

Briefing for the Petitions Committee

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 13 Mehefin 2017

Petitions Committee | 13 June 2017

Research Briefing: Compulsory Welsh at GCSE

Petition number: P-05-760

Petition title: Stop compulsory Welsh Language GCSE

Text of petition: We call on the National Assembly for Wales to urge the Welsh Government to change their policy and allow children to drop the Welsh language at GCSE (Key Stage 4). Give our children back their choice, do not make the Welsh Language compulsory.

Background

It is the Welsh Government's policy that all pupils aged 3–16 should study Welsh, either first or second language. This briefing draws on information available in the Research Service publication, *Welsh-medium education and Welsh as a subject* (August 2016).

Following the introduction of the *Education Reform Act 1988*, Welsh was phased in as a compulsory subject for pupils in Wales aged 5–14 (Key Stages 1, 2 and 3) from 1990. From September 1999 onwards, Welsh was also made compulsory for pupils aged 14–16 (Key Stage 4). The *Foundation Phase*, introduced in 2001, requires Welsh or Welsh Language Development to be taught to all 3–7 year olds.

The National Curriculum in Wales

The National Curriculum in Wales consists of core and foundation subjects. These are listed in the *Education Act 2002*.

The **core subjects** for **Key Stages 1–3** are Mathematics; Science; English and **Welsh first language** (in relation to Welsh-speaking schools, as stated in the *Education Act 2002*). The foundation subjects are Technology; Physical Education; History; Geography; Art; Music; **Welsh second language** (if the school is not a Welsh-speaking school, as stated in the *Education Act 2002*); and for Key Stage 3, a Modern foreign language.

The **core subjects** at **Key Stage 4** are **Welsh first language**; Mathematics; English; and Science. The **foundation subjects** are Physical Education; and **Welsh second language**.

There are no prescribed hours for specific subjects. The amount of time allocated to studying each subject, including Welsh, is decided locally by schools.

GCSE Welsh

One of the recommendations of the Welsh Government's report [*One Language for All: Review of Welsh Second Language at Key Stages 3 and 4*](#) (2013) was that Welsh second language continues to be a statutory subject within the National Curriculum, and continues to be a compulsory subject for all pupils in Wales until the end of Key Stage 4. **Professor Donaldson's [*Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales – Successful Futures*](#)** (PDF 1.58MB) **recommended that Welsh remains compulsory in all schools up to the age of 16.** The then Minister for Education and Skills, Huw Lewis, confirmed the Welsh Government acceptance of the recommendation in a [written statement \(on 15 October 2015\)](#).

One language for All also stated that although Welsh is a compulsory subject in the national curriculum, it is not compulsory to enter pupils to sit a GCSE examination or any other qualification. The decision regarding the appropriate qualification for learners to follow is a matter for schools, and is made at a local level. Currently, at Key Stage 4, schools register pupils for either **Welsh first language GCSE, Welsh second language GCSE (full course), Welsh second language (short course)** or for no qualification at all.

A revised GCSE Welsh second language

Following the recommendations of *One Language for All*, the Welsh Government, in collaboration with the WJEC, Qualifications Wales and other stakeholders, have developed a **revised model for GCSE Welsh second language (full course)** to be introduced in September 2017. The GCSE Welsh second language short course will be withdrawn once the revised full course is introduced, with the last assessment opportunity for the short course in summer 2018.

Arguments for Welsh as a subject at GCSE

Continuity

In her letter to the Petitions Committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Education argues the need for continuity and progression in learning. She says she has **no plans to change established Welsh Government policy** which is that Welsh is a compulsory subject at both ages 5–14 (Foundation Phase, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3) and 14–16 (Key Stage 4). **Linguistic progression** is a key element of the [*Welsh-medium Education Strategy*](#).

Developing language skills is a process that happens over a period of time. It is important that children and young people are able to build on their competence as they mature. Ensuring that there are opportunities for suitable linguistic progression is one of the cornerstones of the Strategy.

Part of culture

The Welsh language is part of the culture of Wales. In its 2014 policy statement regarding its Welsh language strategy, [*A living language: a language for living – moving forward*](#), the Welsh Government stated:

The Welsh language is a valuable part of our identity and culture, and it is important for all learners in Wales – whether they attend Welsh-medium or English-medium schools – to be supported to speak Welsh confidently.

Demand from workforce for Welsh language skills

The Cabinet Secretary for Education also refers to the growth in demand for Welsh language skills from the workforce and the need to ensure young people are equipped with the skills they need. One of the six strategic areas of the **Welsh language strategy**, [*A living language: a language for living*](#), is the Workplace, and the Welsh Government aims to increase the use of Welsh at work. In the 2014 policy statement, the Welsh Government states that the implementation of Welsh Language Standards:

will be an important catalyst for improving how organisations consider the development of Welsh language skills within their workforce.

Advantages of bilingualism

The advantages that bilingualism can bring are well documented.

The Welsh-medium Education Strategy refers to:

the direct advantages of being able to use particular languages (for example to communicate with family members and wider social networks or to enhance career opportunities)

and

the more general advantages of promoting cognitive skills, increasing mental agility and broadening speakers' range of cultural experiences.

The Strategy refers to research in Canada, which reveals that bilingualism [enhances attention and cognitive control in children and older adults](#) (PDF 128KB) and shows the impact of bilingualism on [delaying the onset of dementia symptoms](#). It also refers to [research published by the University of Edinburgh](#) in 2009, which showed that speakers of two languages found it easier to focus on a range of tasks, blocking out potential distractions.

Role of education in increasing the number of Welsh speakers

Reports frequently acknowledge the role of the education sector in increasing the number of Welsh speakers. In the [*Welsh-medium Education Strategy: next steps*](#), the Welsh Government stated:

There is no question that the education system has a vitally important role in securing the future of the language. It is the **provision of Welsh-medium education that has generated the greatest gains** in the number of young people fluent in their Welsh language skills.

It is also important in the context of the Welsh Government's target of [one million Welsh speakers by 2050](#), launched in August 2016. The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee published a report in May 2017 on the [Inquiry into the Welsh Government's new Welsh Language Strategy](#) (627KB). The report emphasises the **importance of education in achieving the aim of a million Welsh speakers** and welcomes the changes to Welsh second language GCSE to be introduced from September 2017.

Attainment

Although the petition appears to relate to Welsh GCSE in English medium schools, it may be useful to note that data shows that studying through the medium of Welsh does not affect proficiency in English. The Welsh-medium Education Strategy states:

Developing skills in Welsh and English are not mutually exclusive. Learners in Welsh-medium settings achieve comparable outcomes in both Welsh and English first language, which suggests the success of the sector in developing natural bilingualism. Assessment data at the end of Year 6 show that 98.5% of learners in Welsh-medium schools achieve a level in English at age 11 that is the same as, or within one level of, their performance in Welsh.

Arguments against Welsh as a subject at GCSE

Restricting choice

Compulsory Welsh GCSE can restrict learners from taking another subject at Key Stage 4, narrowing their options.

Attainment

A Freedom for Information request, as [reported by the BBC](#) in 2014, indicated that primary school children from English speaking homes, and who attend Welsh medium only schools, are less likely to perform well in maths, science and English than their counterparts in English-medium schools. The attainment of 25,000 11 year old pupils was compared.

Public opinion

A [poll for ITV News](#) in 2015, based on a sample of 1,151 people, found that nearly two-thirds of people oppose the current position of compulsory Welsh up until the age of 16.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.