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Curriculum and assessment design and pedagogy in the Curriculum for Wales: a qualitative study

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Curriculum and assessment design and pedagogy in the Curriculum for Wales: a qualitative study

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

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Table of contents

List of tables.....	2
Glossary.....	3
Executive summary.....	5
1. Introduction	16
2. Methodology.....	23
3. Findings.....	30
4. Conclusions.....	78
Annex A: References	87
Annex B: Details of schools in the sample	89
Annex C: Research tool	95

List of tables

Table 1: Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy study schools/settings sample
.....26

Glossary

A-Level

Advanced Level

ALN

Additional Learning Needs

ALNCo

Additional Learning Needs Coordinator

AoLE/Areas¹

Area of Learning and Experience

BTEC

Business and Technology Council Qualifications

Curriculum for Wales Framework

Curriculum for Wales Framework refers to legislation and statutory guidance

Cognitive science

A term sometimes used to refer to an understanding of learning which focuses on the mental processes involved in learning, including in how learners develop knowledge, understanding and skills

FG

Focus Group

eFSM

Eligible for Free School Meal

GCSE

General Certificate of Secondary Education

Knowledge rich

A term sometimes used to refer to a content model of transmission of knowledge and culture within a curriculum context

SEN

Special Educational Needs

SLT

Senior Leadership Team

ToA

Theory of Action

¹ This report uses 'Areas', as this is now the preferred term; however, where participants refer to 'AoLEs' in the verbatim quotes, this has been retained.

ToC

Theory of Change

Executive summary

1. This report forms part of the formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales. As part of the evaluation, topic-based qualitative studies are being carried out, examining specific elements of Curriculum for Wales.
2. The report presents the findings of qualitative research into Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy, led by the University of Stirling. The research aimed to provide answers to two overarching research questions:
 - Research question 1: How is Curriculum for Wales guidance in relation to curriculum and assessment design and pedagogy being implemented in practice?
 - Research question 2: How are settings and practitioners supported to enact curriculum and assessment design and pedagogical approaches as part of Curriculum for Wales?

Methodology

3. The methodology is set out in Chapter 2 of this report and included:
 - Recruitment of sixteen schools (eight primary schools and eight secondary schools) to take part in the study.
 - A desk-based review of literature and documentation to inform the development of research tools: this included a review of policy and guidance documentation relating to curriculum and assessment design and pedagogy. The literature review identified specific lines of enquiry that were used as part of qualitative discussions.
 - Semi-structured discussions and focus groups with senior leaders and practitioners: these were carried out on Microsoft Teams, lasting 60-90 minutes and were recorded with participants' consent.
 - Analysis was undertaken in stages and involved: a review of discussion transcripts; the production of written summaries of each discussion; open coding of summaries to generate recurring themes; interrogation of themes organised around the Theory of Action (ToA) framework (see below).

4. Two theoretical framings informed the research. Firstly, the curriculum-making model, which analyses curriculum-making across different sites of activity in the Welsh system and explores the interconnections between them (for example, schools and external agencies). The second framing was the ToA model, which is organised around three related aspects of curriculum-making, namely Actions (developing practices), Constraints (affordances and factors that facilitate or serve as barriers to curriculum enactment) and Consequences (experiences, sense-making and wider effects). These three aspects provide an organising structure for the findings section of this report.
5. The report highlights a number of limitations associated with this study, notably:
 - the small and self-selecting nature of the sample, meaning that findings are not generalisable
 - the fact that findings were based on evidence collected at a single point in time, limiting opportunities to explore schools' progress over time in enacting the curriculum and employing new pedagogical approaches
 - limited time available to be able to explore all aspects of schools' planning, design and implementation

Findings

6. The findings of the study are structured around the three inter-related aspects of the ToA model, beginning with the Actions senior leaders and practitioners reported, before setting out findings relating to the Constraints and enablers (or factors, influences) that help explain the actions taken, and the Consequences or emerging effects of curriculum enactment.

Part 1: Actions: What actions are being taken (and not taken) in response to the new curriculum?

7. All schools reported making substantial changes to their curriculum, involving a systematic curriculum-making process (with some schools having spent as long as seven years on the initial curriculum design stage). The curriculum-making process was reported to be an ongoing and time-consuming journey.

8. All schools had undertaken some reorganisation of subjects or knowledge in developing their new curriculum arrangements, with a focus on integral skills to support the four purposes, cross-curricular skills and cross-cutting themes.
9. While some schools had moved towards holistic organisation of content (for example, through integrating previously separate subjects or developing interdisciplinary learning), others had not or had retreated from earlier approaches that did this.
10. Evidence indicated that schools had made fewer changes to their approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy, revealing a perception that innovation carries risks and concerns about potential negative impacts on attainment.
11. Curriculum for Wales had been a catalyst for some schools to overhaul their approaches, with a greater focus on enquiry, experiential and authentic learning approaches. There was evidence that pedagogical approaches were being shaped by closer attention to the purpose of learning ('Why are we teaching this?').
12. Some primary and secondary schools reported that they used the pedagogical principles set out in Welsh Government guidance to inform their teaching and learning. In these cases, the pedagogical principles were seen as supporting a move towards 'teacher as facilitator' and learner-centred approaches.
13. The study found a varied approach to assessment across the sample of schools. Most schools focused on formative approaches, and some reported they had introduced peer assessment and self-evaluation. Senior leaders and practitioners noted that they had observed learners taking more ownership of their learning and progress as a result. Primary and secondary schools reported adopting a more holistic view of assessment, aiming to recognise learners' individual characteristics and progress.
14. The research suggests that secondary schools had experienced more challenges in developing assessment frameworks under the new arrangements. Most secondary schools reported having spent considerable time discussing and interpreting the progression steps and descriptions of learning in order to develop assessment frameworks that both reflected the ethos of Curriculum for Wales and were suited to their school context.
15. Most schools reported having consulted with learners, staff and parents/carers in designing their curriculum. Research participants noted that curriculum design was

an iterative process and that they responded to learners' needs in response to feedback from learners and parents. The approach at most schools was a learner-influenced or practitioner-mediated approach, rather than learner-led. This means that while learners' views helped to shape the curriculum, practitioners used their professional judgement to make decisions about how these views would be incorporated into the curriculum.

16. In some cases, there had been reorganisation of staff and management structures, including the creation of faculty or Area leads who were given responsibility for leading on curriculum design within their respective Areas. There was evidence that, where staff structures were put in place giving individuals responsibility for different aspects of curriculum design, this led to a variety of approaches both within and across the sample of schools. These approaches were not always consistent with the aims set out in the Curriculum for Wales Framework, including in some cases an emphasis on knowledge-rich approaches.

Part 2: Constraints and enablers: What explains the actions people are taking (and not taking) in response to Curriculum for Wales?

17. All schools reported that they had made considerable progress in their curriculum-making in ways that reflected the aims of Curriculum for Wales. The Curriculum for Wales Framework (the legislation and statutory guidance) had acted as a spur to substantial changes in all the schools in the sample. Examples were shared of schools developing a curriculum framework and pedagogical approaches that integrated the four purposes and were based on the six Areas, statements of what matters, cross-cutting themes, cross-curricular skills and the pedagogical principles. Due to the 'flexibility' provided to schools to design their own curriculum under the Framework, some senior leaders felt that this afforded schools opportunities to prioritise what was felt to be 'best' for their learners.
18. Leadership had a strong influence on the extent of changes within many schools. Participants emphasised the key role of effective leadership. Senior leaders and practitioners identified school leader understanding of curriculum-making processes and confidence in leading curriculum change as critical components in supporting the reforms.

19. In some cases, external support had been invaluable (for example, the Curriculum Design Pilot, or external networks), but in others, participants had a more critical view of the value and quality of the external support available to them (for example, regional consortia).
20. High levels of engagement, collaboration and trust between staff were important factors in supporting curriculum enactment, especially a staff body that felt supported by senior leaders and where there was an open, questioning culture in which innovation and challenge was encouraged.
21. School clusters and partner schools in federations were cited as important sources of support by many participants, as they helped to strengthen schools' curriculum-making capacities. Where conditions allowed for good cluster working, this facilitated a coherent approach to curriculum-making, planning and enactment across primary and secondary.
22. Some participants reported weak system level support for curriculum-making. Some said that curriculum guidance and other supporting materials were sometimes insufficiently clear and arrived too late, after action had been taken to develop Curriculum for Wales.
23. Resource constraints, particularly in relation to time and capacity, were identified by many schools as a key factor inhibiting curriculum development and pedagogical innovation. Participants reported that the ability to provide authentic learning experiences – sometimes beyond the school classroom – may be tempered due to a lack of resource.

Part 3: Consequences: To what extent and in what ways are the actions being taken in response to the new curriculum supporting the realisation of Curriculum for Wales aspirations?

24. All schools in the sample used the flexibility afforded by Curriculum for Wales to develop their own approaches to curriculum development and enactment. Most schools had moved towards a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to learning. In some cases, however, the approach to curricula did not fully reflect the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales as a process model in which there is an integrated approach rather than separate subjects. For instance, some secondary schools had initially attempted an integrated, interdisciplinary approach but had

subsequently reasserted separate subjects and/or 'knowledge-rich' approaches). A majority of primary schools were less willing to take risks with the subjects of numeracy and literacy and tended to treat these as a special case, relative to other subjects.

25. Participants were of the opinion that, overall, children were more engaged in their learning following the introduction of Curriculum for Wales. Participants believed that learners have perceived a change from a content-based curriculum (education as transmission of knowledge and culture) to one which is process-oriented (education as developmental).
26. Some schools have developed stronger connections to their local communities and an emphasis on 'cynefin' as part of their curriculum-making.
27. In many cases, additional time and resources have been dedicated to professional learning, and a culture of learning and enquiry has developed. Many participants described this shift as transformative, and that embedding research and enquiry-based approaches throughout the school had been an enriching experience for both staff and learners.
28. However, participants raised concerns about equity of experiences for learners between different schools. Some participants said that schools that had been doing well prior to Curriculum for Wales were flourishing, whereas schools that faced greater challenges were struggling with the change. These participants expressed the view that educational inequities could potentially widen, unless school capacity issues were addressed. A few participants were concerned that standards in numeracy and literacy were declining and attributed this to challenges arising from curriculum change. Other participants reflected on the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges posed by introducing Curriculum for Wales during this time, which could not have been predicted.

Conclusions

Curriculum and assessment design

29. In most cases, participants felt that the curriculum making process had enabled them to engage with questions about the purpose and value of education, often described as 'what do we want our children to learn, and why?' These

considerations and reflections informed the development of locally responsive curricula focused on learners' needs.

30. Senior leaders and practitioners in some secondary schools noted that differences in curricula presented challenges in relation to supporting learner progression from primary to secondary. The development of local, unique curricula at primary level resulted in learners having varying knowledge, skills and experiences of assessment when they progressed to secondary education.
31. Key features of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, namely the four purposes, integral skills, cross-curricular skills, and cross-cutting themes, featured in schools' curriculum-making processes. Participants used terms such as 'themes', 'skills', 'concepts' and 'interdisciplinary approaches' to describe these. There was evidence of the four purposes being used to underpin curriculum-making, seemingly inspiring a focus on educational purposes in many schools in the sample.
32. Participants reported a mix of different assessment approaches, including what they described as peer assessment and self-evaluation. In many schools, approaches which might be viewed as more traditional, such as literacy and numeracy tests, were also being used in combination with what could be regarded as more Curriculum for Wales-aligned approaches.
33. Participants noted that the importance of literacy and numeracy, which in part seemed to derive from 'external pressures' such as attainment statistics and inspection, had contributed to the continued use of tests. Secondaries said that, while they agreed with the ethos of Curriculum for Wales and had aligned their curricula accordingly, nevertheless, qualifications were of paramount importance to them, to their learners and parents/carers.
34. Participants emphasised the importance of collaboration, whether this was in the form of support from their cluster, being in a formal federation, or engagement in a wider network, such as regional consortia. Collaboration had many benefits, including the sharing of resources and ideas which could then be adapted to schools' contexts.
35. Participants said that Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance and supporting documentation was of varying use and relevance. Some participants said that it was insufficient to enable them to design their curricula within and across Areas effectively. Some participants said that, in their view, the guidance was too vague, or

that it had not been available to them at the time when it would have been most helpful, namely, at the start of the curriculum making process.

36. In general, practitioners and school leaders welcomed the freedom and flexibility afforded by Curriculum for Wales, while at the same time many of them had concerns about variability and equity of experience across Wales. Some practitioners felt overwhelmed by curriculum-making demands and unsupported by national and regional guidance, resources and networks (including regional consortia).
37. A distinction has emerged between what might be termed 'knowledge-rich' approaches and learner needs-based curricula. The former was valued by some secondaries in the sample. This also affected the curricular frameworks in these secondaries, since many attempts at interdisciplinary approaches had been subsequently abandoned. Subject specialisms were regarded by all of the secondaries in the sample as necessary for supporting the in-depth, specialist knowledge required for qualifications. In contrast, the primaries in the sample generally emphasised the learner-needs approach and found it easier to construct curricula that better reflected Curriculum for Wales's emphasis on interdisciplinarity and cross-cutting themes.
38. Effective leadership at school level was reported to be of critical importance. Indeed, some participants said that successful curriculum change would not have been possible without strong and dynamic curriculum leadership.

Pedagogy

39. The pedagogical principles were used to a certain extent by most of the schools in the sample. In many cases, the principles were used during the initial stages of curriculum planning to inform schools' sense-making processes. Some schools developed what they described as their own principles which were influenced by the twelve principles, if not exactly identical to them.
40. Most participants reported that the introduction of Curriculum for Wales required substantial investment in professional learning, particularly in relation to curriculum-making. In contrast, practitioners generally felt more confident that they had existing knowledge and skills regarding pedagogy. In some cases, practitioners had

undertaken professional learning about enquiry or research-informed pedagogical approaches.

41. Most participants said that new approaches to pedagogy had resulted in learners engaging more meaningfully, demonstrating an increased sense of ownership and enthusiasm about their learning. Many schools had incorporated participatory elements in their learning, involving learners and also parents/carers and communities in curriculum design.

Overarching conclusions

42. Although senior leaders and practitioners recognised the value of Curriculum for Wales, many struggled with structural issues of budget constraints and insufficient time and capacity. This led to variation and impacted on their ability to support innovative approaches. The effect of these constraints was of particular concern in areas of higher deprivation, and for learners already facing other challenges to their learning.
43. Collaboration made a substantial difference to schools' experiences of curriculum-making and adaptations to pedagogy, whether this was internal (in-school collaboration) or external (clusters, federations and other networks).
44. Curriculum for Wales has provided an impetus for schools to focus on educational purposes and to explore different teaching, learning and assessment styles. While some welcomed the freedom afforded by Curriculum for Wales, others found it to be challenging, particularly given the amount of time, capacity, knowledge and resources that curriculum-making requires.
45. At some schools, practitioners had a more sceptical view of Curriculum for Wales or felt that it lacked specificity. This issue of differing interpretations of Curriculum for Wales's aims was a key theme in most of the discussions. For some schools, the question of what was 'best' for their learners led to a prioritisation of what could be perceived as a traditional curriculum approach (for example, so-called 'knowledge-rich' approaches, separation and prioritising of literacy and numeracy), and/or retaining aspects of the previous curriculum that were perceived to 'work'. Some schools attempted to merge these different agendas, citing the freedoms afforded by Curriculum for Wales as an opportunity for doing so.

46. Overall, the research found support for Curriculum for Wales principles among senior leaders and practitioners, tempered by a recognition of the practical constraints that have complicated the pathway to successful realisation. Practitioners and senior leaders were mostly positive about the potential and observed benefits of Curriculum for Wales. However, participants also emphasised the need for increased support and resources to sustain these developments, and to address gaps so that all schools can deliver equitable outcomes for learners in Wales.

Areas for consideration

47. The key areas for consideration arising from the research are as follows:

- Effective curriculum leadership is crucial. A shared vision for change supports successful curriculum-making and new approaches to assessment and pedagogy, and effective leaders play a key role in ensuring that this happens. They are also vital in creating the spaces and processes for collaborative working. Welsh Government should consider how strong curriculum leadership can be made available in all settings. Curriculum-making is a time and resource-intensive process in a context when schools are already stretched.
- External expertise/support at the middle tier has been shown in many countries to be a key factor in supporting successful curriculum-making in schools, particularly in the sense making phase (namely, where to start, what to do).² The middle tier can help build practitioner capacity and knowledge in curriculum-making, assessment and pedagogy where it might otherwise be lacking, as well as offering a forum to produce resources for curriculum development and enactment. Welsh Government should consider how this can be made available when schools require it. Collaborative processes and spaces to develop practitioner agency also emerged as highly important. Welsh Government should consider how the middle tier could better support practitioner agency.

² For example, see Priestley, M. Alvunger, D, Philippou, S. & Soini, T. (2021). Curriculum Making in Europe: Policy and Practice Across Diverse Contexts. Bingley: Emerald.

