



Research on the early implementation of Curriculum for Wales: Wave 2 report

Executive summary

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report presents findings of the second wave (Wave 2) of qualitative research with 62 senior leaders in schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) carried out by Arad Research and the Open University in Wales. The aim of this research was to undertake two waves of qualitative research during academic year 2022/23 to understand how the curriculum and assessment reforms were working for practitioners and learners in schools and settings, and the barriers and facilitators to successful implementation.
- 1.2 This report follows on from the [Wave 1 report](#), which presented findings of the first round of interviews with senior leaders.¹ In addition to presenting findings from follow-up interviews with senior leaders, it also presents evidence from fieldwork with groups of learners in primary and secondary schools, outlining their experiences of curriculum delivery during the academic year 2022/23.

2. Methodology and analysis

- 2.1 The first wave of the research ('Wave 1') involved interviews with 64 senior leaders in schools and PRUs who were implementing CfW during 2022/23 as well as six focus groups with a total of 30 learners. During Wave 2, the research team sought to re-interview as many as possible of those same senior leaders interviewed during the first phase. The findings of this report draw on the following:
 - Interviews with 62 senior leaders in schools and settings who were implementing CfW during 2022/23 (56 of these were also interviewed during Wave 1; six senior leaders were newly recruited)

¹ [Research with schools on the early implementation of Curriculum for Wales: Wave 1 report](#) (Welsh Government, April 2023)

- Interviews with 12 senior leaders in secondary schools that were preparing to implement CfW from September 2023
 - Nine focus groups with a total of 54 learners.
- 2.2 Purposive samples of senior leaders were recruited to ensure regional coverage and the inclusion of a variety of settings stratified by type of setting and by language medium.
- 2.3 It is important to acknowledge the risk of selection bias among the sample of schools that engaged with the research. Settings that had progressed further than others in their preparation activities may have been more likely to agree to contribute to the study. A description of the methodology is set out in Section 2 of the full research report.

3. Progress in implementing the new curriculum

- 3.1 The Wave 1 report had found that most senior leaders were content with the progress they had made to date in designing and implementing their curriculum. Senior leaders reported that practitioners were increasingly taking responsibility and ownership for curriculum implementation. Interviewees reported that there was an increased focus on pedagogy and collaborative activity in schools and settings and across clusters. Senior leaders also reported that designing and implementing their curriculum had created challenges in terms of staff capacity and time.
- 3.2 During Wave 2, senior leaders reported continued good progress in implementing the new curriculum. Developments highlighted during the Wave 1 interviews had advanced in many schools and settings, and senior leaders were generally satisfied with the changes since they had begun implementation.
- 3.3 In a minority of cases senior leaders noted they were struggling to advance, and that progress had been slower than expected. These senior leaders reported feeling overwhelmed with the scale and complexity of the reforms.
- 3.4 Senior leaders noted that implementing changes under Curriculum for Wales (CfW) was an iterative process, and that continuous monitoring, review, and redesign were required. Senior leaders commonly reported undertaking periodic reviews and audits of their curriculum plans.
- 3.5 A minority of senior leaders reported that some staff were reluctant to move away from well-established frameworks and systems, particularly in areas such as assessment. In these cases, senior leaders highlighted that more time and support was needed to build the confidence and knowledge of these staff members.
- 3.6 Senior leaders commonly highlighted being part of strong clusters of schools and settings with effective working relationships that provided guidance, reassurance and opportunities to work collaboratively. In the main, cluster relationships appeared to be strong and had evolved since senior leaders were spoken to in Wave 1. There was variance, however, in the nature of cluster-working and the extent to which clusters were integrated and developing common approaches.
- 3.7 Senior leaders in secondary schools preparing to implement CfW from September 2023 had decided to delay roll-out in order to spend more time trialling and refining aspects of their new curriculum. Some referred to factors such as the impact of the pandemic, school inspections and recent changes to school leadership as having influenced their decision. Most considered they were making good progress with their preparations for roll-out,

although these schools noted concerns about the nature of reformed GCSE qualifications and their alignment with CfW.

