

New curriculum for schools in Wales: Initial response from Cytûn (Churches together in Wales)

On April 30 Welsh Government published a [new draft curriculum for all schools in Wales](#) which are funded through local authorities – primary and secondary, Welsh and English medium, church schools and community schools. Preparation of this material began after the publication of Professor Graham Donaldson's report, [Successful Futures](#), in 2015, and is the result of four years' work by the Government, pioneer schools and teams of teachers and experts. You can see a summary of what has happened and the next steps [here](#).

The faith communities of Wales have been part of the discussion around the new curriculum, and from the first meeting the [Faith Communities Forum](#) has had two representatives on the [Stakeholder group for education reform](#), alongside a host of other organisations with interest in the field. We have taken a particular interest in the development of the curriculum for Religious Education, but have also contributed to discussions about the whole curriculum and related matters – such as training teachers, developing school leadership, and so on. The Catholic Church and the Church in Wales have also had a joint representative on the [Change Board](#), due to their role as providers of education through their denominational schools.

What is the basis of the new curriculum?

Welsh Government accepted all the recommendations in *Successful Futures*, and Professor Donaldson has continued to participate in the discussions. As a result, that document has formed the basis for this work, and the new curriculum is based on the four purposes identified by Professor Donaldson, that *children and young people should develop as:*

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

Achieving these purposes is the aim of the curriculum. School education for pupils aged 3 to 16 years old will be taught across six areas of learning and experience, which are:

- Expressive arts
- Health and well-being
- Humanities
- Languages, literacy and communication
- Mathematics and numeracy
- Science and technology.

Work was undertaken with teachers, schools and educational experts to draw up across these six areas an overview of 'What Matters' – that is those things in each area which pupils will need to know, experience or develop in order to fulfil the four purposes.

What is the content of the curriculum?

In contrast to the national curriculum introduced in 1988, and partially revised since then, the new curriculum offers only a framework for individual schools and teachers to populate with content appropriate to their pupils and local area. As long as schools develop a local curriculum which pays due regard to the national framework, covers the six areas of learning and experience, and aims to fulfil the four purposes, they will have extensive leeway to develop their own ways of working.

As one head teacher who spoke to the stakeholder group for education reform about how their school is developing the new curriculum, *Each new pupil who arrives at the school changes the curriculum, as each pupil brings new experiences, background and talents which will contribute towards it.* But the curriculum will still be led by professional teachers – it is not intended that educational techniques should be introduced which allow pupils simply to decide for themselves what they wish to learn.

What about Religious Education?

Religious Education will be included in the [Humanities](#) area of learning and experience – although religious aspects may arise in any area (e.g. religious stories could be part of the expressive arts or language, literature and communication; spiritual aspects of health and well-being may be discussed in that area; and so on).

Each part of the curriculum aims towards *progression steps* which describe what pupils can do as a result of their studies. For example, in progression step 3 for the Humanities (which corresponds roughly to the progress of an 11 year old child) the aim is that pupils will be able to say (amongst other things):

- *I can explain the importance of special times, events and traditions in my community and in the wider world, and can communicate my feelings about them.*
- *I can understand that different experiences, religions, world views, beliefs and practices contribute to the diverse societies in Wales and the wider world.*
- *I can understand the diversity of cultures and societies that exist beyond my own experience, and appreciate the importance of language, beliefs and values in the formation of cultural identities.*

Regarding the Religious Education element within the Humanities, the intention is that each county's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) – which includes representatives from local religious communities – will continue to draw up a syllabus for the county, and the dioceses of the Church in Wales and the Catholic Church will draw up syllabi for their schools. These syllabi will have to pay due regard to the content of the new curriculum, and schools will need to teach Religious Education in accordance with the appropriate syllabus.

In January 2019 the Welsh Government published a white paper entitled [A Transformational Curriculum](#), which included consultation on whether the right of parents to withdraw their children from all or part of the Religious Education curriculum, and also the curriculum for Relationships and Sexuality Education (part of the [Health and Well-being](#) area of learning and experience). Some members of Cytûn and a number of individual church members responded to this consultation. Welsh Government has assured us that they will continue to consult with faith communities about these matters.

Are there opportunities here for churches and chapels?

Yes. The curriculum says that children of all ages should have opportunities to experience *outdoor learning and opportunities to visit museums; historical sites; places of political, religious or spiritual significance; geographical features or sites; and businesses or retailers.*

Welsh Government has said that it will encourage schools to engage with local organisations in order to enrich the curriculum and root it in their area – the curriculum uses the Welsh word *cynefin* to describe the deep relationship between pupil, school and community which is intended. Many schools do this already, but this will give a new impetus to the creation of such relationships.

Places of worship of all traditions, therefore, will have an opportunity to welcome their local schools on visits and tell their stories. It is the school that will decide how to arrange this, and churches should respect the right of the school to do so. But this could be an opportunity to deepen the relationship with the schools in your community.

A visit to a church or chapel can offer opportunities to learn not only about religion as such but also about local history (war memorials etc), language (the use of Welsh, English and other languages within the building) and culture. There are opportunities also to study mathematics and technology in looking at the design and architecture of the building, and the expressive arts in looking at the use of music, words, drama and so on within the worship and other activities which take place there. The opportunities are endless!

What about collective worship (school assemblies)?

These changes in the curriculum do not change the obligation on schools to provide daily collective worship for their pupils. Cytûn and our member churches will continue to discuss with the Welsh Government matters relating to worship in schools.

Will the new curriculum be introduced immediately?

A number of schools have begun already to introduce aspects of the new curriculum, but it will not become statutory until September 2022, initially for pupils up to and including Year 7 only. That year's Year 7 pupils will then follow the new curriculum through their schooling, and so they will be the first to sit GCSE examinations on the basis of the new curriculum. The syllabi for these exams will be reformed in line with the new curriculum, and pupils will be able to choose the subjects they wish to study, so long as they continue to receive an education covering all six areas of learning and experience. The current GCSE qualifications will continue to be examined until summer 2026.

The next three years, therefore, will be a period of preparation, with opportunity for teachers to receive additional in service training to ensure that they understand the new requirements.

How can we respond?

There is a formal consultation period on the draft until 19 July 2019. Welsh government will be arranging public meetings to discuss it in various parts of Wales, and we would encourage local churches to take advantage of these opportunities.

Anyone who wishes may respond online here: <https://hwb.gov.wales/draft-curriculum-for-wales-2022/have-your-say/> Cytûn will draw together the responses of our member denominations and organisations and contribute to the discussion on that basis. We will, therefore, welcome all comments by email at gethin@cytun.cymru – but please respond directly to the Government as well!

The final version of the curriculum will be published in January 2020.

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30 April 2019.

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