

Developing a systematic approach to curriculum review in Scotland

Background

1. A project led by Scottish Government in partnership with Education Scotland seeks to deliver OECD Recommendation 3.4 ([Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future | en | OECD](#)):

“Develop a systematic approach to curriculum review. Scotland could consider establishing a curriculum review cycle with a planned timeframe and specific review agenda, led by the specialist stand-alone agency”.

2. The project team has been working with partners and stakeholders to co-design a process for systematically reviewing the curriculum. To date, engagement has taken place with existing stakeholder forums as well as a dedicated co-design group made up of practitioners from across all local authority areas, curriculum areas and settings. Work has also been undertaken to carry out a rapid evidence review of international best practice. The aim is that a recommendation will be made to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills outlining an evidence-based model for a cycle of periodic review of the curriculum, including curricular area reviews, by June 2023. The review process will be a function of the new education agency once operational in 2024.

Purpose

3. The purpose of this paper is to be clear on what problem we are setting out to solve in terms of curriculum review, and what we think success would look like. Being collectively clear on the success criteria from the outset will allow us to evaluate any options developed against them as we seek to determine the best process for the systematic review of the curriculum in Scotland.
4. CAB members are invited to:
 - feedback on the draft success criteria.
 - provide initial advice and direction on what the key components of a good process of systematic curriculum review should look like in Scotland.

Problem Statement or Current State:

5. Although ad hoc, reactive reviews of curricular areas do take place, there is no planned process to pause and reflect at a system level on how CfE is delivering for learners in Scotland. The OECD found that the system presently operates in a reactive mode which has led to an over-reliance on external independent reviews rather than creating internal capacity within the system. It has also resulted in intense focus on some areas of the curriculum, but very little focus on others.

6. As indicated in the paper to CAB on 28 January 2023 on current curriculum review and improvement activity, this work will clearly have to ‘fold’ into any systematic review process implemented.

Purpose or Future State:

7. A more systematic approach to curriculum development and monitoring has the potential to deliver greater stability overall and reduce the need for ongoing guidance and clarifications, and the associated workload generated outwith a planned, proactive approach.

Draft Success Criteria

So what does success look like when it comes to a systematic review of the curriculum in Scotland? The following draft success criteria, against which potential models co-created with stakeholders could be evaluated, have been developed having listened to feedback to date from the co-design group and others. We are also mindful that any systematic curriculum review process would need to align with the SG response to Hayward and Withers etc.

We would be grateful for CAB’s general feedback and in particular views on:

- **What’s missing?**
- **What’s wrong?**
- **Is any criterion more important than any other, is there a priority order, should any criterion be given more weighting over another?**

1	Evidence-based and forward-looking: The curriculum remains relevant and appropriate in a changing world through a review process that is informed by evidence (including international research), strong local and national user research and takes account of emerging trends and needs.
2	Collaborative and Coherent: The review process itself is broad and collaborative, involving all layers of the system and strengthening/consolidating cohesion between each part. The review process will take account of the initiatives being taken forward at local and regional level, as well as any structural reform work at a national level, supporting a strategic direction and vision at national level that is complementary rather than conflicting.
3	Ambitious: The review process itself is bold and able to be radical as needed, it celebrates what is working well, identifies what needs to be better as well as what specifically needs to be done to improve.
4	Realistic: The review will also need to be realistic about what can be delivered by the system, creating changes which are sustainable and specifically consider the potential for streamlining.
5	Engagement: Learners themselves are involved in curriculum review, in particular those who experience more challenges in the system (based in evidence), alongside teachers, lecturers, early years practitioners and other

	key stakeholders in a manageable way and ensuring there is sufficient capacity to allow this to happen.
6	Clarity: The intention and purpose of the curriculum review process is well understood by those directly involved with it and impacted by it.
7	Scope: The review systematically tackles cross cutting themes and issues, individual curriculum and subject areas, as well as the four contexts for learning, transitions and takes account of geographical differences.
8	Approach: The review process is planned, but agile enough to be responsive and flexible to allow change if needed.
9	Implementation: Accountability for the output of every review cycle is well articulated and understood by all stakeholders across the education system including how it will be practically implemented. Time is built into the process to allow the system to implement any improvements.
10	Evaluation: The implementation of the previous cycle is evaluated, ahead of the next cycle, to generate lessons learnt.

Next steps

8. We will continue to co-create different options to be considered with the Group we have brought together for this purpose focussing on the following aspects:

- Timeframe
- Methodology/Approach
- Focus
- Involvement of Stakeholders
- Output

9. A summary of key themes which have emerged so far are included in Annex A.

Reflecting on Annex A, is there any initial advice and direction CAB members would like to offer on what the key components of a good process of systematic curriculum review should look like in Scotland?

10. We will continue to engage with CAB members as we refine and test the options and ahead of putting any recommendation to the Cabinet Secretary. The most recent co-design group was held on 9 March and there will be a further session at the end of April.

**OECD Curriculum Reform Team and Education Scotland
March 2023**

ANNEX A

Developing a systematic approach to reviewing the curriculum in Scotland

Summary of key themes emerging from stakeholder engagement so far

Why/do we need a curriculum review process?

There is general agreement that we do need a systematic review process in Scotland.

