversations between Year 2 and Year 3 teachers harder. They added that parents sometimes misunderstand the difference between them.

- 4.67 Seven schools explicitly stated that they passed on the information from the Foundation Phase Profile assessments as learners moved on to Year 3, with six of these describing it as helpful for planning in Year 3, with one stating that it was of limited value due to the change from outcomes to levels.
- 4.68 One school did note that the end of phase assessments were helpful for informing learning in Year 3, in instances where there are common areas where learners have not performed very well. This school, however, did not use the Foundation Phase Profile for their end of phase assessment, instead preferring an internally developed system.

*Identifying Learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN)*

- 4.69 Practitioners were mostly in agreement that the Foundation Phase Profile was, by itself, an insufficient tool to identify learners with additional learning needs, but all who discussed this point emphasised that it was not expected that the Foundation Phase Profile was the only basis for making judgements on additional needs.
- 4.70 A number of practitioners across seven schools reflected positively on the use of the Foundation Phase Profile for identifying learners with additional needs. The Profile was described as a good starting point, and a useful tool for tracking issues.
- 4.71 Two practitioners in two different schools did describe the Foundation Phase Profile as well-rounded, in that it included a focus on Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity and Physical Development. Another practitioner noted that in their experience, it was in relation to language skills that the Profile was most useful in identifying issues.

- 4.72 A small number of practitioners felt that the statements within the Foundation Phase Profile were too vague and broad to flag issues. One practitioner, for example, stated that the Compact Profile was “not great at recognising issues with numbers.” Another practitioner gave the example of learners with autism that struggled with friendships and communication being given an average score under the Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity area because the “statements aren’t good enough” to capture issues in more subjective areas.
- 4.73 Practitioners were instead reliant on ongoing observation to identify issues. One school gave an example of a learner with Cerebral Palsy whereby the baseline assessment was not detailed enough to identify what support they required. Instead, teacher observation was instrumental in identifying what they could or could not do in order to tailor their education appropriately.
- 4.74 The Foundation Phase Profile was however used widely by schools in gathering evidence for ALN support. The use of the Foundation Phase Profile in instances where individual learners are thought to have additional learning needs was required due to specification guiding ALN provision. One practitioner described it as follows:
- “In order to give an Individual Education Plan for a child, she has to show that you have tried to overcome any issues in class before you can categorise them as having ALN. You have to show that you’ve targeted them.”
- 4.75 In such instances, one practitioner described that they would in that case use the Full Profile in order to provide a more in-depth assessment of a learner’s abilities.
- 4.76 A practitioner explained that in order to flag learners who may require additional attention due to additional learning needs, they used a

range of resources<sup>10</sup> that have been approved by their Local Authority as tools for evidence- gathering.

- 4.77 Two practitioners within one school felt that the Profile did not sufficiently cover the very lowest levels of skills that may be necessary to identify additional learning needs in nursery. While they did use P Levels<sup>11</sup> in the school, these practitioners would have liked to have seen a more inclusive Profile which would cover the entire spectrum of skill expectations so that a single system could be used to track skills and progress.

#### *Issues Relating to Language Skills*

- 4.78 Some schools had encountered language-related issues with the Foundation Phase Profile. Within the sample of schools engaged with, seven are taught through the medium of Welsh, and four schools are bilingual, with either dual stream provision, or English with significant Welsh.
- 4.79 The schools most affected by certain challenges with language were Welsh medium or bilingual primary schools with relatively high proportions of learners coming from English-speaking homes. In all, five of these schools raised issues with the Foundation Phase Profile.
- 4.80 The issues stem from learners being underscored in ability due to unfamiliarity with the Welsh language at the time of the baseline assessment. Practitioners in these five schools felt that carrying out the baseline assessment within six weeks of the start of term in reception year gave a poor reflection of the overall ability of the learners. Two practitioners in different schools found that learners' scores are lower having moved to a Welsh language setting, and that this did not reflect the learners' true abilities. One of these practitioners pointed out that learners may be able to identify shapes

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<sup>10</sup> [Alex Kelly Social Skills Toolkit](#): Raven's Progressive Matrices and Vocabulary Scales, the British Picture Vocabulary Scale, and the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability

<sup>11</sup> P Scales or (P Levels) are used to assess the progress of learners who have additional learning needs.

in English but not in Welsh, and that this raised questions about what was being assessed. This practitioner noted that it would be better to carry out the baseline towards the end of the reception year when language skills have improved.

- 4.81 Two practitioners in separate schools, one a headteacher and the other a Foundation Phase Lead, both raised the same question regarding the language of assessment:

“Is it the understanding that’s important or the language of communications? Maybe the mathematician would say that it’s the understanding that’s important, the linguist would say otherwise.”

- 4.82 One practitioner described that the low scores were a concern for parents and led to some questioning whether Welsh medium education was right for their child. The practitioner described that the learners were being scored lower than they had been at the end of their time in English medium nursery, giving the appearance of having “regressed” since joining the school. Another practitioner in a different school expressed concern that parents may worry about the relative outcomes achieved by their learners, but had not experienced this first-hand.

- 4.83 Two further practitioners in different schools with Welsh language provision were asked about this point, and stated that while parents did sometimes ask why their child was scored higher in physical and social categories than in language and numeracy, they understood once the language dimension was explained to them. Both of these practitioners did explain that they felt that it was important to explain to parents why their child may appear to be scoring lower in some areas.

- 4.84 One practitioner from a school with Welsh language provision saw a positive to the challenges with recording baseline skill levels, as they felt that the significant improvement in ability scores from the initial baseline assessment in reception year to later periods positively demonstrated “fantastic” added value.

### *Communicating Foundation Phase Profile Assessments to Parents*

- 4.85 Some schools explained that outcomes from baseline and end-of-phase assessments were communicated to parents, as well as results from other assessments.
- 4.86 In all, eight schools described sharing baseline or end of phase outcome results with parents either through end of year reports or in parents' evenings. Of these schools, one reported that parents often have issues understanding what the outcome levels mean. Some of these schools emphasised that they explain outcomes in a language that parents can understand.
- 4.87 A further two schools made results of end of phase assessments available to parents but did not use the Foundation Phase Profile to carry out these assessments.
- 4.88 Of the remaining eleven schools seven<sup>12</sup> noted that their baseline outcomes were only for internal use, but three of these schools described using the baseline results as the evidence base for targets or general updates for parents. One of these schools also explained that they did make outcomes data available to parents upon request.
- 4.89 A strategic stakeholder (a Foundation Phase Lead in a Local Authority and former primary headteacher) spoken to as part of the scoping exercise did note that as a parent, they felt that the narrative report they had received from the school did not give them much information about their child's progress, and that it did not provide much guidance on what their child needed to do next. They described the feedback as "not very parent friendly."
- 4.90 Three schools used online assessment packages which allowed evidence and recorded progress to be shared with parents throughout the school year.

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<sup>12</sup> The remainder did not provide specifics.

- 4.91 A school which used an evidence collecting platform described how parents are able to access regular weekly information on learner targets, progress, and achievements. This school, however, described the challenges faced in communicating assessment outcomes to parents. This school had shifted their assessment practices away from levels and outcomes and were becoming more focused on learning processes instead.
- 4.92 The biggest issue facing this school was shifting parents' mindsets away from 'levels and hurdles' to individualised learner targets, learning and progression. They planned on holding small group sessions with parents in the autumn term of 2021 to explain how the school is shifting away from learner outcomes and levels to learning and progress which focuses on 'values and learning disposition'. This, it is hoped, will help with the "current obsession" that parents have about "which reading level my child is on, and why isn't she on the next level yet."
- 4.93 Some schools also described their processes of involving governors in discussions around outcome data collected throughout the year on an external assessment recording package. One parent governor spoken to described how the data from the Foundation Phase Profile assessments was studied every year, with governors taking an active interest in understanding the data and the picture that it shows. They described that the outcome data drives their decisions in terms of what interventions are to be introduced and funded, and how these feed into the school's improvement plan.

