

Kirsty Williams AM
Cabinet Secretary for Education
Welsh Government

26 January 2017

Dear Kirsty,

Changes to the curriculum in Wales

Thank you for your attendance at Committee on 12 January 2017 and your letter dated 21 December 2016, which commented on our emerging findings.

The Committee has committed to ongoing scrutiny of the Welsh Government's implementation of Professor Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*. I hope our findings will be helpful to the success of the work.

The Committee believes that the design and development of the new curriculum, together with associated reforms to teachers' professional development and initial training, will be one of the most important areas to get right during the Fifth Assembly. We welcome your declaration that education reform is the Welsh Government's 'national mission' and your focus on ensuring it is implemented well.

The Committee welcomes the Welsh Government's acceptance of Professor Donaldson's recommendations and the work it has initiated to take them forward. However, we are concerned that some aspects of the implementation of *Successful Futures* are not progressing as well as we would expect.

Annex A to this letter contains more detail of the evidence we have received and the Committee's observations in the following areas:

- Implementing Professor Donaldson's vision
- Strategic leadership from the Welsh Government
- Clarity and purpose of Pioneer Schools' roles
- Lessons from other countries



- Synergy between curriculum design and teachers' professional development and initial training
- Relationship with assessment and accountability
- Schedule for implementation
- Contingency planning
- Curriculum content
- Legislative and transitional arrangements

The Committee welcomes the innovative approach the Welsh Government is taking towards implementation, with an emphasis on involving the profession, but this must be supported by a strong leadership and strategic direction from the Welsh Government. We agree it is the right approach and a characteristic of successful curriculum design elsewhere.

You have acknowledged that the collaborative way in which the government has chosen to design the new curriculum 'makes it more complex and challenging' and 'adds to some of the uncertainties'. We believe that the Welsh Government should undertake some contingency planning in case its strategy of developing the new curriculum through the Pioneer Schools Network does not go as smoothly and produce such concrete outputs as is envisaged.

The Committee sees the commendable vision emanating from Professor Donaldson's report as largely conceptual. Whilst it is widely supported, it is apparent that there are difficulties and challenges in translating that vision into tangible implementation. Professor Donaldson's report represented a substantial positive and progressive step forward for education in Wales, although the Committee believes the hard work of implementation very much lies ahead.

This letter completes this particular phase of work in the Committee's ongoing scrutiny of the implementation of the Donaldson Review. We will regularly return to this area during the coming months and years, keeping a watching eye on progress, particularly around key milestones in the strands of the implementation schedule.

I very much look forward to your consideration of our observations.

Yours sincerely



Lynne Neagle AC / AM
Cadeirydd / Chair



Annex A

Implementing Professor Donaldson's vision

1. Evidence suggests that, whilst the vision set out in *Successful Futures* is widely supported, there are difficulties and challenges in translating that reality into tangible implementation.

2. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) told the Committee:

There is a sense that the high level vision, as expressed in *Successful Futures*, remains a useful yardstick for any new approaches but that there is now a need for greater clarity as to what the new curriculum and assessment system will actually look like to individual school leaders, teachers and the wider workforce. (...)

The current plans are exciting and ambitious but the profession and wider stakeholders require an overall blueprint with greater coherence to see how each element – curriculum, assessment and accountability – fits together and encourages the right, constructive ways of working.

3. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) commented 'as is the case for many in the education sector we are still awaiting the devil in the detail'. The NUT also included in its submission to the Committee anecdotal feedback from one of its members saying:

Overall I feel that there is a lack of direction and vision in terms of translating the fantastic vision of the Donaldson review into something tangible and that schools are going to be able to take on board.

4. The Committee notes that the Welsh Government published its plan for taking forward the Donaldson recommendations, *Curriculum for Wales – a curriculum for life*, in September 2015 and a further *Plan for curriculum and assessment design and development* in June 2016. The Cabinet Secretary for Education referred to a 'new phase of engagement' as Strand 2 progresses and the curriculum and assessment arrangements are beginning to take shape.

The Committee believes this new phase of engagement will be crucial and that the Welsh Government should do more to provide a clearer picture of how things are developing since Professor Donaldson's report was published. The regional consortia and local authorities, as the 'middle tier' which the Cabinet Secretary referred to in Committee, could have a role in communicating this.

