

# Looking ahead: Strategic planning for Welsh medium education

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**What are the main issues surrounding the strategic planning for Welsh-medium education for the future, and is there a need for legislation?**

## Upward trends

Since the establishment of the first Welsh-medium primary school in 1947, the sector has grown from initially being supported by a few pioneers to becoming an integral part of the Welsh educational landscape.

The number of Welsh medium learners at primary age shows an upward trend. School Census Statistics for 2009-10 show that 22 per cent of children in Wales are taught Welsh as a first language in Year 1, a percentage which is currently increasing year on year.

Significant growth can be seen in the less traditional Welsh-speaking areas, particularly in the former industrial heartlands of south east Wales.

Figures for 2009-10 show that **21 per cent of Year 1 learners in Rhondda Cynon Tâf** currently receive first language Welsh medium education, with comparable figures in **Caerphilly (17 per cent)** and **Cardiff (16 per cent)**.

The Welsh Government published its Welsh-medium Education Strategy in April 2010 which set out a long-term agenda for the development of Welsh-medium education.

## Planning for the future

The need for local authority forward planning is an issue that is becoming increasingly

The **Welsh Medium Education Strategy** sets out a number of outcomes and targets central to its success, including:

- 30 per cent of Year 2 learners to be assessed in Welsh First Language by 2020;
- 23 per cent of Year 9 learners to be assessed in Welsh first language by 2020.

important, particularly with the aforementioned increase in pupil numbers in some areas of south east Wales.

Groups such as Rhag (Rhieni Dros Addysg Gymraeg) have long campaigned for the need for local authorities to strategically plan their provision by assessing the need for provision within each authority area.

The main elements of the Government's Welsh-medium strategy in this context include steps to improve the processes used by local authorities to assess the parental demand for Welsh-medium education and a requirement for local authorities to work jointly on a regional consortium basis for planning Welsh-medium provision.

Local authorities are also required to submit annual Welsh in Education strategic plans to the Welsh Government, which will be used to monitor their efforts in assessing and meeting the demand for Welsh-medium education.

## A need for legislation?

Whilst the Government's strategy has been broadly welcomed, many organisations have noted with concern its non statutory nature. This inevitably leads to the question of whether primary legislation is needed to ensure the success of the strategy.

The issue of linguistic progression from one phase of education to the next is a factor which is also dependent on local authorities planning their Welsh-medium provision strategically. The strategy acknowledges that the development of language skills happens over time by setting out five-year and 10 year targets in this regard, but its non-statutory nature is seen by many as not having the teeth to force authorities to plan in this way.

The One Wales Government's *Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011* did not contain any specific provision for Welsh- medium education. The Assembly Legislation Committee reported that they did not think this particular piece of legislation was the appropriate place for provisions relating to specific areas such as education.

However, the Measure does allow for the imposition of standards on bodies involved with education, such as local authorities and higher and further education institutions, building on the schemes relating to Welsh education set out under the *Welsh Language Act 1993*.

Whether this is enough to compel local authorities to implement the strategy is questioned by some. It would appear that the calls for a Welsh-medium education Bill will grow during the Fourth Assembly.

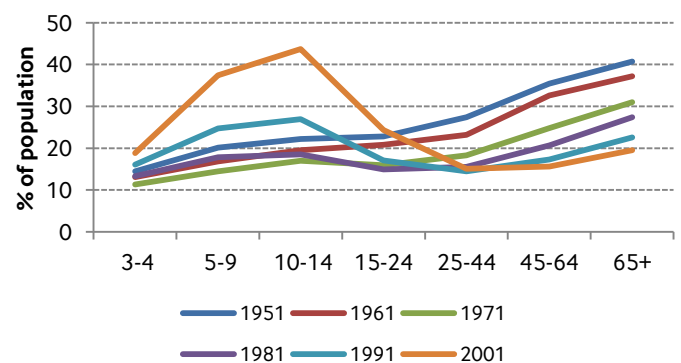
## Supply and demand

The decision of the Welsh Government to call in the council's original plans for primary school reorganisation in Cardiff shows that emotions surrounding Welsh-medium education can run high. Original plans to close an English-medium primary school in order to increase Welsh-medium capacity caused controversy and raised the argument that English-medium education is being disadvantaged in the rush to cater for the demand for Welsh.

Evidence exists that in parts of Wales, there are surplus places in English-medium schools whilst some Welsh-medium schools are over-subscribed or will be in the near future. As local authorities are constrained by tighter budgets, the balance between funding Welsh and English-medium education will come under even more scrutiny.

The results of the March 2011 census should also provide a signpost for any future Welsh-medium education planning.

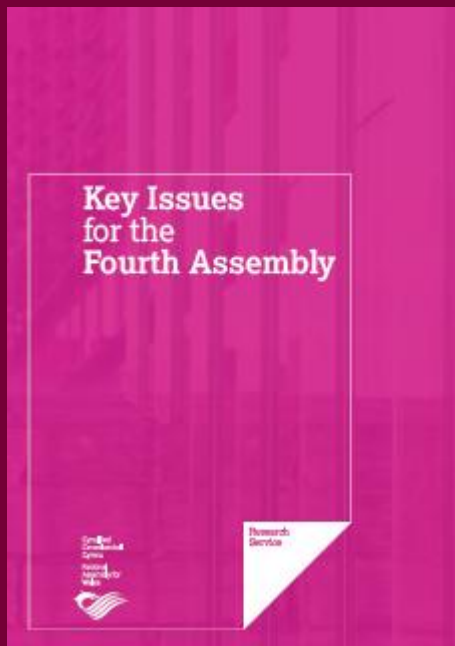
### Welsh speakers by age group: 1951 - 2001



Source: Censuses of population

In 2001, there was a large expansion in Welsh speakers in the group between 5 and 15 years old. Welsh-medium education has been seen as the driver for this increase in many quarters. It will be interesting to see whether the figures for 2011 show a further increase and whether the results will signify any shift in the current policy.

# Article taken from Research Service publication



## Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly

This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

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