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Formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales: phase 1 synthesis report

Executive summary

1. Background and methodology

The Welsh Government commissioned Arad Research to lead a formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW), working alongside Cardiff Metropolitan University, Bangor University, the Open University in Wales, the University of Stirling, the University of Auckland and AlphaPlus Consultancy.

This report provides a synthesis of evaluation evidence collected between May 2024 and September 2025 during the first phase of the formative evaluation. The report is structured around sections of the [theory of change](#) (ToC), developed to support the evaluation of the curriculum reforms in Wales, specifically:

- curriculum design practices, pedagogical practices and assessment practices
- enablers and constraints
- emerging outcomes

Methodology

This synthesis draws on findings from the following research activity and, where relevant, publications.

- Four qualitative studies with schools and settings focused on:
 - [Equity and inclusion in the CfW](#)

- [Curriculum and assessment design and pedagogy in the CfW](#)
- [Realising the CfW in Education Other Than At School \(EOTAS\) provision](#)
- [Health and well-being area of learning and experience in the CfW](#)

Fieldwork for these qualitative studies was carried out in in summer and autumn 2024, with reports published in July 2025.

- [A survey of 925 senior leaders and teachers](#)
- [A survey of 1094 parents/carers and 757 of their children](#) (Reception to Year 9)^[Footnote 1]

Fieldwork for both surveys was carried out between September and December 2024 and both reports were published in December 2025.

- Curriculum journeys case study research: this phase of the research involves longitudinal` research with a sample of 10 schools over three waves of engagement in summer/autumn 2024 and 2025, with another wave planned for 2026. Fieldwork so far provides a rich snapshot and so some findings have been included in this report. A stand-alone report covering changes observed across waves is planned for late 2026.

For this synthesis, the findings of the six reports referenced above and data collected during research with curriculum journeys schools were analysed through systematic searches using NVivo software. Search terms were developed iteratively, using both deductive and inductive approaches, informed by the terminology used in the ToC as well as the research tools and data collected.

The report refers to proportions (e.g. ‘minority’, ‘majority’, ‘vast majority’) using the same thresholds as used in the survey reports.^[Footnote 2] The phrase ‘qualitative studies’ is used when referring solely to the four qualitative reports published in July

[1] Age-appropriate questions were designed, with some variations in which questions were shown, and the wording of questions presented, to learners of different ages

[2] ‘vast majority’ = 85% or more; ‘majority’ = between 59% and 84%; ‘around half’ = between 42% and 58%; ‘minority’ = between 15% and 41%; ‘small minority’ = 15% or less. It should be noted that these descriptors are not applied to findings that draw on qualitative sources of evidence, where the terms ‘most’, ‘many’ or ‘some’ are used to signify the prevalence of findings or weight of evidence.

2025. 'Qualitative research' is used when collectively referring to the four published qualitative studies and evidence from the Curriculum Journeys research. The term 'practitioners' is used when referring collectively to senior leaders, teachers and learning support workers (LSWs). References to 'evidence' signify evidence collected as part of the formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales rather than wider evidence, for example academic research or publications by other organisations in the Welsh education sector.

Methodological limitations

The report highlights limitations associated with the studies and approach, notably:

- Most studies provide a snapshot of practices during an iterative and evolving process of curriculum realisation, which limits the ability to explore progress over time
- In order to minimise participant burden, participants' responses could not be fully probed on all topics
- Sample levels in the qualitative studies mean that qualitative findings, while providing rich, in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, and the context behind these, are not generalisable to the whole population. These have been synthesised together with survey responses to provide both breadth and depth of evidence.
- Most qualitative research did not include the perspectives of learners; learners' and parents/carers' views will be explored more through further planned research
- The survey of learners did not include those below Reception age (3-4 years old)
- There is a risk of selection bias across the evaluation; schools and parents/carers opting to participate may have been those that were more engaged or, alternatively, those motivated to highlight concerns

2. Main findings

Curriculum design practices

Findings show that many schools have made substantial changes to their curriculum design informed by the Curriculum for Wales Framework. Curriculum planning was

reported to have incorporated the four purposes; curricula were organised in a way that reflected the six Areas of Learning and Experience and in response to the statements of what matters for each Area. Many leaders valued the flexibility to tailor learning to learners' needs, also reflecting Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance. However, there was variability in perceptions among those in different schools and in different roles about the extent of changes to school curricula.

