

WLE 29

Ymateb gan: Y Gymdeithas Genedlaethol i Blant Byddar

Response from: The National Deaf Children's Society

About Us

The National Deaf Children's Society seeks to create a world without barriers for deaf children, young people and their families. We support children and young people with all levels of deafness, from mild through to profound, including those with temporary hearing loss and a unilateral loss. We use the term deafness to refer to all levels of hearing loss.

The National Deaf Children's Society welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill.

General Response

We understand the principles of the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 policy and of the Welsh Government's desire to increase the number of Welsh speakers in Wales to one million by 2050. We also acknowledge the government's belief that the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill will assist in rising the number of Welsh speakers within children and young people. Given the cultural importance of British Sign Language within the deaf community, we can sympathise with the policy and the Bill's overarching aims.

Childhood Deafness in Wales

The 2023 Consortium for Research in Deaf Education (CRIDE) report for Wales reported that 2,260 of children in Wales are deaf, with 81% of school aged deaf children being in mainstream state-funded schools, with an additional 8% of deaf children attending resource bases in mainstream schools. Children in mainstream schools, including those in resource bases, are required to adopt the language of the school. The report also estimates that 18% of either severely or profoundly deaf children in Wales attend education settings where Welsh is the primary language. This figure is roughly in line with the 2021 Census statistics in relation to Welsh speakers and addresses a stereotype that we want to ensure does not guide the implementation of this policy on the ground – deafness is not a learning disability, and deaf children are just as capable as their hearing peers provided they are given the support they need to thrive. Given this, we expect the number of deaf children who can speak Welsh to increase over time given the Bill.

Concerns

We note that the Bill in its current state makes no reference to children with a sensory impairment, or to Additional Learning Needs at all. Whilst it is likely that plans for provisions of this nature are to be set out at a future date through accompanying secondary legislation, statutory guidance, or amendments to the ALN Act 2018; the inclusion of specific targets in the Bill, like the CFER Level B2, give us cause for concern. We would encourage amendments to the Bill that specifically outline the duties of local authorities in relation the children with ALN, and children with a sensory impairment in particular.

We would urge for the expectation for all learners in mainstream education to achieve CFER Level B2 skills in Welsh to have some flexibility for deaf children and consider their communication needs. The Bill in its current form only seems to exclude special schools from eventual B2 commitments. However, the vast majority of deaf children are in mainstream education, thus we need to see assurances that families of deaf children will not struggle in securing admission to schools for their children as a result of any perceptions of their child being unlikely to achieve B2 in their time at a school. This could be through an amendment to the target in relation to children with ALN or local authority-recognised sensory loss.

Many deaf children have the potential to excel in learning Welsh. These children should not be excluded from any plans to strengthen their Welsh language ability based on their deafness. Additionally, we also need to ensure that deaf children who may struggle with acquiring another language are not placed under any undue pressure. We would need to see education settings placing the child at the heart of discussions, with the family involved to secure the best chance for the child – whether that be B2 level or not. An ample opportunity to consider this would be when the family is being consulted on their child's Individual Development Plan given the ALN Code makes specific references to children with sensory loss.

Teachers of the Deaf will undoubtedly play a critical role in supporting deaf children through their journey with the Welsh language. However, as the committee is aware, Teacher of the Deaf numbers in Wales are decreasing. In order to ensure that deaf children, their families and schools are supported through the implementation of this legislation, we would need to see a thorough concentration on workforce planning and investment to ensure the appropriate levels of support are available.