Key themes emerging:

- Starting from a position of strength, it would be an opportunity to build on the success of CfE and be a tool for its long term improvement.
- A regular review cycle would make changes less reactive and de-politicise.
- It would provide a framework for quality assurance/standards.
- Better to be on the 'front foot' with planning.
- Opportunity to pause and reflect on what we do and why we do it. Is it still fit for purpose?
- 'Future proofing' - It would ensure the curriculum remains relevant and appropriate in a changing world, and meeting the needs of all learners on a continual basis.
- It would support teachers and give clarity and allow professionals to share expertise.
- There are lots of pockets of good practice we can build on but we need a consistent approach to bring coherence and equity for all learners.
- A curriculum for excellence needs to be a curriculum for all.
- Current approaches to curriculum review are ad hoc, feeling of re-inventing the wheel with no clear vision. Often business as usual will reassert itself.
- A routine, systematic review process where recommended changes are well articulated and understood would help.
- It would allow us to be more strategic in the sense of being fair to different subject areas and aspects of the curriculum.
- It would allow for better co-ordination and co-operation between primary and secondary.
- It would give the new agency a defined purpose.

What would a systematic review involve?

These points relate to what the focus of a review would be and how often it should take place:

- It would be robust, timely, cover all aspects and enable participation of all stakeholders.
- International research.
- 4 contexts of learning.
- A big review i.e. a full scale curriculum review at a system level takes a lot of time, or is the focus on the curriculum areas?
- Are we focusing on the structures, the values or the subject 'content'?
- It should be a rolling review process rather than a 'big bang'.
- It would take place every pupil generation approximately (6-10 years).
- It would need to be agile to allow flexibility of change when needed.
- Opportunity to celebrate aspects that are going well; but also opportunity to consider what children and young people this is working for and those that it is not? Opportunity to be brave.
- What needs to stay, change or go?
- The process would continually review the curriculum, its elements e.g. Experiences and Outcomes, its content e.g. subject specific content and how it is being delivered, while considering the interdependencies of a complex system.
- Taking stock of current curriculum and our future labour market needs.
- All forms of transitions throughout the curriculum.

How could it be undertaken?

- A review process done well would engage all layers of the system and drive cohesion between each part.
- It would be an approach with clear boundaries that can be applied across the board to gauge success. A process that can be repeated time and time again.
- It would be an approach that meets stakeholder needs, avoids duplication and capitalises on the expertise and resources in the system.
- Teachers could have the opportunity to be seconded on a rolling programme of curriculum review to allow them to share expertise and feedback.
- There was support for the model taken in the National Discussion – key questions to be used in discussion groups primarily with learners and practitioners.
- The process needs to be manageable with capacity build into the approach to allow teachers etc to engage.
- Question over whether it should be a LA approach or a cluster approach? Need clarity around whether the review process will be at system level, LA level or school level?
- There is a potential role for academics and researchers.
- Important to build capacity in the system for those that would be involved in implementing the changes. Involve them from the beginning.
- Does there need to be a level of international scrutiny e.g. the OECD
- It should be a cross sector collaborative approach to prevent disconnect in learner journeys and the disjoint between early years/primary and secondary, BGE and senior phase and beyond.

- There needs to be an evaluation process from the previous review to consider lessons learnt and ensure accountability.

Who should be involved?

The clear message from stakeholders was that everyone that will be impacted by the changes should have the opportunity to be involved but in particular:

- Learner voice is critical.
- Practitioners, first and foremost – who deliver the curriculum daily.
- Parents and carers
- Early years.
- Employers
- Academics
- Third sector organisations
- Colleges and Universities
- Teacher Trade Unions – what is achievable within the scope of current job remits?
- Skills bodies to ensure economic priorities are taken into account.
- Subject specialist groups who represent teacher members.
- In the 'beyond education' sphere, civil society should have the change to engage.
- Equalities groups and seldom heard voices – the people who the current system and engagement processes do not work for.

What evidence would we need to support a review process?

- A triangulation of evidence from all stakeholders e.g. practitioners, learners, parents, employers, further and higher education.
- Data and research evidence being conducted in Scotland and internationally (networks that Scotland are a part of).
- Key role of the Inspectorate.
- Involvement of young people who have just finished their school experience (16-18) could play a vital role.
- The evidence should be wide and varied and not purely attainment driven.
- Difficulty is that we currently do not have a clear sense of what success looks like in terms of curriculum - this is what everything hangs off. There needs to be a national understanding of this.
- Evidence on who the curriculum is not working for.
- Geographical disparities.

Potential barriers to an effective review process

- The key challenge identified was time and resourcing, especially if it is to be a ground up approach.
- The process needs to be affordable and cost effective.
- Consider the capacity in the system and the reality of the time it takes to implement the changes following curriculum review.
- Although important to have a review process, there can be too much change in the system and it can be difficult to keep up with.
- Is this the opportunity to trim or slim down the curriculum, currently it is too busy.
- How do we make sure the results of a review are not too verbose; they will need to be easily understood and give a clear message to practitioners, learners and the public.
- The review process must be able to influence decision making at a policy level, otherwise what is the point?
- There is an existing hierarchy of subjects – can this be addressed to ensure a broad and engaging curriculum experience for children and young people?
- Need to think about how it will work practically in education settings. Where will the structures be to support its successful implementation?
- How can we ensure policy and practice are not on different planes?
- It should be thorough but not too onerous from a practitioners perspective – what is achievable within the time practitioners have.
- The systematic review process might need to have a different purpose for different age ranges.
- If we do not do this properly the gap between curriculum and young people's futures increases.
- It will only bring benefit if it is a successful approach bought into by all.
- Concerned this is too big to be manageable – need to be realistic.
- Need to ensure the process is joined up with current reform programmes to avoid any disjoint.