

Policy Papers

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Policy review: Wake me up in 2050! Formulating Language Policy in Wales

by [Colin H. Williams](#)

- The revised Welsh language policy has set a very ambitious target of creating a million Welsh speakers by 2050 which is supported by all political parties.
- Research into the priorities, decision-making and concerns of language policy formulators highlights the difficulties they face in realizing political promises and can point to evidence-based strategies for language revitalization.
- Without substantial investment in formal education, teacher training, the child care sector and the economic development of predominantly Welsh speaking regions, the 2050 target is unlikely to be met.
- Structural difficulties in integrating the programmes of large departments of the Welsh Government militate against holistic and effective planning to reach the target.

Introduction

Wake me up in 2050

When a million will commune with me

And should this vision prove a dream

Let me sleep till 3050.

The formulation of an Official Language Strategy is an amalgam of political ambition and bureaucratic-technical expertise. This contribution focuses on how the Welsh Government formulates its policies to support the Welsh language and addresses the challenges posed by its declared target of securing a million Welsh speakers by 2050, up from 575,000 speakers out of a total population of 3.168 million in 2016. Supporters of this vision argue that this is a symbolic and programmatic investment in a bilingual society. Cynics argue that the target and the timeline are sufficiently far removed from the current political imperatives so as to not cause serious difficulties for the government. Proponents argue that planning, investment and reform should start immediately, while detractors argue that, faced with such an impossible challenge, future generations may never realize

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this ambition and in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual society the securing of a million Welsh speakers is not an essential goal shared by all in society.

The target, and its implementation programme, are best seen as the latest in a long line of initiatives designed to bolster the vitality of the Welsh language. Three issues animate this drive. The first is the socio-political response to the crisis facing the language and a governmental commitment to language revitalization as a key area of public policy. The second is a consequence of Welsh devolution, which since 1999 has sought to embed institutional and personal bilingualism as a defining characteristic of the polity and its public administrative system. The third is the consequence of a legislative turn in language recognition, promotion and use. This legislative turn has secured official status for Welsh, established standards by which Welsh-medium and bilingual services are to be provided and created a legal framework within which statutory obligations, institutional duties and citizen rights and expectations are to be implemented. Thus, while there is no law of Wales, as distinct from England and Wales, there is an evolving Welsh Law. These trends were strengthened by the passage of the Wales Act on 31st January 2017 by which the Assembly's law-making powers moved to a reserved powers model, more akin to Scotland and Northern Ireland.

This paper focusses on the formulation of, and difficulties encountered in the implementation of Welsh language policy. It derives from two related research investigations. The first was an analysis of thirteen official language strategies undertaken in 2012–13 for the EU-sponsored Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity, whose aims were to identify what constitutes a good strategy so as to inform the EU discussions on language policy. The results have been used by the Network to Promote Linguistic Diversity in pressing its case for a new EU Languages Roadmap. (For details please visit <http://www.npld.eu/current-projects/language-planning>).

The current project 'Official Language Strategies for Minority Languages: The Reality Behind the Rhetoric, 2015–18', sponsored by Soillse, Iaith and the Welsh Government, seeks to investigate how language strategies are revised by politicians and senior public servants and asks under what circumstances the official pronouncements of government about language diversity are operationalized in practice.

The four jurisdictions investigated are Canada, Finland, Scotland and Wales and were chosen because they have broadly similar jurisdictions characterized by stable public administration systems which follow similar policy conventions, which track and evaluate their policies and provide time-series evaluations of specific language programmes and, above all, employ a non-politicized civil service. Currently the four language strategies, namely The Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality 2013–18; Finland's National Languages Action Plan; National Gaelic Language Plan; and A Living Language: A Language for Living are being reviewed and replaced by new versions which will operate from 2017/8 onwards.

Here I focus on the institutional framework and principal target of the revised Welsh strategy, which is to create a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

The Institutional Framework

The current era of language policy was inaugurated by the Welsh Language Act in 1993 which recognized Welsh and English as co-equal languages of governance and public service, established the Welsh Language Board as a statutory body charged with the promotion of Welsh, and employed the mechanism of a language scheme by which named bodies are required to specify the type and range of bilingual services they provide. The effect of these reforms has been to establish a bilingual setting for public administration and service delivery systems and to herald a more self-conscious articulation of the duties of institutions and expectations by citizens to use Welsh as a matter of course in public life. The strength of the language scheme system was that it allowed for a differentiated provision by locale and organization ranging from a national minimum set of service standards to a

more nuanced and comprehensive provision in those local authorities long regarded as Welsh language strongholds in the north and west. Its weakness was that because some services on offer were inconsistent the public were often confused and frustrated, leading to greater demands for a suite of individual language rights to be put in place.

