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Making the most of assessment 7–14

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Guidance

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Making the most of assessment 7–14

Audience	All maintained primary, secondary and special schools in Wales; institutions for teacher education and training; local authorities; teacher unions and school representative bodies; church diocesan authorities; national bodies in Wales and others with an interest in education.
Overview	This document provides guidance on achieving alignment between assessment for learning and assessment of learning. It offers general principles to make the most of these different purposes of assessment in order to improve: outcomes for learners (both in attainment and well-being), the effectiveness of individual schools, and the education system as a whole.
Action required	School leadership teams, classroom teachers and local authorities are encouraged to use this resource to support ongoing evaluation of the purpose and effectiveness of their own assessment policies and procedures.
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Additional copies	This document can be accessed from the Welsh Assembly Government website at www.wales.gov.uk/educationandskills
Related documents	<i>Statutory assessment arrangements for the school year 2009/10</i> (Primary and Key Stage 3); <i>National Data Collection & Reporting Arrangements 2009/10</i> (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009); <i>Ensuring consistency in teacher assessment: Guidance for Key Stages 2 and 3</i> ; <i>Making the most of learning: Implementing the revised curriculum</i> ; <i>School Effectiveness Framework: Building effective learning communities together</i> (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008)

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Foreword


Effective assessment, and the systems underpinning it, is key to high-quality teaching and learning, and to successful schools.

Estyn reports note the good practice in many of our schools. Even so, all of us – schools, local authorities and government – need to do more in our drive to improve outcomes for all learners.

This new publication contributes to that goal. It offers general principles to make the most of the different purposes of assessment; for improved outcomes for learners, both in attainment and well-being, for the effectiveness of individual schools and for improving the education system as a whole.

This guidance has drawn on discussion with schools, local authorities and teacher unions. It represents a wide range of opinion and brings together a broad consensus that reflects both Welsh Assembly Government policy for school effectiveness and best practice in the most effective classrooms and schools across Wales.

Making the most of assessment 7–14 is therefore both timely and appropriate to the needs of school leadership teams, classroom teachers, and local authorities. I commend this guidance to you and trust that you will welcome and use it.



David Hawker
Director General
Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning
and Skills

Introduction

In Wales, we want to make the most of both assessment **for** learning and assessment **of** learning. These two aspects of assessment should pull in the same direction. Schools need to align the best of both to improve learning outcomes for every learner and school effectiveness more generally. This booklet provides guidance on achieving that alignment.

The School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) aims to make the whole education system (at school, local authority and national level) more effective; thus giving the best possible start to children and young people. All school and local authority assessment policies and systems should align with the Core Themes and Elements set out in the SEF.

School Effectiveness Framework

This guidance is focused on Key Stages 2 and 3 for both mainstream and special education. It is designed to build on the Foundation Phase and use of assessment information at transition into Key Stage 2. Similarly, good use of assessment information at Key Stage 3 supports schools in guiding learners at post-14, to set appropriately challenging targets and to maximise added value for learners.

This booklet sets out broad principles to guide effective assessment and describes good use of assessment information:

- within lessons to help develop each learner's skills, knowledge and understanding
- to monitor and track learners' progress within and through key stages/phases of education
- to report on learners' attainment and wider achievement to parents/carers and receiving teachers/schools
- to provide management information, to inform decision making, for school leaders, managers and governors
- for evidence of performance within and across schools for local authorities, the Welsh Assembly Government and the wider community.

The new guidance supplements existing Welsh Assembly Government publications, including:

- annual booklets on statutory teacher assessment, reporting and national data collection

Statutory assessment arrangements for the school year 2009/10

National Data Collection & Reporting Arrangements 2009/10

- non-statutory guidance

Making the most of learning: Implementing the revised curriculum (2008)

Ensuring consistency in teacher assessment: Guidance for Key Stages 2 and 3 (2008).

This guidance is designed to assist all schools and local authorities when they are reflecting on their own assessment policies and procedures.

Schools and local authorities should ensure that their arrangements:

- support learners and teachers in achieving high-quality teaching and learning outcomes
- generate dependable and purposeful information
- meet both national and local requirements
- are manageable and sustainable
- are subject to regular review and evaluation.

General principles underpinning effective assessment systems

Whilst assessment can take different forms, the prime reason for all assessment information should be to help learners improve their learning. There is significant evidence, including from Estyn's most recent annual reports (www.estyn.gov.uk), of the beneficial role that the use of good quality, consistent information can play in promoting improvement from learner-level through to system-level.

The information that assessment generates should provide a shared language for discussing progress and improvement. It should be dependable and purposeful. Useful assessment information needs to be valid, reliable, manageable and meaningful for teachers, learners and other audiences.

