

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(4)03-12

Written evidence to the Children and Young People Committee Inquiry into the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009

Evidence from the Minister for Education and Skills

Introduction

The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, ensures that learners in Wales, no matter where in Wales they study or their language of choice (i.e. Welsh or English), have access to a broad and balanced curriculum and to learning support services which will help them to overcome any barriers to their learning and to achieving their potential.

The 14-19 grant funding provided by the Welsh Government plays an important role in the successful implementation of 14-19 Learning Pathways and in assisting local authorities, schools and further education colleges to meet their responsibilities under the Measure. However, it is important to set this enabling grant funding in the context of the overall funding provided by the Welsh Government to support the education of 14-19 year-olds through the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) for 14-16 year-olds and the National Planning Funding System (NPFS) for post-16 learners.

While we welcome the Committee's inquiry into the implementation of the Measure and the opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee, we share the concerns expressed by a number of other contributors about its timing. Given that the Measure will not be fully implemented until this September, we also believe that it is too early to assess its full impact and the difference that it is making at this point.

Implementation

The Committee will be aware that the local curriculum requirements of the Measure have been implemented over a four year period, with the first year, 2009-10, being implemented on a non-statutory basis. The evidence that is already available indicates that 14-19 Learning Pathways policy and the Measure have made a real difference to the breath of subjects being offered to young people and to the support that they receive to help them to overcome any barriers to their learning and achieving their potential.

Attendance levels have improved and exclusions are down, educational outcomes have increased and the number of young people becoming NEET has reduced. More young people are choosing to remain in education or training beyond the compulsory learning age. Cooperation between schools and colleges

has also increased, with a corresponding growth in the number of courses being run collaboratively.

We are pleased that the commitment to 14-19 Learning Pathways demonstrated by stakeholders has ensured many of the concerns that were raised during the passage of the Measure have not materialised and that the requirements of the Measure are being met across Wales, at Key Stage 4 and post-16, whether in Welsh-medium, bilingual or English-medium provision. The 14-19 Learning Pathways grant funding that the Welsh Government has provided has supported this and to provide stability the Welsh Government has already confirmed the continuation of grant funding for the 2012-13 and 2013-14 financial years.

1. What effect has the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 had to date on young people aged 14-19 years?

The Measure has delivered wider choice for learners at KS4 and post-16, in both general and vocational courses. In September 2011 all schools and further education colleges met the local curriculum minimum requirements for 28 course choices, including all Welsh-medium and bilingual providers.

At Key Stage 4 over 97% of all schools in Wales are already meeting the full September 2012 requirement for a minimum of 30 course choices, including a minimum of five vocational options. Networks have put in place the necessary arrangements to ensure that all schools will meet the full requirement for September 2012. At post-16 all schools and further education colleges are already meeting the full requirement of 30 course choices, including a minimum of five vocational options.

The average Key Stage 4 offer for September 2011 was 35 courses. The average number of courses actually run in 2011 was 32, which clearly demonstrates that the offer was genuine and that learners have opportunities to follow a wide range of courses which they find both interesting and challenging. The average offer in September 2008 was 24, but 40 schools offered 20 courses or less.

The average offer in 2011 for post 16 students was 40.

The policy of wider choice has contributed to improvements in learner attainment, attendance and behaviour, at Key Stage 4, as highlighted by Estyn in their 2009-10 Annual Report.

However, the widening of choice has also brought into focus the subjects that are being offered and whether they are those which help young people to develop the skills that employers and higher education demand. The review of 14-19 Qualifications, being chaired by Huw Evans, will help to ensure that the qualifications that are being offered are those which are seen as relevant and valued by employers and universities.

2. Do Welsh language pupils get the same depth and range of choice?

There has been an increase in the number of courses available, both academic and vocational, through the medium of Welsh with all Welsh-medium learners

being offered access to the minimum number of courses required by the Measure. Although the number of Welsh language vocational courses available is marginally lower than those available in English we have, through the ring fencing of an element of the 14-19 grant funding, ensured that there has been a significant expansion in the number of vocational courses offered; since 2008 some £4.2m has been ring fenced for this purpose.