The evaluation evidence shows that schools involve learners and, to a lesser extent, parents and the wider community, in curriculum design but that this involvement remains relatively limited in scope and nature.

Collaboration was reported to have been central to many schools' approaches to curriculum design, mostly including collaboration between teachers within schools and, to a lesser extent, through school-to-school activity to support curriculum design. Collaborative activity was widely recognised as an important factor in supporting curriculum design and realisation, helping to foster engagement and trust, promoting reflection, and facilitating shared learning.

The majority of senior leaders and around half of teachers surveyed indicated that the approach in their school had involved a number of practices that are widely recognised as supporting rigour in curriculum design, for example professional enquiry, using educational research or sharing evidence and expertise across local networks/clusters of schools.

The majority of senior leaders and teachers surveyed reported that there was a shared understanding within their schools of how their school's curriculum supported their learners to develop in the ways described by the four purposes.

Qualitative research showed that many schools reported that their curricula sought to provide a broad and balanced education and a holistic learning experience, reflecting the aspirations of the CfW Framework. This included a focus on social and emotional skills, cross-curricular skills and skills integral to the four purposes and a focus on the local context and effective environments.

Qualitative research found various examples of integrative approaches to curriculum design. This included approaches that integrated curriculum design, pedagogy and

assessment; approaches that sought to integrate subjects, disciplines or Areas as part of planning; and approaches that integrated elements of the Framework.

Pedagogical practices

Many senior leaders and teachers reported reasonably high levels of confidence that pedagogical practices in their schools reflected the CfW Framework. Around two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents agreed they were confident that their pedagogical practice, or that of teachers at their school, reflected the four purposes, the statements of what matters, the 12 pedagogical principles and the principles of progression. Survey data revealed some variation by role: a consistently higher proportion of senior leaders, compared with teachers, agreed that their pedagogical practice, or that of teachers at their school, aligned with the Framework. This reflected the general pattern observed in the survey data, where more positive views were expressed by senior leaders compared with teachers.

The evaluation has found substantial changes in schools to pedagogical practice in response to CfW. These changes were reported to have involved a greater focus on enquiry, experiential, and authentic learning approaches, often supported by practitioners paying closer attention to the purpose of the content being taught and the needs of their learners.

Most schools involved in qualitative research reported that they were using differentiated pedagogies and strategies in response to individual learner needs and interests. These schools emphasised the importance of frequent review and self-evaluation to ensure their pedagogical practices were meeting learners' needs.

Practitioners have devoted considerable attention to developing pedagogical approaches that help establish and maintain learner engagement. Practitioners from across various settings taking part in the qualitative studies described efforts to ensure engagement through a focus on experiences that were relevant, authentic and purposeful.

Some primary and secondary qualitative study participants described a change in emphasis in pedagogical approaches to incorporate practitioner-led or direct teaching alongside a growing focus on what was variously described as 'teacher as facilitator' or learner-centred approaches. This is consistent with the pedagogical

principles set out in Curriculum for Wales which states that good learning and teaching involves ‘employing a blend of approaches including direct teaching’.

Despite adaptations to practice, there remains variability across the system in these changes. This variability is pronounced between primary and secondary: primary schools generally reported having adopted more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches; while secondary schools also reported changes to practice, there was less evidence of widescale change.

