

# First Minister to intervene and save Welsh Duolingo

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 10 Mehefin 2024  
Petitions Committee | 10 June 2024

Reference: SR248622-3

**Petition Number:** P-06-1434

**Petition title:** First Minister to intervene and save Welsh Duolingo

**Text of petition:** Duolingo will no longer update its Welsh course from the end of Oct 2023, with no further development.

This petition is to call for the First Minister to personally intervene with Luis von Ahn, the CEO of Duolingo, with the aim of saving the Welsh course.

## 1. Background

The Welsh Government's ambition is to see the number of Welsh speakers in Wales increase to 1 million by 2050, which would almost double the current number of Welsh speakers in Wales. The 2021 Census results showed that 538,300 people in Wales aged 3 and over reported they could speak Welsh. This is a decrease of around 23,700 people since Census 2011.

Expanding Welsh-medium provision and opportunities to learn and use the language are key themes in the Cymraeg 2050 Welsh language strategy. It notes



of the Learn Welsh provision, which is provided predominantly via the National Centre for Learning Welsh, that the:

sector has an important contribution to make to our aim of achieving a million Welsh speakers. It will do so by enabling adults of all ages and abilities to improve their skills, resume their study of Welsh or learn afresh to give them the confidence to be able to use Welsh in the workplace, socially or within the family.

The Welsh Government directly funds the National Centre for Learning Welsh. The Centre (which runs its programmes under the banner – Learn Welsh) distributes funding to 11 course providers across Wales.

However, there are also other ways to learn Welsh which complement the National Centre for Learning Welsh's provision. Say Something in Welsh (SSiW), a Welsh company, developed an online learning platform and Duolingo, an app-based global learning platform provide other ways to learn Welsh. Both SSiW and Duolingo also work in partnerships with the National Centre for Learning Welsh to enable access and consistency across Welsh learning provision.

## 2. Duolingo

Duolingo is a US educational technology company established in 2011 and launched in June 2012. It offers online courses through its apps in more than 40 languages, including Welsh. The company was established by Professor Luis von Ahn, who is its current CEO.

It's reported that Duolingo generated revenue of \$531 million (US Dollar) and made \$16.1 million profit in 2023. It is estimated to have over 500 million registered users and around 37 million active daily users worldwide. Learners can use Duolingo for free, although a premium subscription called Super Duolingo costs £5 a month, which provides ad free content and additional applications and services.

### 2.1. Development of Duolingo in Welsh

In 2016, a group of volunteers – led by a Welsh language tutor, Richard Morse – began on the work to develop and maintain the Welsh language course on Duolingo. This arrangement remained in place until 2021 when responsibility transferred to the National Centre for Learning Welsh. According to the Welsh

Government's final report on the [Welsh language technology action Plan](#), the National Centre for Learning Welsh "looked after the content of Duolingo Welsh courses" between November 2021 and November 2023. It stated that:

in that time the Centre ensured that the Welsh Duolingo course was aligned with the Centre's 'Sylfaen' and 'Mynediad' courses so the Centre's learners could use Duolingo as a resource to review and practise their Welsh.

The Centre had a pre-existing relationship with Duolingo after establishing a [new partnership in 2017](#) to share its learning resources with the language App. This, the Centre noted, would ensure that "the Welsh version of Duolingo's free language-learning app uses the same language patterns and vocabulary taught on Welsh for Adults courses".

## 2.2. Duolingo pauses further development

In [October 2023](#), Duolingo announced that it would pause development of the Welsh course on its app, as part of a wider review of its courses. According to this [BBC Wales news article](#), Duolingo would be "channelling its resources into courses that were more popular among users". This was despite the fact that Duolingo had stated in [2020 that the Welsh language was considered the fastest growing in the UK](#), with an increase of 44% in new learners compared to 2019 figures. It was also deemed the ninth most popular language to learn in the UK of all languages available on the app.

Responding to the announcement, Richard Morse, who led the group of volunteers that developed the Welsh course on the App, told [Nation Cymru](#) that:

Duolingo is 'sunsetting the development of the Welsh course' (and many others). But they have promised to keep the course available.

It will no longer be possible to edit the course after this month so please note anything that possibly needs to be changed, ideally with a screenshot.

## 3. Welsh Government action

Following the announcement by Duolingo, the [Minister for Education and Welsh Language at the time, Jeremy Miles MS](#), wrote to [Luis von Ahn](#), CEO of Duolingo to

express concern about the decision. In his letter, dated 25 October 2023, the Minister stated:

Whilst I appreciate that the Welsh from English course will remain on the Duolingo platform, I fear the decision not to update its content will be detrimental in the longer term as the course could start to lose its relevance for learners. I am requesting therefore that Duolingo reconsider its decision to pause development of the Welsh course.

The Minister noted in a [response to the Culture and Welsh Language Committee](#) that Luis von Ahn responded to the Minister's concerns on 29 October stating that the:

decision to pause the development of new content of the Welsh course had not been an easy one.

Nevertheless, the Minister noted that Duolingo was keen to ensure that it had a "continued role to play in helping languages like Welsh thrive", and had asked members of his team to "reach out" to the Minister's office to "see how Duolingo could continue to support Cymraeg 2050".

