

WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO THE CULTURE, COMMUNICATIONS, WELSH LANGUAGE, SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE AND TO THE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Minister for Education and Welsh Language

This paper provides evidence in advance of my appearance before the Committee on 17 November 2022. The invitation asked for information on four specific questions, and the response below focuses on each question in turn.

Introduction

At the end of July this year, I approved all 22 local authorities' Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs). These statutory Plans set out how local authorities intend to improve the planning of Welsh in education in their areas over the next 10-years based on a target aligned with our Welsh language strategy: [Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers](#). The approval of the new WESPs marks the start of the next phase in local authority planning as they begin implementing their WESP commitments from September this year onwards. This is a critical 10-year period in terms of meeting our *Cymraeg 2050* targets, and the success of local authority WESPs cannot be underestimated.

1.Has the current statutory framework for Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) improved since the recommendations published in December 2015 in the report of the '[Inquiry into Welsh in Education Strategic Plans](#)' by the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Fourth Senedd? How has the Welsh Government changed its approach to the process of monitoring and approving WESPs following its acceptance of the recommendations in the report?

There is no doubt that the statutory framework for Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) has improved since the previous inquiry in 2015. The inquiry made 17 recommendations, many relating to the need for better alignment with Welsh Government strategies and policies; better partnership working within Welsh Government departments as well as externally; clarity around expectations in terms of targets; clarity around categorising schools according to Welsh-medium provision and improved monitoring and assessment processes. There has been significant investment in recent years to address these issues and others, so that the planning of Welsh in education within the framework of local authority WESPs is as ambitious and robust as it can be.

At the time of the inquiry, local authorities were implementing their first WESPs (2014-2017) and the committee acknowledged that the Plans needed time to embed. However, in 2016 we commissioned a [rapid review](#) in response to what was felt to be a lack of direction and ambition by local authorities with regard to their Welsh-medium education provision. One of the review's recommendations was the need to examine the legislation underpinning Welsh in education planning. We established

an independent ¹WESP Advisory Board between May 2018 and March 2019 to address the recommendations. This led to the review of *the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans and Assessing Demand for Welsh-medium Education (Wales) Regulations 2013*². (“the 2013 Regulations”) and subsequent making of new regulations. [The Welsh in Education Strategic Plans Regulations \(Wales\) 2019](#) (“the 2019 Regulations”). These came into force on 1 January 2020³ and included:

- Removing the duty to carry out a Welsh-medium parental demand assessments and replace this duty with individual local authority targets, calculated by the Welsh Government to reflect our *Cymraeg 2050* expectation to significantly increase the percentage of learners learning Welsh successfully.
- Extending the duration of a WESP from its previous 3-year planning cycle to 10 years to encourage better strategic planning not only aligned to *Cymraeg 2050*, but also to Welsh Government funding programmes (e.g. capital funding programmes, Flying Start) and also reform agendas such as the Curriculum for Wales and Additional Learning Needs.
- Strengthening links between Welsh-medium childcare provision and Welsh-medium education by requiring local authorities to make better use of their childcare sufficiency assessment in the planning of school places from age 3.

We know that the success of a WESP depends on many factors, and working in partnership on a local, regional and national level is one of them. We acknowledged this in the 2019 regulations with a requirement for local authorities to set out how they worked in partnership with their Welsh in Education Planning Forum to prepare the authority’s Plan and oversee its future implementation and evaluation. I was encouraged by the many levels of engagement and planning discussions that took place within these forums during the preparation of the WESPs and more so by commitments made in the vast majority of WESPs to establish sub-groups, such as promotion, support for parents, early years and workforce planning, to support the delivery of their WESP. Our revised statutory guidance included a section dedicated to highlighting the role of partner organisations (local, regional and national) in WESP delivery as well as advice on Welsh language promotion.

