

CFA18 Welsh Language Commission

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

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Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Cymraeg i bawb? | Cymraeg for all?

Ymateb gan: Comisiynydd y Gymraeg | Evidence from: Welsh Language Commission

1. What are the main barriers that prevent wider use of the Welsh language in areas with fewer Welsh speakers, and what might help to change this?

We are about to publish our new strategic plan for 2025-30 and the questions of this consultation reflect the type of considerations that have been central to the process of drawing up the strategic plan. As part of developing the plan we carried out an engagement project with children and young people to understand language use habits and the type of challenges that prevent wider use of the Welsh language. 1600 children and young people all over Wales responded to our questionnaire, and 6 subsequent focus groups were held with children and young people. We'll publish a report based on this research during the Urdd National Eisteddfod in May, but we can refer to some key findings in our responses to the questions of this consultation.

We would argue that there are several complex and linked reasons for the lack of widespread use of the Welsh language among individuals who can speak Welsh (especially in areas with a lower density of speakers). Here are some of the most obvious reasons:

English as a default language: for many Welsh speakers, English is the natural language that's used at home, with friends and in society on a day-to-day basis. Individuals' linguistic habits are deep rooted and are part of the individual's psychology, and it's something that's very difficult to change. Quite simply, what feels most natural and easy for many individuals who can speak Welsh is to speak English.

Welsh as a language of education: linked to the point above, in several areas where there's a lower density of Welsh speakers, Welsh tends to be considered as a language of education. Although the Welsh education system succeeds in creating new speakers, the census statistics show that many of these individuals lose their grasp of the language after leaving the education system. It's likely that part of the reason for this is that these individuals don't use the Welsh language regularly outside the world of education. Our recent research supports the evidence that the use of Welsh beyond the school gates is often very limited. If these individuals lose their grasp of the Welsh language due to a lack of use and confidence, then this in turn reduces the pool of speakers in an area who can support the use of the language in the community.

The relationship between speaker density and language use: in an area where most of the population doesn't speak Welsh, then opportunities to use Welsh are more limited. That is, the critical mass of speakers doesn't exist to ensure easy and natural opportunities for people to use the Welsh language. In areas with a lower density of Welsh speakers, there is therefore more emphasis on creating opportunities to use the Welsh language, for example at school, when doing sports and leisure activities, or when working. It's also true that fewer individuals are available to fill jobs or volunteering opportunities that provide services through the medium of Welsh and offer opportunities for people to use the Welsh language. We therefore believe that increasing use is likely to be easier and more successful if there's a higher density of Welsh speakers in the first place.

The Welsh language exists alongside a dominant language: as is true in all parts of Wales, the Welsh language exists alongside a language that dominates mass culture, the media and entertainment - which is bound to have a substantial influence on language use.

2. What sort of spaces and opportunities might encourage greater use of, and increase confidence in, the use of the language in areas where day-to-day use of the language is limited?

Our recent research supports the evidence of other surveys (for example, the Language Use Survey) which show that there is a relationship between fluency in the Welsh language and the use of the Welsh language. Fluent Welsh speakers are much more likely to use the language regularly in their lives. We know that Welsh-medium education is most likely to lead to the creation of fluent and confident Welsh speakers, therefore increasing the numbers who receive their education through the medium of Welsh is likely to support efforts to increase the use of the language in due course.

One of the main challenges from the point of view of the Welsh language is to increase its use by speakers beyond the school gates. The obvious challenge is to maintain the Welsh language skills of our young people and ensure that they continue to use the language as they progress in their education or training and into work.

In this context, increasing the use of the Welsh language in workplaces is one of the priorities of our strategic plan for 2025-30 because we believe it has a significant influence on people's opportunities to use the Welsh language. We need to build on what the education system achieves by ensuring opportunities for people to use the Welsh language regularly when working. By increasing formal and informal use of the Welsh language in the workplace there's potential to influence people's perception of the importance of the language, opportunities to gain linguistic confidence, and a wider use of the Welsh language in the community. Of course, the Welsh language standards place a duty on public sector organizations to promote internal use of the Welsh language, but workplaces from all sectors offer opportunities to use the Welsh language.

Beyond the education sector and the workplace, there's a wide range of different spaces and sectors that can contribute to encouraging more use of the Welsh language. Some of the most obvious examples include:

Welsh language services: the Welsh language standards system means that people have more opportunities to use the Welsh language in all aspects of their lives. As well as continuing to expand and improve the quality of Welsh language services, one of the priorities of our strategic plan for 2025-30 is to encourage more use of Welsh language services available.

Sports & leisure: our research with children and young people clearly highlights that sports and leisure activities are strategically important areas. Over half of those who responded to our questionnaire stated that they attended leisure/sports activities regularly, a much higher proportion than any other type of activity outside of school. The use of Welsh was also slightly higher in leisure/sports activities compared to other activities.

Cultural events: beyond sports, we believe that cultural events, for example eisteddfods, festivals and shows, plays, gigs and concerts are obvious areas that should be prioritized in terms of increasing language use.