*Foundation Phase Profile and the Curriculum for Wales*

- 4.94 Practitioners on the whole felt positively about the new Curriculum for Wales, with some schools having already made some preparations for its roll-out.
- 4.95 One practitioner reflected positively on its reduced focus on “where you want the child to be at the end of a year.” They felt this would lead to reduced pressure on learners. Another practitioner was similarly pleased that Progression Steps were not specific for any particular year, and hoped that this would result in greater flexibility around learner progress.
- 4.96 There were, however, some areas of concern regarding assessments within the new curriculum.
- 4.97 Some practitioners suggested that the Progression Steps within the new Curriculum were too broad from an assessment point of view, suggesting that progression steps be divided into smaller segments. Five practitioners across different schools were concerned that with the Progression Steps being so broad, some learners may not have advanced on paper from one year to the next. These practitioners felt that adding finer details would allow for more progress to be captured and reported against Progression Steps.
- 4.98 The perception of these practitioners was that the Progression Steps themselves would form the basis of assessment. One headteacher however recognised that the Progression Steps, while forming a common basis, would not be the check-list against which assessments were carried out.
- 4.99 Practitioners in some schools discussed resources that they needed in order to plan assessments that aligned with the new Curriculum for Wales. Several practitioners explained their desire to see more guidance material on assessment in relation to the Progression Steps of the Curriculum for Wales. Some schools had already started adapting their teaching to the Curriculum for Wales, and were finding

the need for guidance on how to supplant outcome measures with Progression Steps.

- 4.100 Some practitioners expressed the desire to see some kind of common framework for assessments that would be made available to all schools. One school looked forward to being able to take ownership of their assessment approach, but still expressed the desire to have a skeleton framework to work from. Another practitioner in a different school called for what is assessed to be clear and consistent across Wales.
- 4.101 A Foundation Phase Lead stated that guidance for assessments relating to Progression Steps was especially necessary for newly qualified teachers, as they would not have as clear an idea of where the end goals were for each cohort.
- 4.102 Two practitioners in a group interview noted the need for a wide-ranging toolkit of options for assessment that schools could have access to, in order to provide a degree of standardisation to assessment practices, but that are also suitable for different variations in assessment styles. They described the ideal resources as a wide selection of choices that are “all the right choice” so that schools can’t choose a poor option.
- 4.103 One school in particular was planning to develop their curriculum in the coming academic year, and emphasised that they were committed to developing an “innovative assessment system” that challenged the school to really understand learners’ progress and good assessment. They felt that Welsh Government needed to listen to schools working hard on developing suitable assessment practices and systems, and were concerned that a lot of schools “weren’t part of that journey.” They were concerned that many schools would go for the quick fixes and packages on the market which are too tick-box oriented, and not aligned with the new Curriculum for Wales.
- 4.104 One point of concern raised by a Year 2 teacher and Foundation Phase Lead was that in the past, the ability of schools to collaborate

within their cluster had been a real strength of the current system. They were concerned that the individuality of each school's curriculum and approach would undermine this strength.

- 4.105 A practitioner complained that they had been receiving mixed messages about the Curriculum for Wales, with Welsh Government driving forward on the new Curriculum on the one hand, but on the other, Estyn, the Local Authority, and the Regional Consortium were still focused on outcomes and levels, and assessing schools on the basis of learner performance at the end of key stages. The school welcomed the direction of travel set out by Welsh Government, but still mistrusted the rest of the system which has previously been focused on accountability.
- 4.106 Practitioners at three different schools reported trialling or receiving training for using Taith360, the assessment tool made by the Assessment Foundation which aligns with the new Curriculum for Wales. A headteacher of one of these schools did however express disappointment that Taith360 was still too much of a tick-box exercise.
- 4.107 A practitioner noted the need for a greater balance between quantitative and qualitative assessment and data in future assessments for the Curriculum for Wales.

#### *Covid-19 and Assessment within the Foundation Phase*

- 4.108 Schools were unanimous in voicing that learners' development had been greatly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and long periods spent away from school. As one practitioner put it, assessment results for the school, which had elected to carry out end of phase assessments within the Foundation Phase had been "the lowest they have ever been ...not because the class is weaker, in fact, the class is really strong ... but because it's been active, hands-on learning ... it's not been as comprehensive had children been in school." One school with a nursery described that the children entering nursery

were much “younger” coming in in terms of skills progression due to the pandemic, and were “well below any sort of baseline.”

## Part 3 – Online Personalised Assessments: Detailed Findings

### 5. Online Personalised Assessments in the Foundation Phase

#### *Online Personalised Assessments and Foundation Phase*

#### *Pedagogical Principles*

- 5.1 The use of online personalised assessments was regarded by the majority of practitioners with whom online personalised assessments were discussed as not necessarily aligned with the pedagogical principles of Foundation Phase. The format of the online personalised assessments was felt to create an environment that was unfamiliar, inappropriate in its complexity, and in some cases, distressing to learners. For some practitioners, it was the very notion of an assessment that drew criticism (seven explicitly stated that a formalised assessment such as personalised assessment should not take place during the Foundation Phase), while others raised criticism of a number of features of the personalised assessments (explained in greater detail below).
- 5.2 The personalised assessments require learners to sit down for a period of time, with some support allowed from staff, in line with the guidance in the [administration handbook](#). The guidance to practitioners advises the use of breaks for learners sitting the personalised assessments, with all but one school questioned on this topic stating that they did provide breaks during the assessments:
- “we tend to let them work on the test for around 20 minutes, then a 10-minute break, and then start again.”
- 5.3 The conditions of the assessments were seen by practitioners to contradict the play-based, hands-on approach normally adopted within the Foundation Phase where learners are usually taught in a relaxed environment working together in small groups, to allow for

peer-learning. In contrast, for the personalised assessments learners were asked to work individually.

Some practitioners felt that any kind of formalised assessment during the Foundation Phase was unsuitable, and not in line with Foundation Phase pedagogical principles. A follow up question was asked of some practitioners who expressed this view, asking whether they thought that the assessments could be adapted so as to make them align with their views on Foundation Phase principles. Most of the practitioners in this subgroup answered that any kind of formalised assessment was unsuitable.

- 5.4 There was a positive correlation between schools that had better integrated or aligned with the guidance on delivering personalised assessments and the favourability of the practitioners' views on personalised assessments. As set out above, the majority of schools did not follow aspects of the guidance, and schools in this group were more likely to view the alignment of the assessments and the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase negatively.
- 5.5 These schools often faced cultural or practical barriers – often related to management practices – in the implementation of the personalised assessments fully in line with the guidance, with the result that they implemented the assessments rigidly and sometimes under circumstances akin to test conditions.

#### *Use of Online Personalised Assessments by Practitioners*

- 5.6 The use of the online personalised assessments across schools varied, with some schools conducting the assessments twice in an academic year (most commonly in the autumn and summer term respectively) and others only once in line with statutory requirements. Eight schools spoken to had carried out, or intended to carry out, two online personalised assessments within an academic year, and nine had done, or intended to carry out the assessments once. Two

schools were unsure in their intentions to carry out the assessments once or twice.

- 5.7 Across the board, all schools but one stated that they had not used any of the professional development materials available on the assessment site, with the one school stating that they had used available material the previous year in order to get up to speed with assessment guidelines. One school, for example, noted that they were not aware of any CPD materials or guidance, and that the assessments had just appeared.
- 5.8 A correlation is evident between the negative sentiment expressed by most of the schools towards the personalised assessments and the number that intended to carry out personalised assessments once within the year. On the whole, schools that had carried out or intended to carry out two instances of the personalised assessments held more positive views on their wellbeing impact and usefulness.
- 5.9 There were some schools however that expressed negative sentiments, but still intended to run the assessments twice regardless. One such school, explaining this decision, stated that they did not believe in using just one instance of the assessment to assess progression, and despite reservations about the usefulness of the assessment outcomes, nonetheless felt the need to obtain a more holistic view. This sentiment was shared by other schools, who despite having some reservations about the value or usefulness of the data, saw some benefit to having a baseline to compare against.
- 5.10 Some schools with more favourable attitudes towards the personalised assessments cited a number of benefits to using the personalised assessment twice in the academic year,<sup>13</sup> including developing target and intervention groups, and measuring learner growth and progression by the end of the summer term. This change from the baseline, in turn, can be shown to parents in annual reports.

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<sup>13</sup> This includes views from schools have only used it once so far, speaking hypothetically about the benefits.

It was also felt that by repeating the assessment learners would become more accustomed to them. One school interviewed felt there were no significant barriers to carrying out more than one personalised assessment per year.

