



Comisiynydd y
Gymraeg
Welsh Language
Commissioner

Llinos Madeley
Clerk
Children, Young People and Education Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

27 November 2017

Dear Clerk,

Welsh medium childcare and early year's education provision briefing note.

The Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy emphasises the importance of the early years towards achieving the aim of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. With this in mind I presented this briefing note on Welsh medium childcare and early years education to the Cabinet Secretary for Education as advice under Section 4 of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011.

The briefing note discusses the significance of the childcare and early years education sector in creating new Welsh speakers. The paper discusses current childcare and early years education provision in Wales, and outlines the Welsh Medium provision in particular. The policy context is discussed, particularly the Welsh Government's commitment to offer 30 hours of free childcare to all 3-4 year olds whose parents are in full time work, and also the vision of reaching a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

The paper concludes that there exists clear potential to integrate the above policies. When the 30 Hours Offer comes to fruition, it will lead to a significant increase in the demand for childcare across Wales, and thus presents a timely opportunity to take significant strides towards achieving the vision of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. To realize this potential, however, several recommendations should be considered:

- The Welsh Government needs to ensure that the Welsh language and its vision for 2050 are key considerations in the process of planning, funding and implementing its plans for childcare and early years education. Although general plans and commitments are outlined in Cymraeg 2050's work programme for 2017-2021, there are no explicit plans on the way



Comisiynydd y
Gymraeg
Welsh Language
Commissioner

forward and there is a risk that a golden opportunity to take highly significant steps forward with regard to the future of the Welsh language will be lost.

- The Welsh Government should use Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) as a framework for coordinating the actions of the Government, local authorities and childcare providers. Specifying growth targets in the childcare sector as a specific outcome in WESPs would ensure that local childcare strategies are aligned with the government's national aspirations and targets for Welsh language provision. Growth in this sector would contribute significantly to increasing numbers across the Welsh medium education sector in the long term.
- In order to produce effective national and local strategies, and to evaluate the impact and success of these strategies in the future, valid and reliable data is essential. The Welsh Government needs to take the lead in reforming the way childcare data is collected and shared in order to ensure that national and local plans and strategies are based on reliable information.

I trust that this paper will be of interest to you, and I hope you'll share the paper with members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

Yours Sincerely,

Meri Huws
Welsh Language Commissioner



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Commissioner

Briefing Note:

Welsh Medium Childcare and Early Years Education Provision

Author: Hywel Iorwerth

Date: 22/11/2017

Welsh Language Commissioner

The principal aim of the Welsh Language Commissioner, an independent organization established by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, is to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language. This entails raising awareness of the official status of the Welsh language in Wales and imposing standards on organizations. This, in turn, will lead to the establishment of rights for Welsh speakers.

Two principles will underpin the work:

- In Wales, the Welsh language should be treated no less favourably than the English language
- Persons in Wales should be able to live their lives through the medium of the Welsh language if they choose to do so

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Key facts

Increasing the number of young children who receive Welsh medium care and early years education will be critical to achieving the Government's vision of a **million** Welsh speakers by 2050.

51% of all Welsh speakers learnt the language at school: 11% at nursery school, 25% in primary school, and 15% at secondary school.



80% of Welsh speakers aged 3-15 learnt the language at school: 22% at nursery school, 46% in primary school, 12% in secondary school.



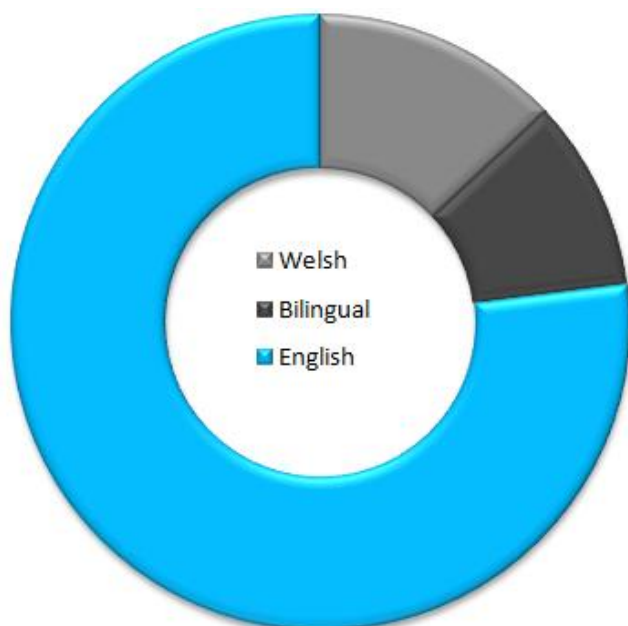
25% of those who learnt Welsh in primary school are fluent.



50% of those who learnt Welsh at nursery school are fluent.



English is the main language of **77%** of childcare providers; whilst **13%** are Welsh medium, and **10%** are bilingual*



Language is acquired quickly and naturally between the ages of 0-5, and research shows that as many as **80-85%** of children in Welsh medium pre-statutory care transfer to Welsh medium primary education.

Executive summary and recommendations

This paper discusses the current situation with regards to Welsh medium childcare and early years education. Here are the main findings:

- Ensuring that children and young people start learning Welsh as early as possible is vital in order to produce fluent Welsh speakers who are likely to use the language and transfer it to the next generation. The childcare and early years education sector has a highly significant role to play in this context.
- Growth in the number of young children who receive Welsh medium care and early years education could be critical in achieving the Welsh Government's vision of a million Welsh speakers by 2050.
- The Welsh Government has committed to offering 30 hours of free childcare to every 3 and 4 year old child whose parents are in full-time work. If this comes to fruition, it will lead to a significant increase in the demand for childcare across Wales and, as a result, a golden opportunity to ensure an increase in the numbers who receive Welsh medium childcare.
- Although the Welsh Government is aware of the importance of childcare to the future of the language, there are no specific and firm plans on how they intend to integrate the 30 Hours Scheme and the 2050 vision. It is unclear how the Welsh Government intends to move from general commitments to increase Welsh medium childcare provision to specific actions which will have an impact on the ground.
- Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) have significant potential to turn broad and general commitments into specific and material actions and targets.
- WESPs could provide an effective framework for coordinating the actions of the Welsh Government, local authorities and childcare providers, in order to ensure that there is significant increase in the numbers receiving Welsh medium childcare and subsequently transferring to Welsh medium education.
- Developing and evaluating national and local strategies to increase the numbers receiving Welsh medium childcare depends on the availability of reliable data and information.
- Current data on Welsh medium childcare in Wales is fragmented, inconsistent and difficult to interpret. There is currently a lack of robust information, and this deficiency may undermine attempts to reform the Welsh medium childcare sector in Wales and, as a result, the potential to take significant strides towards achieving the vision of a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

Based on these findings, we recommend the following:

- The Welsh Government needs to ensure that the Welsh language and its vision for 2050 are key considerations in the process of planning, funding and implementing its plans for childcare and early years education. Although general plans and commitments are outlined in Cymraeg 2050's work programme for 2017-2021, there are no explicit plans on the way forward and there is a risk that a golden opportunity to take highly significant steps forward with regard to the future of the Welsh language will be lost.
- The Welsh Government should use Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) as a framework for coordinating the actions of the Government, local authorities and childcare providers. Specifying growth targets in the childcare sector as a specific outcome in WESPs would ensure that local childcare strategies are aligned with the government's national aspirations and targets for Welsh language provision. Growth in this sector would contribute significantly to increasing numbers across the Welsh medium education sector in the long term.
- In order to produce effective national and local strategies, and to evaluate the impact and success of these strategies in the future, valid and reliable data is essential. The Welsh Government needs to take the lead in reforming the way childcare data is collected and shared in order to ensure that national and local plans and strategies are based on reliable information.