Requirements have been strengthened in relation to how local authorities provide parents/carers with information about the availability and type of Welsh-medium

¹ [improving-the-planning-of-welsh-medium-education.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

² These regulations are made under Part 4 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 (“the 2013 Act”). They require local authorities to prepare and submit to Welsh Ministers for approval Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) illustrating how they will improve the planning of provision of Welsh-medium education.

³ In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (Wales) Regulations 2019 were amended. The Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (Wales) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 (“the 2020 Regulations”) came into force on 1 December 2020 and made changes to the start date of the next WESP cycle – from 1 September 2021 to a year later (to September 2022).

education provision on offer. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we provided RhAG with additional funding to create a [website](#) and [support forum](#) for parents, to signpost and provide them with support and guidance.

We facilitated a programme of virtual WESP planning sessions during 2021-22 to support local authority officers in their preparation of WESPs. 10 sessions took place with 270 attending. To support consistent use of data, we also provided local authorities with a data pack of school statistics including Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) and School Workforce Annual Census (SWAC) data. Local authorities were able to access data for their own area, neighbouring authority areas as well as the national overview. This will be updated by the Welsh Government annually.

All draft Plans received in January 2022 for assessment included a clear commitment to the 10-year target proposed by the Welsh Government. This shouldn't be underestimated. The School Standards and Organisation Act 2013 ("the 2013 Act"), under which the WESP regulations are made, make provisions for local authorities to prepare a Plan based on their own targets to improve the planning and standard of Welsh-medium education for their area. These are the first strategic Plans since 2014 driven by a target calculated by the Welsh Government. Plans were assessed with input from across the Education, Social Justice and Welsh Language Group and feedback provided to all local authorities on areas that could be strengthened. Some draft Plans required more input than others, however, the local authorities' response to the feedback was positive.

We've set clear expectations for local authorities in meeting their 10-year targets. I expect all local authorities to submit an action plan for the first 5-years of the Plan, which will be monitored annually in the form of a review report. If appropriate progress is not being made, new provisions in the regulations enable the WESP to be reviewed and replaced by a new Plan at any time during the 10-year period, enabling a more responsive approach to the process of monitoring and reviewing a Plan.

We've also been looking at how the WESPs are considered across Welsh Government policy areas, particularly with regard to our Sustainable Communities for Learning capital funding programme. In approving the WESPs, I made it clear to local authorities that wider school organisation proposals should be assessed to ensure they are consistent with the aims and objectives of the WESP. Guidance around this has been updated to reflect this change. Furthermore, I recently approved a new approach to future investment through the Programme, allowing local authorities to progress their plans with greater flexibility. Every local authority will be required to submit a 9-year investment plan by March 2024. These investment plans will be assessed against the approved WESP to ensure they deliver the required capacity to meet the targets.

Every local authority in Wales is moving in the right direction—increasing access and opportunities for all learners to learn Welsh. There is a clear emphasis on increasing the number of primary school settings across Wales, with commitments to establish 23 new Welsh-medium primary schools and expand at least 25 Welsh-medium primary schools over the next 10 years. The Plans show that a high percentage of these developments will be realised during the first 5 years of the WESP, often made possible with the support of Welsh Government capital funding. Several authorities have made clear commitments in their WESPs to move their English-medium or dual language schools on a linguistic continuum by changing the language category of schools. These commitments are not to be taken lightly. These are all important, exciting developments—but not without their challenges.

2.To what extent do you expect Welsh in Education Strategic Plans to contribute to the outcomes and targets set out in the Welsh Government’s Welsh Language Strategy – [Cymraeg 2050](#)?

Increasing the number of learners studying through the medium of Welsh is a key aim of *Cymraeg 2050*. The most recent PLASC data (2021), published at the end of August shows a small percentage increase in year 1 learners studying through the medium of Welsh⁴ to almost 24% in 2021/22 with learners progressing on to year 2 higher this year. Although there’s been a slight percentage decrease in learners in Reception classes studying through the medium of Welsh during the same period, it’s important to note that schools are not required to report the number of children studying Welsh who are younger than five years of age on 31 August at the start of the academic year. This means that the information is not complete for reception class children. We will continue to closely monitor the data to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parent/carer choices in relation to Welsh-medium education.