- Some schools have adopted a learner-led, or learner-influenced, approach to curriculum-making. Welsh Government should consider what resources, time and support should be made available so that all learners in Wales have the opportunity and the capacity to engage in active, meaningful curriculum-making.
- The current approach to assessment adopted by schools includes a blend of different formative and summative methods, some of which seem inconsistent with the vision and aspirations of Curriculum for Wales. Welsh Government should consider whether the assessment system (especially secondary phase qualifications) is appropriately aligned with the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales.
- Communication regarding statutory guidance and supporting documentation needs to be improved. Some participants expressed concerns about the relevance, quality and timing of what they referred to as 'guidance'. A few participants said that the amount of guidance and other documentation was overwhelming or difficult to keep up to date with, and they felt that it was changing too often ('moving the goal posts').

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Welsh Government has commissioned Arad Research to lead a formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales (Curriculum for Wales). Arad Research is working alongside a number of organisations as part of a wide-ranging programme of research, including Cardiff Metropolitan University, Bangor University, the Open University in Wales, the University of Stirling, the University of Auckland and AlphaPlus Consultancy Ltd.
- 1.2. The evaluation adopts a mixed methods approach, including surveys of practitioners, surveys of parents/carers and learners, longitudinal case studies to understand schools' curriculum realisation journeys and several topic-based qualitative studies exploring specific elements of Curriculum for Wales.
- 1.3. This report presents the findings of qualitative research into Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy led by the University of Stirling. The report is structured as follows:
 - Chapter 1 provides an overview of the formative evaluation, before focusing on the context and guiding research questions for this Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy study
 - Chapter 2 sets out the methodological approach adopted, describing the approach to recruiting participants, data collection methods, analysis and the limitations of the research
 - Chapter 3 provides an overview of research findings and key implications
 - Chapter 4 presents the conclusions and areas for further consideration

Overview of the formative evaluation

- 1.4. The aim of the evaluation is to assess the extent to which the reforms are working as expected as set out in the Curriculum for Wales Framework (The Framework) (Welsh Government, 2025a). The evaluation objectives are to:
 - review the theory of change (ToC) in the [Scoping Study for the evaluation of the curriculum and assessment reforms in Wales](#) (Welsh Government, 2022a), and make revisions if necessary, in particular to take fuller account of equity within the ToC

- consider the extent to which the mechanisms in the ToC, and the anticipated activities, outputs, and short/medium-term outcomes are being realised as expected
- explore the degree of variation between approaches across schools and other provision³ and describe what factors and/or conditions are supporting or impeding the effective realisation of the reforms and what additional support is needed
- explore the views, practices and experiences of senior leaders and practitioners in schools and other settings and provision in relation to Curriculum for Wales, including to what extent and in what ways do views, experiences and practices differ for different types of practitioners and settings, and why
- explore the views and experiences of learners in schools and other settings and provision in relation to Curriculum for Wales, as well as their parents/carers, including to what extent and in what ways do views and experiences differ for different types of learners and parent/carers, and why
- draw conclusions and highlight areas for consideration for policy and practice across the whole system to support the future realisation and effectiveness of the curriculum and assessment reforms, ensuring these fully consider the breadth of the reforms across different stakeholder groups, contexts, provision and settings

Background and context

- 1.5. Curriculum for Wales is the cornerstone of the Welsh Government's efforts for educational reform and to build an education system that raises educational standards in Wales and ensures public confidence. Curriculum for Wales has four purposes which are the starting point and aspiration for every child and young person in Wales. [The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's \(OECD\) 'Improving Schools in Wales'](#) report (OECD, 2014) and [Successful Futures](#)

³ 'Schools' is used throughout this report to refer to different educational settings/provision including mainstream primary and secondary schools, all-through schools, special schools and education other than at schools (EOTAS) provision, including pupil referral units (PRUs). In some sections of this report the type of education setting/provision is specifically identified, for example when noting differences in the findings.

(Donaldson, 2015), the report published following Professor Graham Donaldson's independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements, set out the rationale for the reforms as well as recommendations for how to design a new curriculum fit for modern day Wales. Under the reforms each school and PRU is required to develop its own curriculum, within the nationally defined Curriculum for Wales Framework, enabling learners to embody the four purposes of the curriculum by becoming:

- ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society

1.6. Under the Curriculum for Wales Framework, the four purposes are underpinned by integral skills to be developed across a wide range of learning and teaching. These integral skills are: creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, personal effectiveness and planning and organising. Subjects are organised around six Areas: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities, Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology. Across these six areas, within the [Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance](#) there are 27 statements of what matters which schools must base their curriculum on (Welsh Government, 2024a).

1.7. As part of Curriculum for Wales, literacy, numeracy and digital competence are mandatory cross-curricular skills. This means that practitioners are responsible to develop and ensure progression in these skills across all curriculum areas. When designing their curriculum, schools should also embed cross-cutting themes in learning across the curriculum. The cross-cutting themes include Relationships and sexuality education, Human rights, Diversity, Careers and work-related experiences and Local, national and international contexts.

1.8. The Curriculum for Wales Framework specifies the [principles and mandatory requirements](#) (Welsh Government, 2022b) that should guide schools' and settings' curriculum preparation and design, many of which are referenced in the findings section of this report. The Framework refers to co-constructing the curriculum,

encouraging learners, parents/carers and the wider community to contribute to its development; ensuring pedagogy supports the realisation of the four purposes; and engaging with professional networks; and reflecting the local school context in curriculum development. From 2020 onwards the Welsh Government published a series of Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance documents to support practitioners with the practical steps of designing, realising and reviewing their curriculum. This includes [‘Curriculum for Wales: continuing the journey’](#) guidance (published in January 2024) (Welsh Government, 2024b) that set out the priorities for curriculum development and learning, emphasising the cyclical nature of curriculum design and the steps schools should take to design, evaluate and refine their curriculum. This guidance underlined the importance of:

- the role of leadership in the design process
- developing a curriculum with purpose
- utilising the principles of progression and statements of what matters for planning for progression
- ensuring that assessment supports individual learners to make progress
- using the descriptions of learning to inform design and assessment
- ensuring that pedagogical approaches draw on the agency and professional judgement of practitioners and that teaching strategies meet the changing needs of learners in their context

1.9. Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015) reflects a vision for Curriculum for Wales as a purpose driven curriculum, outlining a vision for education and the purpose of schooling throughout Wales. The conclusion of phase 1 of the Camau i'r Dyfodol project found Curriculum for Wales to be most closely aligned to a process model curriculum focused on the processes of learner development and “sees curriculum documents not as sets of outcomes but as statements of the principles and processes that education seeks to develop” ([Welsh Government, 2025b](#)). In the case of Curriculum for Wales, the central principles are articulated through the four purposes, which are intended to “help teachers to see what their specific contributions to a child or young person’s learning should be, ... help children and young people, and their parents and carers, to see the point of what they are learning and how the aspects of learning fit together... [and] inform the design of

national expectations for the curriculum and be used to identify and plan the content and intended outcomes” (Donaldson, 2015). The approach to learning emphasises the role of practitioners in supporting learner progress, building from learner knowledge, skills and experiences to develop towards the characteristics and dispositions outlined within the four purposes.

- 1.10. References in this report to a ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum, or approaches that are rooted in ‘cognitive science’ are reflective of evolving thinking within the profession and may not fully reflect Curriculum for Wales’s approach to designing curriculum and assessment which encompass knowledge, skills, and experiences.
- 1.11. The Welsh Government’s [Enabling Learning guidance](#) (Welsh Government, 2023), part of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, supports schools in designing developmentally appropriate curricula for all learners, particularly those progressing toward Progression Step 1. It highlights three interrelated ‘enablers’ – enabling adults, engaging experiences, and effective environments – that collectively foster holistic development through play-based learning, outdoor learning, observation, and authentic experiences. The guidance also underscores five developmental pathways – belonging, communication, exploration, physical development, and well-being – founded in traditional areas of child development as essential for supporting learners’ growth and progression toward the curriculum’s four purposes.
- 1.12. Other Welsh Government guidance and strategic plans emphasise the need for schools to consider how their realisation of Curriculum for Wales can support wider reforms and priorities, including the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code, Cymraeg 2050, tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment and the promotion of learner health and well-being ([Welsh Government, 2021, 2023b](#)).
- 1.13. During the course of this research, ahead of Curriculum for Wales rollout to older learners and the introduction of new qualifications, a [further guidance on 14 to 16 learning](#) (Welsh Government, 2024c) has been published by Welsh Government to support practitioners to design, implement and review an inclusive curriculum for learners in Years 10 and 11. This guidance stipulates that all learning and teaching undertaken within Years 10 and 11 should be planned, designed, reviewed and refined in accordance with the Curriculum for Wales guidance. Schools should apply the [principles of curriculum design](#) (Welsh Government, 2022b) to any learning experiences, including any learning that contributes to achieving a qualification.

- 1.14. This qualitative study provides focused, topic-based research that explores Curriculum and Assessment Design, and Pedagogy. By exploring how specific elements of the Curriculum for Wales Framework are being implemented in different contexts, the study aimed to elicit a rich and nuanced understanding of whether activities are consistent with the vision of the Curriculum for Wales reforms. Furthermore, the study provided insight into how activity related to the topics under consideration supported the short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes described in the Curriculum for Wales ToC.
- 1.15. At the time of this research, Curriculum for Wales was in use for all primary aged learners and for learners in Years 7 and 8.

Research questions

- 1.16. This study explored two overarching questions in relation to Curriculum and Assessment Design, and Pedagogy:
- How is Curriculum for Wales guidance in relation to Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy being implemented in practice?
 - How are settings and practitioners supported to enact Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogical Approaches as part of the Curriculum for Wales?
- 1.17. The study pursued the following specific research questions, as set out in the project specification.

Curriculum and assessment design

- What factors are driving curriculum and assessment priorities, for example local context, the needs of learners, four purposes and statements of what matters?
- What impact are these drivers having on the different stages of learning and development?
- How are the four purposes, cross-curricular skills, cross-cutting themes and integral skills being considered in curriculum design?
- What assessment approaches and methods are being used and why?
- What is the role of collaboration between schools in their curriculum and assessment design and to what extent is this work being done between schools?
- To what extent is the Curriculum for Wales Framework sufficient to enable schools to design their curricula within and across Areas effectively?
- To what extent and in what way do views, experiences and practices differ between different types of practitioners and/or school, and why?
- To what extent are views, experiences and practices changing over time, and why?

Pedagogy

- To what extent and in what ways have the pedagogical principles been used in schools and what is the effect of this?
- To what extent do practitioners have the knowledge and skills to understand the pedagogical principles and use these to inform learning and teaching?
- To what extent has Curriculum for Wales enabled practitioners to bring forward different approaches to learning, and what difference do they think it has made?
- To what extent and in what way do views, experiences and practices differ between different types of practitioners and/or school, and why?

2. Methodology

- 2.1. This chapter provides detail on the research methodology employed during the research. This includes information on recruitment methods, fieldwork conducted, the analytical approach and research limitations.
- 2.2. The research is guided by two theoretical framings. The first framing is provided by a curriculum-making model, which analyses curriculum making in schools and other educational settings in relation to the wider education system (Priestley et al., 2021). Using this model provides an overview of curriculum making activity, across different layers or sites of activity in the Welsh system, taking account of the interconnections between different parts of the system (for example, schools and external agencies). The second framing is the Theory of Action (ToA), which provides a more fine-grained tool to explore curriculum making within different sites (such as schools, classrooms), allowing analysis of constraints, actions and consequences that shape the development of Curriculum for Wales. The ToA explores Actions (developing practices), Constraints (affordances, resources and barriers to realising the curriculum), and Consequences (experiences, sense making, and wider effects) within different sites where curriculum is made.
- 2.3. The enquiry focused on how the curriculum was experienced by practitioners, the extent and nature of development in schools and other local settings, and the extent to which it has been meaningfully supported by external stakeholders. Although the original intention was to explore how Curriculum for Wales is experienced by learners, this phase of the research only focused on senior leaders and practitioners' perceptions of how learners and parents/carers have experienced curricular change, while views and experiences of learners are being explored elsewhere within the formative evaluation.

Recruitment and sample

- 2.4. Schools were invited to express interest in participating in one or more of the qualitative studies that were taking place during the first wave of research as part of the formative evaluation. The opportunity to engage with the evaluation was publicised through Welsh Government (including the Dysg newsletter and Hwb), as well as via the extensive school networks and partnerships of the higher education

institution delivery partners on the evaluation team. Schools were invited to express interest in participating in any of the four qualitative studies or the Curriculum Journeys⁴ study by completing an online form.

2.5. A total of 71 schools expressed interest in participating in one or more of the qualitative studies and/or the Curriculum Journeys element of the evaluation. Arad Research's recruitment team compiled a long-list of 25 schools for the Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy qualitative study, based on schools' preferences from the expression of interest whilst also ensuring a spread of schools across this and all studies. Sixteen schools were recruited to participate in the Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy study which represented a good cross section by sector (primary/secondary), by region (North, Mid and West, Central South and South East), and by language medium. Discussions were arranged with senior leaders who expressed interest on behalf of their schools in participating in the study. Senior leaders selected practitioners from their schools to be involved in discussions.

2.6. A total of eight primary schools (including two federated primary schools⁵) and eight secondary schools participated in the study. All four regions of Wales as detailed in 2.5 were represented in the sample. The 16 schools that participated comprised:

- two Welsh-medium secondary schools; the remaining schools were English-medium
- the schools were located across nine local authorities including a mix of urban and rural locations
- six of the schools (including one federation school) have an above average number of learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM)⁶

⁴ The Curriculum Journeys aspect of the evaluation involved longitudinal case studies of 10 schools across Wales for the duration of the evaluation.

⁵ School federation is a formal and legal agreement by which a number of schools share governance arrangements and have a single governing body. Schools in a federation are able to work together to share good practice, expertise and resources for the benefit of schools in the federation with the aim of raising standards.

⁶ According to [Welsh Government StatsWales \(2024d\)](#), 26.2% of pupils in Wales are eligible for free school meals which includes those transitionally protected. In 2019 a new transitional protection for free school meals policy was introduced by Welsh Government. This [transitional protection](#) was to ensure learners would not lose entitlement to free school meals during rollout of Universal Credit in Wales until the end of their school phase (for example primary or secondary education (Welsh Government, 2024e)).

- the percentage of learners with ALN in the schools in the sample ranged from less than 5% to over 40%⁷
- a mixture of schools by size based on learner numbers, for example the largest primary school had over 450 learners and the smallest had fewer than 250 learners

2.7. A summary of the schools involved in the study is presented in Table 1 below with further details provided in Annex B.

2.8. All schools and practitioners have been anonymised and assigned pseudonyms which bear no relation to their real names. Any potentially identifying information has been removed from the verbatim quotes and from biographical or geographical information about the practitioners and their schools.

⁷ ALN/Special Educational Needs (SEN) data are drawn from the [2024 Pupil-level Annual School Census \(PLASC\)](#) (Welsh Government, 2024f). Data was not published for schools where there are between one and four learners with some categories of ALN/SEN. For these schools, an assumed value of 2 learners was assigned to enable a total number and percentage of learners with ALN/SEN to be derived. The phased implementation of the ALN system was ongoing at the time this report was produced, which is reflected in the PLASC data used.

Table 1: Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy study schools/settings sample

Region	Primary	Secondary
North		Welsh medium x1
Mid and West	English medium x1	English medium x2
Central South	English medium x4	English medium x2 Welsh medium x1
South East	English medium x3	English medium x2

Source: Primary data collected by the authors

Research methods

- 2.9. The design of the research tool (see Annex C) and methods were informed by a desk-based literature review and the professional expertise of the research team. This provided an understanding of the policy context surrounding curriculum and assessment design and pedagogical approaches. The literature review also identified some salient lines of enquiry which were used to aid specific lines of questioning and probing in qualitative discussions. The research tool was developed to be consistent with the overarching approach to the evaluation, in consultation with Welsh Government and is reflective of the time and resource available for this phase of research.
- 2.10. The research comprised focus groups and individual discussions. Both approaches were semi-structured, taking the form of conversations with a purpose, rather than structured schedules of questions. The approach aligned with the hierarchical

focusing methodology developed by Tomlinson (1989). The driving principle of this approach was that discussions started from general questions, linked to the ToA:

- Actions question – What actions are people taking (and not taking) in response to the new curriculum?
- Constraints question – What explains the actions people are taking (and not taking) in response to the new curriculum?
- Consequences question – To what extent and in what ways are the actions being taken in response to the new curriculum supporting the realisation of Curriculum for Wales aspirations?

- 2.11. Supplementary questions were then asked to explore detail (see discussion schedule in Annex C). The benefit of this approach was that it opened up conversations, allowing the researchers to anticipate and direct discussion through a series of specific prompts related to the research questions. Discussions were steered to relate to the general research questions, with the ToA utilised to provide prompts and further questions for gathering more detail.
- 2.12. Focus groups, conducted online with practitioners and school leaders, gauged patterns and experiences in different school communities. These were 60 to 90 minutes in duration and were recorded (with participants' consent) using Microsoft Teams (or via telephone). In some cases, individual discussions were held with headteachers and/or other senior leaders such as the deputy or assistant headteacher. Participants reflected a range of experience/specialisms (for example, ALN, secondary school subjects), seniority (for example, classroom practitioner, heads of department) and length of career (early career, mid-career, experienced).
- 2.13. Each of the schools was asked to share key school policies (including their Curriculum Summary that schools are required to publish) and other documents relating to curriculum and assessment design (for example, short and mid-term planning schedules, timetables and options structures) and pedagogy (such as specific guidance produced by the school). Where provided, these reports added richness to the understanding of schools' contexts and helped to provide further details about points raised in the discussions.
- 2.14. Detailed written summaries were compiled from each discussion, highlighting key themes and (where relevant) quoting directly from participants. Two members of the research team were involved in discussions and the summaries were written up by

one of the researchers involved, in order to help ensure that they were an accurate reflection of the main points presented.

