

Use English before (or instead of) Welsh

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 22 Medi 2025

Petitions Committee | 22 September 2025

Reference: SR25/11930-11

Introduction

Petition Number: P-06-1539

Petition title: Use English before (or instead of) Welsh

Text of petition: The 2021 census results show that around 80% of people in Wales can not speak Welsh.

Yet important information is given only in Welsh, examples include:

- Billboard public service information only in Welsh,
- Variable message road signs only in Welsh,
- NHS TV adverts on English TV channels in Welsh,
- Welsh options first in public service phonecalls.

Prioritising the language that 80% of the country can't understand in these cases is dangerous. English should be prioritised for safety.

The text provided above is submitted by the petitioner. The petitions team make every effort to ensure it preserves their authentic voice. This text has not been verified for accuracy, or errors, and may contain unverified opinions or assertions.

Mae'r testun uchod yn cael ei gyflwyno gan y deisebydd. Mae'r tîm deisebau yn gwneud pob ymdrech i sicrhau ei fod yn cadw ei lais dilys. Nid yw'r testun hwn wedi'i wirio am gywirdeb, neu wallau, a gall gynnwys barn neu honiadau heb eu gwirio.



1. Background

1.1. Legislative framework

The [Welsh Language \(Wales\) Measure 2011](#) modernised the legal framework regarding the use of Welsh in the delivery of public services. It included provisions with regard the official status of the Welsh language in Wales, and established the office of the Welsh Language Commissioner to promote and facilitate the use of the language.

The 2011 Measure also established a regulatory framework for the imposition of Welsh language standards (Welsh language duties) on public bodies and certain private sector organisations that deliver services in Wales. Examples of businesses that may be required to comply with some duties include utility companies, postal services, telecommunication companies and public transport providers. However, the provisions in the Measure do not extend to other businesses, such as supermarkets, banks and online retailers for example. Private companies undertaking work or delivering services on behalf of a public body (under an agreement or contract) may be required to comply with some Welsh language duties.

1.2. Official Status

The legislation provides for the official status of the Welsh language in Wales. It is given legal effect by enactments about, for example, the treatment of the Welsh language on the basis of equality (that is that it shouldn't be treated less favourably than the English language), and through duties placed on bodies to use the Welsh language, and the rights for individuals that arise from enforcing those duties.

The legislation does not, however, affect the status of the English language in Wales. But as the Cabinet Secretary points out in his response to the petition, "there is nothing to prevent a body from providing information or services in Welsh only, or bilingually".

1.3. Public bodies

Most public organisations in Wales, and many UK wide organisations that provide public services in Wales, have to provide Welsh language services to the public. Some organisations still operate *Welsh language schemes* under provisions in the [Welsh Language Act 1993](#), while others operate in accordance with the Welsh Language Standards – specific duties that a public body must comply with.

Failure to comply with the Welsh language standards could lead to enforcement action by the Welsh Language Commissioner, which could include, among others:

- requiring an organisation to prepare an action plan or take specific steps to prevent the continuation or repetition of the failure;
- publicising an organisation's failure to comply with the standards;
- impose a civil penalty on the organisation up to a maximum of £5000;
- seek to enter into a settlement agreement with the organisation.

Currently, 131 organisations are subject to Welsh Language Standards, including local authorities, police forces and health service bodies. The Welsh Ministers are also subject to the Standards.

1.4. Welsh Language Standards

Welsh Language Standards are duties imposed on organisations by the Commissioner. The standards seek to ensure that organisations treat and use the Welsh language equally with English language provision in different scenarios, such as: when the public contact the organisation, in the provision of online services and providing services internally to staff. There are five areas or classes of standards:

- Service delivery standards
- Policy making standards
- Operational standards
- Promotion standards, and
- Record keeping standards

While many of the duties will be similar across organisations, some will be tailored specifically for a particular organisation or sector. You can view the [Compliance Notices for every organisation on the Commissioner's website](#). The Compliance Notice sets out each individual standard that the organisation must comply with and the date it is required to comply.

As a general principle, the standards seek to ensure parity for the Welsh and English languages, such as ensuring that signs are bilingual, or that the Welsh and English are erected side by side in the same font and size. However, some

standards, for instance, require that the Welsh language text must be positioned so that it is likely to be read first, or that an announcement is in Welsh first.

Codes of Practice published by the Commissioner for local authorities, the Welsh Ministers and National Parks for example set out practical guidance in relation to the specific standards that have to be met. Whilst the Code is a statutory document, it states that it “should not be considered complete nor authoritative declaration of the law”. Nevertheless, under 3.51, it provides a question and answer in relation to Welsh only material and provision:

If a standard states that a service must be provided or that material must be produced 'in Welsh', does that mean it must be provided in Welsh only and that material must be produced in Welsh first?

- No, but the standards do not prevent that either. The requirements of the standards only impose duties in relation to providing services in Welsh. They do not impose duties in relation to providing services in other languages and this is therefore a matter for the body.

It continues by noting that the regulations' explanatory notes (within the Welsh Language Standards (No.1) Regulations 2015) state:

“Where a standard specified in these Regulations requires written material to be displayed or provided in Welsh, or for a service to be provided in Welsh, this does not mean that the material must be displayed or provided in Welsh only, or that the service must only be provided in Welsh (unless that is specifically stated).”

1.5. Welsh Language Commissioner

The Welsh Language Commissioner's principal aim, as set out in the 2011 Measure, is to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language. In the exercise of their functions, the Commissioner works towards increasing the use of the Welsh language in the provision of services and other opportunities for people to use the language.

The 2011 Measure also allows the Commissioner to impose and enforce Welsh language duties on organisations named in the Measure, encourage and share good practice, give advice and recommendations to the Welsh Ministers and carry out statutory enquiries.

The Commissioner is independent of Welsh Government, but receives its funding directly from it.

1.6. Statistics

On Census Day 2021, an estimated 538,300 usual residents in Wales (aged 3+) reported that they could speak Welsh. This equates to **17.8%** of the population. This is 1.2 percentage points lower than that recorded in the 2011 Census.

Other data on Welsh language ability and usage is collected via other surveys, such as the National Survey for Wales, the Annual Population Survey (APS) and the Welsh language use survey.

Both the National Survey for Wales and the APS show significantly higher numbers of Welsh speakers in Wales compared to the Census. For example, the National Survey for Wales estimates that some **34%** of the population can speak Welsh (18% can speak Welsh, while 16% had some Welsh speaking ability), while the APS has recently reported that **26.9%** of the population, year ending March 2025, can speak Welsh.

The Welsh Government and the Office of National Statistics has developed a joint work plan to improve understanding of the main survey and administrative data sources used to produce statistics about the Welsh language.

2. Welsh Government action

Whilst it is the responsibility of the Welsh Language Commissioner to impose and ensure compliance with Welsh language standards, it is the Welsh Government that is responsible for developing draft regulations for the Senedd to consider and approve.

Once regulations have been approved, the Commissioner will then draft Compliance Notices for all organisations covered by the regulations and consult with them, before issuing final notices.

The Welsh Government notes in its response to the petition that, “unless the standards provides otherwise, there is nothing to prevent a body from providing information or services in Welsh only, or bilingually” in Welsh and English.

The Welsh Government also points out that, in relation to safety concerns, Wales is not “unique” in terms of its bilingual status, and that bilingual signs and services are:

considered the norm in several European countries with no known evidence to suggest an increase in road accidents in those countries.

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.