Strategic leadership from the Welsh Government

5. Evidence received from stakeholders, particularly from the teaching unions and Pioneer Schools suggested that a stronger strategic lead is needed from the Welsh Government to implement the Donaldson Review.



6. The head teacher unions believe the various workstreams ‘now need to come together as a clear strategy, with a clear timeline and milestones, particularly around the role of assessment’. They added:

There is a moment here that we do need to take stock, really, of what is going on across the different regions, what the different schools in the pioneer network have been tasked to do. We need some type of pulling together now and some overview.

7. On the other hand, the South East Wales regional consortium told the Committee that the Welsh Government has given them sufficient guidance, providing the legislative and policy framework and listening to the consortia’s views about how to deal with any ‘hindrances and blocks’ that arise.

8. However, this guidance does not appear to have reached all of the Pioneer Schools, as one of the professional development pioneers, Ysgol y Strade in Llanelli, told the Committee:

We still have a lot of ideas throughout the entire pioneer network that somehow need to be brought to fruition—that need to be brought to one idea that we can give out. It’s fine to get teachers to create this and build it from the ground up, but, sooner or later, we need one clear goal—we need one document to say, ‘This is the model’. At the moment, we don’t have anything near that.

9. Estyn commented in its written evidence:

It is a challenge to balance the need for quick improvements with giving enough time for considered change. For example, an initial period of reflection on the implication of the Donaldson report was necessary, so that pioneer schools developed a common understanding of the issues. After a year of thinking time, it is time to increase the pace of progress. A clear action plan for the future, particularly for developing the new ALoEs, is now needed. [my emphasis]

The Committee noted that ‘over the coming months’ the Cabinet Secretary will be ‘reaffirming and re-emphasising, with all of [the Welsh Government’s] key delivery partners, [their] collective leadership role in delivering the vision’ provided by *Successful Futures*. The Committee believes this will be timely and recommends the Cabinet Secretary considers whether a clearer strategic steer and direction is needed from the Welsh Government, perhaps in conjunction with regional consortia.

Clarity and purpose of Pioneer Schools’ roles

10. The Pioneer School model for curriculum design has generally been welcomed as innovative and empowering. The Committee agrees that designing the curriculum in partnership with the profession is the right approach. However, evidence indicates,



particularly in the early stages, there appears to have been insufficient clarity of purpose and outcomes in the work of the Pioneer Schools and what is expected from them. In oral evidence, one of the Pioneer Schools, Ysgol y Strade, used the analogy of lesson planning:

'... we're still not being told exactly what our role is, because, of course, in this process it's supposed to be like that. However, sometimes, I think that schools would prefer to know exactly what a clear role would be, what is the start point, what is the end point. I mean, if I observed a good lesson, I'd expect the children at the beginning of the lesson to know what they're expected to achieve by the end of it and, at the end, that they have achieved it. This hasn't been done in that way at all, and, as teachers, I think we find that mightily frustrating, that we haven't got that clear idea.'

11. The four regional consortia jointly reported that 'expectations for schools and regions were not always clear at the outset', which 'initially led to confusion'. In their progress update for the period September 2015 – September 2016, the consortia say 'some Pioneer Schools were initially frustrated with the lack of direction and had difficulty understanding their roles'.

12. There are indications that Pioneer Schools' understanding of their task at hand has improved over recent months. The consortia said they had worked together to 'define roles' and 'develop clarity nationally', meaning roles for Pioneer Schools are 'now clearer'.

13. The Cabinet Secretary acknowledged that 'some Pioneers have, at times, felt unsure of what has been expected of them' and that 'it has taken time to move away from a top-down approach'.

The Committee notes the Cabinet Secretary's expectation that, as the process moves into Strand 2, Pioneers should 'feel that they are clearer about what is required of them than may have been the case for Strand 1'. The Committee believes that the Welsh Government should proactively ensure that this expectation is borne out.

Lessons from other countries

14. The Committee asked Professor Donaldson about the extent to which the new curriculum in Wales is being influenced by what happened in Scotland where he also played a leading role in introducing a new curriculum. Professor Donaldson told the Committee:

In terms of looking at Scotland specifically, I think there are important lessons to be learnt from the way in which curriculum reform has taken place in Scotland, both positive and negative. (...)