- 2.15. For research with Welsh-medium participants, discussions and focus groups were conducted in Welsh. University of Stirling researchers worked with Welsh-speaking researchers at Arad Research.

Analysis

- 2.16. At the beginning of the analysis phase, the Curriculum and Assessment Design and Pedagogy study team met to confirm the stages of the process and to ensure consistency of approach and interpretation of emergent themes from the study.
- 2.17. Analysis was undertaken in a series of stages, comprising:
- a review of the detailed notes taken following each discussion; this involved drawing out the key points raised and clarifying understanding where necessary
 - written summaries of each discussion or focus group, including relevant quotations
 - open coding of summaries to generate themes
 - interrogation of themes using the ToA, as outlined in 2.2 above
- 2.18. This 'constructivist grounded approach' (Charmaz, 2000) allowed for themes to emerge from the data, which were then subject to the application of the ToA framing. The analysis was conducted in the context of the curriculum making framework (Priestley et al. 2021) which enabled the investigation of connections between different sites where curriculum making occurred. The curriculum making framework enabled consideration of the relationships between different layers and sites of activity in the education system of Wales, for example national policy frameworks, regional support networks, school-level curriculum planning, and the classroom experiences of learners and practitioners.

Limitations

- 2.19. This section outlines the limitations of the research.

- 2.20. The main limitation is that the research provides a snapshot of practices at a time when the enactment of Curriculum for Wales in schools continued to be an iterative and evolving process, with some schools emphasising that they still felt they were at an early stage in realising the reforms. This snapshot of a moment in time limited the ability to explore schools' Curriculum for Wales 'journey' and progress over time.
- 2.21. The sample in this research was small and self-selecting, thus the findings are not generalisable. In particular, the unique needs and priorities in specialised settings were not explored in this research, although it is possible to extrapolate findings which may be applicable to other settings. The sample does not fully capture the diversity of experiences across schools in Wales.
- 2.22. Due to the limitations on time available during discussions and that schools were busy and staff not always available, discussions with school senior leaders and practitioners lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. It was difficult to get a full sense of what planning schools had undertaken and the level of detail that was involved.
- 2.23. Learners and parents/carers did not participate in this stage of the research. The views expressed in the findings about learners' and parents'/carers' experiences of Curriculum for Wales are the opinions of the practitioners and senior leaders. The views of learners and parents/carers will be explored through further qualitative research as part of other planned research during the formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales.
- 2.24. Schools volunteered and self-selected themselves to engage in the study, therefore, it is possible that the sample could be skewed to a disproportionate number of more 'confident' schools and schools with capacity and interest in participating in research, or those who specifically wanted to voice frustrations regarding Curriculum for Wales.
- 2.25. Individual practitioners were not directly recruited to the research. There is thus a possibility that senior leaders may have selected staff who were likely to present them in a positive light, or who felt obliged to share a specific narrative about their schools. As such, additional research with practitioners, recruited directly rather than via senior leaders, may be of benefit.

3. Findings

- 3.1. This chapter provides an overview of the main findings. It begins with a high-level summary, followed by a more detailed discussion. The findings are organised under the three overarching ToA themes (Actions, Constraints and Consequences). Overall, the research found that Curriculum for Wales has transformative potential, while highlighting critical areas where further support for schools could enhance the impact of the reforms.

Actions

- 3.2. The research question addressed in this section is: ‘What actions are being taken (and not taken) in response to the new curriculum?’ This relates to the ‘Actions’ element of the ToA approach used for analysing the findings (see 2.2). A high-level summary of key points is provided below; this is then followed by a more detailed discussion.

Section summary: Actions

All schools⁸ reported making substantial changes to their curriculum, involving a systematic curriculum-making process (with some schools having spent as long as seven years on the curriculum design stage). The curriculum-making process was an ongoing and time-consuming journey.

All schools had undertaken some reorganisation of subjects or knowledge in developing their new curriculum arrangements, with a focus on integral skills to support the four purposes, cross-curricular skills and cross-cutting themes.

While some schools had moved towards holistic organisation of content (for example, by integrating previously separate subjects or developing interdisciplinary learning), others had not or had retreated from earlier approaches that did this.

Evidence indicated that schools had made fewer changes to their approaches to teaching literacy and numeracy, revealing a perception that innovation carries risks and concerns about potential negative impacts on attainment.

Curriculum for Wales had been a catalyst for some schools to overhaul their approaches, with a greater focus on enquiry, experiential and authentic learning approaches. There was evidence that pedagogical approaches were being shaped by closer attention to the purpose of learning (‘Why are we teaching this?’).

Some primary and secondary schools reported that they used the pedagogical principles to inform their teaching and learning. In these cases, the pedagogical principles were seen as supporting a move towards ‘teacher as facilitator’ and learner-centred approaches.

The study found a varied approach to assessment across the sample of schools. Most schools focused on formative approaches, and some reported they had introduced peer

⁸ In the Findings and Conclusions chapters of this report, the terms ‘schools’ and ‘participants’ are used at times to present findings that reflect the combined voices of all those who took part in discussions, including senior leaders, practitioners and support staff.

assessment and self-evaluation. Senior leaders and practitioners noted that they had observed learners taking more ownership of their learning and progress as a result. Primary and secondary schools reported adopting a more holistic view of assessment, aiming to recognise learners' individual characteristics and progress.

Data suggests that secondary schools had experienced more challenges in developing assessment frameworks under the new arrangements. Most secondary schools reported having spent considerable time discussing and interpreting the progression steps and descriptions of learning in order to develop assessment frameworks that both reflected the ethos of Curriculum for Wales and were suited to their school context.

Most schools reported having consulted with learners, staff and parents/carers in designing their curriculum. Research participants noted that curriculum design was an iterative process and that they responded to learners' needs in response to feedback from learners and parents. The approach at most schools was a learner-influenced or practitioner-mediated approach, rather than learner-led. This means that while learners' views helped to shape the curriculum, practitioners used their professional judgement to make decisions about how these views would be incorporated into the curriculum.

In some cases, there had been reorganisation of staff and management structures, including the creation of faculty or Area leads who were given responsibility for leading on curriculum design within their respective Areas. There was evidence that, where staff structures were put in place giving individuals responsibility for different aspects of curriculum design, this led to a variety of approaches both within and across the sample of schools. These approaches were not always consistent with the aims set out in the Curriculum for Wales Framework, including in some cases an emphasis on knowledge-rich approaches.

All schools reported that curriculum-making involved considerable time and effort. At some schools, extensive sense-making work had been undertaken from the outset of the Curriculum for Wales process. While some senior leaders and practitioners welcomed this and regarded it as necessary, others found it burdensome.

Curriculum making processes

- 3.3. All schools in the sample had undergone a curriculum-making process in response to Curriculum for Wales. The amount of time involved varied, with schools typically taking between one to five years to develop their curriculum. Practitioners in one secondary school said that they had started their process seven years ago.

“Professional learning was fundamental to us, making sure that we all had a deep and profound understanding of what Curriculum for Wales was, what it was in our school, in our context, and we spent seven years doing that.”
(Secondary O, Senior Leader)

- 3.4. Many schools described their curriculum-making as a process of research and what some participants referred to as a process of ‘mapping’. This involved reading and researching; engaging in professional learning; consultation with staff, parents and learners; and engaging with national or regional networks or their local cluster. New approaches, such as an enquiry-based or a concept-based curriculum, resulted from the research and mapping processes. Schools reported using elements of the Framework, including the four purposes and cross-cutting themes as resources to develop their curricula, although they adapted these to align with learners’ needs and local contexts.

- 3.5. For instance, Primary F described their curriculum model as “led by enquiry” and underpinned by a notion of progressive depth appropriate to the children’s stage of learning, whereby the practitioners “start with the children and then [...] try and branch it out a bit further”. By this, the participants meant that their curriculum-making process was learner-centred, in that it began with an exploration of the learners’ interests and existing knowledge, and then expanded on this, with the practitioner and the learners researching the topic in a way that aimed to be engaging and appropriately challenging. The example that the Primary F participants gave of this ‘enquiry-led’ approach that involved “starting with the child” is shown in the quote below.

“So, for example, if I'm doing food inequality with Year 1, I'm not going to call it poverty, I want to try and approach it in a more fun, light hearted way, whilst also letting the children know that there is there is food deprivation in certain areas, not just here but everywhere.” (Primary F, Practitioner)

- 3.6. All schools reported that curriculum-making involved considerable time and effort, and it was an ongoing process for many. At some schools, extensive sense-making

work had been undertaken from the outset of the Curriculum for Wales process. While some senior leaders and practitioners welcomed this and regarded it as necessary, others found it burdensome. For example, Primary C described the ‘vast’ amount of time involved in sense-making (see 3.110).

Organisation of learning – cross-curricular skills and cross-cutting themes

- 3.7. All schools had undertaken at least some reorganisation of subjects or knowledge in response to Curriculum for Wales and with a focus on cross-curricular skills and cross-cutting themes, integral skills, and the four purposes. Most primary schools emphasised skills and what they generally termed “interdisciplinarity”, which was described as a substantial change from the previous curriculum model. Participants from both primary and secondary schools made frequent mention of themes, skills and purposes, even if they did not explicitly use the terms ‘integral skills’, ‘cross-cutting themes’ or ‘four purposes’.

“One out of five days are ‘enrichment days’ to apply literacy and numeracy across the flexibly timetabled day, aimed at longer pieces of work or enquiry, or visitors. Afternoons are led by themes inspired by children’s wonderings.”
(Primary B, Senior Leader)

- 3.8. Some practitioners said that the teaching of numeracy and literacy remained a priority, and that, they were less inclined to take “risks” with new pedagogical approaches in these cross-curricular skills, due to their importance. One example of this was evidenced in Primary B, where the approach to teaching literacy and numeracy had not changed, even though the structures and planning had been adapted. Some other schools continued to use aspects of the previous curriculum that they considered to be effective.

“Parts of the old curriculum that worked have been retained as we didn’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

- 3.9. These approaches to the organisation of learning and pedagogical approaches under the new curriculum arrangements indicate that schools were less likely to introduce substantial changes in numeracy and literacy, in particular. The variation in approach reveals a hierarchy of Areas and a perception that innovation carries risks, even where the general approach to curriculum planning and organisation

involved considerable change. Further evidence of this was seen at Primaries C, D, F and G, which had all adopted compromise positions by continuing to focus on maths and English (in the context of English medium schools) as separate, discrete subjects, in addition to introducing a more Curriculum for Wales-aligned interdisciplinary focus.

- 3.10. All but one of the secondary schools in the sample had retained subject specialisms, as it was believed that this best supported meaningful learning. In some cases, this was a decision that schools had made early in their curriculum journey, while in other cases schools had piloted Area-based approaches before reverting to previous arrangements.⁹

“We [had] a mantra right from the start, that we are not going to do anything wildly different to what we already did. We kept subject specialisms. We didn’t move to AoLEs. We valued the knowledge that was there in every subject area.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

“We did trial an [inter]disciplinary approach with humanities. And we didn’t feel that it supported learning. It just interfered with the sequencing of learning, and it just very much felt like things were being shoehorned into the curriculum content. So, because of the importance we place on subject knowledge, we have taken a disciplinary approach.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

- 3.11. Secondary O retained separate subjects but ensured that cross-cutting themes were emphasised across different subject areas. This was described as a decision to:

“...protect subject specificity. We haven’t blended any subjects. We don’t teach humanities, we teach history, geography, RE. But what we needed to do was develop and strengthen the links within the AOLE and also across the whole school.” (Secondary O, Senior Leader)

- 3.12. Secondary J returned to subject specialisms following an attempt at introducing a more integrated approach, as they found it to be “superficial” and was “not helping” them to address the statutory statements of what matters. There was a similar experience at Secondary M, where an attempt at amalgamating subjects had been abandoned as it was viewed as incompatible with qualifications.

“Options for geography plummeted. We only had seven pupils who opted for [GCSE] geography out of a cohort of 240. Something went wrong. [We’ve

⁹ The Curriculum for Wales statutory [guidance on the role of disciplines in learning](#) describes the balance needed between learners to consider what they learn from a range of perspectives and disciplines, and having opportunities to specialise within disciplines, particularly at later progression (Welsh Government, 2022b).

gone] back to segregating the humanities again.” (Secondary M, Senior Leader)

- 3.13. Secondary Q reported that they delivered humanities lessons as an inter-disciplinary Area in Years 7 and 8, rather than standalone history, geography and RVE lessons. The senior leader in this school commented on the close collaboration between practitioners with different subject specialisms to ensure that there were common skills being developed. It was felt that learners “are able to connect the skills and statements of what matters across that Area” (Secondary Q, Senior Leader). Similarly, the same secondary school had also organised its provision as part of a Health and Well-being Area.

“We’ve introduced Health and Well-being lessons...which has been established for 3 years now. This is now in Year 7 and Year 8, delivered by a mix of PE teachers, food technology teachers and others.” (Secondary Q, Senior Leader)

- 3.14. However, this school (Secondary Q) also noted that, in terms of what they referred to as “more traditional subjects”, mathematics, science and Welsh and English, “those haven’t changed”.
- 3.15. Changes to the organisation of learning were reported in the context of Year 9 teaching, where two secondary schools reported developing ‘curriculum pathways’ that enable learners to focus on subjects of most interest to them earlier than under previous curriculum arrangements. One of these schools, Secondary Q, noted that learners were now required to choose at least one Humanities subject and one Expressive Arts subject in Year 9, where they were able to enhance their skills in specific subjects of most interest to them. The approach to developing skills in greater depth is coordinated at an Area level and contrasts with the approach prior to Curriculum for Wales when learners did not make these choices until Year 10.

“Learners have to choose at least one of the Humanities subjects in Year 9. The Area lead then ensures that whatever skills they are focusing on in history, they develop the same skills in geography or RE. We take the same approach in the Expressive Arts – they ensure that the same what matters statements measured and assessed whichever subject they specialise in. However, these are not options – they are not an opportunity to begin GCSEs a year early. We have communicated to staff that they aim is to ensure that learners develop the same skills even if they are studying fewer subjects. The idea is that learners receive the same experiences in terms of the skills they’re developing, however, they are able to specialise or focus on their areas of strength and interest.” (Secondary Q, Senior Leader)

Pedagogical changes

- 3.16. Most schools reported that there had been substantial changes to pedagogical practices. Across 11 different discussions, participants described pedagogical changes in terms of enhanced learner engagement and an increase in the use of experiential learning opportunities. Curriculum for Wales provided an impetus for schools to reappraise their teaching approaches and to consider why certain tasks were being undertaken.

“[There] has been quite a significant challenge because under the traditional curriculum, there were activities that would happen because they'd always been there. But they weren't necessarily pushing forward progress, and they weren't necessarily allowing for challenge [or encouraging] independence from learners [...] We've tried to get rid of some of the superficial tasks, time wasting tasks that were not challenging individuals.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

- 3.17. In many cases, participants described how pedagogical changes had helped them to focus on the ‘purpose’ aspect of teaching, and to integrate cross-cutting themes. In some instances, this enabled a focus on innovation.

“[The Curriculum for Wales focus on] pedagogy has allowed our staff to have agency and creativity.” (Primary B, Senior Leader)

- 3.18. At Primary A, for instance, practitioners asked themselves the question of “why are we teaching this and where do we use it in life?”. This emphasis on ‘why’ directly influenced decisions about pedagogy, with Primary A providing the example of their Stonehenge project, which had relevance to their local area, and involved learners constructing a mini stone-circle. This required maths and science and technology skills, involved outdoor learning and engagement with historical and cultural identity issues, as well as other cross-cutting themes and integral skills.

- 3.19. In some cases, participants directly mentioned using the pedagogical principles to inform these new approaches. For example, the Primary D senior leader explained that the pedagogical principles informed their curriculum-making, although they noted that “each one of those 12 pedagogical principles is quite big in itself. We wanted to break each one of those down. So, we came up with [our own] pillars for pedagogy and we wanted to break down exactly what does it look like”. In this case, the pedagogical principles helped shape the sense-making process, and the

school developed their own 'pillars of pedagogy'. At Secondary M, the senior leader explained that "we have given staff...tools that our working party have created, [using] the pedagogical principles".

- 3.20. Not all participants were supportive of the pedagogical principles, however. One senior leader expressed concern that they did not take into account the wider environmental factors that impact on approaches to teaching and learning:

"The twelve pedagogical principles [in the new curriculum] does this in a bad way...You need behaviour and well-being to do anything." (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

- 3.21. In this instance, the senior leader did not find the pedagogical principles helpful and instead saw well-being and "behaviour" as essential foundations of the school's approach to pedagogy, upon which everything else was built.