Previous Strategic Plans set out the policy framework. *Iaith Pawb* (Everybody's Language) was operational from March 2003, its implementation subject to Annual Reports and was replaced by *Iaith Fyw: Iaith Byw* (A Living Language: A Language for Living) which was operational from April 2012 to March 2017. Following the demise of the Welsh Language Board in 2012 the Welsh Government undertook sole responsibility for language policy and planning and operated through a Welsh Language Division, initially answerable to the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, and subsequently to the Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language, Alun Davies. At interview (27/11/2015) government language policy formulators argued that the Welsh Government adopted an integrated approach to garnering data to support its language policy by focussing on both statistical and social analyses. Regular evidence-based policy formulation is undertaken within the Code of Practice as required by the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007. An annual Welsh Language Evidence Plan is drawn up and that for the period 2015–16 identified the following goals:

- to develop a robust evidence base to inform policy and practice in Welsh-medium education;
- to support language planning policy through an informed balance of quantitative and qualitative analysis of language vitality;
- to strengthen the Welsh Government's capacity to mainstream the Welsh language in research activity across Welsh Government portfolios.

Core work to support the evidence base is derived from a range of data sources including the Decennial Census; National Survey for Wales; Annual Population Survey; Welsh Government People Survey; Public Services Data (including DVLA, NHS); Pupil Level Annual School Census; Welsh Examinations Data; Lifelong Learning Wales Record; and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Data.

- Current research priorities include:
- research into language acquisition and use by young children 0–4;
- research into models and methodologies of Welsh language immersion provision;
- an analysis of performance data relating to pupils' Welsh language and curricular attainment;
- the refinement of Welsh language use indicators;
- in-depth analysis of Welsh language skills and use patterns of 16–29-year-olds;
- research on the relationship between the Welsh language and the economy;
- an assessment of Welsh language skills needs in eight sectors together with the development and consolidation of a programme to mainstream Welsh language in research across Welsh Government portfolios (including Education and Skills, Health, Local Government and Communities).

Ongoing research activity includes:

- statistical analyses for the Annual Reports of the Welsh-medium Education Strategy and the Welsh Language Strategy;
- Welsh Language Use Survey 2013–15: analysis of data on Welsh language use in formal and informal settings;
- mainstreaming Welsh in research in the Department for Education and Skills; Local Government and Communities.

There have also been government Task and Finish Groups focused on:

- ‘Increasing the Number of Communities Where Welsh Is the Main Language’;
- ‘Raising Our Sights: Review of Welsh for Adults’;
- ‘A Review of the Work of Mentrau Iaith, Language Action Plans and the Aman Tawe Language Promotion Scheme’;
- ‘National Eisteddfod Task Group: Report and Recommendations’;
- ‘One Language for All: Review of Welsh Second Language at Key Stages 3 and 4’;
- ‘Welsh Language and Economic Development’.

Public consultations were held which culminated on the 4 July 2013 in ‘*Y Gynhadledd Fawr* (The Big Conference): Have Your Say on the Future of the Welsh Language’, addressed by the First Minister who laid out the government’s vision and repeated the government’s commitment to the creation of a bilingual society. Subsequent updates and occasional specialist meetings have been held and the government has responded in detail to all the recommendations of the commissioned analyses, largely agreeing with the interpretations and the measures advanced by the reports. In one illustration, the Government provided firm responses to each of the ten recommendations made as regards the *Mentrau Iaith* (Language Enterprise) programme, critically acknowledging the need for:

- better co-ordination and leadership;
- a longer funding cycle based on linguistic outcomes;
- an improvement in the planning of activities to promote the Welsh language; to provide clarity with regard to the role and responsibilities of organizations funded by the Welsh Government to promote the Welsh language;
- linguistic planning in specific areas which are strategically important for the Welsh language by bringing together a number of agencies; (for example, this would involve implementing a government framework for assessing the risk posed to Welsh speaking communities by the approval of large scale capital intensive infrastructure developments, such as the building of a new nuclear power station at Wylfa on Anglesey);
- a consideration of the future of Language Action Plans.

Thus, there is a great deal of evidence available, a fair measure of consensus as to how to approach the complex issues and a government commitment to strengthening the partnerships required to progress the strategies adopted.

The weaknesses appear to be in implementation. Independent evaluations since 2007 have revealed a structural difficulty in coordinating the efforts of the participating departments, agencies, local authorities and voluntary sector organizations. It is evident that there has been “a lack of evidence and measurement against targets. More robust approaches are required to demonstrating the impact and longer term outcomes of actions”. (Welsh Assembly Government 2007). At interview (7/9/2016) government policy formulators suggested that a more systematic approach to language policy implementation had reduced these concerns, but acknowledged that a major stumbling block was the ability of the Welsh Language Division to influence much larger Departments of Government, such as Education and Skills, to both contribute fully to the formulation of the language strategy and to seek to the uttermost to implement its recommendations.

Revising the Welsh Language Strategy

Section 78(1) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 requires Welsh Ministers across all government departments to adopt a strategy stating how they propose to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language. Section 78(4) requires the Welsh Ministers to keep the strategy under review and enables them to adopt a new strategy. The policy community was preparing a new strategy to replace *Iaith Fyw: Iaith Byw*, which ended in March 2017. Based on the evidence-based reports which had been fed into the language production and reproduction targets, commentators presumed that the total population of Welsh speakers would reach c.750,000 within two generations.

