



SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 56/2023

PUBLICATION DATE: 18/05/2023

Review of the Eco-Schools Environmental Education Programme in Wales (2018-2022): Executive Summary

1. Research aims and methodology

- 1.1 Miller Research, in conjunction with OB3 research, were commissioned to undertake a review of the Eco-Schools Education programme in Wales. The review covered the period of April 2018 through to January 2022, to develop evidence upon which to consider future funding options of the programme.
- 1.2 Eco-Schools is the largest international environmental education programme globally, operating across 74 countries with an aim to empower and inspire learners through classroom study, school and community action to raise awareness of environmental, climate and sustainable development issues. In Wales, Eco-Schools is managed by Keep Wales Tidy (KWT) who have been managing the programme since 1994 and have been funded by the Welsh Government to lead the programme since 2011.
- 1.3 The key aims of the review were to understand how Eco-Schools is being delivered in Wales, the impact of the programme on schools and learners, and how it is supporting key Welsh Government policies. It also aimed to understand how the programme provides an opportunity to engage children and young people with specific Welsh Government priority policies as they develop in the future.
- 1.4 A Theory of Change (ToC) was developed for the review based on project documentation and scoping interviews, that was reviewed by Welsh Government and KWT. The second phase of the review included extensive primary research with a wide range of stakeholders and school settings, to understand how the programme is working and what the benefits are.
- 1.5 Ten case study schools were engaged to carry out fieldwork. Schools were selected to cover a broad range of factors, including geographic location, primary / secondary weighting, level of Eco-Schools award, language, size, and the number of learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM). A total of 15 Eco-Coordinators and education practitioners were interviewed, and eight workshops hosted with learners from the Eco-Committees within case study schools engaged.
- 1.6 Other primary research included eight interviews with a total of 16 stakeholders from across Welsh Government and KWT, as well as ten wider stakeholders comprising of Eco-Schools partners and international representatives. An online survey was also designed and disseminated via KWT to all schools engaged in the programme across Wales, which received a moderate response rate of 80 responses – of which 67 were in English and 13 in Welsh.

2. Key findings of the review

Rationale for the Eco-Schools programme

- 2.1 Feedback from stakeholders engaged during the review demonstrated the rationale for the programme in a number of ways. KWT staff and wider stakeholders working alongside Eco-Schools reflected on several themes relating to the importance of the programme, including:
- Using education as a vehicle for help tackling the climate emergency;
 - Giving learners the opportunities to use their voice on issues that affect them;
 - Supporting all four purposes of the new curriculum for Wales (CfW)¹;
 - Helping schools take practical action; and,
 - Providing a mechanism for embedding relevant Welsh Government priorities throughout children and young people's learning experience. For example, the connection between Eco-Schools and Air Quality policy, to protect learners against risks to their health.

Delivery and management of the programme

Management and governance

- 2.2 A key theme identified from the review was a potential relationship between schools achieving Green Flag status and the number of staff delivering the programme in Wales. The individualised support provided to schools and relationships forged between Eco-Schools Officers and Eco- Coordinators were central to the success and continued engagement of schools through the programme. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Eco-Schools staff acknowledged they had been able to adapt and use resources more efficiently, due to the shift towards online delivery of the programme and reduction in travel and subsistence costs.
- 2.3 In terms of best supporting schools post-COVID-19 pandemic measures, there were understandable concerns from KWT over staff retention and maintaining delivery of the programme at the same scale and quality, particularly in the face of salary increases, returning to a hybrid delivery approach, and challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis. One suggestion by Eco-Schools Officers was a future scenario in which additional funds could support the introduction of an Eco-Schools Officer for every LA in Wales, which could help increase consistency across Green Flag schools, and the maintenance of awards through more tailored support.
- 2.4 The programme had been increasingly trying to connect Eco-Schools across other areas of Welsh Government policy to deliver cross-departmental outcomes. In terms of the importance to Welsh Government, there are opportunities for further cross-departmental working on Eco-Schools to deliver a wide range of action plans and frameworks. For example, by strengthening links to the Education Directorate, Transport, and Resource Efficiency and Circular Economy teams. The international comparison identified lessons on how these opportunities are being harnessed in other countries, where multiple government departments run their own programmes under the Eco-Schools umbrella. There is an opportunity for the programme to encourage this way of working in Wales, to increase funding for the programme as a whole, and further support the delivery of targets relating to wider Welsh Government ambitions.

