

Kirsty Williams, AM
Cabinet Secretary for Education
Welsh Government

8 December 2016

Implementation of the Donaldson Recommendations

As you will be aware, the Children, Young People and Education Committee has been undertaking work to scrutinise the implementation of Professor Graham Donaldson's Review *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*. Thank you for agreeing to give evidence to the Committee as part of this work, the Committee looks forward to hearing from you on 12 January.

The Committee very much welcomes the Welsh Government's acceptance of Professor Donaldson's recommendations and the work that has been initiated to take them forward. However, we are concerned that some aspects of the implementation of Professor Donaldson's Review and recommendations are not progressing as well as should be expected.

The Committee thought it would be helpful to highlight some of the emerging findings ahead of your evidence session on 12 January. It would be very helpful to have your response to the questions raised in this letter ahead of that session – a response by 3 January would be very much appreciated.

The vision set on in Successful Futures

The vision emanating from Professor Donaldson's report, which is very conceptual, is one which has been widely supported. It is however apparent from evidence received that there appear to be difficulties and challenges in translating that vision into tangible implementation. Concerns were raised with the Committee about the lack of clarity as to what the new curriculum and assessment system will actually look like to individual school leaders, teachers and the wider workforce. There was also a call for a blueprint to provide 'greater coherence to see how each element – curriculum, assessment and accountability – fits together and encourages the right, constructive ways of working'.

Professor Donaldson himself referred to the history of educational reform, suggesting that there has often been a gap between aspirations for our young people and the reality of what actually happens in classrooms on a day-to-day basis.



Does the Cabinet Secretary have a strategy to ensure that the vision set out in Successful Futures is fully translated into implementation?

How will the Cabinet Secretary ensure that there is clarity as to what the new curriculum and assessment system will actually look like to individual school leaders, teachers and the wider workforce, and how the different elements will all fit together?

Clarity of purpose for Pioneer Schools

The Committee welcomes the innovative approach the Welsh Government is taking towards implementation, with an emphasis of involving the profession, but we believe this must be supported by a strong sense of leadership and direction from the Welsh Government.

The Committee notes that the Pioneer School model for curriculum design has generally been welcomed, although concerns have been raised that there is insufficient clarity and direction regarding Pioneer Schools' role and purpose, and what is expected from them. These concerns have been raised with the Committee by Pioneer Schools directly and by the four regional consortia.

Involvement of non-Pioneer Schools

Concerns have also been raised that schools who are not part of the Pioneer School Network will not feel sufficient ownership and belonging to the new curriculum. The Education Workforce Council has reported that there is a growing sense of a two-tier system which could be potentially divisive. Professor Donaldson acknowledged to the Committee this was a valid concern and that the Independent Advisory Board was closely considering this issue.

Another concern around this area is that it appears that Pioneer Schools are expected to keep other schools informed and updated of progress being made. This places an additional burden on the Pioneer Schools and raises a potential risk of taking resources away from their own classrooms. The Committee is concerned if this is the case.

What is the Cabinet Secretary doing to ensure that there is sufficient clarity in the role of Pioneer Schools and what is expected from them?

How can the Cabinet Secretary ensure that the demands on Pioneer schools from their work on curriculum design, including spreading good practice or keeping non-pioneer schools informed of progress, do not adversely impact on their own teaching resources?

Timescale for implementation

The Committee notes the Welsh Government has published a *plan for curriculum and assessment design and development*, including some milestones and timescales set out within that plan. Evidence received by the Committee however suggests there is some concern and confusion that those involved were moving towards key milestones without a clear or full picture of what needed to be achieved by when.

There has been a call for pragmatism about timetables for implementation. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the National Association of Head



teachers (NAHT) in particular felt there is a need to ‘take stock’ of what has happened so far and outline a clear plan for moving forward to ensure that those involved get things done in the right way, rather than just getting things done.

There has been acknowledgment that implementing the vision of *Successful Futures* is an iterative process, but the Committee is concerned that not all involved have a clear understanding of their own role in that process and what is the intended final outcome.

The Committee believes that the difficult work is very much still ahead and heard from Professor Donaldson that the next few months will be ‘a very critical period’, with an increase needed in the pace of the development work.

The Committee asked Professor Donaldson about the feasibility of introducing the new curriculum as a whole rather than the gradual introduction of different subjects. In response, Professor Donaldson stressed that introduction would be phased during 2018-2021 and there would be no ‘cliff-edge’ implementation. The Committee believes this message needs to be clearly conveyed during implementation.

What is the Cabinet Secretary’s view on the implementation timetable? Can you provide an update on progress against the first two strands of the Plan for curriculum and assessment design and development (Strategic Design and High level Design)? Are you confident that implementation will meet the timescales set out?

How is the Cabinet Secretary working to ensure that all involved in the implementation are clear about what needs to be implemented, by when, and in what form?

How will you be monitoring progress over the next few months in particular, which Professor Donaldson described as a ‘very critical period’ in terms of increasing the pace of curriculum design?