Schools' assessment systems should accommodate and make use of information in different forms, recognising that different audiences will have different information needs. Effective assessment systems make good use of both qualitative information (teacher and learner commentary) and quantitative information (such as level outcomes, and other numerical data derived from assessments).

Assessment within a school, and across primary/secondary clusters and families of schools, should be designed to provide coherent information. All concerned need to agree a common understanding so that they can interpret and use information consistently across subjects and year groups. Statutory assessment requirements are designed to support teacher assessment which is both internally consistent and aligned across schools.

Assessment **for** learning must dovetail with assessment **of** learning, and with information for strategic leadership and effective whole school management. This is key to school improvement and the service schools provide to learners. A careful balance needs to be struck. An over-emphasis on one focus of assessment, to the detriment of the other, will inevitably be counterproductive.

Forms of assessment information

Various audiences have an interest in and need for assessment information – learners, parents/carers, teachers, teaching assistants (and other professionals involved in the learning process), school managers and governors, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government. Information in a particular form might be relevant and appropriate for one audience but much less so for another.

Assessment for learning generates a range of qualitative information about individual learners that is most meaningful and helpful to learners, their parents/carers, and to teachers as an aid to planning next steps. This qualitative information should include teacher commentary on learners' work and peer and self-assessment by learners. Such information will form the basis of ongoing teacher assessment within classrooms/equivalent learning environments and within a key stage, and will inform reports to parents/carers at the end of each year.

Assessment of learning, with formal recording, is needed for strategic planning, leadership, and accountability purposes as well as for individual learners and their parents/carers. It should provide evidence of individual, whole class, cohort and school levels. Such summary information includes numerical or encoded data to show relative performance and change over time.

End of key stage teacher assessment should draw on all current, valid evidence. It must include a summative 'best-fit' judgement of each learner's performance in relation to the national curriculum level descriptions. At the end of Key Stage 2, this covers the core subjects of English, Welsh, Welsh second language, mathematics and science. At the end of Key Stage 3, this covers the core and non-core subjects.

Frequency of assessment and recording

The intended nature and purpose of assessments are key to decisions about what and when teachers and schools assess and record.

Within classrooms and equivalent learning environments, learner progress should be considered frequently and often informally. Teachers and learners will use this information on a day-to-day basis.

Within a key stage or phase, schools' systems for periodic review and recording of individual learner attainment should generate information for learners, teachers and school managers. Schools should ensure that such assessment is based on a spread of relevant evidence. They should allow for an appropriate period of time to have elapsed since a previous review of a learner's progress. Timing for such periodic review should recognise any subject-specific differences in teachers' contact time with learners and the numbers of learners that teachers need to assess. Schools should guard against over-frequent monitoring and formal recording to avoid a negative impact on teaching, learning and overall manageability.

Statutory requirements for annual reporting to parents/carers set out the arrangements which schools should follow at the end of each school year.

Statutory requirements for end of each key stage assessment set out the way in which teachers should report against national curriculum outcomes/levels. These results must also be used for national data collection. Together with more detailed teacher assessment information about individual learners, they should form the main evidence base for receiving schools at transition.

For learners with additional learning needs, teacher assessment will be related closely to targets planned to meet learners' individual needs. These learners' cross-curricular, transferable skills are likely to form a particularly strong component of teacher assessment. In spring 2010, the Welsh Assembly Government provided new guidance to special schools and special units within mainstream schools under the title *A curriculum for all learners: Guidance to support teachers of learners with additional learning needs*.

Main uses of assessment information

Within lessons to help develop each learner's skills, knowledge and understanding

Within classrooms, assessment for learning should drive day-to-day assessment. This frequent and often informal assessment will operate as part of a 'learning conversation', to help each learner develop an understanding of his/her own progress.

At the heart of assessment for learning is the process of finding out where learners are within a learning continuum, where they need to go and how best to get there.

Individual learners need to:

- know where they are in their learning at any given time
- understand and agree where they next need to get to
- understand how to make that stage of the journey.

Such a 'next steps' approach to target setting should:

- involve learners' active participation in agreeing their individual targets
- ensure they understand how they can achieve those targets
- highlight the importance of self-assessment as well as teacher assessment.

Assessment for learning works best where schools base their practice on sound teaching methods; and provide each learner with meaningful information on both attainment and wider achievement. These schools work hard to build strong and trusting relationships between practitioners and learners within a secure environment, which allow learner strengths and areas for development to be discussed openly and confidently. Teachers possess a wide range of teaching strategies and techniques that they employ to ensure progression. They have a good grasp of the learning process so that they can propose appropriate routes to individual, or groups of, learners. Both teachers and learners value reflective practice, encompassing analysis and interpretation of outcomes, evaluation of achievement and identification of areas for improvement.