- 5.11 Conversely, three schools provided reasons as to why they intended to carry out the personalised assessments once a year. Reasons given included minimising disruption by administering the reading and numeracy tests within the same time window, and the feeling that the feedback from the assessments did not provide sufficient information on learner skill levels to warrant their being used twice annually. On the latter point, one school expressed their view that personalised assessments data had limited usefulness in respect to informing learner development, feeling this was better captured through other methods such as on-going teacher assessments based on observation.
- 5.12 One school explained that the reason they only carried out the online personalised assessments once per year was that they had signed up to another commercially available online assessment package, which they felt provided teachers with better information on assessment outcomes than the online personalised assessments. This school uses the external online assessment package twice per year in September and February. Furthermore, the school stated that when they receive the results from the assessment package, it provides information on the specific questions asked and which learners got them right and wrong, allowing teachers to know exactly where pupil weak spots are. In contrast, practitioners felt the feedback they receive from personalised assessments are more generic and not specific enough in providing feedback on how specific questions were answered.
- 5.13 This school's principal criticisms with the personalised assessments were their adaptive format, with all learners encountering different questions, the complexity of setting up the assessment for entire classrooms (the school had entire classes sit the personalised

assessments at the same time, and did not make use of the flexibility afforded by the personalised assessments and the guidance), and the usefulness of the data they provided. A practitioner at the school described personalised assessment feedback (particularly procedural numeracy) as not specific enough, with the feedback being more complex to read and understand than the other package they had subscribed to.

- 5.14 There was a range of approaches taken to administering the online personalised assessments, with some schools having embraced the freedom to schedule assessments for any time during the academic year, and others who continued to administer the assessments in May within a similar window as the previous paper-based tests. While there was some nuance in the information provided by schools, information collected showed that nine schools carried out the personalised assessments within a pre-determined window of usually two weeks, while six schools explicitly described taking a less formal approach to scheduling the personalised assessments. The remaining schools did not specify.
- 5.15 Several schools gave reasons for why they carried out their online personalised assessments during the previously used test window in May. One school described how they had to schedule assessments for the whole school, and that they had to allocate a slot for the Year 2 personalised assessments to be carried out. It was easier for them to allocate a particular period in which to carry out the assessments due to the need to allocate resources.
- 5.16 Changing practices and culture to align with the personalised assessments was a key issue that arose from the interviews with case study schools and stakeholders. Entrenched habits were still evident in around half of all schools. One stakeholder from a Regional Consortium stated that many schools they worked with still worked to an assessment period that they would have been used to. Another school described how they had continued with the same scheduling approach as used historically largely because they fear moving away

from the previous approach, as they had external people “come to check how we administered the tests previously.”<sup>14</sup> This sentiment was also expressed by another head teacher, who expressed a nervousness that such assessments would once again be used for the external assessment of schools.

- 5.17 There was a correlation between schools that took a more formal approach to online personalised assessments, sticking to practices resembling exam conditions and the overall negativity of their sentiment on online personalised assessments.
- 5.18 In line with the guidance, all schools interviewed provided learners with a pencil and paper for rough notes while they took the personalised assessments. Schools claimed this provided familiarity for the learners, as well an opportunity for them to write down their “workings out” to help them arrive at an answer. These “workings out” are not assessed, and practitioners expressed some frustration that the assessment cannot score them, as practitioners explained that seeing “workings out” could help identify where a learner’s weakness lies, or at what point they went wrong. The inability for learners to go back to previous questions, as would have been possible with paper-based tests, was also flagged as an issue by one practitioner.
- 5.19 A number of stakeholders within local authorities and consortia spoken to about personalised assessments noted cultural barriers to their adoption as intended by the guidance provided. A local authority Foundation Phase lead stated that there was still work to do to “change culture to see [personalised assessments] as *personalised* assessments and not as national tests.” Similarly, a group of Foundation Phase leads within a Regional Consortium commented that schools were still seeing the personalised assessments in a similar light to paper-based tests; not as something which tells you

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<sup>14</sup> The new approach for monitoring assessment administration is based on supporting best practice.  
[Administration handbook 2021/22](#)

where the learner is, but still a “separate thing,” not necessarily linked back to teaching or learning.

5.20 On the whole, most schools who used the online personalised assessments in a more flexible manner were more positive on their use, but still expressed strong reservations. For example, two practitioners noted that they liked that they were able to decide on how and when they could carry out personalised assessments, with the option to set it up for large or small groups, or for individuals. However, reservations included practitioners perceiving the resulting outcomes of personalised assessments as not always reflective of the learners’ ability, based on having experienced differences between their expectations for a learner and their actual performance in the assessments. The potential for some learners to become distressed during the assessment was also a concern.

5.21 The adaptive format of the assessments created mixed responses from practitioners. The assessments are designed to deliberately stretch learners, with learners expected to get some answers wrong, however a small number of practitioners still felt that the assessments could adjust better.<sup>15</sup> One practitioner noted the following:

“Some questions don’t adjust correctly – sometimes a child struggles, but then the next question doesn’t go down.”

5.22 As such, practitioners felt the assessment was producing subsequent questions that are beyond the current ability of learners. For instance, as part of the personalised procedural numeracy assessments, twelve practitioners across seven schools were critical that some learners were being asked questions beyond their curriculum years on topics such as VAT, percentages, and decimals. Similarly, one practitioner cited learners in Year 2 being asked questions about the six times

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<sup>15</sup> As part of the guidance administered to practitioners as part of the Personalised Assessments, they are told to inform learners to not worry if they cannot answer a question, and to move on to the next one.

tables, not scheduled to be taught until Years 3 and 4.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that assessments are not designed to reflect the particular expected ability for the year group of the learner; their adaptive nature means that learners will encounter questions that adjust to their skill level regardless of their year group. This will result in some learners encountering topics that they have yet to cover in the classroom. Another practitioner referenced the lack of sound on the Numeracy (Procedural) assessments as an issue, meaning that if any learners have difficulty reading the questions, staff need to read the questions to them. Although this was the case for the paper-based tests, in the context of the online assessments it was described as time-consuming, and a burden on practitioner time. The option for learners to be able to listen to questions within the procedural numeracy assessments was described by three practitioners as a tool that would help greatly in the implementation of the assessments. Similarly, it was suggested by a practitioner that more visual aspects, such as blocks or diagrams should be incorporated into Numeracy assessments, so as to align more with the visual nature of Foundation Phase pedagogy.

- 5.23 Nevertheless, the online assessment's ability to adapt the difficulty level of the question based on learner answers was viewed positively overall and recognised as a feature that did not exist with the paper-based tests. One practitioner also liked the fact that the online reading assessment pushed learners to not just read the words, but actually absorb what they are reading and understand the sentences.
- 5.24 Practitioners noted that the logistics of the assessments have proved challenging for some learners. Schools were somewhat mixed on the question of whether or not their Year 2 learners had sufficient IT skills to adequately navigate the assessments, with a quarter of schools in particular citing IT skills as a barrier for some but not all learners, with

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<sup>16</sup> As stated in paragraph 1.26, assessments are not designed to reflect the expected ability of year groups; the assessments will adjust to overall ability, which will result in some learners encountering topics that they have yet to cover in the classroom.

the others stating that learners were largely adept, with some exceptions. One strategic stakeholder at a local authority level stated that the teachers they worked with had found that learners' IT skills had improved significantly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This view was supported by two parent governors, whose own children had experienced no issues with the personalised assessments due to being very familiar with using digital devices to do work. A practitioner referenced how they had introduced IT devices to learners at an early stage, thus ensuring that they were familiar and confident using them during the personalised assessments.

5.25 It is important to note that schools are asked to carry out familiarisation assessments with learners in advance, to ensure that they understand the question types and how to navigate the assessments. Also, schools are encouraged to carry out assessments using devices that learners are familiar with. In this context, and highlighting instances where the guidance is not sufficiently followed, one practitioner stated that they had only become aware of this choice following the assessments, feeling that they would have used iPads and tablets for Year 2 learners if they had previously known. Apart from the lack of familiarity with certain IT devices, general school facilities and Wi-Fi issues were also referenced as barriers to conducting the assessment as a whole class.

5.26 The need to switch between different windows on the Reading assessment, moving between text and questions was also cited as a barrier by nine practitioners across six schools, with some, but not all learners struggling to navigate back to read the text when answering a question. One school described this as "not very child friendly," noting that they had to intervene often in order to help learners navigate back and forth. As for Numeracy (Procedural) assessments, practitioners, who seemed unaware that tablets could be used, reported that some learners struggled using a computer mouse, although tablets can also be used to carry out the assessments. Scrolling with the mouse was noted as an issue by four schools as

learners were more familiar using iPads in the day-to-day classroom, rather than the laptops, computers, and keyboards used for the assessments.<sup>17</sup> In these cases, staff described sitting with the learners to show them how to perform basic functions such as clicking on answers or turning pages.