1. Context: Childcare and Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers

Evidence shows that the majority of children and young people tend to learn Welsh at school today.¹ Research jointly commissioned by the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Welsh Government shows that around 80% of Welsh speakers aged 3-15 have learnt the language at school. This compares with 51% of Welsh speakers of all ages who learnt the language at school. Unfortunately, fluency rates amongst those who have learnt the language at school are not as high as they are amongst those who learnt Welsh at home. For example, whilst 80% of those who learnt the language at home are fluent, only 25% of those who learnt the language in primary school are fluent. The fluency rates of those who learnt the language in secondary school is lower (11%) whilst the fluency rate of those who learnt the language at nursery school is much higher (50%). The research proves that there is a correlation between when and where individuals acquire or learn Welsh and how fluent or willing they are to use the language.

The above facts are highly significant in the context of the Welsh Government's ambitious strategy to ensure a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Not only does it emphasise the importance of the education system in terms of creating new Welsh speakers, but also the fact that learning Welsh from the very start of the education process is essential in order to produce fluent Welsh speakers who will use the language and transfer it to the next generation. Language is acquired quickly and naturally between the ages of 0-5, and research shows that as many as 80-85% of children in Welsh medium pre-statutory care transfer to Welsh medium primary education.²

In summary, a growth in the numbers receiving Welsh medium pre-statutory provision is likely to lead to an increase in the numbers in Welsh medium statutory education and also the numbers speaking Welsh fluently in society. It is therefore of no surprise that numerous key bodies and stakeholders are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the pre-statutory period as the start of the journey towards achieving the Welsh Government's target of reaching a million Welsh speakers by 2050.³

¹ For a more detailed overview of the data, see: The Welsh Language Commissioner and the Welsh Government, *Welsh language use in Wales, 2013-15* (2015); The Welsh Language Commissioner, *The Position of the Welsh Language 2012-2015: The Welsh Language Commissioner's 5-year Report* (2015).

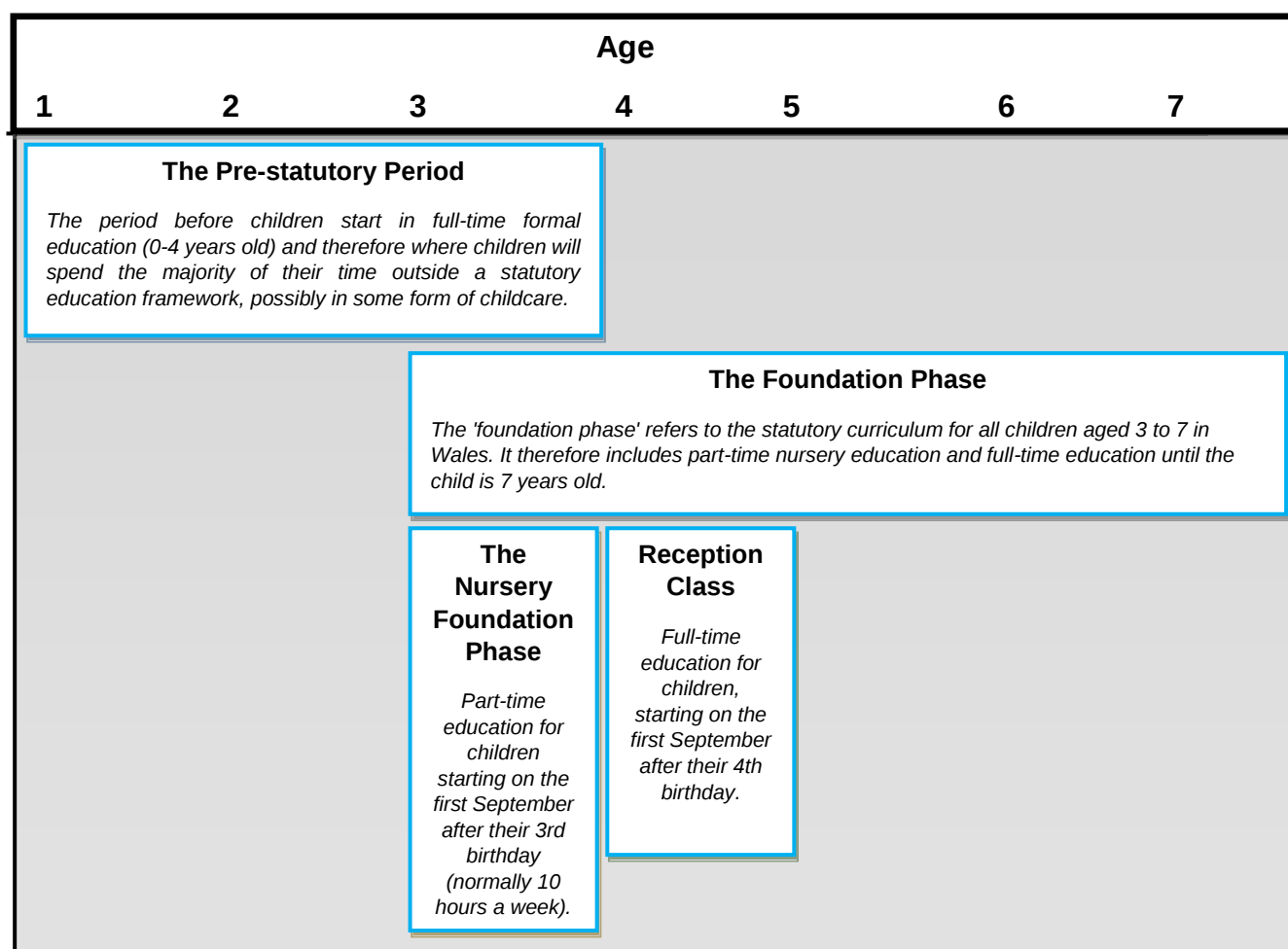
² 2015-16 data provided directly by Mudiad Meithrin.

³ The Welsh Language Commissioner, *The Position of the Welsh Language 2012-2015: The Welsh Language Commissioner's 5-year Report* (2015); Direct discussions with Mudiad Meithrin; Welsh Government, *Urgent Review of Welsh in Education Strategic Plans, 2017-20* by Aled Roberts (August 2017); National Assembly for Wales, Children, Young People and Education Committee, *Inquiry into Welsh in Education Strategic Plans* (WESPs) (December 2015).

2. The current situation

2.1. Childcare and early years education in Wales

Figure 1: Timetable and explanation of the key phases:



Apart from part-time early years education provision, the pre-statutory period is not controlled directly by the Welsh Government and is provided by a wide range of individuals, companies and voluntary and private organisations. This provision includes a variety of childminders (full-time, part-time), full day care (for example nurseries), morning or afternoon day care sessions (Mudiad Meithrin's substantial provision is the most notable example of Welsh medium provision), crèches, nannies, and open access play provision.