Can you provide more detail on how the introduction of the curriculum will be phased between 2018 and 2021? Will there be different legislative requirements on different schools, meaning pupils will be studying different curricula? How will this affect the qualifications they take?

Relationship with accountability and assessment

The Committee has heard contrasting views on the relationship between designing the curriculum and setting the assessment framework. The head teacher and school leader unions strongly believe that the assessment framework needs to be established first in order to have a clear idea of what curriculum is needed to adequately prepare learners. The regional consortia however did not share this view.

The Committee is very concerned that there are such contrasting views on what is a fundamental principle underpinning *Successful Futures*. The Committee urges the Welsh Government to act decisively to resolve any tensions or misunderstandings between these very different approaches.

In terms of accountability, the evidence submitted to the Committee suggests there is still some way to go to realise the philosophical and practical shift recommended by Professor Donaldson away from using assessment for school accountability purposes and towards using it to inform teaching and learning. Evidence also suggested that the



pressures of the current accountability framework can inhibit the capacity of schools to get on and innovate, and even to fulfil their role as a Pioneer:

What is the Cabinet Secretary doing to resolve any tensions or misunderstandings between different approaches to whether the assessment framework needs to be clarified before the new curriculum can be developed?

How will the Cabinet Secretary ensure that the shift away from using assessment for school accountability purposes and towards using it to inform teaching and learning (as recommended by Professor Donaldson) is put into practice?

Synergy with teacher professional development

The vision of Successful Futures envisages that curriculum design be taken forward in conjunction with reforms to teachers' professional development. The Committee therefore welcomes the continued involvement of Professor John Furlong and his inclusion on the Independent Advisory Group.

The Committee notes from the Welsh Government's timescale that a consistent professional learning offer is to be available to all of the education workforce by July 2018, in advance of the new curriculum being available in September 2018. It is clear that a lot of work needs to be undertaken over the course of the next year to enable this to happen.

Evidence received suggests that there have been some early challenges in developing the curriculum and the professional development in tandem, with a lack of clarity as to whether one should be formed first to inform the other, or vice-versa. This appears to be different to the development of the Digital Competence Framework, where digital pioneers had some very clear ideas from the start of where they needed to get to. The Committee heard that professional development pioneers did not have that clarity and are waiting to see a framework that they can build around.

It is clear to the Committee that the development work on curriculum and professional learning is entering a critical stage. It is vital that the Welsh Government is pro-active in providing sufficient leadership and direction to ensure these two complementary agenda are successfully developed in tandem.

What is the Cabinet Secretary doing to ensure that work on curriculum and professional learning are successfully developed in tandem?

Current cohort of students during transition

Concerns were raised with the Committee about the implications for young people in the current school system and the potential for adverse impact from being caught between two, quite different, versions of curricula. This is particularly a risk for pupils currently in secondary schools who will be taking Key Stage 4 qualifications before, during, and immediately after the transition period. The Committee urges the Welsh Government to carefully consider this.

What action will the Cabinet Secretary take to ensure that young people in the current school system are not adversely affected by being caught between two, quite different, versions of curricula.



Legislation

Professor Donaldson told the Committee one of the most important issues to consider is how much of the new curriculum to set out in legislation and that this was a delicate balance to find. In *Successful Futures*, he recommended that the six Areas of Learning and Experience and the four curriculum purposes be stipulated in primary legislation. However, in Committee, he was more cautious about what should be put in legislation.

How will the Cabinet Secretary decide what is included in legislation, have you considered what the right balance should be? When will such decisions need to be made?

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

The Committee notes the recently announced PISA results, which continue to highlight challenges facing the education system in Wales. The Committee is keen to explore how this relates to the implementation of *Successful Futures*, for example to what curriculum design will be influenced by the approach of PISA.

What influence does Wales' performance in PISA have on the development and design of the new curriculum and how much of a factor is this in deciding what children and young people should be learning in school?

Strategic lead from the Welsh Government

Concerns have been expressed from those involved in development and implementation that a stronger strategic lead is needed from the Welsh Government. The head teacher unions believe the various work streams need to come together as a clear strategy, with a clear timeline and milestones, particularly around the role of assessment. The Committee believes that the Welsh Government should consider this matter carefully and whether it needs to provide a clearer strategic steer and direction, perhaps in conjunction with Regional Consortia.

This relates back to the point about the Donaldson recommendations being largely conceptual and ambiguity about what it will mean in practice.

How will the Cabinet Secretary ensure that strong, strategic leadership and direction is provided for the development and implementation of the Donaldson recommendations?

The Committee believes that the design and development of the new curriculum, together with associated reforms to teacher development and training, will be one of the foremost education policy and service delivery priorities throughout the Fifth Assembly. The Committee aims to regularly return to scrutinise this throughout this Assembly.

Yours sincerely



Lynne Neagle AC / AM
Cadeirydd / Chair