- 5.27 The fact that the adaptive nature of the assessments means that learners cannot copy each other was seen as a positive by two practitioners, though no practitioners described this as having ever happened previously with paper-based tests.
- 5.28 When contrasted with the previous paper-based tests, the online assessments were seen to have respective benefits and drawbacks (effects on learner wellbeing are explored in the relevant section below). One of the benefits was a reduction in school bureaucracy.
- 5.29 Whereas with paper-based tests schools had to work to dates set by the Welsh Government in advance and would have drop-in inspections from regional consortia from time to time, schools viewed the online personalised assessments as on the whole easier to administer, due to the flexible nature of when the assessments could be completed.
- 5.30 Practitioners on the whole were happy that the online personalised assessments resulted in less administration and no marking of papers, instead providing feedback quickly and offering an insight into what support different learners need. Nonetheless many practitioners thought that the online assessments were time consuming in other ways. This included teacher oversight of tasks in the IT suite and the time it takes for teachers to set up each PC or other device, ensuring each learner is logged on to the right assessment.
- 5.31 Practitioners did also explain that the online assessments had a less formal feel than paper-based tests, with the paper-based tests having

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<sup>17</sup> The Personalised Assessments Administration Handbook stipulates that learners can take the assessments on a range of devices, specifying: "Staff members will be able to schedule assessments in accordance with their school's preferences and facilities."

been sat in exam conditions. However, practitioners widely agreed that the ability to go back, re-read, and answer previous questions was a strength of the paper-based tests – something that learners are unable to do with the online personalised assessments. These comments on the paper-based tests must however be contextualised against the claims by the vast majority of practitioners that the online personalised assessments are better for learner wellbeing than the paper-based tests.

### *Communication of Personalised Assessments to Parents*

- 5.32 Of the schools interviewed throughout the fieldwork, it was commonplace for them to not communicate the scheduling of online personalised assessments with the parents and guardians of the children.<sup>18</sup> There were several reasons for this, one being the fact that the assessments can be scheduled whenever the school chooses. Other reasons cited by a small number were practitioner concerns that parent knowledge of the upcoming assessment could lead to them putting pressure on the learner in the lead up to the assessment. This aligns with Welsh Government guidance which states there is no requirement to inform parents in advance of the assessments and that the assessments should not be a cause of anxiety for learners.

Parents were most likely to be informed of personalised assessments via the end of year annual report. Thirteen of the schools engaged had to date not shared the information outcome data from the personalised assessments with parents. This was partly due to a sense that parents may not understand the results. The majority of these schools did however provide feedback to parents verbally in parents evenings.

- 5.33 Of those schools that did share, the information provided in the end of year report included the outcomes of their child's assessment, as well

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<sup>18</sup> Schools are not required to communicate scheduling to parents and guardians.

as their areas of strengths and targets for improvement. Two schools noted that following the distribution of these reports, a small number of parents got in touch to seek clarification as they did not understand the information provided. One school stated they got in touch with parents the week following the assessment to inform them their child participated in the personalised assessments, with most parents taking a relaxed attitude.

#### *Usefulness of Personalised Assessment Outcomes*

- 5.34 There were certain examples collected during fieldwork where the data from the assessments has been positively used, with one practitioner stating that “they do highlight some things for some individuals.” In some cases, the feedback was seen to be useful at an individual level, but more frequent was the use of the assessments to highlight issues for the class as a whole. The assessments served in identifying elements that were most in need of development, allowing an action plan to be developed – either through allocating more dedicated time on those topics in the classroom or creating additional staff training on those areas.
- 5.35 In two schools, the opinion on the usefulness of the personalised assessment data was mixed, finding the reading personalised assessment to be valuable, but not the Numeracy (Procedural) assessment. One of these two schools found the reading assessment useful for making sure that the learners were not just reading the words, but actually absorbing and understanding what they were reading.
- 5.36 In one school, the data from personalised assessments were used collectively with other forms of assessment to group individuals ahead of Year 3. Three schools also stated how the data fed into transition meetings where results were shared between staff and trends were identified to differentiate between learners and plan for lessons in the following academic year.

- 5.37 On the other hand, many practitioners interviewed were sceptical of the outcomes of the personalised assessments because of the variance between practitioner expectations and assessment outcomes. They felt some learners' answers to the assessment questions did not reflect their true level of ability.
- 5.38 Four practitioners have expressed concern that learners' comprehension of questions in the Numeracy (Procedural) assessments was affected by literacy issues. Some practitioners cited cases they encountered where learners answered questions randomly without understanding the question or reading the text, purely to get to the endpoint of the assessment. According to practitioners, some of these learners could record chance results far beyond what practitioners considered to be their actual level of ability, with around half of all schools referencing "fluke" results that they had observed. While it is possible that some of these results were learners performing better than expected, practitioners referred to instances where they were confident that the assessment data did not reflect the learner's ability. It should be noted that learners were able to answer paper-based tests "randomly" in a similar manner, or not answer the questions at all.
- 5.39 Two schools cited how the results reinforced what they already knew about the learner's progress. However, in nine other schools, practitioners noted that learners that they expect to perform well underachieved in the assessments, and that learners they expected to perform poorly had in their view overachieved or produced what they considered to be "fluke" results. Practitioners interviewed recognised that the online personalised assessments are one piece of a larger toolkit of assessments, however the perceived discrepancy led to a number of practitioners doubting the value of the assessments for Foundation Phase learners. Two practitioners felt using the assessments twice in an academic year mitigated these drawbacks, but not to a sufficient extent to achieve "a full picture of the pupil".

- 5.40 Some practitioners, recognising that the personalised assessments are one tool among many, stressed the importance of not over relying on this tool alone given that it provides a snapshot of the learner on that particular day, which may or may not reflect the learner's abilities in their work in the classroom. Many practitioners viewed the scores as too random<sup>19</sup> to be differentiating between learners in the Foundation Phase.
- 5.41 Irrespective of their perceptions of how well the personalised assessments demonstrate a learner's ability, practitioners in nine schools considered that the assessments were superfluous, as they feel they do not need an assessment to judge the learners' skill levels after a four-year period, but instead can gain this information through observation and classwork.

#### *Online Personalised Assessments and Learners' Wellbeing*

- 5.42 According to practitioners, the personalised assessments have had both positive and negative effects on learner wellbeing, however the majority sentiment is that they are better for learner wellbeing than the paper-based tests. In comparison to the paper-based tests, practitioners generally felt that learners were more relaxed with the digital format, enjoying the use of computers and tablets and allowing teachers to present the assessments as a "quiz" or "activities" instead of a "test."
- 5.43 How the online personalised assessments were framed in interactions with learners was emphasised as very important to learner wellbeing. Practitioners referred to them as "tasks" and "interesting work" instead of using the word "assessment" as they felt this would cause stress. This approach was largely adopted across the schools interviewed. One school did express scepticism, claiming that the learners would

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<sup>19</sup> Random here meaning that in some instances learners that practitioners expected to do well have not performed as expected, while others have done well unexpectedly. Practitioners felt that some of these learners have been guessing answers.

always view the personalised assessments as tests, no matter how it was described, and could tell that the results from the assessments mattered. This intuitiveness highlights the role of the practitioner in putting at ease concerns that learners have about the assessments, and in contextualising their purpose.

- 5.44 In one case, the personalised assessments were framed as an extension of the existing programmes to help with reading and maths and described to learners as something that would help teachers know what to do next. Furthermore, they were explained in an age-appropriate way, encouraging learners to focus on doing their best rather than worrying about the outcome. Through familiarisation assessments, example questions were shared beforehand, explaining what learners had to do. One school also explained in advance that some questions would be challenging and are more appropriate for the “bigger kids” in the school.
- 5.45 Practitioners in several schools noted that they knew in advance which learners would have the most trouble with a task like the online personalised assessments and were therefore able to approach the task with that learner in an appropriate manner.
- 5.46 Different approaches were used for different learners to ensure they were comfortable. For instance, with learners with additional learning needs, some would have an assessment scheduled separate from the rest of the class, others as a whole class. One school cited how several learners were seen to “freeze” when taking the assessments and as such were allowed to stop, whilst a minority enjoyed the challenge.
- 5.47 Notwithstanding these positives, the majority of practitioners felt that the online personalised assessments had a negative impact on some learners’ wellbeing, with more able learners more likely to become stressed. All but one school reported following guidance in the Administration Handbook on providing breaks during the personalised assessments. This was not implemented in one school which ran the

assessments over the course of an hour uninterrupted. The school stated that they felt giving breaks would cause logistical difficulties. All other schools that responded to this question described providing breaks following a 20 or 30-minute period where learners could go outside, run around, and drink water.