Broadcasting, technology, and social media: given the importance and prominence of technology and social media in our lives, this is another significant area. Our research with children and young people includes a great deal of information about the habits of children and young people in terms of watching television, listening to music and podcasts, and the use of technology and social media through the medium of Welsh. Overall, the results suggest that the use of Welsh is fairly limited currently.

Although perhaps a difficult area from the point of view of linguistic planning, it's important to remember the influence of certain individuals and different organizations in terms of conveying messages about the use of the Welsh language. This includes influential individuals in social groups and community leaders at a local level as well as more well-known role models. The prominence of the Welsh language within Welsh football during recent campaigns is one clear and powerful example.

3. Can you share examples of successful initiatives or activities that have encouraged Welsh language use in areas where use of the language is limited?

There's an extremely wide range of different organizations and initiatives that encourage the use of the Welsh language all over Wales. Our response below will focus specifically on the Commissioner's work. All the Commissioner's work relates to increasing opportunities to use the Welsh language and below are some specific examples.

5 year promotion strategies

The Welsh language standards require local authorities to adopt and implement a 5-year strategy that explains how they intend to promote and to facilitate the use of the Welsh language more widely in their boundaries. Our strategic plan for 2025-30 states our intention to collaborate with local authorities and national parks authorities to prepare and evaluate their 5-year promotion strategies. The implementation of these strategies usually involves bringing together several agencies/organisations locally, such as the mentrau iaith and Mudiad Meithrin. We believe that these strategies have the potential to make a substantial difference to the way opportunities to use the Welsh language are planned and promoted.

Defnyddia dy Gymraeg (Use your Welsh) campaign

Our annual campaign, Defnyddia dy Gymraeg, encourages everyone to use the Welsh they have, and for businesses, charities and organizations of all kinds to promote Welsh language services available to the public. We are keen to encourage people of all ages and from all backgrounds across Wales to use their Welsh every day - at home, at work, in the shop, when socialising, over the phone, face to face and online. The campaign has helped to do the following:

- Increase awareness about the importance of using the Welsh language, especially in key sectors such as health and care.
- Organizations of all kinds have had an opportunity to promote their Welsh language services, making the Welsh language more accessible to the public.
- Encouraged Welsh speakers to use the language in their everyday lives, whether at home, at work, in the shop, when socializing, over the phone, face to face or online.

Iaith Gwaith (Working Welsh) badges

Welsh speakers often need to know whether someone else speaks Welsh before speaking Welsh with them and the orange bubble of the Iaith Gwaith badge enables that. It's had a positive effect on promoting the use of the Welsh language in various locations since its establishment in 2005. Here are some of the main effects:

- Increasing visibility: The orange bubble badge clearly shows that a person speaks Welsh, encouraging others to use the language when communicating.
- Boosting confidence: The badge has helped Welsh speakers feel more confident when using the language in public situations, such as in the shop, hospital, or leisure centre.
- Improving services: The badge has enabled organizations to provide Welsh language services more effectively, ensuring that the Welsh language is more accessible and widely used.

The Iaith Gwaith badge continues to be an important tool we use to promote the Welsh language and encourage people to use the language confidently and regularly.

Y Cynnig Cymraeg (Welsh Offer)

The Cynnig Cymraeg (Welsh Offer) is recognition by the Commissioner given to organizations that have created a Welsh language development plan. It's an opportunity for organizations to show their users that they are proud of the Welsh language and are ready to use it.

To receive the Cynnig Cymraeg recognition, organizations are expected to work with the Commissioner's officers to form a Welsh Language Development Plan. The intention of the Plan is to help organizations to develop their Welsh language services over time. Although the Cynnig Cymraeg does not necessarily target areas where the use of the Welsh language is limited, the Cynnig Cymraeg often targets charities, businesses and sectors where the use of the Welsh language is limited. It also targets spaces that are very visible in the lives of everyone in Wales, for example, supermarkets and well-known large businesses.

4. How could technology and digital tools help to increase the use of the Welsh language, especially among those who use the language infrequently or who lack confidence?

As our response to question 2 indicates, we believe technology and media are prominent areas that have potential to influence the use of language. Of course, challenges exist in these areas given the influence of technology and English-medium media, but there are also opportunities. This is particularly true in terms of offering opportunities for people who don't often use Welsh to hear and use Welsh increasingly when using technology, when communicating online through computer games, on social media, and when watching and listening to programmes and music.

The main objective of the Commissioner's work is to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language. One of the ways we achieve this is by collaborating with public institutions to increase their digital services in Welsh. Through this work we are seeing that artificial intelligence (AI) is having an increasing influence on how organisations deliver different services and on ways of working. For example, it's already being used to create content, facilitate translation, provide automated services and increase employee efficiency in a range of ways. If the Welsh language is central to AI developments from the outset, then there's great potential for it to significantly facilitate our work and that of Welsh public institutions to increase opportunities to use Welsh. The opposite is also true, of course.