4. Careers and work-related experiences (CWRE)

- 4.1 Some senior leaders indicated that they were at a relatively early stage of implementing CWRE within their curriculum and that this was a new focus for their school or setting. These senior leaders reported that they required more support with implementing CWRE. Senior leaders reported that other elements of their curriculum had been prioritised over cross-cutting themes such as a CWRE.
- 4.2 Senior leaders highlighted the links their school or setting had made with local employers and organisations to support them in implementing CWRE. Senior leaders in both primary and secondary schools described their efforts to integrate these experiences within their curriculum activity, themes or projects.
- 4.3 Senior leaders emphasised the importance of CWRE in increasing learners' aspirations by enabling them to consider career opportunities which they would not necessarily be aware of. Senior leaders reported that their school or setting had effective working relationships with Careers Wales which were valuable in supporting CWRE.

5. Welsh language

- 5.1 Reinforcing views expressed during the Wave 1 interviews, senior leaders in Welsh-medium (including dual language) schools reported that the pandemic had impacted upon learners' confidence and ability to use Welsh. This was particularly felt to be a challenge for learners who did not speak Welsh at home. Senior leaders in Welsh-medium schools also reported that they continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining staff who were able to teach through the medium of Welsh.
- 5.2 Senior leaders in English-medium schools noted that progress was being made on the use of incidental Welsh in their school and reported that they were focused on further promoting this in the classroom and wider school environment. Senior leaders had positive views on the Siarter Iaith (Welsh Language Charter) as a framework for increasing the use of Welsh in their school or setting.²
- 5.3 Senior leaders in English-medium schools reported difficulties in filling vacancies both for Welsh-speaking staff and those qualified to teach Welsh as a subject. Some senior leaders indicated that the shortage of staff with Welsh language skills meant they faced challenges in meeting the high expectations of CfW relating to the teaching and learning of Welsh.
- 5.4 In schools preparing to implement from September 2023, senior leaders reported an increased focus on Welsh history and culture across the curriculum, and on promoting the value of the Welsh language as a skill among learners and parents.

6. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Histories

- 6.1 The inclusion of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Histories as a mandatory element of the CfW was welcomed by senior leaders. However there was considerable variation in the progress they reported in this area across schools and settings: some reported that it was

² [Siarter Iaith framework: Initial guidance for schools](#)

early days in their thinking about this aspect of the curriculum, while others stated this was not a new area for them.

- 6.2 Senior leaders in earlier phases of engagement with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Histories had undertaken initial planning and delivery but felt that it needed greater attention during the following school year. Schools and settings that had made more progress on this aspect of the curriculum were often located in more diverse areas and had a history of exploring diversity within the curriculum that pre-dated CfW. Senior leaders spoke of the importance of auditing the curriculum to ensure it was reflective of the diversity of their learners.
- 6.3 A number of senior leaders highlighted low staff knowledge and confidence in this area of the curriculum, especially where there were low levels of diversity amongst the learners and/or the teaching staff. Several senior leaders had engaged with external specialists such as DARPL³ to develop staff knowledge and understanding.
- 6.4 Senior leaders in secondary schools preparing to implement CfW from September 2023 reported similar issues and concerns to those already implementing CfW, with some expressing a desire for more training and examples of good practice.