Pre-statutory childcare has changed significantly over recent years, partly as a result of the Welsh Government's offer of free early years education and childcare, for example the Flying Start project and, more recently, the 30 Hours Offer (discussed further in 3.1 below). Providers have had to adapt to these changes by offering more

flexible provision. As part of the process of piloting the 30 Hours Offer, the Welsh Government's Social Research department has published a report outlining the current situation in terms of childcare capacity in Wales.⁴ Here are some of the key facts in the report:

- It is currently estimated that there are around 175,000 children aged 0-4 living in Wales.
- There are 4,025 childcare providers in Wales, offering around 80,000 childcare places.
- There are around 2,000 childminders, offering around 15,000 places.
- There are around 700 full day care providers, offering around 30,000 places.
- There are around 1,200 part-time providers, offering around 35,000 places.
- There was no information about the range of Welsh medium provision in the report.

Although childcare is not controlled directly by the Welsh Government, the Childcare Act 2006 lists the duties imposed on local authorities as strategic leaders in local childcare provision.⁵ Local authorities have a legislative duty to assess and plan childcare provision in order to ensure its availability and quality. Local authorities are required to monitor and assess provision through Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (discussed further in 2.2 and 3.3 below).

2.2. The Welsh language in childcare and early years education provision

As part of their wider duties to monitor and assess childcare provision, local authorities are specifically required to consider and plan for Welsh medium childcare. The Welsh Government's childcare and early years plan highlights the advantages of bilingualism for children, and outlines a number of actions to support it.⁶ Firstly, local authorities are required, through Childcare Sufficiency Assessments (CSAs), to monitor and fill gaps, ensure sustainability and improve the quality and amount of Welsh language and bilingual provision in the area.⁷ They also work with Mudiad Meithrin and other providers via a range of grants to achieve the above objectives.

According to a recent report by the Welsh Government⁸ there are around 175,000 children aged 0-4 living in Wales. Unfortunately, there is no complete and reliable data on the numbers in childcare, and in Welsh medium childcare specifically (more details in 3.3 below). The main source of information on this sector is data collected by the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW). All childcare providers registered with CSSIW are required to complete a Self Assessment of Service Statement (SASS) which includes questions on the language of provision.

⁴ Welsh Government Social Research, *Childcare capacity in Wales* (October 2017). This report was a result of collaboration between the Welsh Government, the Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) and the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD).

⁵ Childcare Act (2006) - http://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2016/88/pdfs/wsi_20160088_mi.pdf

⁶ Welsh Government, *Building a Brighter Future: The Early Years and Childcare Plan* (2013).

⁷ Welsh Government, *Childcare Guidance* (2016).

⁸ Welsh Government Social Research, *Childcare Capacity in Wales* (October 2017)

One problem with this source is that not all providers complete the self assessment. For example, in 2016, only 76% of those working in the sector completed the self assessment, thereby giving an incomplete picture. The second fundamental problem is that it is the childcare providers themselves who are responsible for assessing the language of provision. It is inevitable that there will be some inconsistency and misinterpretation here in terms of defining language, which then impacts on the reliability and validity of the data.

This data, which is provided by CSSIW, is essential in preparing an evidence base for ensuring the sufficiency of local authority provision (the CSAs). Although the majority of local authorities use CSSIW data to undertake their assessments, the majority also use local data to support this information. As a result, the data reported in local authority reports is different to that held by CSSIW. The ways in which local authorities collect and use data also varies significantly. As a result, the national and local picture of Welsh medium childcare in Wales is fragmented, inconsistent and difficult to interpret. However, the data available can provide an useful snapshot of general patterns in Welsh medium childcare provision in Wales today:

Figure 2: The main language of provision in numbers and percentages in all local authorities, according to CSSIW data based on data from SASS (25 September 2017)⁹.

Local Authority	Welsh		English		Both Languages	
All Wales	500	13%	2993	77%	389	10%
Swansea	7	3%	205	93%	9	4%
Blaenau Gwent	2	3%	62	94%	2	3%
Vale of Glamorgan	9	4%	207	93%	6	3%
Cardiff	28	6%	390	88%	24	5%
Caerphilly	20	8%	214	87%	13	5%
Neath Port Talbot	5	3%	138	93%	6	4%
Newport	2	1%	158	96%	4	2%
Ceredigion	46	41%	30	27%	35	32%
Conwy	27	19%	94	68%	18	13%
Gwynedd	129	64%	19	9%	55	27%
Merthyr Tydfil	3	7%	38	84%	4	9%
Bridgend	8	5%	135	92%	4	3%
Powys	22	11%	160	82%	12	6%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	18	7%	221	88%	13	5%
Pembrokeshire	19	13%	121	82%	7	5%
Denbighshire	24	17%	92	67%	22	16%
Carmarthenshire	76	35%	66	30%	78	35%
Flintshire	9	4%	221	91%	14	6%
Monmouthshire	1	1%	121	98%	1	1%
Torfaen	3	3%	89	94%	3	3%
Wrexham	11	5%	178	88%	13	6%
Anglesey	31	28%	34	31%	46	41%

⁹ It appears that these figures are slightly different to those noted in the Government's most recent report, as there is no information about the language of all provision.

Figure 3: The main language of provision in percentages in all local authorities, according to CSSIW data based on data from SASS (25 September 2017).

