

## **Welsh Government's written response to the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee's short report on *The Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak on the Welsh Language***

I would like to thank the Committee for their time and for the observations in the report that was sent on 26 November 2020. As you will see from our responses, the pandemic has demonstrated how vulnerable a language and its supporting human networks can be, but also how resilient it can be as individuals and organisations adapt, innovate and change.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been working across the Government and with our partners all over the country to respond to a rapidly changing situation, seeking to mitigate any negative impacts on *Cymraeg 2050* and seeking to maximise opportunities that come our way. This has varied from offering additional funding to the Urdd and National Eisteddfod in order to support them as events were postponed and funding streams disappeared overnight, to ensuring Cysgliad is available free of charge, holding a campaign to support parents whose children are in Welsh-medium education and holding an audit of community language use. Full details of our activity is included in the [committee paper](#) submitted by us before I attended the 8 October committee meeting last year. We will discuss the latest developments with you in another committee meeting in February.

As with other government policy areas, the pandemic has affected the *Cymraeg 2050* Work Programme for 2017-21. The uncertainty of Brexit also poses a challenge for Welsh language policy. However, I would like to make clear that whilst the context in which we work has changed dramatically since *Cymraeg 2050*'s inception, our strategic priorities are unchanged. Nevertheless, we are ready to adapt our work programme as necessary in order to respond to these new challenges and opportunities.

I note below our responses to each individual recommendation in the report:

### **Recommendation 1**

***The Welsh Government should ensure that short term reallocations of Welsh Language funding, due to the pandemic, do not result in longer term funding allocations which could detract from achieving the aims of Cymraeg 2050. The Welsh Government should reinstate the budget allocations for supporting and promoting the Welsh language in full, as soon as possible.***

**Response:** Accept.

**Financial implications:** None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

With the arrival of COVID-19 and the urgent response required to the public health situation, budgets were immediately repurposed across Welsh Government. The seriousness of the situation meant we had to make difficult decisions to ensure we were able to support those most vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Budgets were primarily targeted at front-line NHS services, and to the support of organisations placed under pressure by the pandemic.

In assessing the Welsh language budget at the beginning of the pandemic in response to a request to reprioritise budgets to support Government priorities, we undertook a detailed review of budgets based on the following criteria:

- Those things that could no longer happen as a result of the pandemic (eg Welsh language promotion activities in the community).
- Those that could be delayed (eg the review of Welsh Language Promotion Grants).
- Those that can be done differently (eg Welsh-learning activities: courses run by the National Centre for Learning Welsh were successfully moved online, as was our *Leading in a Bilingual Country* programme in conjunction with my department and Academi Wales).

In working in this way, we believe we have kept negative impacts to a minimum, and that we have made every effort to ensure we continue to deliver on our *Cymraeg 2050* commitments. In fact, we have seen many positives during this period, for example: new innovations, alternative use of technology and an additional cohort of learners attending virtual lessons. We will learn from these experiences and build upon them in future planning.

The Government's Draft Budget for 2021-22 was published on 21 December 2020 in what was a difficult period – in the midst of a worldwide pandemic and the continuing uncertainty in relation to Brexit. Under the circumstances, therefore, I am glad that the budget allocated to support *Cymraeg 2050* in my portfolio and in the Minister for Education's portfolio has been fully reinstated in the draft budget to the level set pre-COVID-19. Along with the pandemic came opportunities for innovation, and having held discussions with the National Centre for Learning Welsh, the opportunity arose to reinvest some of its budget during 2021-22. We have redirected £200k of its budget to fund linguistic infrastructure projects that will include policy-making to better co-ordinate dictionaries, terminology and corpus resources in order to strengthen the infrastructure supporting language use.

## **Recommendation 2**

***The Welsh Government should ensure that jobs that support and promote the Welsh language across Wales are central to its economic recovery plan.***

**Response:** Accept.

**Financial implications:** None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Welsh Government and the UK Government have developed a package of measures to protect jobs. This includes the third sector, the private sector and freelance workers. We have developed a number of relevant funds to safeguard the future of a number of organisations and enable them to continue to employ staff. These funds are relevant to the work areas of many organisations promoting the Welsh language. The job retention scheme has protected the employment of many officials and I welcome the UK Government's announcement that it is to extend the scheme until the end of April 2021 – this is a great help to a number of organisations.