7. Progression

- 7.1 During Wave 1 Senior leaders reported that they were working across their schools and settings and in clusters to develop a shared understanding of progression and to develop new progression frameworks (or progression maps). Primary and secondary school senior leaders recognised the greater emphasis on the progress made by the individual learner as part of their thinking and planning in relation to progression. Schools expressed concerns or noted challenges in relation to several aspects linked to progression, notably a perceived risk of divergence as schools and clusters adopt different approaches to recording and reporting progression.
- 7.2 During Wave 2 interviews, senior leaders noted that schools and settings are continuing to develop their approaches to progression. Over the course of the academic year, schools and settings have continued to refine approaches to recording progression and reporting on learner progress. Schools and settings are working in clusters to develop and further refine their approaches to supporting learner progression. Some clusters are taking a phased approach, focusing on specific Areas to develop an approach that can inform an approach taken forward by other Area teams or groups.
- 7.3 Senior leaders described progression models that were being used to track learner development and progress. Progression steps provided a broad framework for planning progression in many schools and settings, with models also often organised around Statements of What Matters, and linked to descriptions of learning.⁴
- 7.4 Reflecting similar comments presented during Wave 1, some senior leaders noted that progression in learning is embedded as part of curriculum design. A number of senior leaders noted that progression is 'built in' at the design stage, and is informed by the principles of progression. Senior leaders noted that curriculum content has become narrower in some Areas, with an emphasis on developing deeper knowledge (and retention of knowledge) and the application of learning and skills over time and in different contexts.

³ [DARPL - Diversity and Anti-Racism Professional Learning](#)

⁴ [Statements of What Matters Code](#)

- 7.5 Primary and secondary school senior leaders noted that approaches to progression were more learner-focused and involved encouraging learners to reflect on their progress in new ways.
- 7.6 Senior leaders reported that they had valued the external support provided to help shape their approaches to progression. This includes involvement in national projects (e.g. the Welsh Government's [Camau i'r Dyfodol](#) project), and support from local authorities, regional consortia and other experts.
- 7.7 Senior leaders noted some concerns or challenges as they continue to develop their approaches to progression, including: different interpretations of progression steps between schools; that a lack of quantitative data is making it difficult to understand individual learner progress; that some schools have jumped to an operational phase in relation to progression without having engaged fully in strategic planning and thinking at a whole-school level.
- 7.8 Some secondary school senior leaders noted that there was apprehension among teachers (and some parents) about moving away from levels to an approach that doesn't give a clear indication of attainment, or the standard of learners' work relative to expected GCSE grades, for example.
- 7.9 Senior leaders in secondary schools preparing to implement CfW from September 2023 reported that they were developing their approaches to progression, but a few were at an early stage of planning and were unsure of their approach. Senior leaders were considering how to ensure a balance between reporting on progress to parents and also including some measure of pupils' likely future attainment.

8. Assessment

- 8.1 Senior leaders interviewed during Wave 1 reported progress in developing new approaches to assessment, with an increased focus on formative, day-to-day assessment. Formative assessment was used to inform planning and differentiated approaches to teaching that respond to individual learner needs. Many senior leaders reported a reduction in the overall volume of formal assessment during the school year; however they continued to use the mandatory national personalised assessments to gauge learners' progress in reading and numeracy. Many senior leaders reported feeling unclear and concerned about the assessment data they will be required to provide as part of future accountability arrangements.
- 8.2 During Wave 2 senior leaders continued to report progress in developing their approaches, with an increased focus on formative assessment. Senior leaders in both primary and secondary schools reported that assessment takes place through assignments and coursework on a continuous basis. They also noted that teachers are engaging in more professional discussions (as Area teams or in other groups) about what the outcomes from formative assessments tell them about the progress learners are making.
- 8.3 Echoing views expressed during Wave 1, Senior leaders commented on the change in mindset and attitude required to design and implement new approaches to assessment. Senior leaders reported that they had continued to observe increased confidence among teachers in the use of formative assessment; this was being supported through professional learning.
- 8.4 Schools and settings continue to use external tools to support assessment and their understanding of where a particular cohort is, often alongside in-school formative assessment methods.

