

Kirsty Williams AC/AM  
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg  
Cabinet Secretary for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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Lynne Neagle AM  
Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff  
CF99 1NA

[SeneddCYPE@Assembly.Wales](mailto:SeneddCYPE@Assembly.Wales)

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Dear Lynne

Thank you for your letter of 14 March, on behalf of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, about the implementation of the Foundation Phase curriculum.

I very much welcome the interest of the Committee in the delivery of Foundation Phase education. In Wales, we can be extremely proud of the Foundation Phase and its approach to teaching and learning which has been identified by practitioners as a significant strength of current educational practice. I do of course recognise some of the views expressed by Estyn in its evidence to the Committee, and I have had a detailed discussion with the Chief Inspector on the provision of early years education in February.

The Committee has rightly focussed its discussions on areas where we know that further improvements can be made - and we are working hard to address those. But it is reassuring that in its annual report, Estyn reflected broadly on positive improvements that have come about through the pedagogical approach which is fundamental to successful Foundation Phase practice.

As the Committee's discussions with Estyn on 14 March recognised, we are in the middle of major educational reform. It is important in that context we do not look at the delivery of the Foundation Phase in isolation to the broader changes in curriculum and assessment arrangements. Support for the effectiveness of the Foundation Phase was emphasised by Professor Graham Donaldson in his review of curriculum and assessment arrangements and, as I have said, this is one of our key strengths in education.

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay  
Caerdydd • Cardiff  
CF99 1NA

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:  
0300 0604400

[Gohebiaeth.Kirsty.Williams@llyw.cymru](mailto:Gohebiaeth.Kirsty.Williams@llyw.cymru)  
[Correspondence.Kirsty.Williams@gov.wales](mailto:Correspondence.Kirsty.Williams@gov.wales)

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The focus that the Foundation Phase brings to early education in ensuring an age appropriate pedagogy has been invaluable. We will ensure that we do not lose that approach in education reform and in ensuring a continuum of education provision exists from 3-16 that takes into account the needs of our very youngest learners.

*Our national mission* reflects on how learners should benefit from their educational experiences that support them in becoming young adults, and the characteristics we think are important to help us achieve that. This ambitious approach can only be achieved by ensuring that the right support is in place from the time at which children begin their education to ensure that they are encouraged to become lifelong learners. We will be working hard to ensure that the needs of Foundation Phase learners are central in our development of transformational curriculum and assessment arrangements.

While that development work is being progressed, we recognise that we need to focus constructively on how we can consistently embed the fundamental pedagogical approach to ensure that the Foundation Phase is delivered effectively in both schools and non-maintained settings.

As part of our commitment to the Foundation Phase an [independent stocktake](#) was published in 2014 and a three-year [independent evaluation](#) was published in 2016. The reports identified positive evidence that the implementation of the Foundation Phase was associated with improvements in school attendance, literacy, numeracy and an overall improvement in the attainment of all children. In its evidence, Estyn agreed that the introduction of the Foundation Phase can bring significant benefits for learners, and it is encouraging that they recognise the advantages to be gained from an experiential, child led approach to education.

We need to resist any temptation to revert to more traditionally based education approaches and ensure that – especially in Years 1 and 2 – practitioners have the courage and confidence to help support young children in becoming independent learners better engaged with their education.

The recent Estyn report on [Active and Experiential Learning in the Foundation Phase](#) noted that ‘many schools feel pressurised to prepare pupils formally for national reading and numeracy tests, contributing to wide variations in foundation phase practice’. This should not be the case. The tests are for diagnostic use only so that teachers will have information on the reading and numeracy skills of their learners and have a common understanding of strengths and areas for improvement in these skills. They should not impact on how the Foundation Phase is delivered. Welsh Government guidance is clear that schools should not spend time ‘practising’ for the tests. Our communications on the National Tests and on the introduction of the new personalised assessments stress their formative use as tools to support teaching and learning.

Online personalised assessments will be phased in over a three-year period, starting with Numeracy Procedural in academic year 2018/19. In these assessments, the level of challenge will adjust to match the skills of the learner, providing a tailored assessment experience. Schools will be able to use the assessments flexibly, at a time they consider most appropriate to gain an insight into learners’ skills to plan next steps in learning.

The evidence presented to us through our earlier research placed considerable emphasis on the need to improve consistency in the delivery of the Foundation Phase curriculum. Working with stakeholders from both the maintained and non-maintained sectors, we have developed a number of key areas of work to help improve the consistent implementation and share excellent practice. These areas are outlined below:

## The Foundation Phase Profile

Informed by evidence, the [Foundation Phase Profile](#) was developed and published in September 2015. The profile has been designed to support assessment of children's learning and development throughout their time in the Foundation Phase, and provides a nationally consistent baseline assessment (at the start of reception year) which aligns with end of phase outcomes and integrates the Literacy and Numeracy Framework.

The profile assesses children's abilities and development in four Areas of Learning:

- Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills
- Mathematical Development, and
- Physical Development.

Through the use of observations and formative assessments, the profile supports practitioners to provide a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children, and should also support the transition of 3 and 4 year old learners in non-maintained settings into school.

## Foundation Phase Expert Group

The establishment of a Foundation Phase Expert Group comprising representation from key stakeholders including academia, education services and inspectorates, has helped us shape the successful development of a 10-year strategic plan for the Foundation Phase.

Working with the Expert Group, in November 2016, we published the [Foundation Phase Action Plan](#) which sets out a national approach to continuously improve the way in which the Foundation Phase is implemented and delivered. The plan was developed with a wide group of stakeholders, under the guidance of the Expert Group, and sets out key actions where research has shown us we need to focus.

## Foundation Phase Excellence Network

In its discussion on 14 March, the Committee asked about developing and sharing effective practice in the Foundation Phase and how we might ensure that this practice was shared and promoted nationally. To provide support and professional development opportunities for Foundation Phase practitioners we have established a national Foundation Phase Excellence Network (FPEN). The network, supported by a Foundation Phase zone on our Hwb learning platform, will help strengthen the links between schools, settings, the third sector, local authorities, regional consortia and higher education institutions to develop an increased focus on research based professional development for Foundation Phase practitioners at all levels. It will also provide opportunities for collaborative working and sharing of best practice.

## Foundation Phase Excellence Network (FPEN) Hwb Zone


The new online community learning zone on [Hwb](#) has been established to facilitate the sharing of information, resources and research between practitioners. The zone hosts 20 new case studies, including three short films which showcase effective practice in Foundation Phase. The case studies have been produced working collaboratively with schools and settings across Wales in five key areas of practice: child development, environment experiences, leadership, pedagogy and Welsh language. I was delighted to launch the network and the zone in Swansea on 28 March and, supported by £1 million of

Welsh Government funding, the network will work collaboratively to share expertise, experience, knowledge and best practice to help improve Foundation Phase practice.

As I have set out in *Our national mission*, I want Wales to have strong and inclusive schools committed to excellent, equity and well-being and a system that is there to support our most disadvantaged learners. This is also true of our youngest learners in the Foundation Phase – in schools and non-maintained settings – and I was delighted to announce recently an increase in the Early Years Pupil Development Grant to £700 per eligible learner – an increase of £400 since 2016/17.

Our national mission is to raise standards, reduce the attainment gap and deliver an education system that is a source of national pride and confidence. To achieve that, we have to focus on all our learners, including our very youngest, and the quality of the education we deliver to each and every one of those learners is crucial to the success of our national mission. We will therefore continue to work with our stakeholders to strengthen Foundation Phase practice to benefit all of our learners as they progress through their journey in education, and beyond.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams'.

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**Cabinet Secretary for Education**