Mudiad Meithrin’s work in this area is vital to enable seamless transition from Welsh-medium childcare settings to maintained school provision. They are on target to establish 150 new provisions by 2026. It must be recognised, however, that improving levels of Welsh-medium provision is a responsibility for the non-maintained sector as a whole, which is why I’ve been working with the Deputy Minister for Social Services to support an expansion of Welsh-medium childcare and early years provision during this Senedd term. In September, a commitment of £3.8m to support more childcare providers develop their Welsh-medium provision was announced.

The 2019 Regulations require local authorities to set a 10-year target outlining the expected increase in Year 1 children taught through the medium of Welsh during the

⁴ 23.4% (7,900 learners) in 2020/21 to 23.9% (8,010 learners) in 2021/22 (PLASC data)

lifespan of the Plan. These are based on the education targets⁵ set out in the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy and are included in the statutory Guidance to the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans, published in January 2021.

This shift in planning according to targets marked a significant step-change. It set out the Welsh Ministers' expectation on local authorities to plan for growth in Welsh-medium education provision in line with *Cymraeg 2050* targets. The methodology for calculating targets grouped local authorities according to population, percentage of Welsh speakers and current model for delivering education. Targets were set using a lower and upper range, as well as grouping areas according to their current provision, acknowledging that the starting point for each local authority would be different and the route to achieving those targets would vary.

Since 2018, over £76m of investment through dedicated Welsh-medium capital grants based on a 100% funding has been made, creating once fully realised, over 3,700 additional childcare and school places, and 285 places in additional late immersion centres or units. I've recently announced a further £7m to support WESP capital developments.

I've already invested £2.2m to support late immersion with an additional £6.6m committed until the end of this Senedd term to support late immersion provision in all local authorities in Wales. I approved bids from all local authorities over the summer and projects have been underway since September.

In May, I published a 10-year [Welsh in Education Workforce Plan](#) to coincide with the Strategic Plans. The Workforce Plan sets out the steps we'll take alongside a range of organisations and stakeholders to increase the number of teachers who can teach Welsh as a subject or teach through the medium of Welsh. The Welsh Government will provide an additional £1m this year to support the delivery of the workforce plan, bringing the total support for Welsh in Education to approximately £9 million, with plans to increase funding over the next two years. We have also extended the Welsh language training provision available to the education workforce. The National Centre for Learning Welsh has published a portal on their website which makes it easier for education professionals to see what bespoke courses are available for them to learn Welsh, and to improve their Welsh language skills. Teachers can also access courses on the National Centre's mainstream community provision free of charge. We are also offering free Welsh lessons for everyone aged between 16-25 since September, which could also improve the Welsh language skills of prospective education professionals.

I'm very aware of the challenges of recruiting, especially in our secondary schools. Programmes such as the *Cynllun Pontio* to enable primary teachers to be supported

⁵ The *Cymraeg 2050* education milestones include increasing the proportion of each school year group receiving Welsh-medium education from 22 per cent (based on 7,700 seven-year-old learners in 2015/16) to 30 per cent by 2031 (about 10,500 in each year group), and then 40 per cent by 2050 (about 14,000 in each year group).

to move into secondary teaching and the *laith Athrawon Yfory* incentive scheme are key. I've also increased funding for the *e-sgol* scheme to £600,000 to extend the e-learning programme to all areas of Wales by 2023. There is a clear need for more intelligent (knowledge-based) planning in this area. All local authority WESPs commit to working collaboratively with us and others to make better use of the workforce data available. This will be monitored in annual WESP review reports. Everyone has a contribution to make to ensure the success of Welsh-medium education and WESPs are a way of facilitating that. However, they can't be the answer to everything.