5.48 The majority of practitioners described a small number of instances in which learners were sitting the assessments for over an hour, and in some instances, for over two hours.<sup>20</sup> Most of these practitioners did explain that breaks were provided during this time in order to split the assessment period into smaller chunks of time.<sup>21</sup> One practitioner cited an example of an able learner within the Foundation Phase who sat the assessment for nearly three hours, while another took a whole day to complete the assessments, breaks included.

5.49 As noted earlier in reference to performance by school year, the personalised assessments are designed to assess the extent of a learner's ability. As such, in numeracy assessments in particular, the adaptive format of the assessments may result in some learners getting questions on topics that they had not necessarily covered in the classroom. Teachers are advised to explain that learners should not worry if they see questions that they have not covered in class, and that they should have a try or simply move on. However, several practitioners interviewed felt that encountering unfamiliar topics was harmful to learner wellbeing and caused some learners to become distressed. One school cited learners receiving questions on rounding up to two decimal numbers before they had learned this in class, whilst another practitioner highlighted learners coming across questions relating to challenging multiplication tables during the numeracy assessments.

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<sup>20</sup> The assessments do not have a set time duration and practitioners are expected to use their professional judgement with regard to how long to allow the assessment to run before concluding it.

<sup>21</sup> Guidance on personalised assessments states that if the learner requires a break to allow them to perform to the best of their ability, then this can be done by pausing the assessment using the facilitation screen on the website.

5.50 Eleven practitioners across eight schools noted that it was higher-achieving learners that were more likely to become distressed while sitting the assessment. Little was said by practitioners about benefits to less able learners due to the adaptive nature of the assessments, other than one comment about the personalised assessments being less stressful for lower ability learners than paper tests. One practitioner explained that academically stronger learners were more likely to be presented with questions that they had not previously covered in the classroom:

“... strong pupils get very demoralised if they end up with questions about 7 and 8 tables, when they’re only expected to do 2, 5, and 10 tables in year 2. The questions are completely out of reason and pupils have really struggled with those questions.”

5.51 Another practitioner provided the following example:

“One bright girl did get disheartened with the difficult questions in the numeracy assessment and said, ‘but I’m good at Maths and I can’t do this’.”

5.52 A number of practitioners described learners deliberately answering questions incorrectly in order to exit the assessment, which they described as a learner “having to fail for it to end”. Others noted some learners becoming disengaged and distressed as they think that they have not done very well.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, one practitioner referenced that the assessment had resulted “in a few tears” amongst learners, either through personal expectation or pressure from parents. It was stated that this was more common with more able learners who are perfectionists and put pressure on themselves. In this context, the impact of Covid-19 on assessment outcomes was also referenced by one practitioner as a risk, as parents might not appreciate the effect the pandemic has had on the development of their child.

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<sup>22</sup> While learners do not know if their answer is correct or incorrect, it is likely that practitioners were referring to the fact that learners were coming across unfamiliar topics and not knowing the correct answer.

*Summary: Barriers and Facilitators to Good Practice*

- 5.53 The following factors can be identified as facilitators to uptake and successful delivery of the personalised assessments:
- Schools that more closely followed the guidelines and the ethos behind the personalised assessments were more likely to express favourable views towards them.
  - Carrying out the personalised assessments with small groups put less pressure on practitioners than facilitating personalised assessments with large groups or entire classrooms.
  - The school with the most favourable view on personalised assessments was the only school to explicitly state that they had engaged with the professional learning material.
- 5.54 The following factors were observed to be barriers to good practice (good practice defined here as adherence to the guidance accompanying the personalised assessments):
- Planning and scheduling of personalised assessment carried out in a similar manner to paper-based tests due to habit and entrenched practices.
  - Insufficient engagement with professional learning material supporting the personalised assessments.
  - Reservations about the usefulness of the data for individual learners is preventing buy-in from the majority of practitioners.
  - Practitioner views on the assessments were affected by experiences of some learners becoming stressed during the assessments, with practitioners all having encountered this issue. This has affected practitioner sentiment towards the appropriateness of the assessments for the Foundation Phase.
  - Frequent questions raised by practitioners about the alignment of the assessments with the play-based approach of the Foundation Phase.

- Reservations held by many practitioners as to the general suitability of a formal assessment during the Foundation Phase affecting buy-in.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 6.1 This chapter sets out our conclusions and offers recommendations to the Welsh Government, its partners, and schools, based on the analysis of data collected from the case study schools.

### The Foundation Phase Profile

#### *Alignment with Foundation Phase Pedagogical Principles*

- 6.2 Practitioners reflected positively on the alignment between the Foundation Phase Profile and the Pedagogical Principles of the Foundation Phase. The principal reason for this was that the baseline and end of phase assessments could be carried out mostly through observation.
- 6.3 However, a prominent issue raised during the course of the research was the extent to which practitioners referred to having to set up a small number of focused tasks, sometimes involving carrying out work sitting at desks, in order to assess some skills. This has implications for assessment practices going forward beyond the Foundation Phase Profile.
- 6.4 While the majority of practitioners did note having to use some focused tasks to assess certain skills, there was nonetheless a broad awareness that such focused tasks are to be avoided where possible as they do not always align with Foundation Phase principles. All practitioners spoken to demonstrated a strong understanding of the pedagogical principles underpinning the Foundation Phase, and were committed to upholding these in their practice. The key factors driving practitioners to use focused tasks were as follows:
- Complexity and nature of the skill: The majority of practitioners described the assessment of some skills as requiring learners to engage in more focused tasks, sometimes sat at a desk. Such tasks do not necessarily align with the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase. However, all practitioners noted that

focused tasks were only required for a limited number of skills to observe.

- Age of learners: More focused tasks are required for Year 1 and Year 2 learners due to the nature of the skills being assessed, and the more advanced skills under review in areas such as numeracy.
- Time pressures, and learner to teacher ratio: Year 2 classrooms generally have a lower learner to practitioner ratio, which put pressure on the capacity of practitioners to carry out observation-based assessments.

### *Extent of use of the Foundation Phase Profile*

- 6.5 Practitioners reflected positively on the quality and usefulness of the Foundation Phase profile, however, the majority of case study schools did not use the Profile beyond the statutory requirement. This, it appears, is not necessarily a reflection of the quality of the Profile but is largely a consequence of the availability of alternative assessment packages, which provide an accessible platform that can be accessed through mobile devices.
- 6.6 Beyond the statutory period of use in the first six weeks of the reception year, the Foundation Phase Profile was used by a quarter of the case study schools (five schools in total). Five schools that had developed their own internal assessment systems, with the remaining ten using alternative assessment software packages.
- 6.7 The majority of the internally developed systems used by schools were based on the Foundation Phase Profile, with practitioners describing having made a number of changes to better suit their needs, which included:
- Breaking down outcome levels into smaller targets.
  - Wanting more of a focus on disposition towards learning as opposed to only skills.
- 6.8 Overall, there was a mixed picture as to the direction of travel with take up of the Foundation Phase Profile within the schools, with two schools

having recently moved away from using alternative assessment software packages at the suggestion of a local authority and a regional consortium respectively, with one returning to use the Foundation Phase Profile, and the other having developed their own system. Based on some stakeholder interviews, the advice given by some local authorities does appear to recommend moving away from other commercially available assessment packages and towards the use of the Foundation Phase Profile or a similar internally developed system.

### *Recent Trends with the Use of the Profile*

- 6.9 Overall, there was a mixed picture as to the direction of travel with take up of the Foundation Phase Profile within the sample of case study schools. The direction of travel among the case study schools was away from other assessment packages, although it is not clear to what extent these schools are representative of Welsh primary schools as a whole.
- 6.10 Two schools had recently moved away from using alternative assessment software packages at the suggestion of a local authority and regional consortium respectively, with one returning to use the Foundation Phase Profile, and the other having developed their own system.
- 6.11 Based on feedback from some stakeholder interviews, the advice given by some local authorities does appear to recommend moving away from other commercially available assessment packages and towards the use of the Foundation Phase Profile. One local authority stakeholder noted that the Foundation Phase Profile was “such a useful tool to inform how to fill in gaps, keep observing, and assessing on an ongoing basis.”
- 6.12 However, usage of other commercially available assessment packages remains high among schools, with half of the case study schools using these as their principal tool for recording assessment.
- 6.13 The sentiment expressed by practitioners as to why other assessment packages are used as widely relates to convenience and ease of use,

with one particular software package offering a simple interface which stores all assessment data, which can then be accessed on a tablet on the go.