Assessment practices

There have been substantial changes to assessment practices, including the development of new assessment models, and the introduction of new practices, informed by the CfW Framework and focused on understanding and supporting individual learner progress. While changes to assessment models and processes have taken place, practitioners recognised the need to continue to review and refine curriculum and assessment arrangements.

Variable accounts were provided according to those in different contexts and roles. The evaluation found that senior leaders and teachers in secondary schools reported that they had experienced challenges in developing assessment practices under the new arrangements more frequently than those in primary schools.

Across many schools and settings, senior leaders and teachers explained that changes to assessment practices had involved a pronounced shift from summative and attainment-focused assessment towards more formative and individualised approaches. Many schools and settings considered that the introduction of CfW supported a positive shift towards more holistic approaches to assessment for all learners, particularly senior leaders and teachers in primary schools and in EOTAS provision, where more tailored assessment practices were considered to better meet diverse learner needs. The vast majority of leaders and majority of teachers surveyed reported that teaching practices use Assessment for Learning principles.

Practitioners and learners who contributed to qualitative research reported that learners were increasingly involved in assessment through the introduction of, or renewed emphasis on, peer- and self-assessment. They reported that peer-

assessment and self-assessment helped foster greater learner ownership and understanding of their progress.

The evaluation heard mixed views from learners about the support available to help them understand their progress. Learners generally reported feeling informed about their progress, with primary school learners more likely than secondary learners to respond positively in survey responses to questions about understanding progression in their learning. Some learners engaged in qualitative research felt that feedback on tasks and assessments was not always constructive and was sometimes unclear.

Some schools continued to use assessment approaches – such as the use of generic level descriptors – that were perceived to work, but which were not well aligned with the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales. Some senior leaders and teachers commented on the perceived vagueness of the guidance on assessment and progression.

Enablers and constraints

Evaluation evidence to date provides insights into the conditions that are conducive to, or support, successful enactment of the CfW Framework. The synthesis report concludes that curriculum change and enactment has been either enabled or constrained by the following factors:

- **Leadership:** purposeful leadership, focused on an inclusive, supportive environment, a shared vision, practitioner agency and enquiry-based approaches to curriculum practice, was perceived to be a strong enabler. Conversely, the success of new curriculum approaches was reported to be contingent on individual leadership capability, meaning that variability across the system arose where this capability was lacking, thereby constraining consistent, high-quality curriculum realisation.
- **Professional learning:** professional learning was seen as a key enabler of design, pedagogy and assessment practices, given the complexity of curriculum and the extent of changes to practice required by Curriculum for Wales; however limited time and financial resources, along with workload pressures, continue to restrict access and engagement, leaving many senior

leaders and teachers without sufficient support to meet their professional learning needs.

- **Collaboration:** collaboration – both formal and informal – was considered important for curriculum development, helping practitioners share expertise, build confidence, and innovate together. Qualitative research found that collaboration (in-school collaboration and school-to-school working) made a substantial difference to schools' approaches to curriculum realisation and adaptations to pedagogy.
- **Professional enquiry:** where professional enquiry was taking place it was viewed as a valuable means of fostering a reflective culture within schools and supporting innovative practices. Some schools reported embedding enquiry through collaborative research, supporting thinking about new pedagogies and assessment practices. Conversely, some practitioners felt limited by the emphasis on professional enquiry, preferring basic guidance over complex research-based models. Adoption of professional enquiry was not widespread, with survey data indicating lower engagement among teachers than among senior leaders.
- **Curriculum design capability:** while senior leaders and teachers are expected to co-construct learner-centred curricula, many practitioners lacked prior expertise in curriculum design, leading to inconsistent approaches across settings. Evidence indicates that curriculum capability was strengthened where leaders established specific roles; however overall confidence in curriculum design was not widespread, particularly among teachers, with survey results showing that just over half of teachers expressed confidence in their own curriculum design expertise.
- **Guidance and exemplification:** The Curriculum for Wales Framework has driven significant change by providing the statutory structure for local curriculum design and supporting more learner-centred teaching. However many practitioners felt that elements of Welsh Government guidance have been unclear, inconsistent, and insufficient to meet their needs.
- **Time and capacity:** the lack of sufficient time and financial resources to support areas such as curriculum design, professional learning and collaboration were reported to have been a significant constraint.