Our *Cymraeg 2050 Work Programme (2021-2026)* sets out our target to reach 26% of year 1 learners learning through the medium of Welsh by 2026, rising to 30% by 2031. If all authorities achieve their minimum 10-year target range⁶, we'll reach our *Cymraeg 2050* milestone of 30% of year 1 learners in Welsh medium education by 2030/31. We must build on the momentum of the WESPs, and the positive steps being taken to support our ambitions for our language—we have both the expertise and the will to succeed, and I am confident that we will reach our targets.

3.How are local authorities responding to changes to guidance on school categories according to Welsh-medium provision, and are they meeting the Welsh Government's ambition to increase Welsh-medium provision in English-medium and dual-stream schools?

In December 2021, I published non-statutory guidance on [school categories according to Welsh-medium provision](#) following an independent review of the current arrangements in 2019. This has prompted many local authorities and schools to start reviewing their local arrangements—something that has not happened to this extent since 2007.

Publishing the revised guidance was just the first step. We are just beginning our journey and the transition from one system to another will take time to embed. It's important we recognise it'll be a different journey for every local authority.

Since the guidance was published, discussions have continued with schools and local authorities. 8 local authorities across Wales have committed in their WESPs to changing the language category of one or several schools to Welsh-medium over the next 10 years. Since September, my officials have met with each of those local authorities in turn, to better understand how they are introducing the new categorisation arrangements within their areas. Each local authority has already, or is in the process of, mapping provision in their schools and identifying schools with the potential to move category. Further meetings are scheduled to explore what more we as a Government can do to facilitate discussions at school, county or

⁶ Many local authorities are aiming for the higher target range by the end of the 10-year Plan, with some committed to exceeding their target.

national level in relation to increasing the provision of Welsh. For local authorities where there are currently only Welsh or English-medium schools, discussions have been around how they can introduce more Welsh into the school day, particularly in their English-medium schools and settings.

I published in October a [Framework for Welsh in English-medium education](#).. Regional educational consortia and partnerships are working together to develop a national professional learning programme that will support the teaching of Welsh in schools in accordance with the actions set out in the Welsh in education workforce plan. This includes a focus on providing support for schools to use the framework effectively to plan, design and review Welsh in their curricula.

All schools have to record their language category annually within the Pupil Level Annual School Data collection (PLASC). We've been making preparations to enable the updating of datasets to reflect the new categories. Despite being a lengthy process, this time is being wisely spent by schools and authorities to familiarise themselves with the new arrangements. We are scheduled to formally transfer to the new language categorisation arrangements by January 2024, once the updating of PLASC is complete. All local authorities are working towards this deadline.

4.What challenges lie ahead in the planning and development of Welsh-medium provision, ahead of your proposed Welsh Language Education Bill?

We've committed in the *Programme for Government* to introducing a Welsh Language Education Bill during the current Senedd term. This also forms part of the Co-operation between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru. The purpose of the Bill will be to strengthen and increase Welsh language education provision across Wales to meet our *Cymraeg 2050* targets.

I'm keen to explore what more we can do to make access to Welsh language education more accessible and equitable. There are still learners and families missing out on opportunities to access Welsh-medium education—and therefore the best chance of becoming confident bilingual citizens. I'm also keen to explore how we can ensure better linguistic outcomes for learners in English-medium education.

I welcome the Committees' focus on these matters. We've gone as far as we can within the current WESP framework, and we'll look at any evidence and recommendations made as a result of this inquiry as part of developing proposals that could be included in a Welsh Language Education Bill.

In approving the WESPs, I committed to meeting the Leader and Director of Education of each local authority to discuss their WESP. Several of these meetings have already taken place. In meeting them, I've been emphasising what I've said

and written many times before: Cymraeg belongs to us all, as does the responsibility for its future. That's why all of us – at the Welsh Government, and all local authorities and schools – need to work together to ensure all learners in every part of Wales get the opportunity to learn Cymraeg successfully, and of using it in their everyday lives.