The establishment of three regional Welsh-medium 14-19 fora, with the support of 14-19 grant funding, has played an important part in coordinating Welsh-medium provision and in securing linguistic continuity in vocational courses at Level 3, for post-16 learners. In 2010-11, the fora supported the development of 12 new collaborative courses; 10 at Level 3. In 2011-12 a total of 20 collaborative courses, both vocational and general, are available with 17 at Level 3; of these 20 courses 14 are new courses, with 13 of these at Level 3.

3. If the Measure has resulted in a wider choice of academic and vocational courses, has this had any unintended consequences for other subjects, for example modern languages?

The Measure requires the development of Local Curricula which meet the needs, interests and aspirations of learners, as well as the demands of the local labour market.

Through wider choice and collaboration we have seen many courses being safeguarded. For example in the Vale of Glamorgan collaboration between two schools has ensured the viability of a GCSE A Level German course which could otherwise not have been run; and there are plans to offer A Level French through a similar arrangement in 2012. This shows the importance of schools and colleges collaborating to ensure courses can be viable when run in partnership and thereby safeguarding subjects which otherwise would not be available.

With regard to modern foreign languages, the Welsh Government is working with CILT Cymru, the National Centre for Languages to promote the learning of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) across Wales. It has developed an action plan which sets out how it will work with stakeholders and CILT to develop and promote the learning of modern foreign languages. The Qualifications Review will also include an assessment of the current situation in respect of MFL provision.

4. Has the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 had any effect on the numbers of young people choosing to stay on in education or training after the end of compulsory education at age 16?

The Committee has already received evidence that the number of young people staying on in education post-16 has increased and that the number of young people classified as being NEET has decreased.

Information from Careers Wales shows that the number of young people remaining in full-time education or training, beyond the compulsory learning age, has increased as follows:

- 2008 – 79.2%

- 2009 – 82.2%
- 2010 – 82.8%

We believe that by offering young people, at 16, access to courses which they see as being relevant and interesting more will choose to continue in education or training beyond the compulsory learning age. This is why the Welsh Government decided against the raising of the compulsory learning age.

5. What practical problems are being addressed in order to implement the Measure?

The development of effective local partnerships is key to ensuring that the requirements of the Measure are being met and that the 14-19 Learning Pathways policy is successfully delivered. Effective collaboration and good planning has helped to address many of the issues that have been raised.

We recognise that this is an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process and that partnerships and cooperative working arrangements need time to mature. Cooperative working has helped to not only secure wider choice but also to make better use of the available resources. There are good examples of effective partnerships and cooperative working across Wales, one example being in Carmarthenshire where Coleg Sir Gar and the local secondary schools in Llanelli achieved national recognition for collaborative working in the Association of College's 2010 Beacon Awards.

We also have examples of how collaborative provision has saved significant funding for schools. For example, the Bryn Tawe - Gwyr Partnership in Swansea has saved around £83,000 for each school by providing 20 collaborative courses. These savings take into account the additional travel costs associated with the joint provision.

However, we recognise that such collaborations may be more difficult in rural areas and/or with some Welsh-medium providers where the distance between settings can make collaboration more difficult. Such circumstances call for innovative solutions. Common timetabling can be used and learner travel undertaken at the beginning or end of the school day. ICT and video conferencing is also being used effectively by some partnerships to deliver collaborative courses and this saves on both travel time and resources.

It is important that all providers act in the best interests of their learners and not of the institution. While there was some reluctance on the part of some providers to collaborate, progress is being made and we are moving in the right direction.

There is also anecdotal evidence of the added benefits that studying at another institution can bring to the learner wellbeing, in terms of being able to experience another setting and meet new peers. We will be looking to gather further evidence on this in the future.

6. Is the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 being implemented consistently across all local authorities?

As stated earlier, all providers in each local authority area met the 2011 statutory requirements under the Measure and we are confident that all schools and further education colleges will also be able meet the full 2012 statutory requirements.

7. Are vulnerable learners, particularly those with additional learning needs, able to benefit from the provisions in the Measure?