- 6.14 The majority of the internally developed systems used by schools were based on the Foundation Phase Profile, with practitioners describing having made a number of changes to better suit their needs, which included:
- Breaking down outcome levels into smaller targets
  - Wanting more of a focus on disposition towards learning.

#### *Quality and Utility of the Foundation Phase Profile*

- 6.15 Practitioners overall were positive about the quality of the Foundation Phase Profile. The majority of practitioners interviewed noted that the Compact Profile was very good at finding out learners' starting point in terms of skills and abilities, and that it offered a wide enough range of skills to observe and assess. Practitioners also noted its value on identifying the targets for learners to focus on, and for helping to decide the areas on which to next focus. There was however the recognition that it was the practitioner's expertise, experience and professionalism that was essential to knowing when to consider a skill acquired, and when to move on to the next step.
- 6.16 It was noted that the Compact Profile was better suited to assessing some areas than others, with more "black and white" abilities being easier to assess than more "subjective" areas, with Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity being raised as a ladder which requires more subjective interpretation of outcome descriptions.
- 6.17 The most common minor criticisms raised regarding the Foundation Phase Profile included it being too time consuming, too much of a tick-box process, and not being tailored enough to the individual learner.
- 6.18 Three schools used the Full Profile regularly as part of their assessment practices, with another stating that they use it when there

are concerns about the development of a learner. A stakeholder from a Regional Consortium explained that while some of the teachers they worked with preferred the Full Profile because of its depth and outlining of next steps, time was the biggest barrier to its use.

### *Identifying Learners with Additional Learning Needs*

- 6.19 While not intended to be relied upon for identifying learning with developmental issues, the Foundation Phase Profile was acknowledged by practitioners to be, by itself, an insufficient tool to identify learners with additional learning needs. It was however used widely to collect evidence on developmental issues as part of a wider suite of resources available to practitioners. The primary issue identified were that statements within the Foundation Phase Profile were too broad and vague to necessarily flag issues.

### *Foundation Phase Profile and Language*

- 6.20 Predominantly, issues with language medium and assessment were found in Welsh medium and bilingual schools where learners came from largely English-speaking homes. Practitioners noted that baseline assessments carried out in the statutory period can be lower for some learners due to unfamiliarity with the language of instruction.
- 6.21 The practitioner described that the learners were being scored lower than they had been at the end of their time in English medium nursery, giving the appearance of having “regressed” since joining the school. Practitioners did however note that the additionality demonstrated during later assessments was a positive, with learners making a great deal of progress quickly in the language of instruction.
- 6.22 There was some concern from a small number of Welsh medium and bilingual schools that this might affect parents’ perceptions of their decision to choose Welsh medium schooling, but others had found that parents were understanding once this issue was explained to them.

## *Foundation Phase Profile and the new Curriculum for Wales*

6.23 Practitioners on the whole felt positively about the new Curriculum for Wales, however some areas of concern existed regarding assessment. These included:

- Many practitioners felt that the Progression Steps were too broad from an assessment point of view. A number of practitioners stated that they would like to see finer detail. It is worth noting that Progression Steps are not intended to guide the assessment approach, and are not intended as assessment milestones.
- Practitioners in some schools wanted more guidance material and resources for designing and implementing assessment practices in the Foundation Phase. Some schools had already started adapting their teaching to the Curriculum for Wales, and were finding the need for guidance on how to supplant outcome measures with Progression Steps.
- Some practitioners wanted to see a common framework for assessment across schools.
- Two practitioners suggested that wide-ranging toolkits be provided to enable schools to select from a range of resources that fits with their designed assessment system.
- One school that was in the process of putting together an innovative assessment system were concerned that a lot of schools would turn to quick fixes and online assessment recording platforms which offer a tick-box approach to assessment.
- One Foundation Phase Lead explained that in the past, collaboration between schools in their cluster had been beneficial to assessment, and that under the new Curriculum, the individuality of each school's approach would detract from this.
- One practitioner complained that they had received mixed message from Welsh Government and their Local Authority, Estyn, and their Regional Consortium. The latter group were still focused on outcomes and levels.

- A practitioner noted the need for a greater balance between quantitative and qualitative assessment and data in future assessments for the Curriculum for Wales.

### **Online Personalised Assessments**

#### *Use and Integration: Adherence to the personalised assessments guidance*

6.24 The key finding from the research related to the use of personalised assessments is the mixed picture regarding adherence to the guidance accompanying the assessments, and the extent to which the ethos of the personalised assessments has been embraced. Many schools have not embraced the guidance accompanying personalised assessments, with a small majority not taking advantage of the flexibility afforded, and a small number not necessarily carrying out the assessments in a manner most aligned with Foundation Phase Principles. There was also evidence of little use made of the professional learning materials supporting the personalised assessments.

6.25 The extent to which practitioners are integrating personalised assessments with Foundation Phase practice is therefore mixed, with some aspects of the guidance provided to practitioners mostly taken on board, with others followed less closely. For example, the vast majority of practitioners were following guidance on encouraging learners to take breaks during the assessments (all but one school).

Some schools were however opting to carry out personalised assessments in circumstances resembling test conditions, appearing to be a carry-over from the delivery of paper-based tests. There was a mixed picture regarding when schools chose to schedule personalised assessments, with around half of the schools still sitting assessments within narrow windows, usually due to the school's scheduling practices regarding assessments.

There was also a mixed picture as to the number of instances of personalised assessments that schools were carrying out. Around half

of the schools still intended to use the assessments only once in the academic year. Reasons given for this decision included:

- Sentiment that the assessment did not align with Foundation Phase pedagogy.
- Experiences with learners becoming distressed during the assessments.
- Not seeing enough value from the outcome data.
- Too much impact on time and administration pressures.
- Using alternative assessment systems (one school).

6.26 Around half of the case study schools had used, or intended to use personalised assessments twice within the academic year to establish a baseline for the learners and assess progress.

*Adherence to the personalised assessments guidance*

6.27 A key issue identified it the uneven adherence to guidance on the personalised assessments. A key finding was also the lack of engagement across schools with the professional learning materials developed to support personalised assessments. More engagement with these materials (such as recorded webinars) would help to promote knowledge of the guidance and a better understanding of the ethos underpinning the personalised assessments.

6.28 There was a correlation between schools that used the online personalised assessments in a more flexible manner in line with the ethos and guidance of the assessments and the positivity of their sentiment towards them. Schools which reflected more positively on the assessments generally adhered to the following:

- The assessments were used and scheduled flexibly by either small groups or individuals.
- Learners were able to use tablets with which they were familiar.
- Learners were provided with regular breaks to break up the assessment period.

6.29 The school with the most favourable view on personalised assessments was the only school to explicitly state that they had engaged with the professional learning material. This school was also the most positive on the question of the wellbeing impact of the personalised assessments.

*Barriers to good practice and other challenges*

- 6.30 There remain cultural and practical barriers in many schools to implementing a shift away from the practices established previously through paper-based testing, and towards a more flexible and informal approach afforded by the personalised assessments.
- 6.31 Barriers to using the personalised assessments more flexibly were largely caused by scheduling practices employed by schools in order to resource tests and assessments with decisions over scheduling made centrally by management.
- 6.32 It should also be noted that the majority of the schools only implementing personalised assessments once within an academic year found the results from the assessments insufficiently useful to warrant a second assessment.
- 6.33 On the whole, schools that had carried out or intended to carry out two instances of the personalised assessments held more positive views on their wellbeing impact and usefulness. There were some schools however that expressed negative sentiments, but still intended to run the assessments twice regardless. One such school, explaining this decision, stated that they did not believe in using one test to assess progression, and despite reservations about the usefulness of the assessment outcomes, nonetheless felt the need to attain a more holistic view. Other schools expressed similar sentiments; despite negative sentiments relating to the pressure they felt the assessments put on some learners, and to the outcomes data, schools were interested in collecting some kind of baseline data on learners returning from a disrupted year due to Covid-19.