- 8.5 Reflecting views expressed during Wave 1 of the research, senior leaders reiterated the point that there was still considerable time and work needed to refine and further develop their assessment arrangements. Many interviewees noted that they felt they were still trialling new approaches and that they remain unsure of their fitness for purpose. There remains uncertainty among some senior leaders about how to assess certain aspects of the CfW framework.
- 8.6 Senior leaders in secondary schools preparing to implement from September 2023 reported that they were undertaking more formative assessment for learning, piloting new approaches in one or more Areas and involving learners in the assessment process. Some senior leaders were hesitant about moving away from standardised, national approaches to assessment until they had more reassurance about accountability arrangements.

9. Equity and inclusivity

- 9.1 During Wave 1 senior leaders emphasised that equity had always been an important focus in their school or setting, but they were now more learner-centred in their approach to curriculum design, with the flexibility to tailor support accordingly. There was a greater focus on the use of learner voice to support and inform curriculum development. Senior leaders referred to the importance of being inclusive and meeting the requirements set out in the [ALN Code](#), commenting that CfW is allowing them to promote and focus on inclusivity.
- 9.2 Senior leaders re-emphasised points raised during the Wave 1 interviews regarding the importance of a purpose-driven and 'learner-centred' curriculum. This included an ongoing learner voice input, with several senior leaders commenting on the strength of this in their school or setting. They also welcomed that the new arrangements enabled them to be responsive and flexible, and to be guided by learners.
- 9.3 Senior leaders referred to a range of specific initiatives delivered in schools and settings to ensure equity and inclusivity. In some instances, these activities require additional staffing and resources.
- 9.4 Funding pressures were mentioned by senior leaders as a cause of concern, undermining the ability of schools and settings to ensure an equitable learning offer for pupils of all abilities. Senior leaders highlighted difficulties in providing adequate staffing levels to meet learner needs, not only with regards to learners who require more targeted support, but also in being able to challenge the most able pupils. Senior leaders noted these challenges were against the backdrop of also supporting expectations for the ALN reform. The focus on improving equity through CfW, whilst supported and prioritised by senior leaders, is undoubtedly a challenge that is dependent on the resources available to schools and settings.
- 9.5 Senior leaders in secondary schools preparing to implement from September 2023 had mixed views on whether the curriculum would improve equity and inclusivity and help to address gaps in attainment. Some felt that the increased focus on pedagogy would improve the quality of teaching and learner support which could subsequently improve outcomes for learners. However, others felt this was already a focus for schools and that other factors, particularly school funding and the cost-of-living crisis, were likely to have a greater influence.
- 9.6 Some senior leaders in secondary schools preparing to implement CfW from September 2023 reported that CfW had reinforced equity and inclusivity as priorities, particularly through an increased focus on pedagogy, wellbeing and individualised approaches to progression and assessment.

10. Parent and carer engagement

- 10.1 During Wave 1 senior leaders reported using a variety of approaches to disseminate information on the curriculum to parents. Some expressed caution in communicating CfW changes to parents and highlighted a range of methods used to 'drip-feed' information. Schools reported using their mandatory curriculum summaries to share information with parents about the reforms.
- 10.2 Compared with Wave 1, senior leaders in schools and settings who were already implementing CfW reported a greater range of approaches to engaging parents and carers during Wave 2. While challenges in engaging parents in 'curriculum-specific' events persisted, senior leaders reported some success in adopting more innovative and informal approaches to engage with parents and carers. These included presentation events or showcases where learners were actively involved in sharing their work. During Wave 2 senior leaders reported being more focused on reporting learner progression to parents. Senior leaders reported that some parents and carers had positive views on the increase in experiential learning opportunities their child was accessing.
- 10.3 Senior leaders in schools preparing to implement from September 2023 reported similar approaches to those reported by schools and settings who were already implementing the curriculum in terms of informing and engaging parents and carers in their new curriculum. These included consultations on curriculum content, developing curriculum summaries and 'bite-size' information on specific elements.