- 3.22. The findings suggest that, across the sample, the Curriculum for Wales pedagogical principles were interpreted as emphasising a move away from practitioner-led or direct teaching towards what was variously described as 'teacher as facilitator' or learner-centred approaches. At Primary D, practitioners described this as "moving from a taught curriculum to a learnt curriculum". Practitioners at Primary G understood this as "giving children ownership of their learning". This pedagogical shift towards teaching as facilitation of learning rather than instruction, and a focus on integral skills rather than content, required effective leadership, and professional development to facilitate these learner-centric environments.

"The focus away from direct instruction [by teachers] has been a significant change." (Primary G, Senior Leader)

- 3.23. This type of pedagogical shift was described by participants as "teachers working more as facilitators" (Primary A, Practitioner), or as an approach that emphasised "pupil voice or [learner] questioning" (Primary A, Practitioner) or child-centeredness: "it is not so subject driven...our pedagogy [is] very child focused" (Primary B, Practitioner).

- 3.24. An enquiry or research-based approach to pedagogy was mentioned by participants at several schools.

"As teachers...we have done a lot of research on pedagogies, and we lead our own research projects [now]" (Primary E, Practitioner)

“[Our approach is] overtly constructivist starting with what children know”
(Primary F, Practitioner)

- 3.25. These examples demonstrate the different ways in which primary school practitioners and senior leaders had introduced new and varied approaches to pedagogy, all of which were based on their interpretations of the Curriculum for Wales pedagogical principles.
- 3.26. The secondary schools in the sample had also introduced new approaches that are underpinned by Curriculum for Wales’s twelve pedagogical principles. Secondary P explained that they had developed a new lesson framework as part of their realisation of Curriculum for Wales, which emphasised the importance of incorporating specific pedagogies including modelling, questioning, differentiation and providing continuous feedback to learners. In one practitioner’s view, this pedagogical change supported a more in-depth learning experience.

“[In Maths] one of the things we try to ensure through our teaching is that we teach less but we teach more deeply, so that we improve proficiency and conceptual understanding, rather than that we’re teaching them how to complete 50 questions in a robotic way.” (Secondary P, Practitioner)

- 3.27. Secondary Q noted that initiating changes to teaching practice had been met with some scepticism among some of the more experienced members of staff.

“Over 50% of our staff have been here since 2000. So, they are experienced and they generally achieved excellent GCSE results. They’re creatures of habit – they’re comfortable in what they do and they do it well – but it doesn’t necessarily correspond to the need to develop lifelong learners. So, teaching methods and styles haven’t changed for a long time for many teachers.”
(Secondary Q, Senior Leader)

- 3.28. Nonetheless, this senior leader noted that the school had introduced a number of pedagogical strategies, which all teachers have been encouraged to adopt in order to support effective progression for all learners.

“There has been a shift in the skills that we emphasise for learners – we want to ensure that everybody has the same opportunities to improve. The strategies we have introduced include a focus on teaching to the top, ensuring that we set high expectations; embedding retrieval practices as part of lessons and units of work; emphasising the importance of demonstrating every learner’s understanding before moving on. Everything is centred around ensuring that all learners make progress – teachers are constantly reminded to ensure that learners who develop more slowly are given enough opportunity to acquire and embed the skills.” (Secondary Q, Senior Leader)

3.29. The senior leader felt that the new pedagogical approaches and strategies being employed were beginning to make a difference, as learners were said to be “retaining knowledge” more effectively. However, the senior leader was of the view that it is too soon to ascertain what impact the changes will have on outcomes over the longer term.

Approaches to assessment

3.30. This section addresses the core research question of what assessment approaches and methods are being used, and why. The context for this is the assertion in [Curriculum for Wales guidance](#) (Welsh Government, 2024g) that assessment is intrinsic to curriculum design and that assessment has three main functions in supporting learner progression, namely:

- supporting individual learners on an ongoing, day-to-day basis
- identifying, capturing and reflecting on individual learner progress over time
- understanding group progress in order to reflect on practice (Welsh Government, 2024g)

3.31. Most schools focused on formative approaches, and some had introduced peer assessment and self-evaluation. ‘Assessment for Learning’¹⁰ was mentioned by a few schools, as was the notion of assessment for progression. Practitioners at Primary A reported that they began with what learners know, and used personalised, in-depth questioning and “learner progression” profiles to gain insights into how individual learners were progressing. Primary E emphasised peer assessing, along with staff self-assessment.

3.32. There was a varied approach to assessment, in that many of the primaries in the sample, and some secondaries, were using what they described as an approach that focused on the whole child and a recognition of the learner as an individual.

“Relationships [are] emphasised, getting to know learners as people.” (Primary B, Practitioner)

¹⁰ Assessment for Learning is a well-known approach to assessment that is influenced by the work of Black and William (see: Black, P. and William, D., 1998. Assessment and classroom learning. Assessment in Education: principles, policy & practice, 5(1), pp.7-74). It emphasises formative assessment strategies, with the aim of supporting children’s learning.

“The new assessment approaches in the school allow us to see the individual child behind the data.” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

- 3.33. A blend of existing assessments, including the Online Personalised Assessments for reading and numeracy (which are mandatory for Years 2-9), along with newly designed Curriculum for Wales approaches was common in the primary schools. In some cases, traditional assessments such as tests were used to generate data for both accountability purposes and also to understand learner progression.

“There is still some pressure [from external sources] to produce attainment data.” (Primary H, Senior Leader)

- 3.34. The source of these external pressures was not always explicitly stated, although participants made references to imperatives to improve school performance in relation to raised attainment in qualifications, and inspection reports. One participant described the demands on practitioners as follows:

“Assessment [pressure] comes from levels above, middle leadership, Headteacher, and Estyn” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

- 3.35. In the case of Primary H, “the spectre of Estyn led to a big focus on discrete Literacy and Numeracy teaching each morning” (Primary H, Senior Leader).

- 3.36. At Primary A, participants described the approach to assessment at the school as a mix of online testing and practitioner judgement. This is consistent with the Curriculum for Wales Framework that refers to retaining online personalised assessments in numeracy and reading as formative assessment tools to complement schools’ own approaches to assessment that help determine whether and how progress is being made.

“We have tools to help with progression: PiRA [Progress in Reading Assessments] and PUMA [Progress in Understanding Mathematics Assessments]. Leadership maps out which tests we use, and we use teacher judgement for the rest of the year.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

- 3.37. In this sample, the secondary schools were generally having more difficulties or concerns with assessment compared to primary schools. Most of the secondary school participants reported having spent considerable time discussing and interpreting the Curriculum for Wales Framework (notably the progression steps and descriptions of learning), in order to develop assessment frameworks that both

reflected the ethos of Curriculum for Wales and were workable in their school context. Referring specifically to the development of approaches to assessment, a senior leader in Secondary P noted that “one of the challenges with the Curriculum for Wales Framework has been translating the broad theories and guidance into practical approaches that work for our school and our learners”.

- 3.38. Secondary P leaders noted that during a trial phase (prior to the statutory launch of Curriculum for Wales) they had initially used the progression steps and descriptions of learning in a similar way to how ‘levels’ had been used previously. Through their work as part of regional and national networks, they had observed a tendency for other schools to take similar approaches. They felt that this was a flawed approach and had since refined their model to focus more on cross-cutting themes and integral skills.

“We quickly realised during our trial year that we were concentrating on themes, but we were not focused enough on skills. So, when we were assessing we were focused on the progression steps and the corresponding descriptions of learning. But these aren’t standards – for example progression step 4 in history sets out what the learner can do but without reference to the quality of the work. The progression steps and descriptions of learning are useful in helping to plan tasks and work – but they don’t provide a framework for assessing standards. This is a huge gap in the [Curriculum for Wales] Framework. So, consequently, we have produced our own marking plan, based on the principles of progression – which was a bit light-bulb moment for us. Now each Area has an assessment plan, which is similar to a marking plan you’d have for GCSE. It assigns a standard or mark to work. Area leads meet with primary cluster. This has been useful in ensuring joint planning and shared understanding.” (Secondary P, Senior Leader)

- 3.39. Many secondary school participants also reported that Assessment for Learning strategies were embedded as part of their curriculum planning and delivery. They provided examples of approaches to building in ongoing self-evaluation as part of units of work where learners were encouraged to correct and improve their own work continuously. Schools referred to the first principle of progression (Increasing Effectiveness) as a driver. Senior leaders and practitioners noted that they had observed learners taking more ownership of their learning and progress as a result.
- 3.40. Secondaries also noted that they maintained a strong focus on qualifications, and this is discussed below (see 3.93-3.104).

Stakeholder involvement in curriculum and pedagogical change

- 3.41. Most schools consulted with learners, staff and, in some cases, parents and carers as part of their curriculum-making and pedagogical journeys. Methods included parental/carer surveys and engagement with school councils.
- 3.42. Some schools started their curriculum-making process by consulting learners, with the most radical approach being learner co-creation at Secondary K, where the learners developed the foundational purposes of the curriculum. This process started with “imagining what an excellent pupil is” and involved discussion with the school council, “who suggested children should input, [and that the curriculum] should be about happiness, balance, involve[ment] in school life” (Secondary K, Senior Leader). This process led to the creation of seven purposes, unique to the school but aligned with the Curriculum for Wales four purposes. These seven purposes were linked to the existing rewards system in the school, the rationale being that this helped ensure learner ‘buy in’ to the new approach.
- 3.43. There was also evidence from some other primary and secondary schools about how the four purposes had either been the foundation of their curriculum design or had encouraged them to focus on the purpose of education (often described as the ‘why’). Some schools had adapted the four purposes to create purposes that were aligned to their own context. This was sometimes done with input from the learners, although this was generally not as radical a co-construction approach as seen at Secondary K.

“No school would ever disagree with the four purposes. The four purposes are the driver for all of us as educators and they probably always have been since the day we stepped [into a] classroom.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

- 3.44. In terms of learner and parent/carer involvement in pedagogical change, examples given by participants included learners explaining the new teaching and learning approaches to their parents/carers, and innovative parental/carer engagement which involved ‘hands on’ experiences.
- 3.45. One example of this was Primary E’s immersive coal mine experience, which involved recreating within the school the experience of being in a mine shaft, and which facilitated learning about the historical and economic context of the local area.

“[Learners] created a coal mine where parents were invited to crawl through. They measured it to the exact measures of a coal mine which people would have to travel down. And then the parents came out and they shared their experience of what they felt down the coal mine too. You know, cold, wet, confined. [We then] looked at what we can do in our school to reduce energy costs, the way we use energy, what can we do?” (Primary E, practitioner)

3.46. In this way, learners and parents/carers co-produced the learning, and the topic was connected to other areas of learning.

3.47. Some practitioners described an iterative curriculum planning process they had followed, that responded to learners’ needs. In response to learner and parent/carer feedback, some schools reported that they had adapted and experimented with aspects of Curriculum for Wales.

“We surveyed pupils and parents about what they thought should be in the curriculum, and created ‘pillars’ – we didn’t like the phrase ‘non-negotiables’ – for each AoLE: overarching knowledge, and the content that has to be covered. Pupils and parents [were consulted] first, then the ‘pillars’ were created.” (Primary D, Senior Leader)

“[Our curriculum-] planning approach is adaptable and allows pupil voice to have a driving effect. It’s up to the pupils where they take it. The children lead and tell us where [they] want to go.” (Primary E, Practitioner)

3.48. The approach at most schools was a learner-influenced or practitioner-mediated approach, rather than learner-led. As one school noted, “[practitioners are] working more as facilitators and the focus is on pupil voice and using questions” (Primary A, Practitioner). Different interpretations of the aspirations for learner agency in Curriculum for Wales were also evident. In some cases, such as at Secondary N, there had been extensive consultation with learners to construct a curriculum that was more responsive to local needs. However, the practitioners at this school felt that this type of engagement was more suitable for older learners, requiring practitioner mediation and guidance.

“One of our cluster schools had a focus on student voice and using that to inform decisions over curriculum content. They’ve moved completely away from that. How does an eight-year-old know what is the best content to teach?” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

3.49. In general, primary school participants mentioned learner voice but there was a lack of detail about how fully learners were involved in shaping the curriculum, and the extent to which learners’ views were acted on by schools. Secondary school

practitioners and leaders expressed a more qualified view that while learner voice was important (and in some cases played a central role in curriculum design, as at Secondary K), consulting with learners and incorporating their views in a meaningful way was a complex process.

Staff and management restructure

- 3.50. A few schools had proceeded by reorganising their staff and management structures in response to the Curriculum for Wales Framework, for example creating faculty leads that correspond to Areas.

“We put a strategic decision in place the three years before we've produced the new curriculum. We moved to a head of Humanities faculty leader, faculty leader for Science, faculty leader for Health and well-being. So we create[d] our staffing structure to meet the needs of our curriculum, to try and put a framework behind it.” (Secondary J, Senior Leader)

- 3.51. Secondary O identified the need for a dedicated leadership role to support the development and realisation of Curriculum for Wales.

“We were a Pioneer school and they kept talking about enquiry, we didn't have a senior leader that led on pedagogy [and] professional learning. So, I suppose the very fact that Curriculum for Wales came into being made my headteacher think, ‘right, we need someone to strategically lead on this’.” (Secondary O, Senior Leader)

- 3.52. This had led to an enquiry-based approach to teaching and learning being embedded throughout Secondary O. The impact of having a non-teaching staff member who leads on curriculum-making is also noted below (see 3.81).

- 3.53. There were divergent approaches to curriculum design both within and across the schools in the sample, informed by different priorities. These approaches had emerged at the same time as the staff reorganisation in some schools, suggesting that these schools had used the affordances provided by Curriculum for Wales to undertake a complete reform of the school structure and overall ethos. In some cases the approaches taken involved reorganising staffing structures based on subject specialisms, which were not always conducive to a more interdisciplinary approach to curriculum-making emphasised in the Framework.

3.54. References by some senior leaders to a ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum and ‘cognitive science’ approaches, coupled with the fact that these participants cited the influence of leading figures in England, suggests that these ideas emanate from practice in England’s National Curriculum, rather than Curriculum for Wales.¹¹ It should be noted that despite the faith placed in these theories and practices by Secondary N, they remain contested.¹² Although these schools were using the flexibility afforded by Curriculum for Wales to make changes, these reforms were not necessarily in line with Curriculum for Wales’s aspirations, even when practitioners stated that changes had been made in order to meet the requirements of Curriculum for Wales.

¹¹ Senior leaders used the terms ‘cognitive science’ and ‘knowledge rich’ but did not explicitly refer to their approach to curriculum design being informed by the National Curriculum in England. This is the authors’ interpretation based on references to leading curriculum experts in England and ‘knowledge-rich’ approaches.

¹² See, for example, [Education Endowment Foundation](#) (2021). Cognitive science approaches in the classroom: A review of the evidence.

Constraints and enablers

- 3.55. This section explores the following research question: ‘What explains the actions people are taking (and not taking) in response to Curriculum for Wales?’. This relates to the ‘Constraints’ element of the ToA approach used for analysing the findings (see 2.2). A high-level summary of key points is provided below; this is then followed by a more detailed discussion.
- 3.56. It should be noted that the use of the term ‘constraints’ in the context of the ToA framework refers not only to limiting factors or barriers, but also to aspects that facilitate or enable the enactment of the curriculum. Constraints can be affordances, i.e. conditions or factors that support curriculum-making. Therefore, issues relating to capacity, for example, can be viewed as a constraint in achieving the aims of Curriculum for Wales. In this section, issues of consistency, practitioner expertise and approaches to assessment are considered as constraints, factors that limit or enable the realisation of the aims of Curriculum for Wales.

Section summary: Constraints and enablers

All schools reported that they had made considerable progress in their curriculum-making in ways that reflected the aims of Curriculum for Wales. The Curriculum for Wales Framework had acted as a spur to substantial changes in all the schools in the sample. Examples were shared of schools developing a curriculum framework and pedagogical approaches that integrated the four purposes and were based on the six Areas, statements of what matters, cross-cutting themes, cross-curricular skills and the pedagogical principles. Due to the ‘flexibility’ provided to schools to design their own curriculum under the Framework, some senior leaders felt that this afforded schools opportunities to prioritise what was felt to be ‘best’ for their learners.

Leadership had a strong influence on the extent of changes within many schools.

Participants emphasised the key role of effective leadership. Senior leaders and practitioners identified school leader understanding of curriculum-making processes and confidence in leading curriculum change as critical components in supporting the reforms.

In some cases, external support had been invaluable (for example, the Curriculum Design Pilot, or external networks), but in others, participants had a more critical view of the value and quality of the external support available to them (for example, regional consortia).

High levels of engagement, collaboration and trust between staff were important factors in supporting curriculum enactment, especially a staff body that felt supported by senior leaders and where there was an open, questioning culture in which innovation and challenge was encouraged.

School clusters and partner schools in federations were cited as important sources of support by many participants, as they helped to strengthen schools' curriculum-making capacities. Where conditions allowed for good cluster working, this facilitated a coherent approach to curriculum-making, planning and enactment across primary and secondary.

Some participants reported weak system level support for curriculum-making. Some said that curriculum guidance and other supporting materials were sometimes insufficiently clear and arrived too late, after action had been taken to develop Curriculum for Wales.

