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Senedd Cymru

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Dear Delyth,

Thank you for your letter dated 8 October 2021. Here are more details regarding a number of matters raised during the Culture Committee meeting on 29 September 2021.

Changes to the funding for agriculture

The agricultural industry makes an important contribution to the viability of the Welsh language. The Farmers' Union of Wales' analysis of Census 2021 data shows that the agricultural sector is the sector with the highest percentage of Welsh speakers¹. Government figures show that 4 of the 6 counties with the highest proportion of Welsh speakers are also 4 of the 6 counties with the highest proportion working in agriculture, forestry and fishing (namely Gwynedd, Anglesey, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire)². The Farmers' Union of Wales also draws attention to the importance of the industry maintaining the Welsh language in counties where the percentage of Welsh speakers is lower across the population³. At the same time, we see that Welsh farms tend to be small in size, 45 hectares on average with 54% of Welsh holdings less than 20ha in size⁴.

¹ Farmers' Union of Wales, [Farming in Wales and the Welsh language](#) (July 2017), p. 6.

² [Securing Wales' Future Summary \(gov.wales\) \(2019\), p.11](#)

³ Farmers' Union of Wales, [Farming in Wales and the Welsh language](#) (July 2017), p. 9.

⁴ [Securing Wales' Future Summary \(gov.wales\) \(2019\), p.28.](#)



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We acknowledge that there is a climate emergency and support the Welsh Government's objective to address this significant challenge. Therefore, we understand the Government's emphasis on sustainable land management. Our understanding is that the Government's intention is to replace the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and other EU agro-environmental schemes with a Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS). Through these schemes, farmers will be rewarded for environmental results, mainly better air quality, reducing carbon emissions and improving the quality of the soil.

We are concerned about the impact of these proposals on smaller family farms which sustain a number of Welsh language communities. We foresee that the proposals will be more advantageous to large landowners. As family farms have less land in general, it is possible that they would not be able to designate a proportion of their land for projects which will have environmental results without it having a detrimental impact on their ability to produce food. That could threaten the continuity of those smaller farms, possibly leading to the failure of farms which would in turn lead to merging farms; creating larger farms and as a result reducing the countryside population and undermining communities where the Welsh language is still thriving. Recently, we have seen articles in the media about farms being bought by large companies outside Wales as places for them to plant trees⁵ in order to offset their carbon emissions, thereby reducing the environmental, social and economic advantages to Wales. It is a concern for us that the proposed funding arrangements will contribute to more situations such as these.

Therefore, we have concerns about the impact of the schemes on the continuity of the Welsh speaking agricultural community, and on the viability of rural communities more generally. We did not feel that the recent Welsh Language Impact Assessment in the Agriculture (Wales) White Paper⁶ adequately addressed this challenge, as it did not acknowledge the possibility that the policy could be more harmful than positive for the Welsh language. We feel that the funding schemes need to be reconsidered so that they are more mindful of the nature of farming and agricultural communities in Wales, for example by targeting subsidies in a way which would help family farms to survive. If the Government continues with this scheme, we believe that financial support should be provided for wider social and economic advantages, including positive results for the Welsh language, as well as environmental advantages.

My office has conveyed these concerns to the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd in the Welsh Government and held a meeting with Senior

⁵ ['Coedwigoedd newydd yn dinistrio cymunedau gwledig' - BBC Cymru Fyw](#)

⁶ [Agriculture \(Wales\) White Paper \(gov.wales\)](#)



Officers from the department during November 2020. We have responded to the Welsh Government's consultations on these proposals and wrote formally to the new Minister in July this year. However, a meeting has not yet been arranged to discuss our concerns.

International Work – International Association of Language Commissioners (IALC)

The Welsh Language Commissioner has been a prominent member of the International Association of Language Commissioners ([IALC](#)) since its establishment in 2013. The main aim of the association is to support and promote linguistic rights, equality and diversity across the world and support language commissioners so that they can uphold the highest professional standards in their work. It has 11 members – including the Basque Country, Catalonia, Flanders, Ireland, Kosovo and a number of minority language Commissioners in Canada. It also provides advice and guidance to countries across the world where the discussion on linguistic rights is in its infancy.