¹ The four purposes of the new CfW are designed to support children and young people to develop as: ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

Engagement within primary and secondary schools

- 2.5 The review identified a number of challenges in engaging secondary schools in the programme comparative to those at the primary level. These included school size where, particularly larger secondary schools, found it more difficult to facilitate whole school delivery, due to time pressures on staff for embedding Eco-Schools work into lesson planning across the curriculum. Secondary schools also experienced competing priorities with examinations and results, particularly with older learners, that can make it challenging to commit time to the programme. These challenges were further compounded in cases where there were mixed levels of support for the programme across staff within the school, which created issues in implementing a cross-curricular, whole-school approach. Here, it was felt that the programme needed to develop more incentives for teachers to embed Eco-Schools links into the CfW delivery, so that the programme isn't viewed as an 'add-on' activity. These could be in the form of further online resources, or opportunities for schools to share best-practice approaches with one another.
- 2.6 In terms of future diversification of activities, Eco-Schools Officers identified an opportunity to increase engagement with secondary schools by placing more emphasis on skills acquisition, professional development and job opportunities aligned with Eco-School priorities. By undertaking this approach, it was felt that programme content would be more aligned with the priorities of Key Stage 5² in ensuring developmental progression.
- 2.7 Comparatively, at the primary level, Eco-Schools Officers felt the curriculum afforded younger learners more time to participate in Eco-Schools activities, and was more flexible to ensuring a whole-school approach to deliver Eco-schools work.

Eco-Schools Officers and support provided to schools

- 2.8 Schools reflected positively on their relationships with Eco-Coordinators and the support received through Eco-Schools. One trend identified by KWT was the level of support required by schools depending on their time involved in the programme. Schools became less dependent on seeking external guidance and support over time, as activities became second nature. In this sense, KWT staff were described as **enablers** for schools to continue their Eco-Schools journey more independently.
- 2.9 In terms of specific types of support, online resources available to schools were felt to be of a high quality and motivated the activities of learners and teachers. Schools found that the online workshops and events provided by the programme were insightful and inspiring for learners, and provided the opportunity for knowledge-sharing. It was felt that these events could be strengthened further for primary schools, through extending them to the Foundation Phase.
- 2.10 Teacher training provided through the programme was also felt to enrich and improve programme delivery in schools by Eco-Coordinators. Online delivery for these sessions were more time-efficient for schools, allowing for greater attendance and reach. Beyond the existing types of training provided, a few respondents saw opportunities for training to be tailored to special schools where Eco-Coordinators faced challenges in implementing the learner-led approach of the programme in a meaningful way. Additionally, it was suggested by wider partners that the programme should consider training volunteers, who play a role in wider community engagement for the programme, to create volunteer networks for schools to utilise to alleviate issues with capacity and time-constraints.

Partnerships

- 2.11 The programme in Wales involves a wide range of partners, bringing together many sectors in an integrated approach to improve schools and the wider community. These included the Healthy Schools Programme, Plantlife, Size of Wales, Repair Café Wales and Dwr Cymru. Partners of the

² Students aged 16-18

programme felt that the work of Eco-Schools is highly relevant to their activity, in terms of awareness, education, collaboration and working towards shared goals. It was widely reported from partner organisations that a key impact of the programme was the ability to work collaboratively and benefit from the reach and activities Eco-Schools has.

Programme delivery within schools

Motivations for joining Eco-Schools

Schools cited a number of motivations as to why they had chosen to implement the Eco-Schools programme, centred around:

- An alignment with the school's overall ethos
- Raising awareness of vital social and environmental issues
- Being part of a global environmental movement
- Being involved in an internationally accredited programme, that provides legitimacy to schools Eco-Actions.