Research indicates that qualitative feedback to learners raises their self-esteem and self-confidence, thereby influencing the speed of progress and adding to the learner's overall sense of well-being. Such feedback encourages learners to regularly assess their own performance.

Teachers need to have a manageable way of recording each learner's progress. In most subjects, this is best undertaken as commentary on learners' work, to give a clear picture of their development in skills, knowledge and understanding. It also provides an opportunity to show negotiated next steps and how well learners have applied themselves to these next steps, with or without support.

To monitor and track learners' progress within and through key stages/phases of education

Annual targets

On an annual basis, schools are required to publish their targets for end of key stage attainment for cohorts of learners. These school-level targets should be based on challenging but achievable outcomes for individual learners, in relation to their expected end of key stage subject levels.

Evidence from assessment of learning helps schools and local authorities to project performance for learners, as they move through Key Stages 2 and 3 and towards the end of Key Stage 4. These pupil-level forecasts provide a useful tool in target setting for individual learners and institutions, and at whole system level.

Considered comparison of actual outcomes for cohorts against targets is an important aspect of schools' self evaluation. It should be a major determinant of actions to identify and respond to underlying reasons for any variation between the two.

Use of national curriculum outcomes and level descriptions

National curriculum outcomes and level descriptions are designed for 'best-fit' judgements of learners' attainment after a significant period of learning and teaching, i.e. normally at the end of each key stage. If schools use them for monitoring and tracking learner progress over shorter intervals of time, care needs to be taken to avoid an inappropriate, narrow focus for assessment information. For example, single pieces of work should not be levelled, although they may provide evidence for characteristics from one or more level descriptions.

Schools should avoid ranking the statements of each level description in terms of perceived demand and/or assigning a sub-level based on a precise number of statements that a learner has demonstrated in his/her work. Similarly, arbitrary sub-divisions within a level are not part of their design or intended use. Schools should also avoid deconstructing the national curriculum level descriptions because that poses inherent risks of misalignment with national standards.

However, to recognise progress within a key stage, 'best-fit' judgements could use the features of adjacent level descriptions to indicate whether a learner is working at the lower end, securely within, or at the top end of a broad national curriculum outcome/level. Typically, a learner at the lower end of an outcome/level shows mainly characteristics of that outcome/level across a range of work, but may still have some characteristics of the previous outcome/level in some aspects of the work. A learner securely within the outcome/level demonstrates the characteristics of that outcome/level across a range of work. A learner at the top end of an outcome/level demonstrates clearly characteristics of that outcome/level across a range of work with some examples of characteristics of the next outcome/level. Special schools and mainstream schools can use such 'best-fit' judgements to share information about individual learners, within and across schools.

At the end of a key stage, learners' attainment must be reported in terms of the most appropriate whole outcome/level. All attainment at the lower end, securely within or at the top of an outcome/level should be recorded as being at that level.

The importance of 'best-fit' applies to assessment of all learners. Using 'best-fit', all teachers are able to take account of relevant evidence, encompassing transferable skills, as well as knowledge and understanding. School managers should ensure that all teachers understand the concept of 'best-fit' and apply it consistently.

To report on learners' attainment and wider achievement to parents/carers and receiving teachers/schools

Learners and their parents/carers have a legitimate interest in regular updates on individual progress and attainment. Annual guidance from DCELLS sets out the minimum requirements for reporting to learners' parents/carers. Individual schools have flexibility to decide on any additional arrangements beyond statutory requirements.

Within a key stage, the statutory requirement is that schools must provide an annual report to parents/carers. As a minimum, brief particulars must be provided on each learner's progress in all national curriculum subjects and religious education. If schools choose to record and/or report updates on learner attainment more frequently, they should ensure their systems support effective learning and teacher/learner well-being.

Learner-specific information, in the form of teacher comment on strengths and areas for development, is likely to be most meaningful and helpful to both learners and their parents/carers. It will be important for schools to make clear to parents/carers how they are using information based on national curriculum outcomes/levels, underlining that the level descriptions are broad, 'best-fit' descriptions of attainment, and therefore not designed for frequent use to report change in terms of numerical outcomes.

Both qualitative and quantitative assessment information should be transferred to inform receiving teachers and schools.

At transition, secondary schools will want to be able to utilise assessment information from primary schools as the main evidence base for supporting each learner's progress during the first term of Year 7.