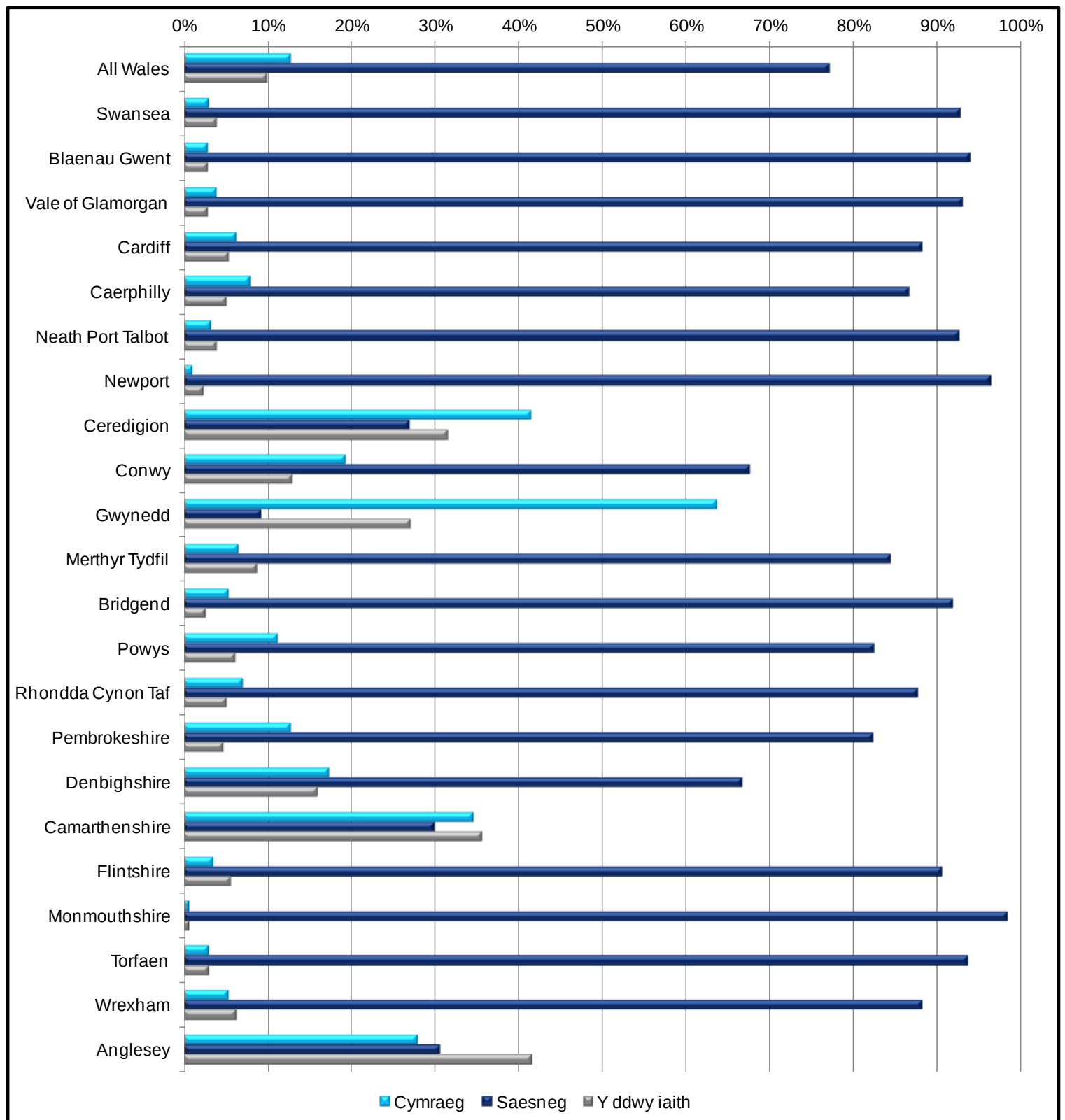
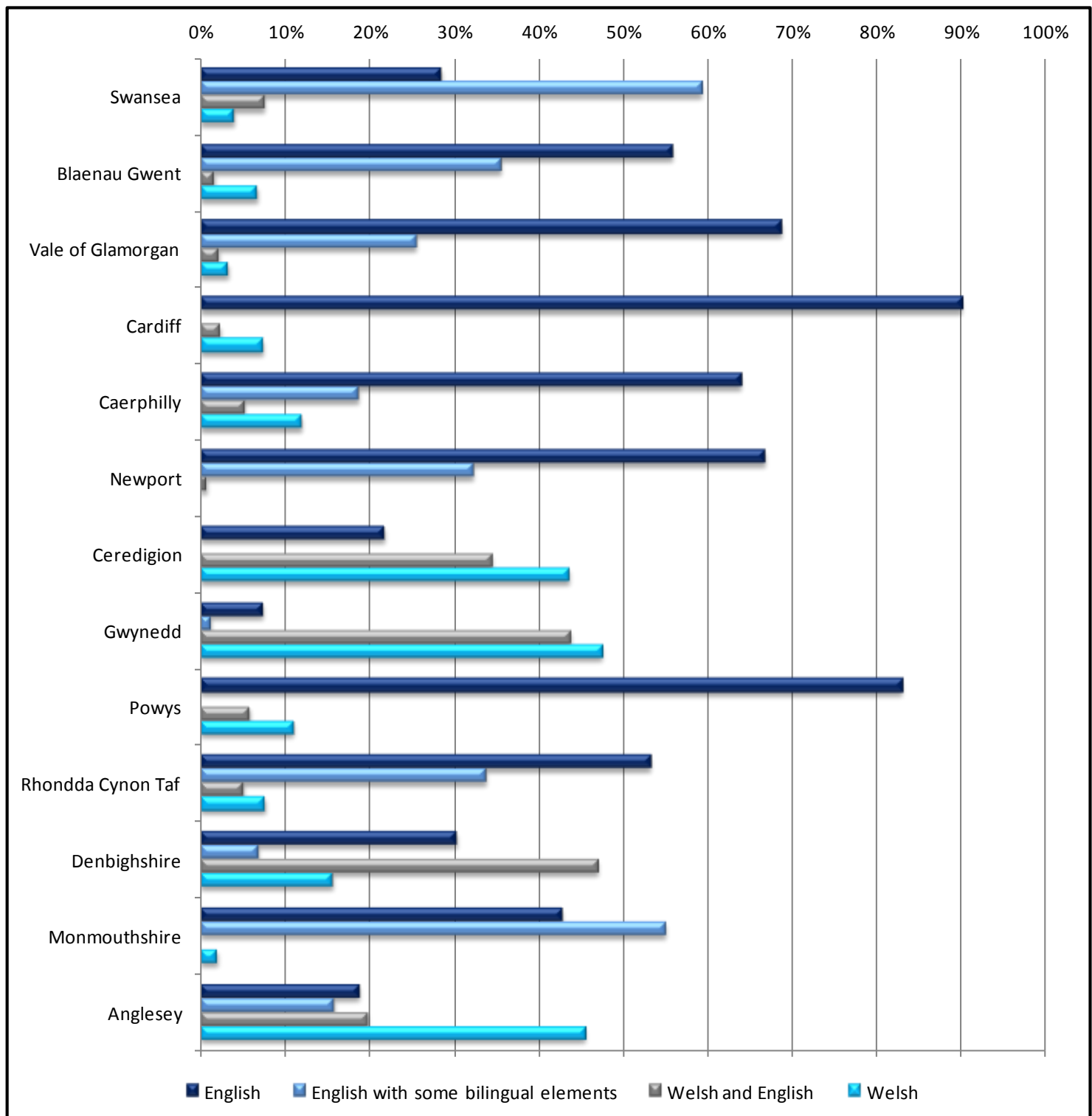


Figure 4: The language of provision in 13 local authorities, according to data collected by the Commissioner from local authority CSAs 2017-2022.



This data shows a rather different picture of Welsh medium childcare provision compared to figure 3. The significance of these differences will be discussed in 3.3 below.

3. Strategic planning for Welsh medium childcare and early years education

The Welsh Government has stated the importance of expanding Welsh medium childcare and early years education in order to achieve the target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Various factors will affect the success of that vision:

3.1. National strategy and integrating Government policies

The Welsh Government needs to ensure that the Welsh language and its vision for 2050 are key considerations when planning, funding and implementing its plans for childcare and early years education. Without explicit plans on the way forward, it is likely that a golden opportunity will be lost to take highly significant steps forward with regard to the future of the Welsh.

A national target has been set to expand Welsh medium childcare provision by creating 150 more nursery groups over the next 10 years.¹⁰ In Cymraeg 2050's work programme for 2017-2021, the Welsh Government states that it wants to 'support the expansion of Welsh-medium early years provision by 40 nursery groups by 2021'.¹¹ It also states the intention to deliver the offer of 30 hours of free childcare across Wales, providing more Government-funded Welsh-medium childcare places. Beyond this general commitment to provide support and funding, it is not yet clear what specific actions the Welsh Government intends to take, nor what framework will be used to drive this work forward.