Resource constraints were identified as a factor inhibiting curricular and pedagogical innovation. Resource constraints, particularly in relation to time and capacity, were identified by many schools as a key factor inhibiting curriculum development and pedagogical innovation. Participants reported that the ability to provide authentic learning experiences – sometimes beyond the school classroom – may be tempered due to a lack of resource.

How Curriculum for Wales aims and Framework are supporting curriculum-making

- 3.57. As discussed above, all schools had undertaken a process of curriculum-making, and many had made considerable progress with this. Many participants viewed these changes as reflecting the aims of Curriculum for Wales. Some schools developed entirely new curricula based on Curriculum for Wales principles, which were seen as helping to focus on what practitioners considered to be important in education, points that are developed further below.
- 3.58. Many schools had developed, or had attempted to develop, a curricular framework and pedagogical approach based on cross-cutting themes and cross-curricular skills. While approaches differed, most schools in the sample were using the six Areas of Learning and Experience as curricular organisers; undertaking learner capacity-based or enquiry-based approaches; and/or using the statements of what matters as underlying curricular principles. This latter approach was described by some participants as 'why are we learning this?' or 'why is this important?'.

“The emphasis is on critical thinking: enquiry questioning to support teachers to decide ‘why’ and ‘so what?’... We use the [statements of] what matters.”
(Primary B, Practitioner)

“The first part of the [curriculum-making] process is ‘why’. It's simply that word. Why are you doing this? And we've broken that down into: why for the cohort? Why in terms of the broader school development plan? Why nationally, what aspects of the national mission for Wales and education in Wales are we trying to tackle?” (Primary H, Senior Leader)

- 3.59. With regards to the extent to which pedagogical principles have been used in schools, and in what ways, there was evidence from across the sample that the aims of Curriculum for Wales had supported practitioners to think about and prioritise the purposes of education. For Primary B, this meant a focus on criticality and questioning skills; for Primary H, this was a locally and nationally responsive curriculum. Primary G practitioners described a “total change”, starting their curriculum-making with a “clean slate”. Areas were interpreted as “super subjects”, and the school used four “learning lenses” (Discovery, Creativity, Expression; Cynefin, Community and Citizenship; Wellness; and Diversity and Equality) to look at interdependencies and coherence across the Areas. The school identified “conceptual triggers” and clusters of what the senior leader referred to as “low-level concepts”, using the statements of what matters, for each of the four learning lenses (for example, under the Wellness Learning Lens, the conceptual triggers are: relationships (communication and respect); physical activity, games and sport; feelings, emotions and mental health; human actions and beliefs; keeping safe and well; and living things). As well as the four purposes, the school has also integrated “learner capacities” across the curriculum (communication, self-esteem, curiosity), as these are regarded as key skills or capacities. This is illustrated below.

Primary G Curriculum Framework

Areas of Learning and Experience interpreted as 'Super Subjects'

- 4 Learning Lenses for interdependencies and coherence
 - Learning Lens: Wellness
 - Relationships
 - Physical activity
 - Emotions
 - Beliefs
 - Safety
 - Living things
 - Other Lenses: follow a similar structure.
- Learner Capacities integrated across the curriculum:
 - Communication
 - Self-esteem
 - Curiosity

3.60. Primaries B and D and Secondaries K and N 'went their own way' but regarded Curriculum for Wales as giving them the freedom to pursue what they considered to be best for their learners.

"We know what we want the children to achieve. We know where we want to get them to. We're producing work that then matches that... Whether it's entirely what the Welsh Government intended it to be, I don't know." (Primary D, Senior Leader)

3.61. Secondary N interpreted Curriculum for Wales's aims, including the focus on cross-cutting themes, as giving them the flexibility to create a curriculum based on what the senior leader described as a 'cognitive science' approach (see sections 1.9 and 1.10 for context).

"Our curriculum embraces ideas from cognitive science about how to develop memory and combat forgetting. It's designed to develop a depth of understanding in key concepts over time." (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

- 3.62. It should be noted that this was the participant's interpretation of 'cognitive science', and that the senior leaders at this particular school made a decision to focus on 'cognitive science' based on their understanding of the Curriculum for Wales approach to learning (learning as process).
- 3.63. Overall, Curriculum for Wales's aims had provided an opportunity for schools to do things 'differently' and to prioritise what they thought was important in education. However, this does not necessarily mean that schools were following the specific purposes and principles set out in the Curriculum for Wales Framework. The points made by participants about making decisions regarding curriculum, pedagogy and assessment based on what they deemed 'best' for their learners suggested professional agency in curriculum making, afforded by the flexibility of Curriculum for Wales, and shaped by prior experiences of developing the curriculum in schools. In some cases, primary and secondary schools retained or reintroduced approaches to teaching and learning which were in place prior to the introduction of Curriculum for Wales.

Factors that affect actions

- 3.64. Most participants said they broadly agreed with the purposes underpinning Curriculum for Wales. However, there were factors which affected their actions, both positively and negatively, and which supported or hindered their ability to achieve the policy aims of Curriculum for Wales. This section considers the factors which impact on curriculum-making and pedagogy such as practitioners' beliefs, perceptions, assumptions, values and attitudes, commitment, knowledge, understanding and capability.

Leadership of curriculum change

- 3.65. The findings underlined the importance of effective leadership in establishing a school environment where practitioners feel able to contribute equally to curriculum-making, where they feel confident to ask questions and are supported to take flexible approaches to teaching and learning. Many schools had a shared understanding and a culture of learning and enquiry that supported making and embedding the curriculum. This was often driven by effective school leaders who

were able to secure good levels of engagement from staff as part of the curriculum reform process in their schools.

“A key strength is strong levels of trust among staff and high collaboration among staff [...] It’s not just lip service, but whole team trust and buy-in.” (Primary H, Senior Leader)

“I just don’t think this can be done unless you have strong leadership. Our head is confident, strong and research led. Their culture trickles down in the school... They self-reflect, question, have a vision for the culture that is completely different.” (Primary B, Practitioner)

- 3.66. At Primary D, practitioners expressed the view that curriculum change “has been done with us, not to us...we have been part and parcel of this from the start”. Staff at Primary B had confidence in their headteacher, who was described as “not necessarily following Curriculum for Wales” but was emphasising the aspects of Curriculum for Wales that made sense in terms of the local context and their learners’ needs. Positive relationships, good communication, shared values and a sense of trust between school staff and senior leaders were identified as factors that make a difference and develop confidence among practitioners in supporting the enactment of Curriculum for Wales.

“[Practitioners will say] ‘actually, can I soundboard off you... I want to run with this idea. Have you done it before; have you had an experience of doing it?’ That also builds a confidence then as well, so they’re able to go ‘you know, I’m going to give this a go’. I think because we are so open and so supportive, we don’t really see it as a hierarchical thing. We’re all in it together, and we’re all willing to support each other in any way we can.” (Primary E, Senior Leader)

“Our school is built on relationships. If we are not sure about something, we just go around and ask. [Moving to this school] been a real adjustment, realising it’s okay to question, and we work together with the head to think about things differently... You can make mistakes [here].” (Primary A, Practitioner)

- 3.67. Having an experienced, knowledgeable senior leader who held direct responsibility for curriculum-making was regarded as vital by most participants, given the reported weakness of support by middle-tier partners (regional consortia are discussed in more detail in 3.117-3.118).

“We have been fortunate enough to have a deputy head [...] who has been non-teaching [and] has been purely dedicated to designing the curriculum... [That] has been absolutely invaluable.” (Primary C, Practitioner)

- 3.68. Evidence from across the schools revealed the importance of distributed leadership in ensuring collaborative approaches to curriculum-making. Where participants felt that change had been successful, they often attributed this to an environment where staff are encouraged to ask questions, and an enquiring approach is welcomed. This was considered by practitioners to be essential in view of what they regarded as insufficient external support and limited resources.

Practitioner attitudes and beliefs

- 3.69. Practitioners at many of the schools reported they were dedicated to supporting curriculum reform. For example, the practitioners at Primary A described going “above and beyond” to develop and embed the new curriculum arrangements. This involved a commitment to professional development and involved what they described as an “intense” workload.

“Because we're passionate, we want the children to succeed, we want the best for them... We work on ourselves rather than [do] what the minimum is, we're going above and beyond.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

- 3.70. At Primary A, there was a view that Curriculum for Wales was adding to workloads through the additional planning and preparation, and that this increased pressure may have negative implications for teacher recruitment and retainment.

“The new curriculum was meant to reduce workload. There's no difference. Or we're actually working harder now. Too much marking. Hopefully workload gets better but we're working harder and I don't see that changing... Younger teachers are not staying in the profession.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

- 3.71. The participants noted that professional commitment and dedication was demonstrated through the time spent in professional learning; planning and re-designing the curriculum; familiarising themselves with Curriculum for Wales guidance and considering how to incorporate elements of the Curriculum for Wales Framework into plans for different year groups. In some schools, practitioners were highly committed to creating a new curriculum based on Curriculum for Wales principles.
- 3.72. Some practitioners emphasised the positive relationships they had with learners and parents and that this was another aspect of their professional commitment.

“We have [good] relationships with the children, so if they do say something unexpected or unjust, we can address that with the children, it’s a lovely opportunity... We have lovely relationships with the parents. We have a lot of family engagement.” (Primary B, Practitioner)

Aspects of capacity issues which hinder effective realisation

- 3.73. Many participants from primary and secondary sectors voiced concern about differing interpretations of Curriculum for Wales and the resultant effects on consistency across the wider system. For example, there were worries expressed about other schools experiencing challenges or even ‘floundering’ due to a lack of expertise, knowledge and effective leadership.

“My worry is always about consistency across the community. The curriculum is open to interpretation, which worries me [...] I know some schools are taking what they have always done and [are] shoehorning. I think it comes back to leadership, buy-in and engagement.” (Primary B, Practitioner)

“It comes with the red flag, because the way in which the curriculum has been written is so broad and quite vague, it can be totally misinterpreted, unless you have that skill set and confidence and knowledge and in depth understanding of what next steps are.” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

- 3.74. These views were echoed in a number of secondary schools who also felt that different interpretations of the guidance could lead to ‘huge inconsistency’ in how aspects of the Curriculum for Wales Framework were being enacted across schools in Wales.
- 3.75. In some instances, senior leaders said there had been initial resistance to change from practitioners but that this was resolved through staff engagement and discussion (Primary H and Secondary J).

“It’s embracing change. All the schools I’ve been in, whatever you’re doing, once they’ve embraced the change and they can see the benefits, you can’t stop teachers.” (Secondary J, Senior Leader)

- 3.76. A key point from the evidence is that the role of effective leaders in driving change had a strong and direct influence on how schools design and implement the curriculum. This dependence on individual leadership was partly due to what was perceived as a lack of effective middle tier support across Wales. Another factor was the widely varying levels of curriculum making knowledge upon which schools were able to draw. Participants observed that these factors were producing

divergence and inconsistency in the quality of curricula. However, it should be noted that participants were commenting on what they perceived as a lack of knowledge and/or leadership in settings in their cluster (for example, School E considered themselves to be “flying” compared to other schools in their cluster; see 3.80), or a perception that there is a lack of knowledge and/or effective leadership in other settings more generally.

- 3.77. These concerns about a dependence on individual leadership and potential lack of effective middle tier support were also linked to potential inconsistencies in curricular content and the implications of this for schools and learners. This inconsistency was highlighted as a point of concern for periods of transition, for example progression to secondary and tertiary levels of education. There were also concerns about variations in the quality of curriculum development and realisation, given the differences in expertise and resources between schools.

Social/relational conditions that support curriculum-making

- 3.78. The next sections consider how settings and practitioners were supported to enact curriculum and assessment design and pedagogical approaches as part of Curriculum for Wales. These include factors such as local and regional interactions, networks, collaboration and norms.

Clusters and community engagement

- 3.79. For most schools, relationships with other schools in their cluster played an important role in supporting and informing curriculum-making. Some schools’ engagement in the cluster highlighted the need for stronger transitions between primary and secondary phases of education. These schools noted that more meaningful connections between primary and secondary schools could help address this. Relationships between cluster schools, and schools more widely, had a considerable impact on actions. In particular, cluster working had created a supportive environment where a culture of professional enquiry, openness to sharing practice and greater flexibility were becoming established. However, schools reported different experiences with regards to sharing curriculum-making knowledge within their cluster and with other schools. While some were open to sharing, others were more cautious.

3.80. Many senior leaders and practitioners observed that the extent of cluster working to support curriculum enactment depended on the relationships and readiness of partner schools to engage with one another, for example whether those in their cluster are prepared to be supportive and commit time to helping others.

“We've made our own action plan and shared that with our cluster schools, who may not be as fortunate as us as having a non-teaching deputy head in that position [i.e. a dedicated curriculum-making role].” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

3.81. While the above quotation is partly concerned with capacity issues, it also underlines the importance of social/relational networks: Primary C was actively supporting the cluster and sharing their planning expertise, as they recognised that the other cluster schools did not have the advantage of a non-teaching senior role dedicated to curriculum-making. Although cluster working was seen as providing opportunities for schools to learn from each other and to coordinate more consistent approaches to curriculum enactment, school-to-school collaboration also revealed variability and was a source of concern in relation to equity of learners' experiences across Wales.

“Cluster meetings have revealed gaps. At first it was a bit of a shock. We've got to take a grip, otherwise it's woolly. We have freedom, not like England, but it's scary... Other schools that haven't mapped out [their curriculum] are walking an invisible tightrope. It's too loose. There's no meat on the bones.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

“We worked with the cluster and we shared work. One thing I did find, [is that] we were really far ahead, and we were really on the ball. I remember coming out of these cluster meetings going, 'we're flying, we're absolutely flying.' So it may be an element of that is actually showing good practice and being confident in ourselves. Let's show what we can do, and hopefully support other schools if they're still on the journey.” (Primary E, Senior Leader)

3.82. However, there was also reluctance in some cases to share expertise and resources with the cluster or with other school networks, given the amount of staff time and effort required to develop these resources. The head of Primary D was hesitant to share their curriculum-making experience and resources with other schools, given that so much time and effort had been invested in this within their federation although, in this case, this attitude was beginning to shift.

“We haven't put ourselves out there. We kept it very much under wraps for a long time because we spent a lot of time, money and effort on it, releasing staff, working together. It took hours and hours and hours of work to create

what we've created. And now we're sort of being a bit braver and sharing bits out there. You know, people are saying 'great, we like it, can we have it?'" (Primary D, Senior Leader)

- 3.83. The importance of good relationships with the wider community was crucial for many schools. Some participants explained that they felt unsupported and uncertain about how to proceed (particularly at the start of the curriculum-making process) and were unsure whether they are making suitable progress. Interactions with the local community and the cluster helped schools compare their progress with other schools in their area, seek support for change, and build the capacity of their staff.

"We have 17 different languages spoken. I would say we are a true mix of children [...] We're working with the community, we're in the community, we have an open-door policy. We have designed a curriculum that is responsive to the local community and student population, which is crucial for ensuring relevance and engagement." (Primary C, Senior Leader)

Collaboration and shared values

- 3.84. Collaboration emerged as a key theme in the successful realisation of Curriculum for Wales. In some cases, collaboration referred to the wider cluster of schools, and in other cases, it related to the benefits that participants identified as arising from being part of a federated school. The practitioners working in federated schools (Primaries D and E) were of the view that their shared approach had been highly positive. Federation was reported to have enabled the sharing of resources and staff, and the schools had a shared context in terms of locality and values. While the Primary D practitioners viewed the two schools as distinct, in that they served learners with different needs, they agreed that they were "singing from the same hymn sheet" as a staff team

"One of the big changes [with the new curriculum] is the organisation of staff across the federation...each member of staff leads an AoLE in both schools. We collaborate." (Primary E, Senior Leader)

- 3.85. Primary E was also part of a federation, and practitioners felt that shared values across the schools supported a cohesive approach to curriculum-making.

"Our federation has been hugely significant in supporting successful curriculum-making. So that has to be a driving factor behind elements of the new curriculum...we don't just go on with that separate[ly]. We've gone right, let's use that [together]." (Primary E, Practitioner)

- 3.86. These examples highlight that school federations can provide effective support for curriculum-making. The evidence indicates that they can foster collaboration and can help reduce the time and effort expended on curriculum-making, since knowledge and resources can be co-produced and easily shared. Further, federation can foster a better understanding of different learners' needs, as was the case at Primary E, in particular.

System conditions which support or hinder actions

- 3.87. The next section considers the role of system conditions, in particular the middle layer that sits between and connects policy and practice. This includes guidance, practitioner networks and professional learning, as well as national-level actors, regulations, resources and support.

Guidance

- 3.88. Most practitioners were of the view that guidance on curriculum-making was insufficient and lacked clarity and specificity. Some participants said that the guidance was overwhelming or difficult to navigate. The term 'woolly' was used independently at three different schools to describe the curriculum documents. The timeline for the introduction of national and regional guidance and resources also caused issues. Practitioners reported that some of what they described as guidance documentation was produced after schools had already designed their curricula, and as such, it was of limited use. They would have preferred it if this guidance had been available to them at the start of the curriculum-making process.