Meri Huws, the former Commissioner, was chair of the association between 2016 and 2018 and the office of the Welsh Language Commissioner was also responsible for the secretariat between 2015 and 2018. I am currently Deputy Chair of the association and I will become Chair during spring 2022.

In addition to quarterly meetings attended by the Commissioners and the Ombudsmen who are members of the association, an annual programme of meetings and webinars are arranged for officers in order to share good practice. The relationships formed through these activities have proved extremely useful as we can contact officers from the offices of other Commissioners as needed to ask how they deal with specific situations, and we receive similar requests from them in turn. The association's first volume, [Constitutional Pioneers: Language Commissioners and the Protection of Official, Minority and Indigenous Languages](#), was published in 2019 under the editorship of one of my senior officers, Dr Eleri James. I can arrange for a copy to be sent to you as Chair of the Committee if that would be of interest to you?

Several international conferences have been held by the association since its establishment where successful practices have been shared and opportunities provided to discuss and see the language policies of the various countries being implemented. In May 2017 the [conference was held in Cardiff](#) on the theme of 'iaith gwaith'. Presentations were given by representatives from a number of national organisations in Wales and speeches were made by other members of the association on the impact of technology and strategic planning on the bilingual workplace. My office was extremely grateful to the predecessor of this Committee for



the practical support it gave that conference, specifically the use of the Senedd estate, and the welcome given to members of the association over lunch.

There is no doubt that members of the association benefited from visiting Wales. To quote Rónán Ó Domhnaill, Ireland's Language Commissioner in the committee's evidence session in the Fifth Senedd:

“We do look to Wales as a good example of how to get things done, especially within the International Association of Language Commissioners. The Welsh Language Commissioner has been a huge part of that organisation, a former chair of the organisation, and they've had groups from Nunavut and from Kosovo and from Canada over to view the workings of the office. The main success, I suppose, as I would see it from an outside view looking in, is that they have moved to a system of standards [...]”

There is no doubt either that Wales has a lot to learn from countries across the world. Sharing good practices and hearing about the policies and approaches of other countries through the association has certainly been valuable to us as an organisation over recent years. I am eager to ensure that other organisations in Wales can benefit from the fruitful relationship which exists between us and other members of the association. To this end, I would like to organise an international conference in Wales as soon as the situation allows. Of course, organising such an event has implications in terms of resources, and I would appreciate if the Committee could consider whether there is potential for it to collaborate with my office to support such an event.

During September this year I had the privilege of presenting evidence to the Committee on the Irish Language and the Gaeltacht in the Dàil. After the evidence session, I was asked to explain the Working Welsh scheme and I explained that the scheme had been extended to Scotland during the past two years. I was asked to contact the authorities in Ireland to ask whether they had any interest in extending the scheme to Ireland. Since the meeting I have discussed the scheme further with Ireland's Language Commissioner who has referred me to Foras na Gaelige which is responsible for promoting Irish in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. We are currently awaiting a response from Sean O Coinn, the Chief Executive of Foras, to the suggestion.

Other international work: protecting and standardising place names

You will also be aware of the Commissioner's specific responsibility to recommend standard forms of place-names in Wales. Other countries in Britain and beyond have



similar responsibilities and we share information and best practice with them regularly. As a result of the cyber attack which affected my office, we lost the editorial database which was the basis of the [List of Standardised Welsh Place-names](#). This has led to new discussions with colleagues in Ireland, for example, to ensure that we plan new provision based on international best practice. It is worth emphasising that the provision in Ireland, and the legislative protection given to Irish names, exceeds our current arrangements in Wales. This could be a fruitful area for the Committee to consider further.

Widening access reports

As soon as I am in a position to express an opinion without prejudicing any ongoing cases, I will write to the Committee to comment.

Stepping forward: Assurance Report 2020-21

The assurance report for 2020-2021, “Stepping Forward”, notes a number of factors which impacted organisations' ability to undertake their duties due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of my main findings is that compliance with the standards and language duties was mainly affected when bodies did not have sufficient arrangements in place *before* the pressure of the pandemic hit them i.e. better resilience was seen by organisations which were already complying well. Those bodies where Welsh is not a central consideration in planning services found it more difficult to comply as they were too dependent on translation services which came under pressure as the pandemic took hold.