Topics and activities undertaken

- 2.12 Engagement with schools revealed a breadth of creative activities being undertaken. These ranged from litter picks in the local community, tree planting in school grounds, designing forest trails, connecting with wildlife and nature through school-based conservation, reducing plastic waste, hosting uniform swap days and much more. Common feedback across schools engaged was that activities were predominantly learner-led, meaning that many ideas and initiatives came directly from the Eco-Committee themselves.
- 2.13 Out of the nine Eco-Schools topics, litter was ranked highest amongst schools, in terms of where they had been able to implement the programme most successfully. In primary schools, it was felt this was because the litter topic is easier for younger learners to digest, where the impact is seen immediately, compared to other topics where concepts are more abstract to understand. Comparatively, Transport, Energy and Water were ranked amongst the more difficult topics schools were able to introduce. This was due to a variety of contextual factors including safety concerns related to transport activities and management of energy and water systems by external companies, which limited the types of changes schools were able to make.

Alignment with the new CfW

- 2.14 A key finding of the review is the importance of Eco-Schools in aligning with and supporting delivery of the new CfW. There was consensus amongst schools that there is a natural alignment between the pupil-led nature of the programme and freedom that the new curriculum offers in allowing learners to steer their learning experience and the themes and issues covered.
- 2.15 It was widely reported by Eco-Coordinators that ideas on how to link their Eco-Schools work with subjects came through discussions with other teaching staff across departments and during lesson planning. This allowed case study schools to fill gaps and create links between Eco-Schools topics and areas of learning and experience, enabling learners to acquire knowledge through real world examples. Subjects through which schools were able to make curriculum links to Eco-Schools varied across schools, but included examples across the Humanities, Science, Health and Wellbeing, Mathematics and Literacy.

Assessment process for schools

- 2.16 The Green Flag (GF) system used by the programme to accredit awards, was seen as an opportunity for further growth and development of schools in the programme. Eco-Coordinators identified a number of opportunities to streamline the awards process. Suggestions included offering flexibility for schools to report in different ways to the current online form, and allowing different types of data to be collected and reported on for assessments, whereby schools struggled to capture 'softer' outcomes of learner's participation.
- 2.17 Platinum schools experienced challenges in the ability to sustain activities to renew their status each year, and suggested their progression through the programme would benefit from an extension of the time-period between assessments and the opportunity to apply for additional levels of award beyond platinum to maintain momentum and engagement with the programme.

Barriers and challenges for schools

- 2.18 Schools faced a number of barriers that impacted their ability to implement the programme. One of the key challenges facing many Eco-Committees was finding ways to fund their Eco-Schools equipment and work. It was felt these challenges could be alleviated through support from Eco-Schools on signposting ways schools can fund their Eco-Actions. Here, schools would benefit from case studies on how different schools and settings have financed their Eco-Actions, or through mapping out different routes schools can choose.
- 2.19 Other barriers for schools included Covid-19, that created knock-on effects on the scale and types of activities Eco-Committees were able to undertake. Lack of physical space was also an issue for some schools, whereby urban locations have reduced access to space for outdoor learning if they have no greenspace or forest land close by. Additionally, schools found challenges in an inability to undertake larger Eco-Schools projects where school resources were limited and/or already being used for other Eco-Actions. In these instances, schools wanted more opportunities to work in clusters with other schools in their local area to achieve greater outcomes through collaborative work.

International comparison

- 2.20 The international element of the programme presents several layers of useful context and applicable learnings for schools. The connection to a global network of Eco-Schools was felt to play a central role in supporting learners to become ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world, in alignment with the new CfW.
- 2.21 The international comparison provided useful insights into possible future delivery models and useful wider context to consider the effectiveness of the Eco-Schools programme in Wales. This was especially useful when considering the scale of outcomes and general engagement with secondary schools, as other countries focused upon secondary learners leading on the coordination and reporting on the programme. Like Wales, other countries noted that differences between school settings affected engagement with the programme including location and access to open space. One possible solution to support greater engagement with secondary schools could include devising a scaled support system based on the characteristics of the school.
- 2.22 Additionally, comparison against delivery of the programme in other countries indicated that it could be useful to consider inviting funding streams from private enterprises to support the programme in Wales. For example, certified B-Corps or members of environmental campaigns who may have an interest in financially supporting the programme.