“There was a hell of a lot of documentation to get through, and this is documentation that is ever evolving and ever changing ... it's almost felt a little bit like the goal posts were moving at times where we were trying new approaches and I'd say the first two years of Curriculum for Wales for us was very much trial and error.” (Primary F, Practitioner)

- 3.89. While the participants at Primary C supported the ethos of Curriculum for Wales, they believed that “it's the implementation [that's problematic]” (Primary C, Senior Leader) and cited a lack of timely, high-quality guidance as a key implementation issue.

- 3.90. In some schools, what was described as a lack of clear and timely guidance and supporting documentation resulted in a period of delay while school leaders and practitioners undertook professional learning on curriculum making. The Primary D focus group described how “in terms of what Welsh Government were asking us to do, we were totally left in the dark”. One of the practitioners described attending “session after session after session of training about how to write a curriculum” but “came away blinded by the science and not really sure about how to write a curriculum” (Primary D, Practitioner). In terms of who provided this training, participants noted a mix of Welsh Government¹³, local authority or consortium, and third-party provision.
- 3.91. Practitioners in some schools described how they had attempted to do what they thought was best for their learners, based on their professional judgment, despite feeling that they had been provided with inadequate support and guidance in terms of quality, timing, amount and accessibility. Some practitioners said that external curriculum training from a range of providers had been ‘unhelpful’, that the guidance had left them feeling unsupported, or that there was an abundance of online documents which were difficult to navigate.
- 3.92. Practitioners at Primary H said that they had lacked capacity in curriculum-making, and that participating in the Welsh Government’s Curriculum Design Pilot had been essential for them. Other schools had turned to research or courses and materials developed by third party providers, including independent education consultants. For example, schools reported using ideas from podcasts and resources produced by individuals and organisations in England. Sometimes these were reported as being excellent, as in the example below, but in other cases they were viewed as being of poor quality.

“We very much utilise experts in other areas... We've had to reach out to the brilliant maths hub in Bristol to help us because there's nothing available on our doorstep here. I think there is a lack of expertise for us to be able to access. Who's our maths guru in Wales? Who's our literacy guru in Wales?”
(Primary C, Senior Leader)

¹³ [National Support](#) was introduced by Welsh Government in Autumn 2024, when fieldwork for this research was still underway (Welsh Government, 2024h).

Assessment and qualifications

3.93. The positive impacts of the new progression practices, such as a focus on a holistic view of learners and less emphasis on summative approaches, were mentioned by most participants. This was discussed in detail by many primary school participants. Some schools had a strong emphasis on self-assessment, which in the case of Primary E meant self-assessment and self-evaluation for both staff and learners. At other primary schools, there was a 'whole child' approach:

“[Our] focus is on the 'whole child'. Well-being is the priority, but standards are important. If you've not got a happy child, you've not got standards” (Primary A, Practitioner)

3.94. This holistic approach was regarded by many participants as a substantial change from the previous understanding of assessment:

“[Now, we are] staying away from assessment tools. Instead, good teaching is emphasised, and relationships [are] emphasised. Getting to know learners as people.” (Primary B, Senior Leader)

3.95. Although the holistic approach to assessment was mainly discussed by primary school participants, Secondary K's senior leader stated that “the new assessment approaches in the school allow us to see the individual child behind the data”.

3.96. Many of the primary school participants described the positive impact that these new assessment approaches were having on learners:

“[Learners] now go into lessons knowing what their question is, what and how they are going to go about it, [and] their success criteria.” (Primary E, Senior Leader)

3.97. Nonetheless, some practitioners, particularly those from secondary schools, reported difficulties in interpreting the new assessment expectations, leading to concerns over consistency in measuring learner progress, especially between year groups and between schools.

“[This] was what we were always doing, but it's so much easier when you have a [standard] that you are measuring that progress against. Whereas [the new] curriculum focus goes against that, and it's not about particular [standards], it's much more about a holistic interpretation of where progress is being made. So, I think this has been a challenge for staff.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

3.98. Participants expressed frustrations around the timing of the updated information about assessment and what they regarded as the lack of clarity in the guidance documents, which had implications for curriculum-making and pedagogical approaches. Participants discussed accountability and assessment as interconnected issues, rather than separate in the way set out in [school improvement guidance](#) (Welsh Government, 2024i).

“The assessment [...] has been an absolute nightmare because it's been so woolly. We did not know how success is going to be measured while writing the curriculum; that was never really clarified, and it's not really been clarified to this day.” (Primary D, Practitioner)

“Assessment and teaching overlap. They come hand in hand, whereby [sic] Welsh Government seems to have seen teaching over here, assessment over there, and it hasn't woven together properly [...]” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

3.99. The timing of the decisions and guidance about the new GCSEs was also unhelpful for Secondary M, where an attempt to amalgamate the humanities had been abandoned.

“We only found out last year that they were going to keep the subject specialisms [for GCSEs]. [Learners] need the subject knowledge to take through into GCSE as opposed to an amalgamated knowledge.” (Secondary M, Senior Leader)

3.100. While many of the themes discussed were evident across primary and secondary schools, in all of the secondaries, there were particular tensions and pressures around meeting Curriculum for Wales aspirations while also ensuring that learners attained qualifications and that attainment targets were met.

“GCSEs are so important to us [...] It's the elephant in the room. The real truth of it all is that the students are here for qualifications.” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

3.101. In some cases, curriculum planning started with the knowledge required for qualifications.

“We planned backwards from the A level through to GCSEs and BTECs, and then arrived at our curriculum, so we knew that even if things did change [...] we were still okay. So, we are safe in that knowledge.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

3.102. Secondary N had a different perspective to the qualifications-led approach described at some of the other secondaries, although they did also acknowledge that exam content had a strong influence on what is taught.

“Our approach to curriculum planning has never been to prepare students for an exam. It's to ensure that they're great mathematicians or scientists or historians, in which case, if they are, they will be ready to sit exams in those subjects and they will be able to demonstrate their knowledge and apply that knowledge at a later date.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

3.103. A further issue, as already noted, is that the influence of England's National Curriculum's perceived 'knowledge-rich' approach was apparent in many of the secondaries.

“We do still follow the knowledge-rich English curriculum. At the end of the day, our learners need to leave our school with strong GCSEs and employability skills.” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

3.104. The difficulties outlined by secondary schools in relation to amalgamation of areas of knowledge and the prioritisation of qualifications relates back to the issues noted in 3.7, 3.8 and 3.107 regarding attempts at interdisciplinarity, and views from many schools in the sample about Maths and English being 'too important' to take risks with. It also points to the strong influence, in some schools, of ideas, prevalent in England's school system, about a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum, which may not align with the aspirations for Curriculum for Wales that balance knowledge, skills and experiences.

Equalities

3.105. This section addresses issues around socio-economic inequality, ALN inclusivity, and diversity, and how this has influenced decisions about curriculum and assessment design and pedagogical approaches.¹⁴

3.106. Schools located in contexts of high deprivation, such as Secondary K and Primary G, were conscious of structural inequalities and the need to equip their learners with key knowledge and skills. Secondary K regarded a 'knowledge-rich' approach as the best means of achieving this.

¹⁴ See the separate qualitative study examining how equity and inclusion are being supported through the realisation of Curriculum for Wales for a fuller exploration of these issues.

“The students are coming to us with no cultural capital, and don’t know things like who the Prime Minister is. We want our children to be able to go into a room with middle class people and be able to participate. They need to be knowledge-rich.” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

- 3.107. This point about the necessity of learners being ‘knowledge-rich’ was an overarching educational purpose for this school. The senior leader emphasised knowledge as crucial, regardless of current curriculum policy. This position echoes arguments made in England that access to knowledge is an equity issue ([Gibb, 2021](#); [Department for Education, 2025](#)); that learners need to develop cultural capital, that is to say the knowledge, skills and experience, in order to be able to participate in society. This also demonstrated how existing preconceptions about curriculum can be powerful shapers of the ways in which Curriculum for Wales is interpreted and enacted by senior leaders and practitioners, as noted in 3.64.
- 3.108. Primary G is culturally diverse with a high number of learners with ALN, and a comparatively high proportion of learners who are refugees or whose families are asylum seekers. The decision to retain numeracy and literacy as separate subjects was described as “a huge sacrifice internally, morally and philosophically” by the headteacher, but was viewed as necessary since the baseline level for learners in the “two most fundamental of processes – numbers and language” is very low, and senior leadership considered it essential to ensure learners progress in these.
- 3.109. Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALNCos) participated in several focus groups. Primary B practitioners described a “high level of social need” among their learners, arising from socioeconomic inequalities, and explained that they had a unique blend of families, with a “nice mix of all kinds of cultures, communities and heritage”. The school also participated in other initiatives which sought to promote the inclusion of specific groups and communities. Due to the school’s diversity, it was “known for good practices in inclusion and accessibility”. Senior leaders said that they “knew every single child and their needs in the school”. This had informed their approach to curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment, and their expertise on this diversity-focused approach was sought out by other schools in their networks. For Primary E, inclusion was connected to issues of health and well-being as well as changes to assessment and pedagogical practices.

“We have an emotional health and well-being assessment. We reassess some of our ALN children just to see how their progress is coming on. Before, it was kind of like you’re working at a level 1A or whatever it is. It’s now actually

looking at what progression step they're in and whether they're embedding, they're learning or reflecting upon their learning.” (Primary E, Practitioner)

Time, capacity and professional learning

- 3.110. Curriculum-making, in addition to daily workloads and budget constraints, was noted by many practitioners as a considerable additional pressure. Practitioners at Primary D described being exhausted by the “day job”, and the addition of a curriculum project with a perceived lack of time and resource was said to be extremely demanding. They reported feeling “exhausted” and “beaten down”. This was also reflected in the experiences of Primary C, who also referred to the time invested in curriculum development over many years.

“We’ve all embraced this curriculum to make it work. But the time that it has taken, with [existing] workloads... If I clock the number of hours we've spent on designing this curriculum over the last five years, it is vast.” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

- 3.111. Many senior leaders in the discussions observed, in both positive and negative ways, a great emphasis in their school strategy and resourcing on professional development for all staff.

“In the last five years, the majority of our professional development time [has been on] the curriculum [...] We're crying out for more professional learning time to implement this curriculum and to get it right and to get assessment right and to get communication right, and [we are doing all of this] while doing all of our normal day-to-day on the same amount of time we've always had.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

- 3.112. Finding sufficient time for staff development and learning was identified as a constraint by practitioners in most schools. For Secondary K, this was their biggest issue, even though the participants reported that they had allowed more time for professional learning than in previous years. Inducting new staff into the school’s curriculum model was identified as a particular challenge, since the model is unique to the school, an issue arising from the flexibility and variation afforded by Curriculum for Wales.

“Staff have embraced the Curriculum for Wales changes but need more time to really explore this ... but we just can’t give it to them because of budget and time.” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

3.113. Two schools introduced asymmetric timetabling to free up time for professional development opportunities (Primaries A and B). For Primary A, the restructuring meant that practitioners had a split between the number of Friday afternoons spent in school and Fridays which were free for them to work together on planning, mapping out the curriculum, or focusing on “well-being for teachers” (Primary A, Practitioner).

“Time is something we do get [at this school]. We have good work/life balance. If you want to do research, they give you the time to do it in school, so you don’t burn out. We don’t have staff meetings. Everything unnecessary is stripped back by the headteacher.” (Primary B, Practitioner)

3.114. Practitioners at some schools were concerned that the impact of additional curriculum-making on an already stretched workload may be a contributing factor in the difficulties in recruiting and retaining new practitioners. These practitioners reflected on the consequences of this for the profession more broadly, an issue that is also explored above (see 3.69-3.70).

Resourcing implications

3.115. Resourcing constraints were reported by many to play a role in limiting the ambitions for curriculum making, including pedagogy. For example, aspirations to provide authentic learning experiences, which were curriculum focused but took place beyond the school classroom within the community, may have to be tempered due to a lack of available expertise or expensive materials.

“Welsh Government have said they want to try and offer a wider range of rich experiences but those experiences cost something. There's a lot of evidence of schools who are unable to deliver what they'd like to.” (Secondary M, Practitioner)

3.116. Some practitioners spoke about how funding impacted on equity issues, which in turn had implications for schools’ capacity to develop and implement new curricular and pedagogical approaches. At Primary D, practitioners discussed how financial constraints impacted on their ambitions for pedagogical innovation “when you are trying to implement experiential learning, which is resource hungry”. They explained that experiential learning can involve a considerable amount of classroom materials.

At the same time, “schools [are] running with a deficit budget which reduced staff” (Primary D, Practitioner), making it even more challenging to achieve change.

Regional consortia

3.117. The contribution of regional consortia in supporting curriculum design was explicitly raised in several schools, providing a mixed picture of their value.¹⁵ In three schools, there was a view that the regional consortia provided good support. These schools referred to the support provided by improvement partners, and support provided by regional consortium Area/subject specialists on curriculum design. These three schools also noted that the regular training courses delivered by consortia were beneficial as a source of information – signposting to schools to “helpful resources” – and in facilitating networking opportunities.

“Just this week I was on a course on whole-school assessment linked to Curriculum for Wales delivered by [deleted] [the regional consortium]. The model they tend to deliver involves having a morning of presentations and break-out groups and then in the afternoon, a mix of primary and secondary schools are given slots to talk about their approaches and good practice. So, they are supporting a shared understanding of progression by giving opportunities for schools to share their experiences.” (Secondary Q, Senior Leader)

3.118. However, apart from those three schools, all other schools considered that the regional consortia were of limited help, and practitioners at three different schools stated that the consortia were of no help at all.

“The consortium have not been helpful. They've just come to us with a toolkit for designing [the curriculum]. We're in our third year of actually teaching the curriculum!” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

“To be frank, the consortium was not good enough. They shared lots of good practice, but not steeped in research or impact, so we have gone our own way and done our own thing and have showed the consortium. They now share the school's curriculum with the local authority despite the fact the school did it

¹⁵ At the time that fieldwork was carried out as part of this study, the roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales – including the functions of regional consortia – were subject to ongoing reform. The followed on from a review of school improvement arrangements, commissioned by Welsh Government and led by Professor Dylan Jones. Following the outcomes of the review, the Cabinet Secretary for Education confirmed in a written statement in October 2024 the intention ‘to bring together the current functions of the National Academy for Education Leadership and some of the functions of the regional consortia and local authority partnerships into a new national body. The body will be responsible for designing and delivering professional learning and leadership support on a national level in response to changing practitioner and Welsh Government priorities.’

without the consortium... They shared resources too late, the school had already done them and they should have shared four to five years ago.”
(Secondary K, Senior Leader)

Pioneer schools

3.119. In some cases, schools’ local networks (such as clusters, consortia and other connections) included schools which had been Curriculum for Wales pioneer schools.¹⁶ At several schools, there was a view that pioneer schools could have better supported capacity-building and shared their experiences of curriculum-making with other schools. One school that had been part of the pioneer school model found it beneficial, whereas those that had not been viewed it as less helpful.

“The work [of] the pioneer schools didn't get distributed or fed back into the system early enough. We probably should have been made to visit Pioneers.”
(Secondary J, Senior Leader)

3.120. When discussing sources of support for curriculum-making, some practitioners felt that both the regional consortia and the pioneer schools had the potential to share learning and foster networks between schools, but that this was a missed, or underdeveloped, opportunity.

¹⁶ Following the publication of Professor Graham Donaldson’s report, *Successful Futures*, the Welsh Government recruited pioneer schools from across Wales to support the design of the Curriculum for Wales. These schools contributed to one of three workstreams, focusing on curriculum and assessment design; professional learning; or the Digital Competence Framework.

Consequences

3.121. This section explores the following research question: 'To what extent and in what ways are the actions being taken in response to the new curriculum supporting the realisation of Curriculum for Wales aspirations?' This relates to the 'Consequences' element of the ToA approach used for analysing the findings (see 2.2). A high-level summary of key points is provided below; this is then followed by a more detailed discussion.

Section summary: Consequences

All schools in the sample used the flexibility afforded by Curriculum for Wales to develop their own approaches to curriculum development and enactment.

Most schools had moved towards a more holistic and interdisciplinary approach to learning. In some cases, however, the approach to curricula did not fully reflect the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales as a process model in which there is an integrated approach rather than separate subjects. For instance, some secondary schools had initially attempted an integrated, interdisciplinary approach but had subsequently reasserted separate subjects and/or 'knowledge-rich' approaches. A majority of primary schools were less willing to take risks with the subjects of numeracy and literacy and tended to treat these as a special case, relative to other subjects.

Participants were of the opinion that, overall, children were more engaged in their learning following the introduction of Curriculum for Wales.

Participants believed that learners have perceived a change from a content-based curriculum (education as transmission of knowledge and culture) to one which is process-oriented (education as developmental).

Some schools have developed stronger connections to their local communities and an emphasis on cynefin as part of their curriculum-making.

In many cases, additional time and resources have been dedicated to professional learning, and a culture of learning and enquiry has developed. Many participants described this shift as transformative, and that embedding research and enquiry-based approaches throughout the school had been an enriching experience for both staff and learners.

However, participants raised concerns about the equity of experiences for learners between different schools. Some participants said that schools that had been doing well prior to Curriculum for Wales were flourishing, whereas schools that faced greater challenges were

struggling with the change. These participants expressed the view that educational inequities could potentially widen, unless school capacity issues were addressed.

A few participants were concerned that standards in numeracy and literacy were declining and attributed this to challenges arising from curriculum change. Other participants reflected on the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges posed by introducing Curriculum for Wales during this time, which could not have been predicted.