6.34 Other barriers to good practice include:

- Insufficient engagement with professional learning material supporting the personalised assessments.
- Insufficient engagement with guidance to prepare learners for the adaptive nature of the assessments (in the sense that some learners can expect to be asked questions beyond topics covered in class, and they can simply move on). All practitioners had encountered some learners, particularly more able learners, becoming stressed during the assessments. This has affected practitioner sentiment regarding the appropriateness of the assessments for the Foundation Phase.
- Frequent questions raised by practitioners about the alignment of the assessments with the play-based approach of the Foundation Phase.
- Reservations held by many practitioners as to the general suitability of a formal assessment during the Foundation Phase affecting buy-in.

6.35 There were some practical issues raised by practitioners regarding the facilitation of personalised assessments, which included the following problems flagged:

- There were a number of instances where learners struggled with using IT hardware.
- Challenges with IT competency was raised by some practitioners, particularly in relation to the reading personalised assessments, with some requirement to move between windows to read text then answer questions. This was said to be challenging for some learners.
- Four practitioners stated that the literacy skills of some learners were too low to enable them to access and therefore suitably answer questions on the procedural numeracy personalised assessments. These practitioners and others raised the point that an option to listen to the questions would help learners.

*Cultural change: what level of change is required?*

- 6.36 In some schools, there is a need to further promote a cultural shift away from the practices established previously through paper-based testing towards a more flexible and informal approach afforded by the personalised assessments. Practitioners from all schools demonstrated a strong understanding of the pedagogical principles underpinning the Foundation Phase, and were committed to upholding these in their practice, and so the cultural shift required in some schools relates to the need to move beyond seeing personalised assessments as “tests”, and not to any issue with the understanding of the play-based approach of the Foundation Phase.
- 6.37 In some instances, barriers to practitioners using the personalised assessments more flexibly were caused by scheduling practices employed by schools in order to resource tests and assessments. In schools where this barrier was encountered, scheduling for assessments was usually done centrally by the management team. Under this system, Foundation Phase practitioners did not necessarily have autonomy to carry out the assessments flexibly. Other schools continued to hold assessments during the same period in May out of habit.

*Usefulness of Personalised Assessments Outcome Data*

- 6.38 The picture as to the use of outcome data is also mixed. Most schools expressed reservations about the value of the outcome data, with many expressing the view that the assessment outcomes were not always consistent with their judgement of certain learners. These concerns stem from the following:
- Issues with some learners’ literacy, meaning that numeracy personalised assessments outcomes may not reflect their true numeracy ability.
  - Some learners may be answering questions at random, leading to instances where outcomes do not match practitioners’ judgement.

6.39 Practitioners interviewed considered the outcome data was of most use in identifying skills gaps across classes as a whole, which practitioners did then use to plan next steps for learners, and also to identify gaps in learning that can be addressed for future cohorts.

*Practitioner reflections on the appropriateness of personalised assessments for the Foundation Phase*

6.40 Use of personalised assessments in the Foundation Phase was viewed negatively by most practitioners interviewed. However, a small number of practitioners interviewed were positive about the assessments, and had integrated them well within their assessment practices, adhering to the ethos and guidance accompanying them. The following positive reflections were provided:

- *All practitioners* agreed that the personalised assessments were an improvement on paper-based tests for learner wellbeing.
- One practitioner liked that the assessments let learners move at their own speed.
- A small number of practitioners felt that the data from the assessments was useful, especially in instances where the assessments were used twice within the year.
- Feedback data for judging skills gaps across classrooms as a whole was described as useful by six participants.

6.41 The majority of practitioners reflected negatively on some aspects of the assessments. A number of common themes emerged from practitioner interviews which gave rise to negative sentiment towards the assessments, including:

- Frequent questions were raised by practitioners about the alignment of the assessments with the play-based approach of the Foundation Phase, with the majority of practitioners stating that the personalised assessments do not align with Foundation Phase principles.
- All schools but one had experienced some learners finding the assessments stressful, although it was acknowledged that most

had no problems with the assessments, and some even enjoyed them.

- Many practitioners found that the data provided by the assessments was not sufficiently useful.

### *Online Personalised Assessments and Learners' Wellbeing*

- 6.42 Practitioners felt that the online personalised assessments were better for learner wellbeing than paper-based tests. The flexibility allows learners to avoid carrying out an assessment in test conditions, which many practitioners noted to be an improvement. The use of computers and tablets allowed teachers to present the assessments as a “quiz” instead of a “test”, however it was noted by a small number of practitioners that learners are still able to tell that the activity is an assessment regardless of how it is framed.
- 6.43 The majority of practitioners felt that the adaptive nature of the online personalised assessments had resulted in a negative impact on some learners' wellbeing, with higher achieving learners more likely to become stressed due to facing challenging questions, sometimes on topics beyond those covered in the classroom.
- 6.44 Despite the advice set out in the guidance and the fact that practitioners could determine when learners took breaks, the majority of schools described having had a small number of learners sitting the assessment for long periods lasting sometimes for hours (although with breaks provided). The guidance does encourage practitioners to use their judgement in determining if learners have sat the assessment for too long a period of time, and to end the assessment if necessary.
- 6.45 The aspect of the guidance most adhered to by practitioners was around encouraging learners to take breaks during the personalised assessments. Only one school interviewed stated that they did not provide breaks to learners taking the assessments.
- 6.46 Practitioners in multiple schools noted that it was more able learners that were more likely to become distressed during the assessment. This was due to being faced with questions covering material beyond

what has been covered to date in the classroom, or coming away from the assessment with the sense that they have not performed well.

### *Communication of Personalised Assessments to Parents*

- 6.47 The majority of the case study schools had not shared the reports of the personalised assessments with parents and carers, using the outcome data instead for internal use only.<sup>23</sup> There was a sense among practitioners that parents would not necessarily understand the results. Two schools that had sent the outcome data to parents described how parents had contacted them to seek clarification as they did not understand the reports.

## **Recommendations**

### *Foundation Phase Profile*

- 6.48 **Recommendation 1:** Collect and provide best practice examples for practitioners within the Foundation Phase on how to best set up opportunities to assess skills in such a way that avoids the over-use of formal tasks, especially tasks that involve sitting at a desk. Access to resources on creative and innovative means of assessing skills that are hard to assess through observation will help to alleviate tensions between the pedagogical principle of the Foundation Phase and the need to evidence certain skills. These base practice examples could be in the form of instructional videos.
- 6.49 **Recommendation 2:** Within the Curriculum for Wales schools should build sufficient nuance into assessment systems in order to identify developmental issues. Based on feedback received on the Foundation Phase Profile, this would likely involve encouraging schools to, when developing assessment systems, ensure that levels are broken down into fine levels of detail, and in accompanying text, provide additional descriptors for skill areas that are more subjectively assessed. Sufficient understanding of child development is important to enable

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<sup>23</sup> Schools are required to share the assessment outcomes with parents and carers.

schools to map out sufficiently small steps within progression steps. Furthermore, when developing assessment systems, schools should consider assessing and capturing a learner's *disposition* towards learning as well as skill levels.

- 6.50 **Recommendation 3:** Ensure that the role of Progression Steps within the Curriculum for Wales is clear to education practitioners and provide clarity on the relationship between Progression Steps and assessment. There was an understanding expressed by many practitioners that under the new curriculum Progression Steps would be used as a basis for assessment, which is not the intention.

#### *Online Personalised Assessments*

- 6.51 **Recommendation 4:** School leaders should make sure that they and staff administering personalised assessments are aware of the user guide, the handbook, and available professional learning materials designed to support personalised assessment use. Regional Consortia and Local Authorities are also encouraged to promote awareness and use of these resources. Practitioners spoken to were largely unaware of professional learning materials available to support personalised assessments.
- 6.52 **Recommendation 5:** Schools are encouraged to ensure that learners have experienced examples of assessment questions found within personalised assessments by undertaking a familiarisation assessment prior to taking the live assessments.
- 6.53 **Recommendation 6:** Schools that have not embraced the flexibility of personalised assessments faced barriers due to culture and established administration practices. For some schools, keeping to established windows for personalised assessments appears to be linked to the need to arrange personnel resources within a term or annual timetable, or habit. Greater encouragement is needed from Regional Consortia or Local Authorities to encourage these schools to change established practices, and it should be recommended to schools that they move towards a more flexible approach in carrying

out personalised assessments, both in terms of when assessments are carried out, and how they are carried out.