The big message that has come through, I think, from looking more generally, not just at Scotland, is the need to think about this with all the various components



that need to come together—the pieces in the jigsaw that need to come together if we're going to create the kind of high-quality education system in Wales that we need.

15. The Cabinet Secretary said that there are 'some very specific differences' in the approach that is being taken in Wales and 'it is not a case of slavishly following the Scottish example'.

The Committee believes that curriculum design and development in Wales should be informed by, but not simply replicate, experiences in other countries, for example Scotland. The Committee notes the Cabinet Secretary said there are some specific differences between implementation in Wales and Scotland and that curriculum design here is part of a 'holistic reform programme'. We welcome the development of the curriculum in conjunction with the other two 'pillars' of education reform, as the Cabinet Secretary called them, initial teacher education and professional development and learning. The Committee would welcome further information from the Welsh Government on what it sees as the differences in approach between Wales and Scotland.

Synergy between curriculum design and teachers' professional development and initial training

16. The vision of *Successful Futures* envisages that curriculum design be taken forward in conjunction with reform of teachers' professional development and initial teacher education and training. The Committee has comments to make in both of these related areas and will be considering the issues more closely in its inquiry into Teachers' Professional Learning and Education.

Professional development

17. The Committee notes that a consistent professional learning offer for all of the education workforce is due by July 2018, in advance of the new curriculum being available in September 2018. We welcome the intention to develop them in tandem but are anxious that there remains a considerable amount of work to be done. Professor Donaldson said:

I would expect, over the course of the next year, a lot of work to be done in terms of professional learning, but building out from the pioneer schools, because for identifying what that professional learning means, it's the pioneer schools that will help to identify where the needs are, what the needs are and how you do it.

18. There appears to have been some early challenges in developing in tandem the curriculum and the professional development, with a lack of clarity as to whether one should be formed first to inform the other, and vice-versa. Ysgol y Strade told the Committee:

Our experience as a professional development school—a former new deal school—is different to the digital pioneers. The digital pioneers had some very clear ideas



from the start of where they needed to reach, whereas as a professional development school, we were at the beginning waiting to see a framework that we could build around, because it's very difficult to train staff for something that doesn't exist.

19. This chimes with Professor Donaldson's analysis that:

But professional learning has to take place in relation to something—you know, you can't just do professional learning per se. So, I think the point at which the professional learning process goes up a gear, or goes up a number of gears, will have to work as the shape of the new curriculum becomes clear. So, I think it's in the course of 2017 that that process begins to jack up, because if you start doing a lot of professional learning in an apparent vacuum and it's not relating to—. You know, people say, 'What actually are we talking about here?' Well, you've got to know what you're talking about. Teachers naturally want to know what the new frameworks are going to look like. Professional learning really has got to be geared to the new framework that will be emerging over the course of the year.

The Committee believes the next 12 to 18 months will undoubtedly be critical to the development work on curriculum and professional learning. The Committee will wish to monitor the progress of the Pioneer Schools involved in developing the professional learning offer and also note that there will be a consultation before summer 2017 on new professional teaching standards. Teachers must be ready to deliver the new curriculum, therefore the Welsh Government must ensure curriculum design and professional development are successfully developed in tandem.

Initial Teacher Education and Training

20. The Committee welcomes the fact that Professor John Furlong is a member of the Independent Advisory Group, which should benefit the development of the curriculum in terms of links with the training of new teachers. Professor Donaldson, who chairs the Group, emphasised the importance of Professor Furlong's involvement and the Committee agrees.

21. The Welsh Government has consulted on draft criteria for the accreditation of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Wales, and proposals for giving the role of accrediting initial teacher education courses to the Education Workforce Council. However, there is a potential time differential between the curriculum first becoming available in September 2018 and the new courses being initially adopted in September 2019, meaning the first tranche of new teachers trained to deliver the new curriculum will not be qualified after then.

22. The Committee notes that the Welsh Government is working with institutions providing ITE to get current trainees 'up to speed for what we anticipate the new curriculum will be like'.



The Committee notes that Professor Furlong's review of Initial Teacher Training found that the current arrangements are not sufficient to prepare teachers to deliver the new curriculum envisioned by *Successful Futures*. We welcome the Welsh Government's action to reform the initial education and training programmes and believe this should be strongly informed by the process of curriculum design as work on both of these agenda progress further.