Outcomes and Impacts of Eco-Schools

- 2.23 Feedback received from schools engaged with depicts a programme that has delivered positive outcomes for the majority of schools that have taken part. Evidence from the review denotes benefits for learners, with the programme appearing to achieve against intended outcomes for inspiring and empowering learners, engaging them in learning about the environment, and providing new skills on how to tackle climate change issues. A strong theme indicated in this review was the 'trickle down' effect of learners encouraging positive behaviour change with peers, neighbours and parents, across wide ranging environmental topics.
- 2.24 The programme appears to have contributed to the intended outcomes and impacts relating to improving the local environment as a result of Eco-Schools. Additionally, schools undertook a variety of approaches to include the wider school community with their Eco-Schools work, including through litter picking, working with local growers and allotment groups, and working with foodbanks to develop food forts. While some outcomes emerged here, the survey denoted that some schools felt they had less success in engaging parents and wider community members in conversations about climate change. As such, there is an opportunity for the programme to shift additional focus to sharing best practice and lessons learnt for more successful wider engagement.
- 2.25 A contribution analysis indicated that although some schools may have been able to deliver similar activities if the Eco-schools programme did not exist, the value of the programme comes from the scale of activities it has encouraged schools to engage with. Due to the nature of Eco-Schools, many of its impacts are difficult to measure and assess. Some options are however available, and would involve surveying learners at periodic intervals, returning to sampled learners following engagement to ascertain the additionality or difference achieved. A limited programme of monitoring such as this would provide Eco-Schools with more concrete data on its impacts.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 Based on the findings of the review, several recommendations for the Eco-Schools programme are presented below.

Delivery and management

- The programme should consider seeking additional funding to mitigate against the increased costs of moving away from sole virtual delivery and the cost-of-living crisis, to enable sustainable growth of the programme.
- The programme should consider what public sector investment could be obtained by encouraging other departments within Welsh Government to run programmes under the Eco-Schools umbrella. With the support of Land, Nature and Forestry, the programme should look to strengthen links with the Education Directorate in Welsh Government to help achieve this. Through adopting this way of working, the programme could provide more opportunities for shared learning and support the delivery of further cross-governmental outcomes.
- Eco-Schools should also consider options for securing additional funding through collaboration with private sector partners who have an interest in financially supporting the programme.
- Engagement through their LA was found to be one of the most frequent ways that schools found out about the Eco-Schools programme. As such, the programme should consider scoping out further opportunities for increased networking with LA partners, to help promote the benefits of the programme and engage new schools. This might include working with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and the Partnership Council for Wales.

Training

- 3.2 With regards to training, case study schools and survey respondents discussed several possible improvements to the existing materials delivered by Eco-Schools, including:
- Delivering teacher training using a hybrid approach of online and in-person, to allow as many teachers to attend as possible.
 - Alongside the provision of training, ensuring sessions are recorded for teachers who are unable to attend, and uploaded to Hwb, so that individuals can catch up in their own time and have a wider dissemination to schools.
 - Consider developing online resources and training materials specifically focused on how special schools can adapt Eco-Schools activities to fit their learners needs. These should be informed through KWT engaging further with special schools to understand what specific support they need for the programme.
 - To help overcome capacity issues within some schools, the programme should explore extending current training for teachers to volunteers, as a means of creating additional networks of human resources for schools' Eco-Schools work. These options could be explored through engaging with organisations such as the CiW and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA).