We recently responded to the Welsh Government's request for information on what kind of technology would help increase the use of Welsh. Our response was based on what Welsh organisations told us at a series of seminars earlier this year which focused on successes, challenges and good practice in the field of technology and the Welsh language. Here's a taste of what the organizations said:

- There's a real concern that the AI field is developing so rapidly that it's impossible to predict what will come next. There's also concern that the Welsh language will be left behind and seen as irrelevant if it is not included in these developments.

-The biggest concerns were expressed in relation to education. AI is increasingly being used in this sector. It's essential that the provision in Welsh is in line with the provision in English so as not to undermine the value of the Welsh language as a medium of education.

-Challenges were highlighted in attempting to plan and design services that use AI due to a lack of data on the practices and behaviour of Welsh language service users.

- The need to comply with language duties doesn't mean that it isn't possible to offer services by means of technology and AI. AI offers new opportunities to facilitate the use of the Welsh language and to support organisations in providing services.

The above list suggests that there are many barriers that need to be overcome to enable organizations to realize that. We will be working with Welsh Government and other stakeholders to better understand the implications of technology for the way public services are delivered. As part of this effort, we will be looking at how we can support organisations as they pilot new ways of working before using them more widely. This work will provide a solid basis as we develop a policy perspective on the regulation of AI in relation to the Welsh language in the coming year.

As well as regulating the Welsh language duties of the public sector in Wales, we are working with the private and third sector to promote an increase in the use of Welsh. Through that work we can see that AI offers opportunities to improve Welsh language services for the public. A specific example of this would be the ability of banks and housing associations to use AI to develop apps that would be able to offer Welsh language services. Developments of this kind would be positive, and to be welcomed, but we must be vigilant of the risks of offering an inferior service in Welsh. It is critical that AI is used responsibly to support the language skills of the workforce, not replace them.

5. What impact, in your view, do cultural events such as national Eisteddfodau or Welsh language festivals have on Welsh language use, particularly in areas with fewer Welsh speakers?

Major cultural events such as the national Eisteddfods and the Tafwyl and Gŵyl Tawe festivals are very effective ways of offering spaces for people to use their Welsh. By celebrating the Welsh language and its culture, these events are a positive advertisement for the Welsh language and do a great job of promoting the language. Our impressions of these events are that they're inclusive and encourage people to attend and use the Welsh language, regardless of how much Welsh they have. This was on display at a recent event rewarding businesses in the Rhondda Cynon Taf area for their contribution to promoting the Welsh language in the aftermath of the 2024 National Eisteddfod.

We're very supportive of this inclusive message, as it's likely to encourage people beyond those who already use Welsh regularly. To increase the use of Welsh it's necessary to attract new speakers and speakers who have stopped using Welsh. Attending such events could be the motivation people need to re-engage in the language, or to pursue learning it. For example, in a

report to Rhondda Cynnon Taf Council's cabinet on the legacy and impact of the 2024 National Eisteddfod, it was reported that there's been an increase in the number of staff choosing to attend Welsh courses.

The events can be an effective way of involving non-Welsh speaking parents who choose to send their children to Welsh education. The Urdd National Eisteddfod, as well as festivals such as Tafwyl, are very effective in involving local schools in the programmes, which are of course going to attract the children's parents and relatives to attend.

We see these events as a great opportunity to promote our work, and to spread our Iaith Gwaith badges. The months in which the national Eisteddfods fall are consistently the months in which we receive the most orders for Iaith Gwaith goods. We're looking forward to engaging with the communities, businesses and charities of Port Talbot and Wrexham at this year's eisteddfods.

6. How might these events (whether large or small in size) be adapted or improved to better serve communities with fewer Welsh speakers

In the last decade the National Eisteddfod has been very successful in attracting very large crowds when it's visited areas with lower speaker density, such as Cardiff and Rhondda Cynnon Taf. Indeed, when the National Eisteddfod ground was free for visitors in Cardiff in 2018, the festival was visited by record crowds, with estimates judging that over half a million visited over the course of the week. That's more than three times the average attendance at the National Eisteddfod in an average year. The Urdd Eisteddfod in Denbighshire in 2022 was also free and attracted a crowd of 118,000, which is around 30,000 more than usual. It's reasonable to conclude that the reach of the free Eisteddfods has been successful in attracting new people to the Eisteddfod.

Of course, funding the National Eisteddfod to be free to attend is costly for the public purse. But if we are serious about increasing the number of people who use the Welsh language daily, then it's a policy that's worth considering more regularly.

We would encourage cultural event organisers to consider what the legacy they want to achieve in the long term, consider who are the groups they want to target to attend from the very beginning, and how to measure their success. Considering these questions when planning could enable more detailed and targeted communication and promotion work, and that could be an effective way to attract new audiences. Any data that's collected about events should feed into the work of evaluating the success of the events at attracting new audiences, and to inform the planning of any similar events in the future.

7. Are there any other matters you would like to draw to the Committees attention about the Welsh Government's approach to supporting the Welsh language in areas with fewer Welsh speakers?