Relationship with assessment and accountability

Assessment

23. The Committee heard contrasting views on the relationship between designing the curriculum and setting the assessment framework. The head teacher and school leader unions strongly believed that the assessment framework needed to be established first in order to have a clear idea of what curriculum is needed to adequately prepare learners. The NAHT believe that, at present, these are not 'constructively aligned'.

'... there's very much an assessment conundrum, in that, until we clarify the actual purpose and the role of assessment—and colleagues here alluded to key stage 4 and key stage 5—. So, we need to be very clear on what the assessment is going to be. What assessment model are we looking at? (...)

Unless we get those clear messages, we are—to use the word—going to stumble along.'

24. The regional consortia did not share this analysis. Dr Kevin Palmer from EAS (South East Wales) told the Committee:

'It's not, in my view, a correct assessment, because a purposes-driven curriculum starts with purposes and proceeds. It doesn't start with purposes and then start again with assessment. (...)

The danger of saying, 'We start with the purposes—please give us an assessment regime', is that you predetermine everything that happens in between.

The Committee noted that the Cabinet Secretary described the scenario as not a choice between which comes first out of 'a chicken and an egg' but 'chicken and egg at the same time because we have to develop both elements'. We do not disagree but see this as a considerable challenge. The Committee would welcome further information from the Welsh Government on how exactly it proposes to successfully manage curriculum reform with changes to assessment and accountability at the same time. This is even more important given there are different views amongst the unions and the consortia about where assessment fits in to the process. The Committee believes the Welsh Government needs to resolve any such misunderstandings or tensions, which otherwise pose a risk to successful implementation.



Accountability

25. The evidence submitted to the Committee suggests there is still some way to go to realise the philosophical and practical shift recommended by Professor Donaldson away from using assessment for school accountability purposes and towards using it to inform teaching and learning. The NAHT said:

There is a sense that the current ways of holding schools to account, because of the way in which they use outcome-only assessment measures, are counter-productive, if you like. They would potentially present an obstacle to drifting towards the way in which we think we should be working. If you look at the recommendations specifically about assessment and its core purpose being a formative one ... that's not reflected in the way that schools are currently being measured.

26. Ysgol y Strade, a Pioneer School, indicated that the pressures of the current accountability framework can inhibit the capacity of schools to get on and innovate, even fulfil their role as a Pioneer:

The performance management within the school asks them to reach targets at GCSE, to reach targets at key stage 3 and to ensure that pupils show progress. I find it very difficult sometimes to have those conversations with teachers about the pioneer network because, actually, at the moment it's nothing to do with what they're doing in the classroom with the children.

The Cabinet Secretary said the Welsh Government is considering how to change accountability measures to minimise unintended consequences, such as inhibiting innovation. The Committee recognises that there is little value in hastily changing accountability measures now only to then change them again for the new curriculum. However, we believe the Welsh Government needs to strike an appropriate balance between adjusting accountability measures now so that Pioneer Schools feel free to get on and do their work, and working on more long-term one-off lasting reforms that dovetail with the new curriculum.

Schedule for implementation

27. The Committee was concerned to hear that there has been some slippage in the schedule for designing the six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) that will form the basis of the new curriculum. The *Plan for curriculum and assessment design and development* (June 2016) anticipated that Strand 2, which is the high-level design of the AoLE, would start in September 2016. However, the Committee learnt from the Cabinet Secretary's evidence that the working groups to undertake this are only being established now and were due to have their first meetings on 17 and 18 January 2017.

28. The Committee notes that the Cabinet Secretary is still confident the existing timescale of completing Strand 2 by June 2017 will still be met. Strand 3, which is the



more detailed decisions on content of the AoLE is due to take place between March and December 2017. However, there is an obvious risk of a knock-on effect on the viability of the timescale of Strand 3 from the late start of Strand 2.

29. Professor Donaldson told the Committee the process is at a 'critical period' and 'it is very important that the pace increases' in 2017. On the other hand, we heard calls for 'pragmatism' from the head teacher unions who felt there is a need to 'take stock' and the emphasis should be on 'getting it done right, not just about getting it done'.