Concerns about inequity

3.122. Several participants raised concerns about the fairness of learners' experiences across Wales under the new curriculum arrangements. Specifically, senior leaders were concerned that some schools lacked resources and faced challenge which could impact on their ability to fully realise the ambitions of Curriculum for Wales over time.

“I do worry about the equity of provision across Wales. That is my key message to you today: equity of provision, and who is actually measuring the impact of this curriculum, because everybody's had this ‘emperor's cloak’ [attitude], isn't it wonderful, isn't it great?” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

“I said when Curriculum for Wales came in, the good schools are going to get better because of this, and the schools that that are struggling anyway with pedagogy, learning and teaching are going to get worse. And that's been my worry from the outset, that we get a bigger spectrum.” (Secondary O, Senior Leader)

3.123. Senior leaders flagged concerns about knock-on effects of inequitable curriculum realisation on standards and attainment. Primary D's senior leader thought that a perceived decline in attainment could be attributed to a lack of direction, particularly in relation to evaluation and implementation, because “no teacher in Wales truly knows what ‘good’ looks like” (Primary D, Senior Leader).

3.124. More broadly, some participants were concerned that attainment had declined since the introduction of Curriculum for Wales. For example, a senior leader at Primary D was supportive of the aims of Curriculum for Wales, but feared that, if Curriculum for Wales was perceived to “fail” (i.e., a decline in standards), that there would be subsequent policy change back to what they termed a “box-ticking” approach to curriculum delivery. Hence, the concern was not about Curriculum for Wales as

such, but about what the senior leader perceived as the gap between curriculum intentions and implementation:

“What I feel is the saddest thing of it all is so much about Curriculum for Wales is good, but the message was lost in translation. The message just wasn’t clear enough. So everyone has got a different message...And then standards [in reading] will plummet, and then the good things about Curriculum for Wales, the baby, that will get thrown out with the bathwater, and then we will go back to box-ticking.” (Primary D, Senior Leader)

- 3.125. Practitioners at Primary D echoed this concern and said that there appeared to be a view that progress in literacy and numeracy had declined.

“There is a perspective from parents...that reading and mathematics abilities and progress...have declined in Wales since Curriculum for Wales was introduced.” (Primary D, Practitioner)

- 3.126. A few participants reflected on the negative impact of COVID-19, given that Curriculum for Wales had been introduced around the time of the pandemic. They noted that the experience of lockdown had ongoing implications, particularly for the youngest learners. In this example, practitioners at Primary F discussed the key consequences of the pandemic for their school, namely the difficult transition to a new curriculum and the longer-term effects on learning and on children’s well-being.

“[Curriculum for Wales was introduced] just post-COVID, [and] obviously it was a very difficult time to introduce a new curriculum because we were also battling with the fallout from COVID... For our younger learners it is very much about well-being, and their happiness in school comes first and they’re enjoying their learning. After COVID, so many of the children found it very, very challenging to come back into school, and we had lots of children that just weren’t being sent when they were supposed to be. So the head made sure [to] push the well-being as much as you can get.” (Primary F, Practitioner)

- 3.127. Similarly, the senior leader at Secondary K believed that “COVID caused a lag in progress [with the new curriculum] in terms of time, resources, pupil contexts and priorities shifting”.

- 3.128. Some other participants discussed the effect of the ongoing ‘cost of living’ crisis and felt that, due to increasing socioeconomic inequity, “children are more difficult [and] parents are more difficult... [The] cost of living is a significant pressure’ (Primary D, Practitioner). The overall view at Primary D was that Curriculum for Wales was the “right idea at the wrong time” (Primary D, Practitioner).

- 3.129. It should be emphasised that these comments reflected participants' own perceptions about attainment, or opinions that they had heard from others regarding this issue.

Learners' experiences

- 3.130. Overall, participants reported that learners were more engaged in their learning and demonstrated greater flexibility under the new pedagogical approaches. It should be noted again, however, that discussions were conducted with practitioners and senior leaders, not parents/carers and/or learners.
- 3.131. Most primary school practitioners felt that their learners had had a positive experience of Curriculum for Wales. They cited learner engagement in curriculum-making, ownership of learning, and learners' increased confidence and ability to articulate what they have learned and pose meaningful questions. Pedagogical innovations, such as a greater focus on enquiry-based and authentic learning experiences, were popular with learners and parents/carers, according to some practitioners.

“[There has been] positivity from parents about increased opportunities for authentic learning, such as a farm to fork agenda in a rural community.”
(Primary G, Senior Leader)

- 3.132. Many schools focused on incorporating real-life experiences and applications as part of their curriculum, in an effort to make learning more authentic and engaging for learners, as per Curriculum for Wales aims. Part of this engagement often included a holistic and learner-centred approach, emphasised by both senior leadership and practitioners as integral to new school strategies and curriculum design. A learner-centred orientation was evidenced in the use of enquiry-based approaches and the use of ongoing feedback between learners, parents/carers, and practitioners through surveys and learner voice events.

“The children love it [Curriculum for Wales]. They absolutely love the opportunity...to make sure that their voices are heard, that it goes with their interests.” (Primary C, Senior Leader)

“From a teacher's perspective, I feel that they're getting a much better experience throughout the school in all subjects. Most students will talk about things and say, 'oh yeah, we're talking about that in history as well'. They're making connections between the subjects.” (Secondary N, Practitioner)

3.133. Discussions revealed a range of approaches taken by many schools to incorporate real-life contexts and experiences as part of curriculum delivery. This was done to varying degrees and was often interpreted as aligning with learners' lives and communities. Practices such as local educational trips, school events with parents and community members, and local Welsh cultural heritage were cited as successful approaches to real-life contextual engagement for learners. Participants shared the benefits of building connections with families and the wider community.

“We did a big survey with students... there was a question about how many children speak Welsh in their homes, [and] for food, there was a question about what types of meals they're eating, how often they're going out, different experiences that they may have, their beliefs, their views. And that was the foundation for us of being able to have a better understanding of our community and engage with students in a meaningful way.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

3.134. In this example, learner surveys have provided a better understanding of the community, feeding this into the development of a more engaging, representative and diversified curriculum. This has also facilitated reflection on identity, belonging and the concept of 'cynefin'.¹⁷

“[We aimed to] diversify the curriculum. Different ethnicities are represented within our curriculum, but it probably was at the expense of not placing enough emphasis on, actually, we are a school in Wales. And cynefin is about embracing being part of a Welsh community, no matter what your background, what your values, your belief.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

3.135. A more cautious view about the impact of Curriculum for Wales was expressed at Primary A, where it was felt that their learners' experience would be good regardless of the curriculum model.

“I would say [the learners are] positive. But they would still be positive if it was the old curriculum. [Our] pupils have a good attitude to learning.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

¹⁷ For further information on cynefin and diversity and inclusion, see [Welsh Government](#), (2022c) Minority ethnic communities, contributions and Cynefin in the new curriculum

3.136. Secondaries K and M also had qualified views about whether Curriculum for Wales was having a positive impact on their learners and felt that this might become more apparent as time progressed.

“Learners [are] starting to be a bit more self-reflecting about the work that they're doing... Maybe over [the next few] years we will see that [positive change] a bit better.” (Secondary K, Senior Leader)

3.137. Generally, secondary leaders and practitioners said that although they had observed some positive changes in their learners, such as in the example from Secondary K where the participant felt that Curriculum for Wales was supporting learners to have a more realistic perception of their strengths and weaknesses, the impact of Curriculum for Wales on learners' experiences over the longer term remains to be seen.

3.138. Some participants expressed concerns about the effect of curricular variation on transitions and learner progress. Secondary school leaders and practitioners discussed this issue in relation to the transition between primary and secondary.

“Each curriculum is bespoke, and so expected progress will inherently look different everywhere. I think that is a big challenge for transition leaders and Year 7 to make sure that when you [have] 254 pupils coming in [to start secondary school] that expected progress in those six Areas looks roughly the same. I think there needs to be time given to exploring this.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

3.139. Some practitioners identified a lack of deep connection between primary and secondary schools. They considered curriculum variation to have implications for learners' progression and for educational equity.

“Pupils feed into secondary schools and there's no consistency as [they] all have been taught differently. The layers [of learning] are lost for a couple of years. Our standards are high, but at secondary, it's stripped back.” (Primary A, Practitioner)

3.140. Secondary N used their network, in this case a small cluster of only two primary schools, to influence views, experiences and practices.

“The conceptual knowledge that we're working towards is the same conceptual knowledge that we can then build on when they come up to us in Year 7. And the primaries can work back, and the primaries have really changed. [The cluster primaries] have been very, very receptive, really wanting to learn from [us].” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

- 3.141. Secondary N had concerns that the cluster primary schools' learner-led approach would result in content choice that reflected primary school learners' interests, but which was not relevant or aligned with progression at secondary. At Primary D, there was a view that progress in reading and maths, for learners aged 3-7, had declined across Wales since the introduction of Curriculum for Wales. There was a suggestion that this could be attributed to a lack of direction in the realisation of Curriculum for Wales, because "no teacher in Wales truly knows what 'good' looks like" (Primary D, Practitioner).
- 3.142. Most schools stated they sought greater ongoing feedback from learners and parents/carers as a result of Curriculum for Wales. In some cases, learners had opportunities for this feedback to co-construct curriculum choices and design. Learner voice on these matters was sought differently, and to different levels, across schools. Greater opportunities for feedback were reported to be positively received by learners, with practitioners and senior leaders at a few schools stating that learners "vocalising what they would like" in their curriculum was a substantial shift in educational priorities in curriculum design and in pedagogy.

"[There is a sense now] that children enjoy authentic, real-life experiences and that the enquiry-based learning approach allows [the children] to have input in what they learn." (Primary G, Senior Leader)

Practitioners' experiences

- 3.143. Overall, the positioning of practitioners in curriculum making in Curriculum for Wales has, ultimately and according to participants, facilitated meaningful, contextually relevant learning through a variety of pathways in different schools. Many participants shared that Curriculum for Wales changes in their schools had provided space for greater professional development and collaboration, resulting in professional satisfaction. One headteacher shared that staff in their schools "are really excited now that they can try out their own ideas".

"Over the past few years I finally feel like I have the freedom to be the teacher I always wanted and was meant to be through Curriculum for Wales." (Primary H, Senior Leader)

"I love Curriculum for Wales...you can have a passion, [it is] exciting. We get to learn with the children and make it relevant to the world and what is needed." (Primary B, Practitioner)

3.144. In some schools, practitioners had engaged more deeply with their roles, working in collaboration with the senior leadership, other schools (including in federations), external academics and Welsh Government-led initiatives and further learning to enhance their practice. Staff at some schools reported that they were involved in curriculum-making and evaluation in a way that they had previously not been.

“I’m really pleased that staff now have the knowledge, skills and experience to feel like they are evaluating their curriculum content. Before three years ago, we weren’t thinking really about curriculum content.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

3.145. At most schools, considerable time and effort was reported to have been invested in practitioners’ professional learning. Many practitioners said that there was a culture of learning at their schools, and that they regarded themselves as reflective practitioners. A focus on practitioner flexibility was a crucial element in developing and sustaining Curriculum for Wales. It should be noted that a number of participants used the term ‘autonomy’ to refer to the flexibility afforded by Curriculum for Wales.

“A strong focus of our curriculum has been giving staff autonomy to decide what they’re going to teach, how they’re going to teach it and in what order. So, when it comes to curriculum design, it’s been about that ‘why’, then with decision-making happening at subject level, because they [i.e. staff] are the specialists.” (Secondary N, Senior Leader)

“The headteacher always talks about slowness to learning [and] matches what the children want in terms of enquiry and pace. This is really powerful as a teacher, to be able to have autonomy to decide when you want to do it. Interrupting this would be like interrupting children’s play.” (Primary B, Practitioner)

3.146. At Secondary O, Curriculum for Wales had been an impetus in developing a culture of professional enquiry and practitioner agency, although this was partly in response to what the headteacher regarded as the inadequacy of the support surrounding Curriculum for Wales.

“We took the ingredients of good teachers, what teachers have in their toolbox, and we developed an enquiry approach [...] We literally have looked at about 16 different pedagogical approaches, researched them. Staff have sort of become little experts in them. But that’s been through our own enquiry processes, rather than anything that was written in the curriculum guidance.” (Secondary O, Senior Leader)

3.147. All senior leaders reported the need for greater resources and time to maintain their focus on supporting practitioners as curriculum designers, to sustain the positive benefits of the shift and effectively address gaps and drawbacks. However, there were concerns from a few participants about the potential for curriculum policy change if Curriculum for Wales is perceived to ‘fail’.

“But, we have an underlying worry that sits in the background [...] Where will it go next? Will [Welsh Government] make some changes that really make a U-turn [on curriculum policy]?” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

3.148. This view was also echoed in the comments quoted above from the Primary D practitioner about the risk of a return to “box ticking” approaches to curriculum if the Curriculum for Wales approach is not deemed to have been successful. Similarly, Primary G, practitioners were “unsure if [we] have got ‘it’ right, as all schools are doing this differently”, and were concerned that curriculum policy might change as a result of concerns about these perceived differences in approach.

Parent/carers engagement

3.149. Practitioners explained that Curriculum for Wales had provided an opportunity to involve parents/carers in the curriculum design process. Many schools shared the positive outcomes of ongoing, open and reciprocal communication with parents/carers. In some cases, participants said that parents/carers had a positive response to Curriculum for Wales aspirations around learner well-being and engagement. However, changes to assessment practices were more challenging.

“Communicating [change] been a significant conceptual shift for parents, who are used to saying ‘he’s an A* child, or a C child’.” (Secondary L, Senior Leader)

3.150. Some respondents described tensions between the school’s Curriculum for Wales aims and parental/carers expectations around qualifications and summative assessment. For instance, Primary A’s headteacher noted that “we realised that we have not supported [the parents] to understand [that] assessment is not just percentages”. There had been a similar experience at Primary B.

“[We have had] questions from a few parents on why the school isn’t traditional... parents wanting to know the children’s rankings in the class.” (Primary B, Senior Leader)

3.151. The senior leader at Secondary K observed that there were difficulties in communicating the message to parents/carers that “[all children] can progress in different ways”. At Primary G, there was a view that Curriculum for Wales supports meaningful parental engagement in a range of areas.

“Curriculum for Wales provides opportunities to change mindsets of parents away from traditional views...and [this in turn] allows Headteachers to solve wider problems, such as a falling pupil roll.” (Primary G, Senior Leader)

3.152. It should be noted again that these findings are the perceptions of senior leaders and practitioners, and not views gathered directly from parents/carers

4. Conclusions

Curriculum and assessment design

What factors are driving curriculum and assessment priorities, for example local context, the needs of learners, four purposes and statements of what matters?

- 4.1. A key factor influencing curriculum and assessment priorities was participants' engagement with the ethos and principles of Curriculum for Wales. In most cases, participants felt that the curriculum making process had enabled them to engage with questions about the purpose and value of education, often described as 'what do we want our children to learn, and why?' These considerations and reflections informed the development of locally responsive curricula focused on learners' needs.

What impact are these drivers having on the different stages of learning and development?

- 4.2. An issue mentioned by senior leaders and practitioners at some secondary schools was that differences in curricula presented challenges in relation to learner progression from primary to secondary. This was because the development of local, unique curricula at primary level resulted in learners having varying knowledge, skills and experiences of assessment when they progressed to secondary education. Although it could be argued that this is an issue that predates the introduction of Curriculum for Wales and is found across different education systems, it was specifically identified by participants as an area that was affecting them.

How are the four purposes, cross-curricular skills, cross-cutting themes and integral skills being considered in curriculum design?

- 4.3. Key features of Curriculum for Wales, namely the four purposes, integral skills, cross-curricular skills, and cross-cutting themes, featured in all schools' curriculum-making processes. Participants used terms such as 'themes', 'skills', 'concepts' and 'interdisciplinary approaches' to describe these. There was evidence of the four purposes being used to underpin curriculum-making, and they seem to have

inspired a focus on educational purposes in many of the schools in the sample. Many schools adapted the four purposes, for example using them as part of a sense-making process, which in some cases resulted in them developing ‘their own’ purposes. In a few cases, these purposes were co-created with learners.

What assessment approaches and methods are being used and why?

- 4.4. Participants reported a mix of different approaches, including what they described as peer assessment and self-evaluation. At many schools, approaches which might be viewed as more traditional, such as literacy and numeracy tests, were also being used in combination with what could be regarded as more Curriculum for Wales-aligned approaches. Some participants said that the importance of literacy and numeracy, which in part seemed to derive from ‘external pressures’ such as attainment statistics and inspection, had contributed to the continued use of tests. Participants from all of the secondary schools highlighted tensions between meeting the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales and ensuring learners gained qualifications. Some participants explained that whilst they agreed with the ethos of Curriculum for Wales and had aligned their curricula accordingly, nevertheless, qualifications were of paramount importance to them and to their learners and parents/carers. As such, ‘exams’ had to remain the focus. However, it should be noted that Curriculum for Wales encompasses a blend of approaches to assessment. For instance, this includes the use of online personalised assessments in reading and numeracy.

What is the role of collaboration between schools in their curriculum and assessment design and to what extent is this work being done between schools?