The [COVID-19 reconstruction: challenges and priorities](#) report recognises the challenges involved in the recovery of the economy, communities and society, setting out the context. In this respect, the Welsh language will be given full consideration as we emerge from the pandemic. The document notes the importance of:

*Protecting the resilience of our Welsh-speaking communities and networks, pressing forward with our commitments to increase the number of people who learn and use the Welsh language in future, and ensuring our responses to coronavirus takes these commitments fully into account.*

Naturally, the promotion of the Welsh language in the context of the economy is an essential part of protecting Welsh speaking communities and networks, and we will continue to emphasise this aspect of our work. I have established an Economy and Language Round Table to discuss the relationship between the economy and the Welsh language, looking specifically at the future of Welsh speaking rural communities, considering how economic developments can benefit the Welsh language.

The Arfor programme offers a new model of working by focusing on the development of the economy of West Wales, considering also ways of benefiting the Welsh language. An independent evaluation of the programme will be undertaken, and the way ahead considered in terms of similar action in the future. This is interrelated also with the findings of the report on [The effect of COVID-19 on Welsh language community groups](#) who promote or facilitate the use of the language, all of which will help us to understand the effect of the pandemic on the way in which community groups work. I will look at these recommendations in terms of possible opportunities, especially the potential of social enterprises to create jobs and increase the use of the Welsh language within the workplace.

### **Recommendation 3**

***The Welsh Government should review and update its Cymraeg 2050 action plan and the Welsh language technology action plan to reflect the rapid change to online Welsh language learning, activities and cultural events that has facilitated its use at home and grown interest in the language abroad.***

**Response:** Accept

**Financial implications:** None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

We are currently developing a new work programme for *Cymraeg 2050* for the next government, and I will of course consider the committee's recommendations as we do so. The plan will also look at the direction of travel in terms of technology and the Welsh language. I fully recognise the positive role of technology during the pandemic. On 22 December last year, I published a [Progress Report](#) showing our work to date under the [Welsh Language Technology Action Plan](#). The report discusses what has already been achieved and how we have been adapting our work in response to COVID-19.

However, in discussing the role of technology and increasing the use of the Welsh language, we must be clear about our intention. There is a difference between building the capacity / skills of individuals or organisations to use technology and ensuring there is a fit-for-purpose digital sub-infrastructure available across Wales. There is also a difference between these two concepts and work to create a *language technology* infrastructure, which is what the Welsh Language Technology Action Plan and the work packages contained within it addresses.

#### **Recommendation 4**

***The Welsh Government should make training available for organisations and individuals to ensure they make the most of online opportunities to promote the use of Welsh and support their members.***

**Response:** Accept

**Financial implications:** None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

As I noted under Recommendation 2 above, the Welsh Language Partnership Council Increasing Language Use Sub-group commissioned a survey of the impact of COVID-19 on community groups. The survey asked community groups about their experiences during the first lockdown at the end of March last year, and asked what could be helpful to them to ensure they were able to continue and thrive in the future. One of the main findings was that great challenges faced a number of the community groups in their effort to deal with COVID-19 and the need to move many elements online.

In response to these issues:

- A number of organisations and individuals have already developed their skills as a result of the pandemic, and have done so within a very short period. This can be seen clearly as a number of organisations to whom we award grants to promote the Welsh language have adapted their activities to online provision.
- Some organisations carry out commendable work to develop the skills of individuals, eg Merched y Wawr workshops.
- The Urdd and National Eisteddfod have cultivated invaluable experience and skills in seeking to reach their audiences, whether traditional or new following, through Eisteddfod T and Eisteddfod AmGen.
- These examples demonstrate that many skills have already been established in this area and that organisations are able to help each other.
- The Welsh Language Promotion Group (a network chaired by Welsh Government) holds a discussion between partners working in the area of language planning. Meetings specifically address information-sharing, training, opportunities for co-operation along with developing the work of partners in achieving the results which form the basis for *Cymraeg 2050*. In recent meetings, the challenges, opportunities and highlights of the pandemic to date were discussed and how to proceed going forward.

Many programmes fostering linguistic ability are already offered, and we will assess which of these will be relevant to our partners.

### **Recommendation 5**

***The Welsh Government should update its Digital Strategy to reflect the greater need for fast, reliable internet service across Wales in light of the increased reliance on digital content following the COVID-19 outbreak.***

**Response:** Accept

**Financial implications:** None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The importance of digital connectivity has become of critical importance in our response to the current pandemic whether this is to enable remote working or learning, or tackling social isolation. Now more than ever, access to fast and reliable connectivity is crucial.

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted our reliance on digital connectivity and the need to fully exploit both traditional and new forms of innovative digital infrastructure to ensure that the demands put on it can be met.