The Welsh Government's childcare policies

The Flying Start project targets children under the age of 4 who live in some of the most deprived areas in Wales. One part of the project is the provision of free part-time childcare to 2 and 3 year old children. Although local authorities are expected to offer Welsh medium provision, statistics show that only 7% of those who were eligible requested Welsh medium childcare. This percentage is far lower than the percentage of children receiving Welsh medium education in Wales.¹² It is fair to say that there is room for improvement in terms of integrating the objectives of this project with the aim of increasing the numbers in Welsh medium childcare.¹³

¹⁰ Welsh Government, *Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh speakers* (2017), p. 12.

¹¹ Welsh Government, *Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh speakers - Work Programme 2017-21* (2017), p.10.

¹² Arad, *Welsh Medium Childcare Provision for Pre-School Children* (March 2017).

¹³ The organisation Parent for Welsh Medium Education has echoed these concerns and has gone so far as to say that Flying Start is militating against the expansion of Welsh medium education. See below its response to the consultation on Welsh in Education Strategic Plans:

<http://www.senedd.assembly.wales/mgConsultationDisplay.aspx?id=179&RPID=1008375631&cp=yes>

The Welsh Government's 30 Hours Offer is more far-reaching than Flying Start in terms of childcare. The Government has committed to offering 30 hours a week of free childcare to working parents of 3 or 4 year old children. The childcare will be offered for 48 weeks of the year. The 30 Hours Offer is a combination of early education time (Nursery Foundation Phase) and childcare. During term time (39 weeks), children who are 3 years old before September get at least 10 hours of early years education a week. The 30 Hours Offer will include an extra 20 hours of childcare in addition to this early years education, as well as 30 hours of childcare outside of term time (up to a total of 48 weeks).¹⁴ The Government is piloting this plan in 7 local authorities, including specific areas in Anglesey, Gwynedd, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Flintshire, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea.

Full details of the 30 Hours Offer continue to be developed, and they are likely to be modified as a result of the pilot scheme. If the full offer does come to fruition, however, it would lead to a significant increase in demand for formal childcare across Wales and, as a result, provide a timely opportunity to create new Welsh speakers in line with the vision for 2050. Despite being a positive opportunity to improve the position of the language, this offer is also likely to intensify challenges relating to the provision of Welsh medium childcare.

A recent report by the Welsh Government's Social Research department¹⁵ was commissioned with the aim of mapping childcare provision in Wales against the possible demand for that provision as a result of the 30 Hours Offer. The comprehensive report provides a wide range of data along with very important strategic planning information for the 30 Hours Offer. Given that the Welsh Government has emphasised the importance of childcare and early years education to the vision for 2050, it is surprising that the report makes no mention of Welsh medium provision. Nonetheless, here are some key facts from the report which outline the availability of childcare in Wales in the context of potential demand as a result of the '30 Hours Offer'.

- There are 175,000 children aged 0-4 living in Wales, and there are around 80,000 childcare places.
- There are 115,000 children aged 0-4 with working parents, who are therefore likely to be using some form of childcare.
- There are 70,000 children aged 3-4 in Wales, and around 46,000 of these are currently eligible for the 30 Hours Offer.
- There are only 45,000 full childcare places (that would currently be able to offer 30 hours or more childcare a week) in Wales.
- If all full-time childcare places for children in Wales were earmarked for 3 and 4 year old children eligible for the 30 Hours Offer, more provision would still be needed. This does not take account of the likelihood that some of the places would be taken by some of the 69,000 children under the age of 3 with working parents. Some places could also be taken by older children (possibly after school or during school holidays).

¹⁴ These hours can vary slightly from one local authority to another. Some local authorities offer 15 hours of nursery education a week and, in this case, an additional 15 hours of childcare will be provided.

¹⁵ Government Social Research, *Childcare capacity in Wales* (October 2017)

- It is likely that a significant number of the 46,000 children who will be eligible for the 30 Hours Offer are not currently receiving childcare. It is very likely that the majority of these will want to take advantage of the free childcare when the scheme is fully operational.
- It is likely that there will be an increase in demand for childcare in deprived areas in particular, where the offer could enable parents to look for work without having to worry about childcare costs.

Trying to estimate how much additional childcare will be needed as a result of the 30 Hours Offer is both complex and inconclusive. The Welsh Government's report includes detailed calculations in order to try to map capacity and availability and, although we must treat this data carefully, it is safe to say that there is a significant gap between current capacity and likely demand over the coming years. All of the evidence strongly suggests that there is a lack of places, and that far more childcare places will be needed when this scheme is rolled out across Wales.

Integrating the 30 Hours Offer with the vision for 2050

The figures above show the general challenge that will likely arise as a result of the 30 Hours Offer, but no consideration has been given to the more specific challenges we are likely to face in the context of increasing Welsh medium provision. Despite the Government's commitment to creating 40 new nursery groups by 2021, this commitment, by itself, is not ambitious enough. Mudiad Meithrin's statistics¹⁶ state that there is an average of 21 children in each of its nursery groups in Wales. Based on this average, 40 new nursery groups would create approximately 900 new Welsh medium places. Despite the fact that it is likely that these new nursery groups would provide more spaces than the above average¹⁷, the Government's recent report suggests that there is a need for tens of thousands of new places in order to meet the demand which is likely to be seen as a result of the 30 Hours Offer. It is unclear whether creating a total of 40 new nursery groups by 2021 will improve the current situation in terms of the percentage receiving Welsh medium childcare. Whilst such central strategies are part of the answer, it is clear that more detailed and ambitious planning is needed to ensure that local authorities and childcare providers shoulder some of the responsibility for increasing Welsh medium provision. There are several important questions that need answering if the Government really does want to see childcare making a significant contribution to the vision for a million speakers by 2050:

- What framework could be adopted to ensure effective collaboration between the Welsh Government, local authorities and childcare providers in order to increase Welsh medium provision?
- How could the Welsh Government's funding plans be used to ensure an increase in Welsh medium childcare provision? Mudiad Meithrin has received additional funding for 2018/19 and there are important questions about how

¹⁶ Mudiad Meithrin, *Annual Report 2015-16*.

¹⁷ Most of the current nursery groups consist of morning/afternoon sessional care whilst the 30 Hour Offer will require full daycare provision which will likely increase the numbers attending such nursery groups.

exactly this funding should be used and the role of the Welsh Government and local authorities in terms of this planning. Some local authorities use the Government's childcare grants to fund Mudiad Meithrin in their local area, whilst other authorities operate in different ways. There is little detail so far about the framework and processes for managing investment and planning at national and local levels.