Online Resources

- 3.3 Schools outlined several additional online resources and materials they wished to see from the programme, including:
- Tailoring the content of online sessions for primary schools, so that materials can be used for the Foundation Phase.
 - Explore options for strengthening existing resources for schools on the CfW, supported by strengthening links to the Education Directorate in Welsh Government. For example, through establishing knowledge-sharing sessions among groups of schools to share best practice on how other schools integrate Eco-Schools across the curriculum.
 - Explore options for developing additional online resources for schools on different ways they can fund Eco-Schools activity.
 - It is recommended that additional focus is given to sharing best practice and lessons learnt around ways of engaging with the wider school community, and that additional advice is provided to schools to encourage more successful wider engagement. Barriers to wider school community engagement should be identified for schools, with measures taken to address this shared as best practice.
 - The programme should consider what additional support may be required for schools to help delivery of activities against less successful Eco-Schools topics such as Water, Global citizenship, and Energy.

Engagement with secondary schools

- 3.4 Specifically relating to engagement with secondary schools, several specific recommendations are proposed:
- Given shared challenges of sustaining engagement with secondary schools – a scaled system of support could help to level the playing field and reach schools at a disadvantage. A support strategy, based on the characteristics and criteria of schools could be introduced to ensure that schools at a disadvantage receive an enhanced level of targeted communication – to ensure their participation.

- Consulting with secondary schools to develop more ‘off-the-shelf’ resources on making Eco-Schools a more prominent part of the new CfW.
- There is an opportunity to consult with secondary schools to develop a resource to help learners get involved with green jobs or green volunteering opportunities as part of the Welsh Baccaulaureate / their compulsory work experience and Careers and work-related experiences (CWRE) guidance.

Wider support for schools

3.5 Specifically relating to wider support the programme might consider offering for schools, it is recommended:

- Place more emphasis on developing opportunities for increased collaboration amongst schools, to develop cluster projects and activities that will achieve outcomes on a larger scale using less resources. For example, joint local energy projects, sharing equipment with other schools, or county-wide activities.
- To consider what additional support may be required for schools to help delivery of activities against less successful Eco-Schools topics such as Water, Global citizenship, and Energy. There is an opportunity at a more strategic level to identify where existing partnerships can support and inspire schools to undertake doable projects and encourage cross-school engagement on harder to deliver areas.
- Consider exploring opportunities to strengthen links to Welsh Government circular economy policy through actively exploring potential partners and wider activities in this space, to bring it forward as an area of interest for schools across Wales.

Assessment and awards process

3.6 A number of recommendations for improving delivery of the Eco-Schools assessment and awards process were identified from the review, including:

- Opportunities to streamline the online form currently used by schools for award assessments, through added flexibility to schools to report evidence in different ways and times of the year.
- It is recommended that additional focus is given to exploring how schools can best capture softer outcomes of learner participation in the programme, to gather and evidence impact.
- Consider options for extending the gap between assessment periods of platinum schools, to provide more time for schools to undertake new Eco-Schools work and the development of an award beyond platinum level.
- Consider reviewing the assessment structure so that secondary learners (as young leaders) can take charge of coordinating the programme and reporting on progress within their schools. This may alleviate the perception of increased burden associated with the programme in KS3/4.

3.7 Regarding future evaluation, Eco-Schools should consider undertaking a focused review of a school’s environmental activities during initiation into the programme, to help build a better picture of the additionality that Eco-School achieves within its engaged schools. Teachers in a select sample of schools, or Eco-Coordinators could take part in this exercise by carrying out periodic questionnaires with their learners to ascertain the progress made against various factors. This approach can also involve a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures, capturing “softer” outcomes that may otherwise be missed in the Eco-Schools Green Flag assessments, and that schools wished to report on. Such data would enable a better picture to be developed of the impact of the programme on the scale of activities carried out within a school due to engagement with Eco-

Schools. Monitoring this data and making comparisons against this baseline would help Eco-Schools to review its impact.

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Full Research Report: Byrne, M; Sterritt H; Kilbride, K; Mann, J; Morgan, N; Lynn, S; Wise, C. (2023). Review of the Eco-Schools Environmental Education Programme in Wales (2018-2022). Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number: 56/2023

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/eco-schools-programme-wales-review-april-2018-january-2022>

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

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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