To ensure that we fulfil our commitment to continue to provide robust connectivity across Wales, through both traditional and new means, officials are working to update the Welsh Government's Digital Strategy to reflect current and new demands presented to us. This will see, amongst other initiatives, a focus on more targeted investment and support. This will build on the already large positive impact that Welsh Government intervention has made on digital connectivity across the country.

The Welsh Government Superfast Cymru programme has provided access to fast and reliable broadband to 733,000 premises across Wales. The programme fundamentally changed the broadband landscape in Wales. Around 95 per cent of premises in Wales now have access to superfast broadband compared to about 48 per cent before the programme began in 2013.

The Welsh Government's current full fibre roll-out with Openreach will provide access to full fibre broadband to a further 39,000 premises in Wales. This is funded predominantly from the Welsh Government and EU with some additional funding from the UK Government. The project is scheduled to be completed by June 2022.

A £10 million Local Broadband Fund was launched in November 2019 to provide funding to local authorities and social enterprises to connect entire communities that do not have access to fast and reliable broadband to ensure they are not left behind.

The Access Broadband Cymru grant scheme was introduced by the Welsh Government in January 2016, replacing the previous broadband support scheme. This scheme provides grants to fund (or part-fund) the installation costs of new broadband connections to homes, SMEs and third sector organisations. The amount of funding available depends on the speed of the new connection: £400 for

10Mbps and above, or £800 for 30Mbps and above. To date around 5,000 premises have been given access to broadband under the scheme.

The Welsh Government has been working to ensure that UK Government initiatives reflect the challenges of delivering digital connectivity in Wales. The Welsh Government provides a top-up to the voucher doubling the amount of funding available to a maximum of £3,000 for residential premises and £7,000 for businesses. To help focus the funding on properties that need it most, only premises without access to superfast speeds (30Mbps) are eligible.

The Welsh Government Public Service Broadband Aggregation (PSBA) network provides a Wales-wide managed network which connects over 110 public sector organisations in Wales to a private secure ICT network to nearly 5,000 public sites across the country. Currently around 560 GP surgeries and more than 1,500 schools benefit from being on this fast, resilient and secure network.

The PSBA network has played an important role during the initial phases of the COVID-19 response providing high speed connectivity to the Red Dragon hospitals quickly and efficiently. As shown above, the current situation has highlighted the importance and potential of homeworking including across the public sector. It has also underlined that some public sector homeworkers need a fast business grade connection to undertake their roles. In response, PSBA has introduced a new product that will allow business grade connections to be routinely provided to homes of public sector workers where it is necessary.

## **Recommendation 6**

***The next Cymraeg 2050: Welsh language strategy action plan should take full account of the changes in learning opportunities now available. It will need to consider the ways in which online learning and inperson lessons can be blended to best suit learners, and the level of funding needed to ensure that the growth in online learning can be sustained.***

**Response:** Accept.

**Financial implications:** None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Learn Welsh sector has adapted and changed rapidly in response to COVID-19. Face-to-face learning came to an end entirely across the sector in March last year, but the National Centre for Learning Welsh and its providers responded very positively to the situation. Welsh-learning provision changed substantially during 2020, and both tutors and learners made a special effort to continue with virtual learning across Wales. There was an increased interest in starting to learn Welsh during lockdown. The Centre introduced a new blended course in May (combining self-study and virtual learning). Over 1,000 new learners registered for the course and 89 virtual classes were established. Over 8,000 individuals registered for the Centre's online self-study taster courses, and the Centre's Clwb Cwtsh weekly sessions on Facebook proved to be very popular. The Centre's Digital Strategy to create self-study lessons and resources has also been developed more quickly than

expected in response to the pandemic. This will include the roll-out of blended courses across all levels of learning, and self-study courses at specific levels initially.

In May 2020, the Centre announced a new partnership with Say Something in Welsh. The Centre and Say Something will share resources, and learners registered at each provider will be given a discount on the provision of the other. This is a step forward in creating one community of learners and in increasing access to different courses.

Although the changes that came about as a result of the pandemic had to be made at speed and have been challenging, it is important that we benefit from the opportunities that have arisen and make the most of the digital learning developments that have proven to be popular among learners. We will work with the Centre to ensure Welsh-learning provision continues to use various learning methods, including online learning, so that learners benefit from a varied offer of provision which is accessible and flexible. The Centre is currently working with its providers to plan provision from September 2021, which makes the most of digital learning opportunities that have emerged, and which makes full use of the digital content that is being developed. With our support, the Centre will continue to invest in its [site](#), a one-stop-shop for learners, with its course finder and host of digital learning resources.

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