- In relation to the point above, Mudiad Meithrin is the most notable Welsh medium childcare provider in Wales and it would be useful to hear the Welsh Government's plans in terms of the Mudiad's contribution to planning and provision at national and local levels. The Mudiad has already started mapping the position of each nursery group, with specific consideration being given to their ability to respond to, and provide for, the 30 Hours Offer. How will this feed into the action of the Government and specific local authorities?
- What information and data is needed to create an effective strategy to increase Welsh medium childcare provision? The recent Welsh Government report has provided information on general capacity, but the linguistic agenda also needs consideration.
- Welsh medium provision cannot be protected nor widened without securing a sufficient supply of staff with the appropriate language skills, as well as the correct expertise, to work in the sector. Although projects to increase the numbers of qualified Welsh medium staff in the sector (for example, the Cam wrth Gam scheme) have been successful, many members of staff are leaving their posts in nursery groups and the childcare sector due to low salaries compared with the salaries of classroom assistants in the primary education sector.
- Consideration needs to be given to the ways in which Welsh medium childcare provision can be promoted and facilitated, rather than simply meeting the demand.

To conclude, the Government has stated that increasing the numbers receiving Welsh medium childcare is essential in order to reach a million Welsh speakers by 2050. A recent Government report clearly shows that far more childcare provision will be needed over the coming years. There is no doubt, from reading Cymraeg 2050's work programme for 2017-2021, that the Government is aware of the importance of childcare and early years education in terms of its vision for 2050. It is, however, unclear how the Government intends to turn a general commitment to develop the sector into specific actions which will have an impact on the ground. Below are two more specific recommendations on ways of mitigating the challenges outlined above, and ensuring that the potential to integrate childcare policies with the vision for 2050 comes to fruition.

3.2. Childcare and Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs)

Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) could provide an extremely effective framework for coordinating the actions of the Welsh Government, local authorities and childcare providers. Specifying growth targets in the childcare sector as a specific outcome in WESPs would ensure that local childcare strategies are aligned with the government's national aspirations and targets for Welsh language provision. Growth in this sector would contribute significantly to increasing numbers across the Welsh medium education sector in the long term.

Since publishing the Welsh Medium Education Strategy in 2010, local authorities have been required to prepare Welsh in Education Strategic Plans and submit them to the Welsh Government. The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 provided a statutory basis for those plans. Local authorities are required to plan a Welsh medium education strategy, including 7 specific outcomes, in order to increase and improve provision. Following a great deal of criticism about the strategic plans, Aled Roberts was asked to conduct an urgent review of the current system for planning Welsh medium education in Wales in March 2017. Like many other previous reports,¹⁸ Aled Roberts' report is critical of many local authority plans and of the general governance and legislative system. According to the report, one clear shortcoming in the plans is the fact that there is no outcome relating to pre-statutory provision.

Currently, there is no specific outcome which requires local authorities to provide a plan, targets and specific criteria with regard to Welsh medium childcare. Although Cymraeg 2050's work programme for 2017-2021 states that WESPs should include plans to improve Welsh medium early years provision, it is not compulsory. As a result, very little attention is currently being paid to childcare in local authority plans. Requiring local authorities to include a clear and definite plan to increase the numbers receiving Welsh medium childcare and early years education would be beneficial for two main reasons.

1. WESPs have significant potential as a means of coordinating the actions of the Government, local authorities and providers. WESPs would provide an effective framework for the Government to ensure that sufficient local planning and action coexists with its national aspirations and targets. Although CSAs already require local authorities to undertake childcare planning and to consider the language of provision, there is no approval process relating to these reports. WESPs need to be approved by the Government in order to ensure their quality and authorities would therefore be accountable for the targets set. These local plans would also be an effective way of promoting and targeting the work of Mudiad Meithrin as the provider who is likely to develop the majority of new Welsh medium provision. It is likely that the

¹⁸ National Assembly for Wales: The Children, Young People and Education Committee, *Inquiry into Welsh in Education Strategic Plans* (December 2015); Estyn, *Local authority Welsh in Education Strategic Plans* (September 2016).

Government will expect the additional funding earmarked for the Mudiad to be used to reach its target of creating 40 new nursery groups by 2021. In order for this work to have the biggest possible impact in terms of creating new Welsh speakers, it is essential that local authorities are part of this planning process. The situation in terms of Welsh medium provision varies significantly from one area to another, and there are different requirements within and between areas. There is no one-size fits all solution, and local authorities will have the relevant information to prepare a plan and strategy that befits the local area. If local authority WESPs were to outline a clear plan for growth in Welsh medium childcare and early years education in the area, if there was a strong strategic relationship between the local authority and Mudiad Meithrin, and if the Mudiad received support and investment from the Government, then significant developments should be seen in the numbers of children receiving Welsh medium childcare. Reforming WESPs in accordance with Aled Roberts' recommendation would therefore be a positive way of addressing the challenges noted in 3.1 and would represent a substantial and tangible act on part of the Welsh Government.

2. Including a specific outcome for Welsh medium childcare provision in WESPs could lead to significant growth in numbers across the Welsh medium education sector. The current plans' first outcome relates to growth in the number of 7 year old children who are taught through the medium of Welsh. Given the evidence which shows the transition rates between childcare and Welsh medium primary education and the clear relationship between how early in life someone learns Welsh and their fluency at the end of the journey, it is surprising that there is no specific outcome on increasing the number of children receiving Welsh medium childcare and early years education. This is especially true given the fact that there is a fundamental problem with the current outcomes required by the WESPs framework. The majority of local authorities do not set targets for the number of 7 year old children who will be taught through the medium of Welsh. Instead, projections are noted based on the numbers in Yr2, Yr1 and reception class in the area. Local authorities, therefore, know the figures in terms of the number of 7 year old children who will be taught through the medium of Welsh for the next 3 years (the length of the current plans) because these children are already part of the Welsh medium education system. In order to set targets for growth rather than reporting facts, local authorities either need to be asked to prepare more long term plans or be required to set growth targets for pre-school years. Growth in the pre-school sector would have a significant influence on the numbers of 7 year old children in Welsh medium education in subsequent years. Ensuring large numbers across the Welsh medium statutory education system would subsequently be based on successful progression and transfer from one phase of education to another.

3.3. Collecting and recording data

In order to produce effective national and local strategies, and to evaluate the impact and success of these strategies in the future, valid and reliable data is essential. The Welsh Government needs to take the lead in reforming the way childcare data is collected and shared in order to ensure that national and local plans and strategies are based on reliable information.

The recent report by the 'Government Social Research' department¹⁹ is striking and demonstrates how data could potentially be used as a way of informing government strategies. Unfortunately, no consideration was given to Welsh medium provision in this report, and data on Welsh medium provision is very poor in comparison. As discussed earlier (see 2.2 above), there is no effective framework for collecting reliable and valid information on Welsh medium childcare in Wales. Aled Roberts' recommendation to include a specific outcome in the WESPs on increasing pre-statutory Welsh medium provision, depends on the ability to collect and present reliable and valid data on this sector. Without reliable and valid data, there is no robust evidence base to inform Welsh Government and local authority decisions and strategies in terms of funding and planning improvements to the provision. Neither is it possible to assess the effectiveness of any operational strategies. The fact that this sector is not directly controlled by the Welsh Government and includes a wide range of different services makes this a difficult task.