- 6.54 **Recommendation 7:** In addition to recommendation 6 above, we further recommend that schools be encouraged to allow Foundation Phase practitioners autonomy in scheduling personalised assessments, and where possible to de-couple personalised assessments from the school arrangements for timetabling to schedule other assessments. More autonomy for the Foundation Phase practitioners could encourage them to overcome the cultural barriers to using personalised assessments more flexibly.
- 6.55 **Recommendation 8:** The research encountered concern from a small number of practitioners that personalised assessments may become a tool to track school performance and rank schools. It is therefore recommended that the Welsh Government ensures that there is system-wide messaging that personalised assessments are not intended for this purpose. This may help to promote the idea that personalised assessments will not be used in this way, and are intended as a formative assessment tool.
- 6.56 **Recommendation 9:** Welsh Government should look into the practicalities of providing an audio option to listen to numeracy (procedural) questions in order to help overcome the literacy barriers experienced by some learners.
- 6.57 **Recommendation 10:** While there is a cap on the number of questions within each assessment, and practitioners are encouraged to provide breaks to learners, almost all schools spoken to had experienced instances where learners were sitting the assessment for what practitioners considered to be an unreasonable amount of time. The School User Guide advises practitioners to give breaks to Year 2 learners, and that the length of the break is at the teacher's discretion. The guide also advises that practitioners can encourage learners to work more quickly if they are taking too long to answer questions and can use their professional judgement if they consider that the length of the assessment becomes excessive. We therefore recommend that the Welsh Government should consider implementing subtle prompts for

supervising practitioners to consider moving a learner on, taking a break, or finishing an assessment if necessary. This could take the form of a suggestion box that appears after a certain amount of time. While the guidance to practitioners sets out that they are able to use their discretion when encouraging learners to take breaks, a subtle nudge may provide further reminder to supervising practitioners that breaks should be taken.

- 6.58 **Recommendation 11:** Evidence collected from the case study schools suggests that some learners, particularly more able learners, become concerned about not being able to answer the questions presented. We recommend Welsh Government consider placing a simple graphic or video at the beginning of assessments to explain very simply to learners that incorrect answers are expected, and that this is normal for everyone taking the assessment.

## Annex A – Breakdown of Practitioners Interviewed by School Type

Role	WL / High FSM	WL / Low FSM	EL / High FSM	EL / Low FSM	Bilingual / High FSM	Bilingual / Low FSM	Total
Headteachers		3	1	3		1	8
Deputy / Assistant Headteachers	1	1	3	2		2	9
Foundation Phase Leads	1	1	3	2		2	9
Year 2 Teachers		2	4	2		1	9
Year 1 Teachers			1			2	3
Reception Teachers		2	2	1		2	7
Nursery Teachers		1	2			2	5
Teachers of multiple school years (Nursery, Reception, and Years 1 and 2)	2	2			3	1	8
Higher Level Teaching Assistants	1	1	2	1	1	1	7
Teaching Assistants		3					3
Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators (ALNCo)			1	1		1	3
Other			1				1
Parent Governors		1	1	2			4
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>76</b>

## Annex B – Topic Guide

<b>1</b>	<b>Background</b>	
	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell me a bit about yourself and your role at X?</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<b>Concepts</b>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you define the purpose of assessment – in general – within the Foundation Phase? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Baseline</li> <li>○ On-going assessment</li> <li>○ End of phase</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In your opinion, to what extent do the assessments (baseline, on-going, and end-of-phase) fit with the Foundation Phase’s pedagogical principles of a play-based approach?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What, in your opinion, are the most effective assessment methods within the Foundation Phase?</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<b>Use of assessment practices</b>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use the Foundation Phase Profile beyond the reception year?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use Incerts, or any other programme to help with assessments?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use the Compact and/or Full profiles? And why?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use the Foundation Phase Profile to carry out an end of phase assessment at the end of year 2?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent is the Foundation Phase Profile used within your school to monitor learner progression within the Foundation Phase?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you use the Foundation Phase Profile in your practice?</li> <li>• Are there any barriers to its use? Are there any challenging aspects?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you use any other advice or guidance to support assessment or progression if not the Profile?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent have you found that the baseline assessment can be carried out through observation only?</li> <li>• Are there any particular skills or areas that are difficult to assess through observation?</li> <li>• Is any practice required which is not consistent with the Foundation Phase pedagogical approach? If so, why is this approach necessary?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the Foundation Phase Profile used beyond the Foundation Phase at all?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent do you use the evidence from the Foundation Phase Profile within your practice and in what ways?</li> <li>• What are the benefits and challenges of using the evidence to support learners?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effective are the Compact and Full Profiles at assessing the skill levels of a learner?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How, if at all, does your school use the evidence from the baseline and end of phase assessments to inform provision? (e.g., allocation of resources in school)</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How, and to what extent does the use of the Foundation Phase Profile impact on the progression of learners within the Foundation Phase? (any positive or negative impacts)</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you experienced any barriers to integrating assessments with the Foundation Phase pedagogical principles and practice to support progression? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Baseline</li> <li>○ On-going assessment</li> <li>○ End of phase</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effective is the Foundation Phase baseline assessment at identifying learners with a potential developmental delay or additional learning needs? Can you provide examples?</li> <li>• Are there areas which need strengthening?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is information on the baseline and end of phase assessments communicated to parents?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you aware of the use of Foundation Phase Profile assessments in nursery provision – either in a school or within non-maintained nursery provision - that feed into your school?</li> <li>• (If yes) Does your school use that data in supporting learners? How is this done?</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	<b>Personalised assessments</b>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When did you last use the Personalised Assessments with Year 2 learners in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numeracy Procedural</li> <li>• Reading</li> </ul> </li> <li>• How many Personalised Assessments do you intend to carry out per school year?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your thoughts on the role of online personalised assessments in the Foundation Phase? (This question does not refer to the previous paper-based assessments?)</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you undertaken or used any of the professional development material available for the assessment system?</li> <li>• Are you aware of the guidance material available for teachers? How often do you refer to it?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does your school administer personalised assessments? When do you run them?</li> <li>• How are personalised assessments administered within your school (e.g., each teacher/lead member of staff for each key stage/assessment coordinator?)</li> <li>• How long do learners usually spend carrying out the personalised assessments?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any barriers to carrying out more than one personalised assessment per subject per school year?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you explain Personalised Assessments to learners?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you do anything in advance of running the assessments (e.g., familiarisation assessments)? [probe awareness of guidance]</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you arrange for the learners take breaks during the assessments? [probe awareness of guidance]</li> <li>Do the learners use pencil and paper at all during the numeracy assessments? (In order to work out answers) [probe awareness of guidance]</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do learners' IT skills present any barriers to them accessing the personalised assessments? If so, how are learners supported?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you use the online Personalised Assessments data to assess learner progression and support learning?</li> <li>Can you give an example of the above?</li> <li>Are you aware of the range of feedback reports available from the assessment system?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you have carried out the personalised assessments twice within a year, what has been the benefit of doing so?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have you used the skills feedback from the personalised assessments? How?</li> <li>Have you used the group reports from the personalised assessments? [group profile, skills profile, learner paths, group progress] How?</li> <li>Have you used the individual learner progress reports? How?</li> <li>How valuable are the feedback and reports from the personalised assessments, and are there any challenges in their use?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How do you think the Personalised Assessments integrate with the Foundation Phase pedagogical principles and practice to support progression?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is information from the Personalised Assessments communicated to parents?</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	<b>New Curriculum</b>	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you think the new Curriculum for Wales will affect assessment practices?</li> <li>• What is your understanding of the criteria against which learners will be assessed? (probe for what this might be: school's own curriculum, progression steps, something else?)</li> <li>• To what extent do you think the personalised assessments support the principles of progression in the new curriculum? (probe for understanding of skills progression, adaptive format of the assessments)</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	<b>Well-being and language</b>	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do learners respond to the online Personalised Assessments?</li> <li>• Are there any positive or negative impacts?</li> <li>• Have you found any particular approaches to the Personalised Assessments which have had a more positive wellbeing impact on learners? (And what have been the most problematic for wellbeing?)</li> <li>• How do they compare to previous paper-based assessments with regard to learners wellbeing?</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you experienced any issues relating to the language in which Foundation Phase learners undertake the personalised assessments?</li> <li>• (If yes) What kind of issues have been apparent?</li> <li>• To what extent do language ability issues (Welsh or English) affect the broader assessment of the learner's development?</li> </ul>