It is also a concern that some bodies decided not to provide Welsh language services as they did not mainstream the Welsh language, deciding to move key members of staff to new roles due to the impact of the pandemic. This led to some citizens in Wales seeing a significant deterioration in their ability to source information about the pandemic in Welsh.

We also saw the impact of changes in ways of working during the pandemic – especially where there was a shift to digital services. The inability of software such as Microsoft Teams to enable simultaneous translation during meetings had a significant detrimental impact on bodies' ability to conduct external and internal meetings in Welsh. I am concerned that such a change of practice will have a long-



term detrimental impact and I am eager to continue working with the Government to ensure that digital developments enable the use of Welsh and support bodies to comply.

It is, perhaps, too early to fully understand the impact of the pandemic on bodies' compliance with their duties as well as its impact on the use of Welsh. However, the findings of this period highlight some areas such as digital developments and it will be vital that we continue to monitor these over the coming years.

Any impact on dealing with complaints and statutory investigations as a result of that?

Early in the pandemic – in March 2020, I decided that I would defer the consideration of complaints or of the opening of investigations regarding the compliance of Health Boards and NHS services in Wales whilst they were under pressure. I also decided to give each body the option of delaying investigations if resources were not available to respond. That situation continued until the end of August 2020, when I started conducting investigations and dealing with complaints again.

I also used my discretion where it was sensible not to conduct investigations in every case where the pressure of the pandemic had led to failures to comply.

By October 2020, the statutory system had fully restarted. However, there was also a fall in the level of complaints during 2020.

Your opinion on how organisations have adapted to the need to provide bilingual services digitally at short notice.

The response has been mixed with some bodies showing innovation and responding positively to the challenge as change was forced upon them. Some bodies have adapted in some circumstances but not others, and unfortunately a number of bodies have taken a step backwards in terms of Welsh.

A number of bodies report that they are now providing more online services and, as a result, have been able to increase information or reach in terms of Welsh, including new services such as apps or a chatbot on websites.

Homeworking and subsequent changes to telephone service arrangements is one example of where changes have enabled better arrangements in terms of providing Welsh language services.

However, there have been challenges as bodies adapt, and difficulties have arisen where a relevant software does not support the use of Welsh and where bodies have not planned thoroughly to purchase systems which support Welsh. This supports the



general argument that bodies which have embedded Welsh well in arrangements and decisions are more likely to ensure compliance across their developments. Bodies which do not plan well are more likely to find that they cannot adapt.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant change in terms of the number of people who work, with many staff who work for public bodies now working from home. Could you give the Committee a general narrative on how organisations can increase the use of Welsh in the workplace in this new work environment, and whether organisations are using the resources available to them to develop the workforce's Welsh language skills?

Our self-assessment surveys showed a difference of opinion in terms of the impact of the pandemic on opportunities for people to use Welsh at work. Some bodies reported that the shift to homeworking has led to less opportunities for staff to speak Welsh informally in the office – and that this has had the biggest impact on people who used those informal conversations to improve their confidence. Some bodies reported that previous patterns continued, and others stated that they had provided other opportunities for people to use Welsh informally.

The report finds that a change to online provision with regard to Welsh lessons and the development of Welsh skills has led to an increase in the numbers of staff who are now learning the language. Flexibility in terms of time and resources has boosted these numbers. I believe that further innovation in this area, shared learning resources and open, flexible drop in sessions, could see this increase continue. However, the need to give people an opportunity to practice at work and with their peers is vital to enable people who are new to Welsh to be confident speakers.

I agree that we need to ensure that work continues to promote the opportunities which are available to increase Welsh language skills. We also need to continue to promote the availability of software which supports Welsh.

In order to better understand whether there has been an impact on opportunities to use Welsh at work during the period, I have added a question to the Welsh speakers' survey this year, and in years to come, in order to see if there is a change. I will report on the finding from the survey next year.

One of my strategic objectives for my period as Commissioner is to consider improving the climate within public bodies which are subject to the Welsh Language



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Standards to encourage the use of Welsh internally and to move towards encouraging more bodies to operate in Welsh at a team, department or whole organisation level. I am currently working with my officers on how to plan a strategic project to address this; taking into account the way people are working now, we need to think about possible innovation in this area. I am more than happy to appear in front of the Committee again in the future to discuss this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Aled Roberts
Welsh Language Commissioner