- 4.5. Many participants emphasised the importance of collaboration, whether this was in the form of support from their cluster, being in a formal federation, or engagement in a wider network, such as regional consortia. Collaboration had many benefits, including the sharing of resources and ideas which could then be adapted to schools’ unique contexts. Several participants said that the support available from local consortia was not always relevant or timely.

To what extent is the Curriculum for Wales Guidance Framework sufficient to enable schools to design their curricula within and across Areas effectively?

- 4.6. Overall, participants said that Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance and supporting documentation was of varying use and relevance. Some participants said that it was insufficient to enable them to design their curricula within and across Areas effectively. Some participants said that, in their view, the guidance was too vague, or that it had not been available to them at the time when it would have been most helpful, namely, at the start of the curriculum making process. Others said that the documentation was overwhelming or difficult to navigate or expressed frustration about changes to guidance. This perceived lack of clear or timely guidance contributed to some practitioners' uncertainty and feelings of being left 'in the dark'.

To what extent and in what way do views, experiences and practices differ between different types of practitioners and/or school, and why?

- 4.7. In general, practitioners and school leaders welcomed the freedom and flexibility afforded by Curriculum for Wales, while at the same time many of them had concerns about variability and equity of experience across Wales. Some practitioners felt overwhelmed by curriculum-making demands and unsupported by national and regional guidance, resources and networks (particularly the consortia).
- 4.8. Notably, a distinction has emerged between what might be termed 'knowledge-rich' approaches and learner needs-based curricula. The former was valued by some secondaries in the sample. This also affected the curricular frameworks in these secondaries, since attempts at interdisciplinary approaches had, in many cases, been attempted and subsequently abandoned. Subject specialisms were regarded by all of the secondaries in the sample as necessary for supporting the in-depth, specialist knowledge required for qualifications. In contrast, the primaries in the sample generally emphasised the learner-needs approach and found it easier to construct curricula that better reflected Curriculum for Wales's emphasis on interdisciplinarity and cross-cutting themes.

- 4.9. It is also important to note that, where effective and high-quality middle tier support was lacking, effective leadership played a disproportionate role. Indeed, some participants said that successful curriculum change would not have been possible without strong, dynamic leadership.

To what extent are views, experiences and practices changing over time, and why?

- 4.10. Participants across all of the schools said that there had been considerable, and in some cases substantial, changes. Most schools had developed new assessment frameworks and pedagogical approaches to support learning. There was a new or increased emphasis on research or enquiry-based approaches and local relevance, in particular. The focus on cynefin was also welcomed by some participants. Considerable time was invested in supporting practitioners' knowledge and skills in relation to new approaches, in some cases leading to a sense of being 'overwhelmed'.

Pedagogy

To what extent and in what ways have the pedagogical principles been used in schools and what is the effect of this?

- 4.11. The twelve pedagogical principles were used to a certain extent by most of the schools in the sample. In many cases, the principles were used during the initial stages of curriculum planning to inform senior leaders' and practitioners' sense-making processes. Some schools developed what they described as their own principles (using terms such as "pillars of pedagogy") which were influenced by the twelve principles, if not exactly identical to them. Generally, participants said that they welcomed the principles underpinning Curriculum for Wales, particularly in relation to pedagogy. Almost all of the practitioners supported the pedagogical changes and had a good understanding of their purpose and value, and most participants said that learners seemed to enjoy the new approaches to learning and teaching.

To what extent do practitioners have the knowledge and skills to understand the pedagogical principles and use these to inform learning and teaching?

- 4.12. Most participants reported that the introduction of Curriculum for Wales required substantial investment in professional learning, particularly in relation to curriculum-making. In contrast, practitioners generally felt more confident that they had existing knowledge and skills regarding pedagogy. In some cases, practitioners had undertaken professional learning about enquiry or research-informed pedagogical approaches. Many participants said they shared innovative pedagogical ideas and resources through local networks, such as clusters and regional consortia.

To what extent has Curriculum for Wales enabled practitioners to bring forward different approaches to learning, and what difference do they think it has made?

- 4.13. Most participants said that new approaches to pedagogy had resulted in learners engaging more meaningfully, demonstrating an increased sense of ownership and enthusiasm about their learning. Many schools had incorporated participatory elements in their learning, involving learners and also parents/carers and communities in curriculum design. Locating the school 'in its community' was a common theme in the discussions, whether done through co-design, learning experiences, or aligning learner skill development with community priorities. In general, these developments align well with Curriculum for Wales's aims for education to be flexible, relevant, experiential and responsive to local contexts and learner outcomes.

To what extent and in what way do views, experiences and practices differ between different types of practitioners and/or school, and why?

- 4.14. Where schools reported successes with their pedagogical changes, as with curriculum making and assessment innovation the key factors were good leadership and an inclusive, supportive environment where staff have a shared vision and practitioner agency and professional enquiry are valued and encouraged. Networks (for instance, clusters and federations) were considered to be highly beneficial for

sharing resources and knowledge, providing space for discussion, and providing direction where this may be lacking.

- 4.15. Although senior leaders and practitioners recognised the value of Curriculum for Wales, many struggled with structural issues of budget constraints and insufficient time and capacity. This produced variation and impacted on their ability to support innovative approaches. The effect of these constraints was of particular concern in areas of higher deprivation, and for learners already facing other challenges to their learning.
- 4.16. Collaboration made a substantial difference to schools' experiences of curriculum-making, whether this was internal or external (federations, clusters and other networks). In particular, federation structures may provide a means of supporting smaller schools otherwise lacking in capacity and leadership, and this may have particular relevance for rural schools, which typically have small learner numbers.
- 4.17. The question of whether, to what extent and why views, experiences and practices are changing over time is something that future research could address. It is difficult to get a sense of the extent to which school practices and practitioners' views and experiences are changing over time without undertaking a longitudinal study. However, as noted in the findings, some schools had modified their initial Curriculum for Wales-based approaches to curriculum design. For example, several secondaries had attempted to introduce an interdisciplinary model, which they regarded as being aligned to Curriculum for Wales but had subsequently abandoned this and returned to a subject-based approach). Some primaries chose to teach maths and English as discrete subjects, but with cross-curricular approaches for other areas of learning.

Overarching conclusions

- 4.18. The actions undertaken by schools support the realisation of Curriculum for Wales's aims in part. All schools had undertaken a large amount of work to design a new or revised curriculum. However, they all had different approaches and there was considerable variation in how these curricula look, their starting points, their underlying theories, their priorities and emphasis, and the amount of progress that had been made.

- 4.19. Curriculum for Wales has provided an impetus for schools to focus on educational purposes (for example, what are we learning, and why?), and to explore different teaching, learning and assessment styles. All schools undertook changes to their curriculum, assessment practices and pedagogy. While some welcomed the freedom afforded by Curriculum for Wales, others found it to be challenging, particularly given the amount of time, capacity, knowledge and resources that curriculum-making requires. All schools were taking action to realise the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales as they interpreted them.
- 4.20. At some schools, practitioners had a more sceptical view of Curriculum for Wales or felt that the Framework lacked specificity. For some schools, this scepticism or perceived vagueness led to senior leaders deciding on what they saw as 'best' for their learners; as one headteacher commented, "whether this aligns with what was originally intended for Curriculum for Wales is a different matter" (Primary D). This issue of differing interpretations of the aims of Curriculum for Wales was a key theme in most of the discussions. For some schools, the question of what was 'best' for their learners led to a prioritisation of what could be perceived as a traditional approach (for example, so-called 'knowledge-rich' approaches, separation and prioritising of literacy and numeracy), and/or retaining aspects of the previous curriculum that were perceived to 'work'. Some schools attempted to merge these different agendas, citing the freedoms afforded by Curriculum for Wales as an opportunity for doing so. In some cases, however, these decisions arose from what was perceived an absence of timely and useful guidance and other supporting documentation, particularly in relation to evaluation and assessment.
- 4.21. Structural factors such as socio-economic inequality had influenced schools' thinking and approaches to curriculum making. Primary schools, particularly those in areas with higher concentrations of learners impacted by poverty, tended to focus on teaching numeracy and literacy as discrete subjects, as these were deemed 'too important' to take risks with.
- 4.22. Overall, the research found support for Curriculum for Wales principles amongst senior leaders and practitioners, tempered by a recognition of the practical constraints that have complicated the pathway to successful realisation. Practitioners and senior leaders were mostly positive about the potential and observed benefits of Curriculum for Wales. However, participants from across all schools also emphasised the need for increased support and resources to sustain

these developments, and to address gaps so that all schools can deliver equitable outcomes for learners in Wales.

Areas for consideration

4.23. The key areas for consideration arising from the research are as follows:

- Effective curriculum leadership is crucial. A shared vision for change supports successful curriculum-making and new approaches to assessment and pedagogy, and effective leaders play a key role in ensuring that this happens. They are also vital in creating the spaces and processes for collaborative working. Welsh Government should consider how strong curriculum leadership can be made available in all settings. Curriculum-making is a time and resource-intensive process in a context when schools are already stretched.
- External expertise/support at the middle tier has been shown in many countries to be a key factor in supporting successful curriculum-making in schools, particularly in the sense making phase (namely, where to start, what to do).¹⁸ The middle tier can help build practitioner capacity and knowledge in curriculum-making, assessment and pedagogy where it might otherwise be lacking, as well as offering a forum to produce resources for curriculum development and enactment. Welsh Government should consider how this can be made available when schools require it. Collaborative processes and spaces to develop practitioner agency also emerged as highly important. Welsh Government should consider how the middle tier could better support practitioner agency.
- Some schools have adopted a learner-led, or learner-influenced, approach to curriculum-making. Welsh Government should consider what resources, time and support should be made available so that all learners in Wales have the opportunity and the capacity to engage in active, meaningful curriculum-making.
- The current approach to assessment adopted by schools includes a blend of different formative and summative methods, some of which seem inconsistent

¹⁸ For example, see Priestley, M. Alvunger, D, Philippou, S. & Soini, T. (2021). Curriculum Making in Europe: Policy and Practice Across Diverse Contexts. Bingley: Emerald.

with the vision and aspirations of Curriculum for Wales. Welsh Government should consider whether the assessment system (especially secondary phase qualifications) is appropriately aligned with the aspirations of Curriculum for Wales.

- Communication regarding statutory guidance and supporting documentation needs to be improved. Some participants expressed concerns about the relevance, quality and timing of guidance. A few participants said that the amount of guidance and other documentation was overwhelming or difficult to keep up to date with, and they felt that it was changing too often ('moving the goalposts').

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Annex B: Details of schools in the sample

Primary A

Free School Meals¹⁹: Average

ALN²⁰: High

English as an Additional Language²¹: 'Not diverse' (practitioner-reported information)

Size²²: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: Senior leadership team (SLT) discussion and practitioner focus group (FG) [n=3]

Primary B

Free School Meals: Below average

ALN: High

English as an Additional Language: Below average

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion and practitioner FG [n=5]

Primary C

Free School Meals: Below average

ALN: Low

English as an Additional Language: Above average

¹⁹ Free school meals statistics from Estyn and [My Local School](#). Figures have been rounded to avoid identification. May refer to a three-year average.

²⁰ ALN/SEN data are drawn from the [2024 Pupil-level Annual School Census \(PLASC\)](#) (Welsh Government, 2024f). Data was not published for schools where there are between one and four learners with some categories of ALN/SEN. For these schools, an assumed value of 2 learners was assigned to enable a total number and percentage of learners with ALN/SEN to be derived. Schools with 7% or less are considered to have a 'Low' number of ALN learners, 7.1% to 14% as 'Medium' and greater than 14% 'High'. These thresholds have been used so that around a third of schools and settings fall into each category.

²¹ EAL statistics from Estyn and [My Local School](#). Where EAL statistics are not available for the school, we have relied on information provided by the participants.

²² Based on Estyn size ranges for primary and secondary schools.

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: Joint SLT and practitioner discussion [n=2]

Primary D (Federation)

Free School Meals:

School 1: Below average

School 2: Below average

ALN: Low

School 1: Medium

School 2: Medium

English as an Additional Language: *'Not diverse' (practitioner-reported information)*

Size:

School 1: Medium

School 2: Small

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion and practitioner FG [n=4]

Primary E (Federation)

Free School Meals:

School 1: Above average

School 2: Average

ALN: Low

School 1: Medium

School 2: Low

English as an Additional Language:

School 1: Above average

School 2: Above average

Size:

School 1: Medium

School 2: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion and practitioner FG [n=5]

Primary F

Free School Meals: Above average

ALN: Medium

English as an Additional Language: Above average

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion and practitioner FG [n=3]

Primary G

Free School Meals: Above average

ALN: Medium

English as an Additional Language: 'Diverse' (practitioner-reported information)

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion and practitioner FG [n=4]

Primary H

Free School Meals: Below average

ALN: Low

English as an Additional Language: 'Not diverse' (practitioner-reported information)

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion and practitioner FG [n=3]

Secondary J

Free School Meals: Average [NB high percentage of learners live in the 20% most deprived areas in Wales]

ALN: Medium

English as an Additional Language: Below average

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion [n=1]

Secondary K

Free School Meals: Above average

ALN: Medium

English as an Additional Language: Above average

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion [n=1]

Secondary L

Free School Meals: Above average

ALN: High

English as an Additional Language: Above average

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT focus group [n=2]

Secondary M

Free School Meals: Average

ALN: Medium

English as an Additional Language: Below average

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT and 2 practitioner discussions [n=3]

Secondary N

Free School Meals: Above average

ALN: High

English as an Additional Language: Above average

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: Joint SLT and practitioner FG [n=2]

Secondary O

Free School Meals: Below average

ALN: Low

English as an Additional Language: Below average

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Fieldwork: SLT discussion [n=1]

Secondary P

Free School Meals: Average

ALN: High

English as an Additional Language: Below average

Size: Small

Language medium: Welsh

Fieldwork: SLT and practitioner discussion [n=2]

Secondary Q

Free School Meals: Above average

ALN: Low

English as an Additional Language: Below average

Size: Medium

Language medium: Welsh

Fieldwork: SLT discussion [n=1]

Annex C: Research tool

Practitioner and senior leader focus group

NB – The phrase ‘making the curriculum happen’ is used in these questions because it implies a more active curriculum-making process than ‘realisation’ (which implies mediation) and it is less open to misinterpretation than ‘realisation’.

Actions questions

- Could you tell me the main actions that you have taken in your school to make the new curriculum happen (including ‘why’ and ‘how’ in relation to each question where necessary)?
- What changes have you made to the organisation of subjects/knowledge in your context?
- What changes have you made to the selection and organisation of content in your context?
- What changes have you made to pedagogy and the way you teach?
- What changes have you made to assessment practices in your context?
- How much progress do you think you have made in making the new curriculum happen in your context?
- What are you particularly proud of?
- How are changes evaluated and what have you learned from this?
- Is there anything you wish you had done differently?
- What do you think you need to do more work on?

Constraints questions

- Goals - How do you understand the new curriculum?
- What do you think the new curriculum is trying to achieve?
- How do you think the curriculum differs from the curriculum that preceded it?
- Do the priorities of the new curriculum align with what you think is important in education?

- Human capital: Do you feel able to make the new curriculum happen in your context?
- Do you feel you have the know-how and expertise to make the curriculum happen in your context?
- Social/relational conditions: Is the curriculum suited to your context?
- How well does the curriculum align with the needs of the community your context serves?
- What do you think learners feel about the new curriculum?
- What do you think parents think about the new curriculum?
- System conditions: Does the wider educational landscape support you in making the curriculum happen in your context?
- Do you feel there is a shared understanding among all about the curriculum? How has this understanding been developed in your school? (for example, collaborative activity, professional inquiry, professional learning)
- Do you feel you have the freedom to develop the curriculum in your context as you would wish? In what ways are the current systems for qualifications a factor shaping curriculum and pedagogy?
- Do you feel supported by local authority/regional consortia or partnership/Estyn/the government etc? What more could they do?
- In what ways has resourcing affected your ability to make the new curriculum happen?
- If a teacher, do you feel supported by the leadership in your school? Senior leaders? Middle leaders?
- Probe if necessary: what support have you accessed: professional learning (for example, through local authorities, consortia, NAEL, Hwb, others); guidance

documents (for example, the 12 pedagogical principles); collaborative activity (for example, National Network, Talk Pedagogy, SLO)

Consequences questions

- How do you think learners' experience of school has been changed by the work you have done to make the curriculum happen in your context?
- What are the main changes that you think a learner would have noticed?
- What feedback have you sought from learners? What are they saying?
- What are the main changes that you think parents and carers would have noticed?
- What feedback have you sought from parents and carers? What are they saying?
- How do you think the staff experience of school and their understanding of their roles have been changed by the work you have done to make the curriculum happen in your context?
- To teachers – What are the main changes that you have noticed?
- To senior leaders - What are the main changes that you think teachers and support staff would have noticed?
- To senior leaders - What feedback have you sought from teachers and support staff? What are they saying?
- To teachers – Do you work differently as a result of the curriculum change? How well have changes worked?
- To senior leaders - Do you see teachers and other staff working differently as a result of the changes in your school? Do these changes in working practices align with the purposes and principles of Curriculum for Wales? How well have changes worked?