11. Learner experiences

- 11.1 Learners in primary schools reported that they enjoyed learning through topics and projects, which provide opportunities to explore subjects in depth and also helps demonstrate how areas of learning are connected. Primary school learners reported that they were often involved in decisions about their learning, contributing to choosing topics, tasks or learning activities. Learners noted that they value being involved in decisions, saying that it helps motivate and enthuse them.
- 11.2 Primary school learners reported that teachers set out specific learning objectives and regularly talk with them about their progress. Learners also noted that they are encouraged by teachers to review their own work, discuss their work with peers and think about how they can continue to improve.
- 11.3 Secondary school learners generally reported having less of an influence on their learning than was reported by those in primary schools. They also felt that there were fewer clear links between Areas or subjects they were studying, albeit that learners in some focus groups did provide examples of links between subjects that had been planned by teachers.
- 11.4 Secondary school learners felt that teachers placed an emphasis on providing feedback to support their progress in learning. Some learners felt that teachers placed an emphasis on getting learners to review their own work and to also look to improve the quality of their work.
- 11.5 In both primary and secondary schools, learners underlined the importance of a good classroom environment to their learning experiences.

12. Issues for consideration

12.1 The following issues for consideration draw on the findings of both the Wave 1 and Wave 2 reports.

- i. The Welsh Government should continue to encourage collaboration between schools and settings, focusing on supporting joint working among Area leads as part of curriculum planning, and evaluation. This should include collaboration between primary and secondary schools.
- ii. The Welsh Government should continue to promote the CWRE guidance and resources that are available and encourage schools and settings to embed CWRE across all Areas and connect learning to real world contexts. This includes promoting the [CWRE toolkit and toolbox](#) and the work of key partners, including Careers Wales.
- iii. The Welsh Government should continue to encourage and support schools and settings to embed Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Histories across all Areas. Welsh Government and stakeholders should consider how they can facilitate schools and settings in accessing high quality and appropriate guidance and support to inform their planning, delivery and self-evaluation.
- iv. There is recognition of the need to increase the number of teachers and support workers able to work through the medium of Welsh and teach Welsh in order to support the aims of CfW. As part of processes to monitor the delivery of the '[Welsh in education workforce plan](#)', the Welsh Government and stakeholders should identify any aspects of curriculum delivery across Wales which require additional focus or support.
- v. The Welsh Government should continue to monitor how schools and settings are promoting Welsh language oracy through their new curriculum arrangements and disseminate good practice where it is identified.
- vi. The Welsh Government should consider whether there is a case for the development of additional resources to support RSE provision, particularly in primary and special schools.
- vii. The Welsh Government, working with regional partners, should ensure that international languages are promoted and delivered as an integral part of the new curriculum arrangements in all schools and settings, particularly in primary schools.
- viii. The Welsh Government should continue to encourage schools, settings and clusters to collaborate in developing joint approaches to learner progression based on a shared understanding.
- ix. The Welsh Government should continue to monitor the potential implications of divergence in schools', settings' and clusters' approaches to monitoring progression, particularly in considering how to monitor progress at a national level.
- x. Senior leaders frequently referred to a desire for reassurance that the approaches they are taking to curriculum planning, progression and, particularly, assessment were appropriate (and 'on the right track'). While collaborative working between schools goes some way to providing reassurance, Welsh Government should consider whether there is a need for a role that provides external constructive

challenge to schools (particularly around progression and assessment) during these early years of implementation.

- xi. The Welsh Government should continue to monitor how schools and settings report to parents and carers on learner progression. This should include the approaches being taken in some secondary schools to provide parents with reports that include learners' 'projected journeys' or 'trajectories' relating to their likely achievement of qualifications.
- xii. Senior leaders highlighted the financial challenges facing schools and settings as they work towards implementing a curriculum that supports equity and inclusivity for all. They noted that there are costs associated with providing appropriate challenge and support to enable all learners to realise their full potential. The Welsh Government should consider whether there are opportunities to provide more targeted funding to schools and settings to address some of these challenges.

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

For further information please contact:

Schools Research Branch
Social Research and Information Division
Knowledge and Analytical Services
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ
Tel: 03000255381
Email: schoolsresearch@gov.wales

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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