For the core subjects (English, Welsh, Welsh second language, mathematics and science) schools should follow statutory requirements for cluster group moderation, to ensure a shared understanding of standards and the availability of robust assessment information. Primary and secondary school leadership teams should actively support their cluster by ensuring:

- appropriate time for cluster group moderation meetings
- teacher representation at cluster meetings
- agreed decisions and outcomes from cluster meetings are implemented by all relevant staff.

In effective clusters, Year 6 to Year 7 transfer of core subject national curriculum outcomes/levels and linked qualitative teacher commentary provide sufficient information for receiving secondary schools' early assessment of individual learners. School leadership/management teams should ensure that this information is fit for purpose and utilised fully.

At transition, schools should also ensure manageable arrangements for effective transfer of assessment information for non-core subjects. Succinct qualitative information on learners' cross-curricular, transferable skills would be of particular value to receiving teachers.

To provide management information, to inform decision making, for school leaders, managers and governors

Within effective schools, senior management teams provide strong leadership to ensure that all teachers/departments have clear guidance on how to use assessment to improve learner performance. This emphasises the importance of consistent practice and the quality of assessment across the school. Agreed targets are realistic but challenging, with effective monitoring and reporting of learners' progress.

Communications between school leaders and managers and classroom teachers are conducted in an environment of mutual respect and trust, and with a shared purpose. Estyn reports have confirmed that the most effective learning and teaching environments are characterised by strong and dynamic communications between teachers and learners. Effective communications should also extend to other teachers, school managers and school governors, learners' parents/carers, and to cluster groups and families of schools.

Effective schools employ systems and procedures that are designed to hold, share and make good use of appropriate and robust information. Systems for collecting and interpreting assessment information ensure that information is both readily accessible and meaningful to the intended audience.

For administrative purposes and as a short-hand communication (e.g. for IT-based systems), schools may encode periodic capture of teacher assessment updates. This may be linked to emerging evidence of 'best-fit' in relation to the level descriptions. For example, performance at the lower end, securely within, or at the top end of a broad level could be recorded as being, respectively, Level X-, Level X or Level X+. There are clear benefits for data transfer within and between schools if ICT software uses a common convention. This is the coding that the Welsh Assembly Government will therefore adopt in our liaison with commercial suppliers of management information systems.

Where schools wish to record achievement that exceeds expected progress towards an agreed target and achievement below expectations, symbols such as + and – could be used, respectively.

For evidence on performance within and across schools for local authorities, the Welsh Assembly Government and the wider community

Assessment as part of the School Effectiveness Framework

In line with the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) philosophy, the education system as a whole must ensure focus on every young person's entitlement to high-quality learning experiences throughout their educational career. Under the SEF, each learner's progress should be tracked within and across educational settings. This links to the seven core aims for young people, as set out in *Children and Young People: Rights to Action* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004).

It enables a learner's progress to be monitored as an individual and removes the tension of judging institutional performance as a proxy for pupil performance. This also means that intra- and inter-school variation, and local authority performance can be assessed, supported and challenged but always in the context of performance of individual learners within a local authority area, not individual institutions.

The SEF aims to support and challenge schools, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government to review assessment systems regularly, to ensure that they are rigorous, fit for purpose, manageable and sustainable.

Strategies for making the most of assessment are fundamental to robust self-evaluation. They form a central plank of School Performance Improvement, linking closely with the improvement and accountability element of the SEF.

The Core Themes and Elements of the SEF emphasise strong self-evaluation, the use of data and management information to identify strengths and areas for development, and the need to work collaboratively and learn from one another. Assessment information needs both analysis and to be put into context in order to understand it properly and to take appropriate action.

School staff and leadership teams should work together to provide high-quality assessment. Key to school improvement and accountability is the ability to:

- set appropriately challenging but achievable targets for learners
- make rigorous use of both formative and summative assessment methods
- provide feedback to learners
- employ effective learning and teaching techniques.

At regional and national level, summary assessment data provides the evidence on which local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government can base their support to schools. Also, it should be used to provide effective challenge to each individual school, to drive improvement across the education system as a whole.

Within Wales, we want our teacher assessment results to be robust, reliable and demonstrably credible to all audiences. That is why ensuring a common application of national standards across Wales is essential. At Key Stage 3, external moderation of subject departments and external verification of whole school assessment policies and practices are designed to help achieve this. These arrangements are most effective through tri-level working between schools, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government. In 2010, pilot work across Wales will explore how best to extend such external support to Key Stage 2. This work is drawing upon the findings and recommendations from Estyn's 2009 evaluative survey of teacher assessment in the core subjects at Key Stages 2 and 3.

Schools and local authorities that make the most of assessment, using the integrated approach described in this guidance, should see real improvements in outcomes for their learners.