30. The NAHT suggested 'it is better to maybe delay it slightly and make sure we are properly prepared and able to deliver [the new curriculum]'. In this context, the Committee recognises the very clear merits of phasing in introduction of the curriculum between making it available for schools to start using it during a three-year period before making it a statutory requirement; no 'cliff-edge' implementation as Professor Donaldson put it.

The Committee notes the Welsh Government plans to share initial thinking on the proposed structure of each AoLE during Autumn 2017 and will wish to return to the specific issue of whether implementation is on schedule later this year.

Contingency planning

31. The Committee welcomes the innovative approach the Welsh Government is taking to giving the profession itself a leading role in designing the new curriculum. However, such an approach carries some risks and the Cabinet Secretary acknowledged it makes the programme 'more complex and challenging' and 'adds to some of the uncertainties'.

32. The Cabinet Secretary told the Committee:

Part of the problem is convincing people that we are serious about the joint way of working. I think there are some people out there that still think, at some stage, we're simply going to say to them, 'There you go, that's what you're going to do', and trying to convince them that is not how it is going to work is still taking some time to get through to people.

The Committee welcomes the involvement of the profession in designing the new curriculum and commends the innovative nature of the Pioneer Schools Network. We very much hope it is successful, although we are concerned about the consequences should this model fail to deliver the desired output: the availability of a new, clearly structured, modern fit for purpose curriculum by September 2018. The Committee believes the Welsh Government should undertake some contingency planning and ensure there is sufficient resilience within the programme to mitigate this risk.

Curriculum content

33. During this particular piece of scrutiny on the development of the new curriculum, the Committee has sought to focus strategically on the way implementation is being carried out, the progress so far, and prospects for meeting timescales and key milestones.



We have therefore concentrated less on the various calls for specific items to be included in the new curriculum and the status they will have in the new structure. However, a general theme emerging from the Committee's consultation during summer 2016 on priorities for the Fifth Assembly was that stakeholders are concerned about the current emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people in Wales. Stakeholders were anxious to see sufficient coverage of topics such as sex and relationships education (or 'healthy relationships') emotional and mental health, wellbeing, and citizenship.

The Committee believes such issues would sit suitably within the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience and urges for this to be actively considered as the design of the AoLE progress into more detailed stages. We also recognise the calls for greater teaching of Welsh history, and indeed regional and local history, and believe this should be considered in the design of the Humanities AoLE. The Committee acknowledges that there will be further opportunities for commenting on content of the AoLE as this emerges more clearly later this year.

Legislative and transitional arrangements

Legislation

34. The current national curriculum is statutory and some form of legislation will be required to repeal and replace it. Professor Donaldson told the Committee that the proportion of the new curriculum to set out in legislation is a delicate balance to consider. In *Successful Futures*, he recommended that the six Areas of Learning and Experience and the four curriculum purposes be stipulated in primary legislation. However, in Committee, he said his counsel was: 'be cautious about what you put in legislation'.

35. The Committee notes from the Cabinet Secretary's letter of 21 December 2016 that she is reluctant to 'speculate' on the level on statutory prescription that will be necessary (or desirable) for the new curriculum as this depends on the outcome of the Pioneer Schools' work. However, the Cabinet Secretary indicated that the Welsh Government would wish to follow the principle of subsidiarity (a presumption of decisions taken at a level closest to where they are enacted), which would mean 'legislation should be used lightly'. She said this would be a 'significant change to the level of direction and prescription' provided at present.

The Committee believes that decisions over the level of legislation used to establish the new curriculum will require careful consideration. Any primary legislation will require adequate time to be introduced, scrutinised and enacted, which all needs to be built into the timescale.

Implications for young people taking qualifications during transition

36. The Committee welcomes the Cabinet Secretary's assurance that Qualifications Wales and the WJEC are working to ensure that no young person will be negatively affected by being either in the last or first cohorts of pupils taking different versions of



qualifications. Such a risk is exacerbated by the fact it is not only qualifications that are likely to change but that the entire curriculum that pupils will have studied towards.

The Committee urges the Welsh Government to carefully consider the implications for young people in the current school system and the potential for adverse impact from being caught between two, quite different, versions of curricula. This is particularly a risk for pupils currently in secondary schools who will be taking GCSEs before, during, and immediately after the transition period. We welcome the fact this is receiving ongoing attention and urge that this continues in earnest.