Whilst the partnership is between the National Centre and Duolingo, Welsh Government officials met with Duolingo's Head of Government Affairs in November 2023. The Minister noted that Duolingo highlighted the:

significant challenges it faces in developing new content and that, whilst it was pausing the development of new content, **the door is not closed on future developments**. Duolingo was also keen to emphasise that its experience of working with the Centre as a partner organisation has been a positive and constructive one, and praised the commitment shown by the Centre to developing the Welsh Duolingo course and to increasing the number of users.

The Welsh Government was, in the short-term, to continue its discussions with Duolingo to understand the challenges, and where practical help could be provided. It was also looking to the long-term, to see what role Duolingo might have as a "resource to support teaching and learning as people progress along the continuum".

Regardless of the issues with updating the course, Duolingo noted that it was committed to "ensure that the Welsh course will always be available free of charge to users". Dialogue between [Duolingo, the National Centre and Welsh](#)

Government officials will also continue to “allow us to review if updates to the Welsh course are required in the future”.

## 4. Welsh Parliament action

Following news of Duolingo’s decision to pause further developments and updates to the Welsh language course on its app, the Chair of the Culture and Welsh Language Committee wrote to the then Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles MS. The Chair expressed concern about the decision and its impact on the platform’s users, and asked for a response to a series of questions.

The Minister responded on 30 November 2023 confirming that “the Welsh course will still be available on the Duolingo platform and will remain free for all learners to use”. The Minister also stated that meetings with the company since the announcement had led to it agreeing on a “number of actions to ensure that the company’s commitment to the Welsh language continues”.

During Plenary on 25 October 2023, Samuel Kurtz MS asked the then Minister about Duolingo’s decision:

It was announced that the popular language app Duolingo is stopping several language courses, including Welsh. And whilst the course will not be removed, it does mean that the content will not be updated or added to... Your department has been in touch with the company. May I ask what proposals the Welsh Government has made, and whether any response has been received from Duolingo management?

The Minister to the question noting that:

Duolingo is one of the means that people use to access the Welsh language—one of the many means, of course—and it continues to be an attractive route, for reasons we could fully understand. I have written to Duolingo, asking them to reconsider the decision that they have taken. But as the Member mentioned, the Welsh language won’t be removed from the platform—it will remain there. And as the Member may recall, the Welsh language is one of the few examples—perhaps the only example—where it’s not volunteers that create the content for the app. **For some time now, the National Centre for Learning Welsh has been responsible for developing the content of the app in the Welsh language, and they have built on the excellent work done by volunteers**

**prior to that.** So, in light of that, my understanding is that there has been more and swifter development for the Welsh language on the app than in some other languages. So it's possible that the impact will be less detrimental on the Welsh language than on some other languages. **But I would like to see Duolingo reversing its decision,** structure in place that is funded in Wales and is ready to continue to develop content on the app.

On 6 December 2023, Andrew R.T. Davies MS tabled a written question for the Minister for Education and Welsh Language at the time about any further planned talks with Duolingo;

Does the Minister have further talks planned with Duolingo about maintaining support for the Welsh language Duolingo course, following the increase in users taking up the course?

The Minister responded on 14 December 2023 noting that:

A meeting was held with Duolingo on 13 November 2023, where the company confirmed that the Welsh course will continue to be available on the Duolingo platform and will remain free for all learners to use.

We have also agreed to meet regularly to review Duolingo's contribution to the Cymraeg 2050 Strategy.

On 30 January 2024, the Minister during a debate in Plenary on the Welsh Language Commissioner's Annual Report reflected further on Duolingo's decision not to continue updating the Welsh course, stating that:

In general, I would be surprised if 99 per cent of the people who use the [Duolingo] app realised that there was a difference. So, we do need to take some comfort from that. It's not great, but the Welsh language is treated differently from the major languages, but this is part of a broader programme by Duolingo. In terms of the Welsh language, one of the encouraging things, I thought, was Duolingo's response to the campaign by Welsh speakers. They hadn't seen anything of the like before, so it does demonstrate the passion for learning Welsh.

On 13 March 2024, Andrew R.T. Davies MS tabled another written question for the Minister at the time about the actions taken to "ensure that any errors on Duolingo are corrected and released to the 700K users who learn Welsh using it?"

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The Minister responded, noting that:

Concerns about errors in course content have recently been submitted by individuals directly to Duolingo. I understand that Duolingo has considered all of the matters raised but has **concluded that only a few of the requests for revisions were due to valid errors**. They are in the process of making those revisions.

Duolingo has indicated that it is **willing to correct errors** in the Welsh course. Any concerns should be raised, either **directly with Duolingo** or through the National Centre for Learning Welsh, for it to consider.

During a recent Culture Committee evidence session, Tom Giffard MS asked the Chief Executive of the National Centre for Learning Welsh about Duolingo's decision:

Around six months ago, Duolingo said that they weren't going to continue updating the app. What impact has that had to date in terms of your efforts?

In response, the Chief Executive noted that:

The good news is that the course still exists. So, the Welsh language Duolingo course is still there, and many people are turning to it. What ended was the updating of the course. So, to be entirely honest, I **wouldn't anticipate there being a huge impact as a result of that**. The resource is still available and people are turning to it in exactly the same way. We have aligned some of the Duolingo course with our courses, so people can take advantage of both. But, again, I would encourage people to **use Duolingo to add to what we do**, in order to practice their skills and help them to use the Welsh language. So, no huge impact, if truth be told.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.