However, on August 1st 2016 at the National Eisteddfod, the First Minister, Carwyn Jones, declared that the ambition of the new strategy would be the creation of a million speakers by 2050. This changed the whole dynamic of the situation and at interview (7/9/2016) policy formulators admitted that this required a radical rethink both of the strategy and of their need to engage far more intensively with major government departments and civil society so as to deliver this declared aim. Above all, they argued, that a new set of justifications were needed to mainstream Welsh as a public good, one which would feed into a more relevant narrative and discourse surrounding the creation of a bilingual society. Consequently, an Executive Summary for the revised strategy was prepared for public consultation during the autumn of 2016 which declared that in order to reach the target there was a need for “more children in Welsh-medium education, better planning in relation to how people learn the language, more easy-to-access opportunities for people to use the language, a stronger infrastructure and a revolution to improve digital provision in Welsh, and a sea change in the way we speak about it “(Welsh Government, 2016).

Six key areas for action were identified, namely Planning and Language Policy; Normalization; Education; Language Transmission in the Family and Workplace; A Supportive Infrastructure; Improved Legislation and Stronger Language Rights. The government proposals offer clear objectives for these action areas and are supplemented by detailed recommendations. The key requirement is how best to mainstream the language and it is argued that in order for Welsh to be an integral part of strategic planning at every level, a more robust discourse and consistent time-series data collection and analysis is needed. The creation of new speakers is best achieved through the education system. Consequently, investment in a proficient workforce means planning to support the training of teachers and learning assistants, expanding sabbatical schemes and significantly increasing the number of workers in the childcare and early years sectors. The fundamental new concern acknowledged here is the recognition that language attrition, whereby some lose fluency as they move through the education system, needs to be replaced by a guaranteed linguistic progression and is supplemented by a commitment to maintain a continuum of access and skills development for the workplace.

A further challenge identified by policy formulators (7/9/2016) is how to influence the discourse surrounding the perception and use of Welsh so that in government terms it becomes ‘normalized’. A key priority concerns the social use of Welsh in communal and network contexts. While recognising education as the key pillar of language production, the strategy also acknowledges the role of the family and the community in language production and transmission and provides tangible means by which this may be achieved. An additional priority is to enhance robust infrastructural support in corpus planning, IT and the media while a further priority to improve language legislation was actioned by the Minister’s Written Statement on Preparing a Welsh Language Bill on January 31st 2017, which signalled the government’s intention of revisiting the delicate balance between promotion and regulation and the remit and effectiveness of the Welsh Language Commissioner. An emphasis on language use, the reduction of blame and penalization and a simplification of the language regime characterize the Minister’s Statement. Let me conclude by emphasising the outstanding challenges of which the Welsh Language Division is well aware, but may not be fully able to anticipate, resource or control given the longevity of the plan’s duration.

Concerns and challenges for Welsh language policy

The feasibility of and impetus for the million speaker target are called into question by current growth estimates. The target may have been set as a demonstration of political commitment by government or as wish fulfilment for language activists rather than having its basis in solid evidence. Moreover, the somewhat arbitrary target does not necessarily serve the goals of revitalization: a putative set of skills among a politically symbolic target population matters less than actual usage of Welsh in a wide range of domains in daily life.

The current parameters by which we can define a speaker may not obtain in 2050, so these should be clarified and reviewed over time. Whether UK Welsh speakers who do not reside in Wales will figure in the target million is unclear. Clearly many thousands more than a million speakers will have to be produced if a resident target population of a million in Wales is to be realised for there is a steady outmigration of Welsh-born people to other parts of the UK and beyond. The threshold level of what counts as a speaker and the definition of a ‘community of speakers’ may also be different in 2050. Speakers will have been produced by the system so as to constitute a virtual network of communicants, but the methods by which people interact and communicate in effective ways will change in an increasingly digitized society. Policy must be reactive to these potential changes, prioritizing effective Welsh usage and future transmission over symbolically large populations with rudimentary skills.

Implementation of the Strategy is another area where monitoring and evaluation will be required. A clear framework against which progress can be measured would be welcomed as would more detailed action plans as to how the medium and long-term targets are to be met. We have noted the importance of the education system in relation to Welsh language policy. The education system must invest in the required number of new Welsh-medium teachers, open new bilingual or Welsh-medium schools, embed more effective Welsh-medium teaching in hitherto English schools. It must support the work of Further Education and Higher Education institutions in staff skills development, in curricula design and teaching resources to create the effective bilingual workforce lauded in the Strategy. Currently, the Department for Education and Skills has revealed little detail as to how it will action the Strategy, but its ready cooperation and significant investment is crucial to the government programme of action.

Current discussions on revised Welsh Language legislation may redefine the remit of both the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Welsh Government as Mac Giolla Chríost et al. (2017) suggest, and look likely to introduce new promotional bodies, such as a Welsh Language Agency into the language regime.

The required clarification may soon be revealed. Consultation on the Strategy occurred during the autumn of 2016 with a launch date scheduled for mid-summer 2017, thus in short time the detailed implementation plan for the achievements of the government’s commitment to its robust ambition will be known.

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Further reading

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