All learners in maintained secondary schools and further education colleges, including those with additional learning needs, have the same entitlement to wider choice. Special schools fall outside of the remit of the Measure with regards to wider choice. However, learners who are able to follow courses of study within mainstream settings already have access to wider choice through dual registration arrangements. Those learners whose particular circumstances mean that they are unable to follow a course of study in a mainstream setting will already be receiving individualised learning tailored to their individual learning needs. Special Schools fall within the remit of the Measure in relation to learner support services.

Those planning the local curriculum must consider and include suitable provision for those learners whose needs may be best met by courses at a lower or higher level. At Key Stage 4 this means taking into account the needs of those with Additional Learning Needs and make sure that learners who are unable to access Level 2 courses due to their ALN have opportunities to pursue a choice of courses that allow them to make good progression towards Level 2 qualifications.

Similarly at post-16, those planning the local curriculum should ensure that learners who are unable to access Level 3 courses have opportunities to pursue a choice of courses that allow them to make good progress at the appropriate level for the learner. There should be an appropriate level of courses below Level 3 to meet the needs of learners for whom these programmes are most suitable.

Under sections 31 and 32 of Learning and Skills Act 2000 (“the LSA”), the Welsh Ministers must secure the provision of proper facilities for education and training suitable to the requirement of 16-18 year olds and reasonable facilities for education and training suitable to the requirements of those aged 19 and over, (post 16 education). In performing those duties the Welsh Ministers must take account of the education and training required in different sectors of employment for employees.

Under sections 34 and 35 of the LSA the Welsh Ministers may provide financial resources to providers of post-16 education or training and may impose conditions on such funding. ‘Post-16 education and training’ includes full-time and part-time education (other than higher education) and vocational training. Under section 41 of the LSA, in discharging its functions in relation to sections 31, 32 and 34, the Welsh Ministers must have regard to the needs of persons with learning difficulties.

As indicated above, while the wider curriculum requirements of the Measure do not apply to special schools the learning support elements do. This means that all learners should have access to impartial information, advice and guidance, which will help them to make informed and realistic choices, overcome barriers to their

learning and to realise their individual potential. There are examples of good practice in delivering learning support services in special schools, including Trinity Fields School in Caerphilly, which was highlighted in the Welsh Local Government Association's evidence to the Committee.

8. Is learning support being delivered effectively?

Learner support comprises careers information, advice and guidance, personal support and learning coaching, the latter of these was introduced directly through 14-19 Learning Pathways. The Welsh Government has published guidance setting out our expectations on local authorities, schools and colleges. There is no prescribed model of delivery for learner support services and a range of different delivery models have been developed across Wales. The important thing is that the provision of learning support should be related to learner need. This will mean that while some learners might need minimal support to achieve their potential, others may require more intensive one-to-one support over a period of time.

While careers information, advice and guidance and personal support are long standing services, the learning coach function is relatively new and the Welsh Government has supported the development and delivery of a Level 4 national training programme.

The Welsh Government has determined that there should be a minimum ratio for learning coaching of 1:80; and we are pleased that all schools and further education colleges have indicated that they will have achieved this ratio by March 2012.

The new work-based learning contracts, issued in August 2011, also ensure that learning support, including learning coaching, is available to young people undertaking work based learning.

In due course we will ask Estyn to undertake an inspection of learner support services.

9. What effect is the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 having on further education colleges?

Further education colleges have a vital role to play in ensuring the successful delivery of 14-19 Learning Pathways and the Measure. Colleges across Wales are cooperating with schools to provide high quality vocational provision for KS4 pupils, which has necessitated them adjusting to be able to facilitate 14 and 15 year olds within their settings. Some college lecturers are teaching at the schools themselves, which means that the learners are saved from having to travel. We expect to see continued growth in collaboration between schools and colleges as we embed the regional working model across Wales.

We do however, need to focus more efforts on ensuring young people can follow courses through the medium of Welsh at post-16. We are pleased to report that through the Welsh-medium Education Strategy, the Welsh Government has increased its commitment to the post-16 education phase to enable further

education colleges, in particular, to develop Welsh-medium and bilingual progression routes. The number of Bilingual Champions in colleges increased from four to eight in April 2011 and four new colleges have already started to implement strategies in order to build firmer foundations for Welsh-medium and bilingual developments for post-16 learners.