- **Teacher agency:** the freedom and flexibility afforded under the Framework was widely welcomed by practitioners. However, this agency was constrained by the resulting lack of standardisation across the system, causing practitioners anxiety that local curricula might later be judged unsuitable and forced to change.

3. Emerging outcomes

Emerging outcomes for learners

Most learners involved in the curriculum journeys research reported positive experiences through Curriculum for Wales. Many learners expressed satisfaction with their learning, noting that their school provided appropriate support. Many learners reported feeling supported to make progress and some also reported feeling empowered through greater ownership of their learning. Survey results showed that the majority of learners enjoyed school, enjoyed what they were learning and felt their teachers helped them to understand when they were getting better at learning. Around half of learners felt they could be themselves at school (asked of Year 3-9 learners only), got all the help they needed, and that school was fair for everyone.

The majority of learners surveyed agreed that their learning at school was helping them progress towards most aspects of the four purposes and also expressed positive views in relation to their well-being.

Survey data revealed mixed views among learners about the opportunities given to them to influence their school curriculum, with a higher percentage of primary school learners indicating that they were consulted about curriculum design. Learners who participated in discussion groups mostly disagreed with or were unsure that they have a say in what they learn about in school.

Learners were perceived by many senior leaders and teachers to be more engaged in their educational journey following the introduction of the curriculum reforms. Practitioners felt that this was because the reforms had acted as a catalyst for overhauling pedagogical approaches toward enquiry, experiential, and authentic learning which was helping to improve engagement.

There were, however, variations between different types of learners: primary learners were generally more positive than secondary learners, and disabled learners also reported less positive experiences than non-disabled learners. The formative evaluation evidence consistently pointed to notable variability in experiences across the system, raising concerns among some practitioners about equity of experiences for learners.

Emerging outcomes for parents and carers

Most schools reported engaging with parents as part of their curriculum design through surveys and other communication methods, although experiences varied: some parents felt listened to and motivated to support their child's learning, others believed that schools did not actively seek or respond to their feedback.

Survey findings indicated that there is a relationship between parent agency (being listened to, having confidence in and being motivated to support their child's education) and their meaningful engagement in curriculum design.

Parents' confidence in and satisfaction with the curriculum at their child's school was mixed, including its ability to meet individual learner needs and the extent to which the curriculum, teaching and learning was helping their child to progress and prepare them for the next steps in their education, work and life more generally. Parents of disabled learners reported less confidence in the quality of education and in their school's ability to meet their child's needs compared to parents of non-disabled learners. Some parents raised concerns about insufficient focus on skills development and around the clarity of assessment, highlighting the need for more consistent school-parent communication and support.

Emerging outcomes for practitioners

The evaluation has found clear commitment to CfW among senior leaders and teachers, with many embracing the principles of the Framework and the flexibility it offers to tailor learning to local needs, enabling schools to realise a more inclusive curriculum for all learners. Evidence indicates that the reforms have contributed to senior leaders' and teachers' sense of purpose and encouraged creativity, leading some schools to re-evaluate their ethos and approaches.

The majority of senior leaders and teachers expressed confidence that the school curriculum would support learners to develop in the ways described in the four purposes and support learners equally well to progress regardless of their individual circumstances or starting point. The majority of senior leaders and around half of teachers were confident their new curriculum (compared to the previous curriculum) would better meet the needs of all learners, help learners reach their full potential, lead to improved learner progression and improve overall levels of learners' achievement.