Here is a summary of the main problems that need to be addressed:

Reliability: There exists problems with the consistency of data collection and presentation methods within and between local authorities. The aim of CSAs is that all local authorities provide a clear picture of the childcare sector in order to undertake effective planning for the future. Local authorities are required to use CSSIW self assessment data to complete their childcare sufficiency assessments. One problem in this regard is the self assessment completion rates, which means that the picture is incomplete. Another more fundamental problem is that local authorities often supplement CSSIW data with their own data. This can include data in the form of surveys or quantitative data collected by the local authority itself. The ways in which local authorities collect, interpret and present this additional data varies from one report to another and from one authority to another. CSSIW data and data presented in CSAs never correspond (even when taking self assessment response rates into account); many local authorities completely ignore statistics about the language of provision; some local authorities provide statistics on the language of childcare provision as one combined figure, whilst others only provide statistics on language according to the type of provider (childminders, nurseries etc). This makes the process of following trends over time and comparing different authorities complex, unclear and, in some cases, impossible.

Despite the introduction of a new process in 2016 in an attempt to ensure a more consistent and standardised method of preparing CSAs, reviewing the CSAs that have recently been submitted for 2017-2022 shows that fundamental problems still

¹⁹ Government Social Research, *Childcare capacity in Wales* (October 2017)

exist. For example, only data from 13 of the 22 local authorities can be used in figure 4 (above), either because the data is unavailable or because it has been presented in a way which makes it impossible to use. If the data collection method is inconsistent and unreliable, then the information will be invalid and it will not be possible to prepare or evaluate any plans and strategies for increasing and improving provision in this sector in a meaningful manner.

Validity: a very important factor in ensuring the quality of any data collected on childcare provision language patterns is the problem of categorisation. The Childcare Statutory Guidance defines 4 language categories:²⁰

- a) Welsh medium setting
- b) Welsh and English medium setting
- c) English medium setting with some bilingual elements
- d) English medium setting

Here are the categories most frequently used in CSAs recently submitted by local authorities in 2017. However, as can be seen in figures 2 and 3, CSSIW's most recent data (25 September 2017), in the same way as its previous data, uses only three categories. This is very unclear given that the CSAa are meant to be based on CSSIW data in the first place.²¹

Beyond obvious problems with the consistency of the categories and the source of the data, there are questions about the validity of the self assessment process in terms of the language of provision. Research conducted by Arad on behalf of the Welsh Language Commissioner states that misinterpretation occurs on both sides, with settings describing themselves as Welsh medium and English medium settings when only one member of staff is able to say a few words in Welsh, and other settings which, to all intents and purposes, are Welsh medium or bilingual settings but are afraid to describe themselves as such as they feel uncomfortable about being able to prove that all their paperwork and correspondence is in Welsh.²² In addition, it appears that the use of different language categories can have a significant impact on the process of self assessing the language of provision. For example, there are significant differences between figures 3 and 4 above and more detailed comparisons in specific areas are noted below:

²⁰ Welsh Government, *Childcare Statutory Guidance* (2016), p. 32.

²¹ All of the CSAs evaluated use 4 language categories and state that the data has come from CSSIW's SASS. In recent correspondence with the Commissioner, CSSIW stated that the SASS includes 3 language categories and that it is not aware of any data which includes 4 language categories.

²² Arad, *Welsh Medium Childcare Provision for Pre-School Children* (March 2017).

Figure 6: Comparison between CSSIW data (2017) and data collected from Denbighshire CSA 2017-2022.

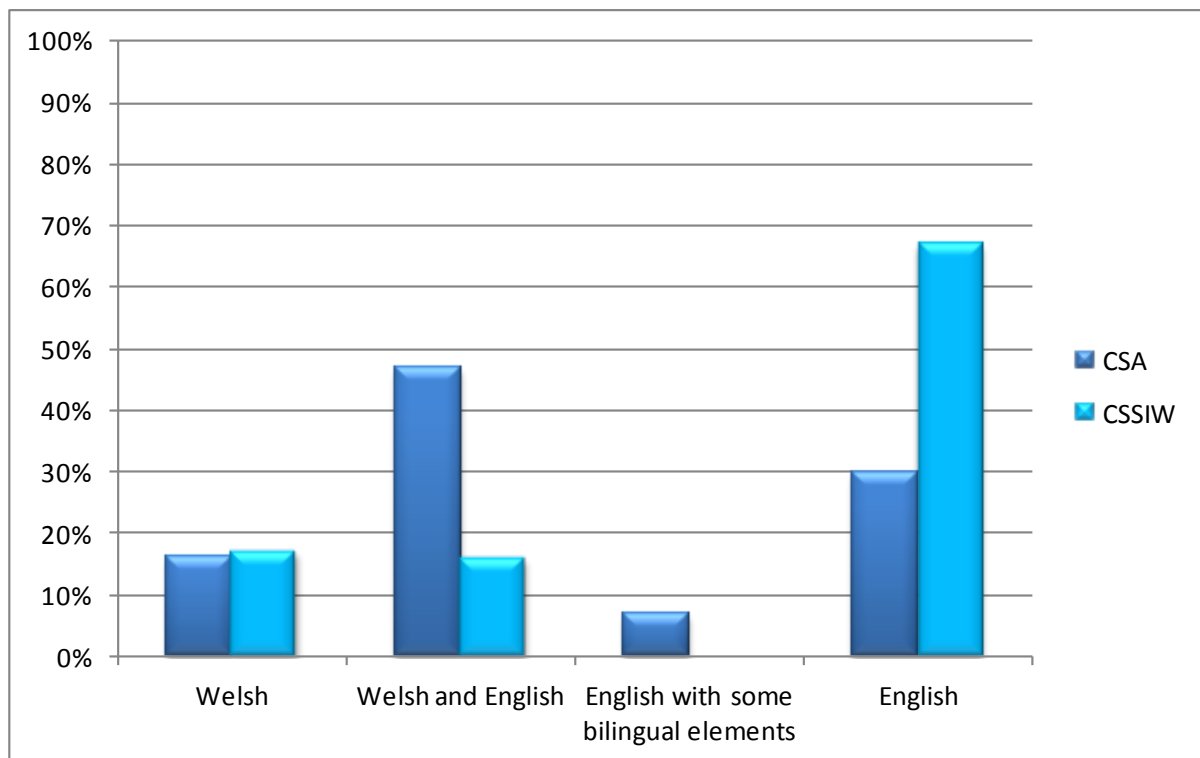


Figure 7: Comparison between CSSIW data (2017) and data collected from the City and County of Swansea CSA 2017-2022.