However, this positive outlook was also accompanied by a note of caution, both in the survey and qualitative research, with senior leaders and teachers expressing the need for increased support and resources. Some practitioners also expressed the view that the Framework was too open to interpretation and had resulted in an increased workload.

Overall, there is confidence that the curriculum supports learner development and progression, however findings suggest that sustaining progress and achieving longer term outcomes for learners and the wider system will require ongoing support and investment.

4. Issues for consideration

The insights from this evaluation give rise to three important issues to prioritise as part of the next stage of the curriculum realisation journey across Wales. These priorities are:

- 1. Tackling variability in curriculum realisation across the system:** this includes variability in how the Framework has been understood and interpreted, the extent and quality of its enactment, and how it has been experienced by learners and parents/carers.
- 2. Enhancing and deepening practitioner understanding of the CfW Framework,** encouraging greater ambition among schools, settings and all system partners in making use of the flexibility afforded by the Framework.
- 3. Strengthening and enhancing further the quality of curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment practices** to increase rigour, build

capability, and improve practice in ways that positively impact all learners' experience and outcomes.

The enablers introduced earlier in this report provide a focus for curriculum realisation efforts – leadership, professional learning, collaboration, curriculum design capability, guidance, time and capacity. Considering those enablers in light of the particular priorities outlined about tackling variability, deepening understanding, and enhancing the quality of practice leads us to propose three pillars that should underpin the approach to addressing the priorities. We also make explicit why each pillar is important for the three priority issues outlined above. The pillars are:

- a. A system perspective** that recognises the interconnectedness and interactions between parts of the system (the organisations, agencies, initiatives, policies, programmes, tools and resources etc.) that support curriculum realisation.

A system perspective is important for:

- **tackling variability** because it positions the system as a whole as responsible for variability – all players have a role to play, and a role in supporting others.
- **deepening understanding** because those in different parts of the system bring different perspectives to what aspects of the curriculum mean, and the perspectives of partners from across the system can help enhance and deepen understanding.
- **enhancing the quality of professional practice** because the work of those across the system determines how conducive the conditions are for teachers and leaders to explore new practices

- b. A networked infrastructure for curriculum leadership** that a) recognises ongoing success is dependent on the relationships between those working to support curriculum realisation and b) is focused on and conducive to developing curriculum leadership efficacy, solving problems and supporting improvement in curriculum, teaching and learning. It is important to underline that curriculum leaders can be senior leaders and teachers in a wide range of positions, i.e. those who lead and/or participate in networks with a view to leading aspects of curriculum realisation in their schools or settings.

A networked infrastructure for curriculum leadership is important for:

- **tackling variability** because it creates networks of relationships that will allow information, resources, ideas, expertise etc. to flow across the system
- **deepening understanding** because it builds relationships that connect people with different understandings and strengths in ways that they become resources for each other.
- **enhancing the quality of professional practice** because it supports increased trust that is essential to taking well-considered risks, trying new things, sharing challenges and supporting colleagues learning.

c. **A systematic and robust approach to professional learning that is embedded as part of schools' curriculum design activity.** This should allow for sustained, rigorous professional enquiry, integrating insights and expertise from research and practice, the sharing of expertise across the system and collaboration that effects change and strengthens the capability of all involved and the capacity of the system. In practice, this could involve employing participative enquiry-based approaches to professional learning that both support professional development and inform curriculum development/realisation at the same time.

A systematic and embedded approach to professional learning is important for:

- **tackling variability** because it can be systematically focused on parts of the system, and aspects of the curriculum where the need is greatest
- **deepening understanding** because its robustness allows for weak spots to be addressed, and gaps between what is actually happening and what was intended to be addressed. Robust approaches support teachers to progress from surface to deep understandings of the curriculum they are working with and how their practice can improve in support of that.
- **enhancing the quality of professional practice** because it recognises the inadequacy of quick fixes, tips and tricks, and the necessity for more sustained approaches that are tightly connected to teachers' own contexts and work.

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

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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