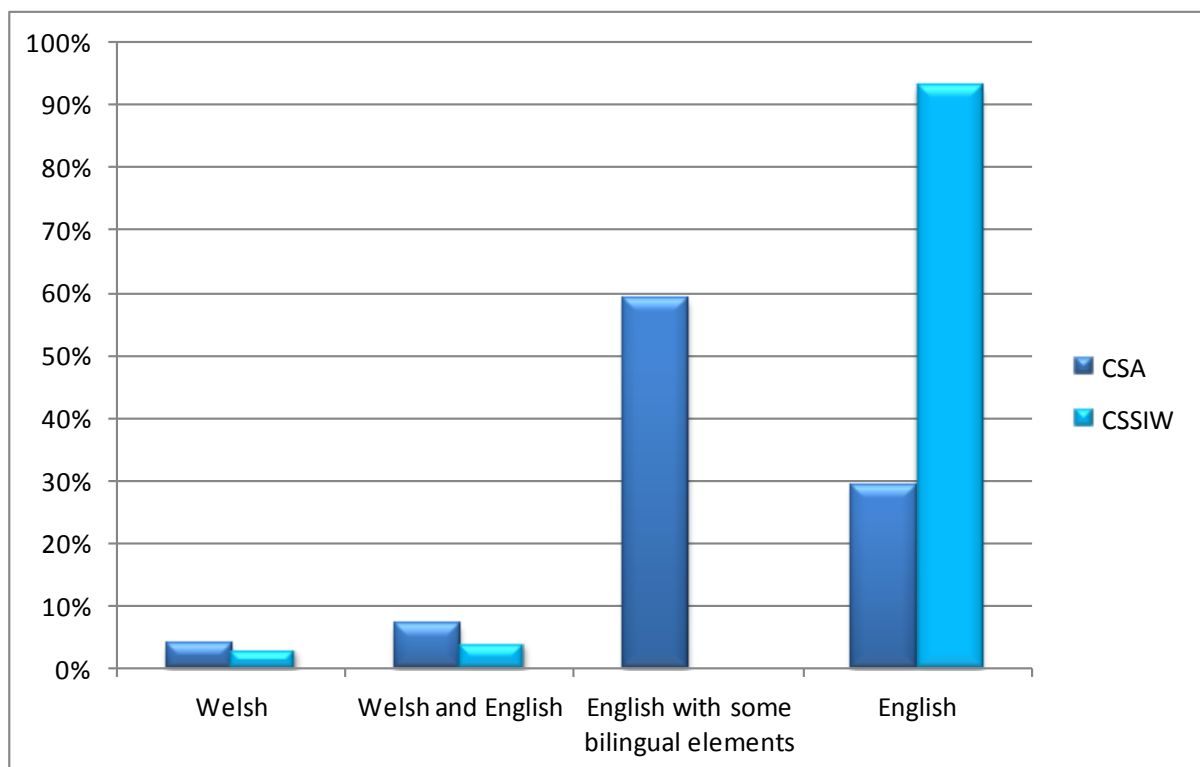
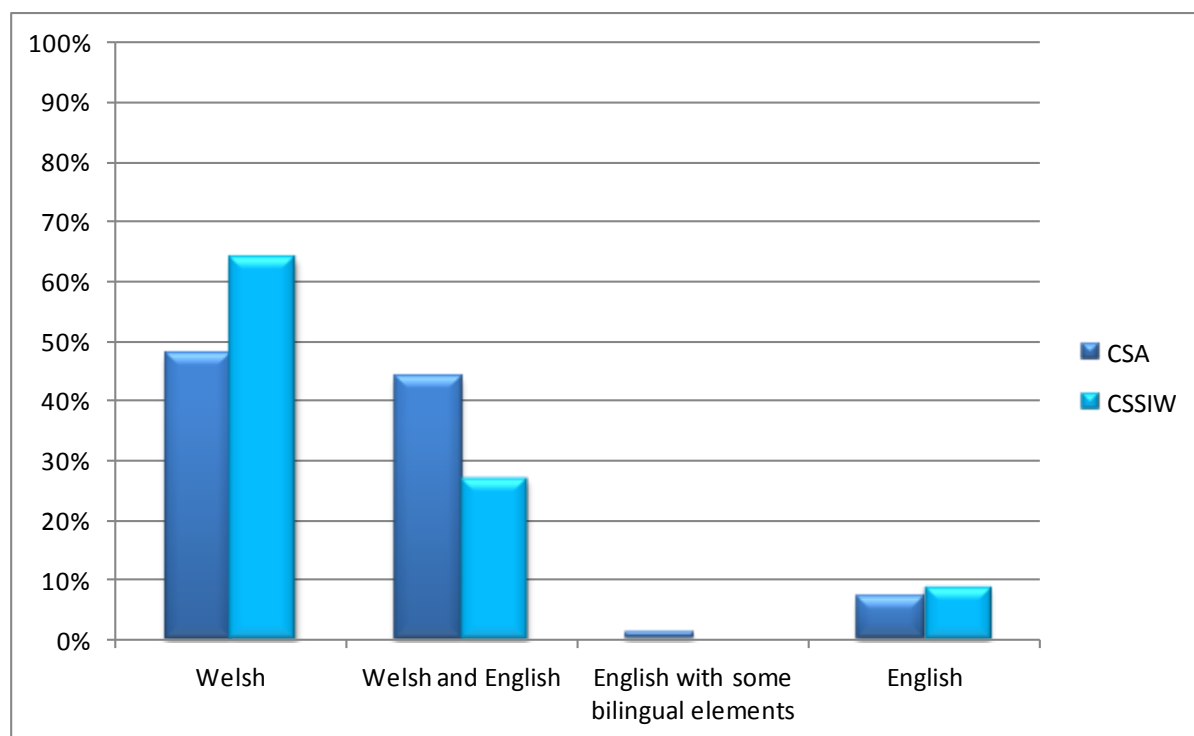


Figure 8: Comparison between CSSIW data (2017) and data collected from Gwynedd CSA 2017-2022.



The data above shows that there are important questions to be answered about how the data is collected and interpreted and the subsequent findings i.e. concluding that the City and County of Swansea has moved from a situation where 95% of childcare was being provided in English to a situation where 60% of the provision is bilingual would be very misleading. It is fair to conclude, from looking at the data, that around 90% of childcare in Swansea is, to all intents and purposes, provided through the medium of English. It is important to be clear about this when describing the position of the language in the area, in terms of providing information to parents on the available provision and, more importantly, in terms of ensuring a valid evidence base to evaluate any previous strategies and plan new ones. It is impossible to avoid these problems completely, but it is important to consider and try to minimise the impact of these on the quality and accuracy of the data.

It appears that the most effective way of moving forward is to reform the current framework. The most comprehensive data on the sector is likely to be provided by CSSIW, and work should be undertaken with the organisation to improve the quality of self assessments and completion rates. Specific local authority data could be used to support CSSIW's data, but consistency is needed in terms of how this is done and how the data is presented. The Government has already tried to move in this direction, but it is obvious that further standardisation and management is needed. It appears, from looking at the recent report by the Government's Social Research

department²³, that CSSIW and the Welsh Government have a wide range of detail and data on childcare in Wales. They also have the research expertise needed to collect, interpret and present this data in an effective way. In view of this, it is unclear why 22 local authorities need to be given raw data from CSSIW, before interpreting and presenting it themselves in the CSAs. It appears also that the Welsh Government and CSSIW could provide data on Welsh medium childcare at national and local levels. This data could be considered alongside the published report on childcare capacity and availability in Wales. It is clear that the Government already has the software and data, and it would just be a case of swapping or adding variables (for example, the availability and location of Welsh medium and bilingual provision, details on Welsh medium schools in the area, areas where the demand for childcare is likely to increase, and the numbers of children aged 0-4 in the area). Good quality data would provide a robust evidence base and enable local authorities to plan and evaluate the first outcome in their WESPs, namely increasing the number of children in Welsh medium childcare. It would also enable local authorities and the government to measure the success of these strategies in terms of increasing Welsh medium childcare provision.

²³ Government Social Research, *Childcare capacity in Wales* (October 2017)