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SPOTLIGHT ON USING WELSH IN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

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Spotlight on using Welsh in health and social care services

Being able to use Welsh in health and social care isn't just a preference; it can affect dignity, safety, and outcomes for people.

The Welsh language is a vital part of people's identity, well-being, and access to quality care. Over 828,000 people in Wales (27% of the population) say they can speak Welsh, with much higher proportions in areas like Gwynedd (72.7%), Anglesey (62.5%), and Ceredigion (56%). Yet, access to Welsh language services in health and social care remains inconsistent across regions.

The [People's Principles](#) set out the eight expectations people have of health and social care services. These include being able to communicate in a way that works for them and being treated with dignity and respect. The experiences shared in this report suggest that, for many Welsh speakers, this is not yet the reality.

Here we set out what Llais has heard about how Welsh is currently used in health and social care services across Wales. It is based on what we have heard from people about their experiences and what we know from working with policy makers and others with an interest.

In Wales, some health and social care services have a legal duty that says they must treat Welsh and English language equally. This is set out in the [Welsh Language Standards](#). It means things like signs, forms, and services should be bilingual. When these aren't provided, it's not just disappointing; it's failing to meet legal requirements.

Not all health and social care services have to comply with the Welsh Language Standards, GP surgeries, for example. However, all services must follow the Equality Act 2010. This means they must treat people fairly.

So, if someone with a disability or living with dementia finds it easier to communicate in Welsh, not offering those services could mean they're not getting equal or fair care – even if that service isn't required to follow the Welsh Language Standards.

In 2022 the Welsh Government launched a five-year plan called “Mwy na geiriau” to make it easier for people to use Welsh in health and social care services.

In the past year, Llais has worked with the Mwy na geiriau team to see how well services support Welsh speakers as well as getting out into communities to hear directly from them.

We've listened to people through engagement activities at the national Eisteddfod, Eisteddfod yr Urdd, launching a national survey, and through our day-to-day activities across Wales. **Here's what we heard.**

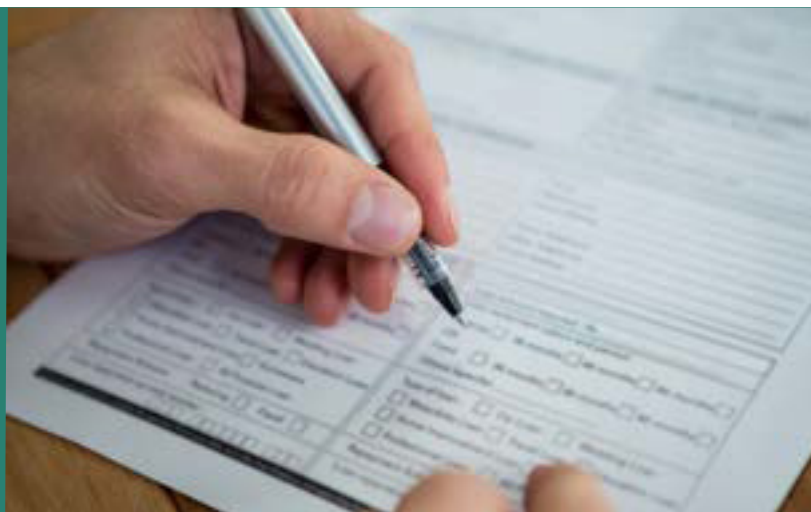
What people told us

We heard more from people about their experiences of health services, which may reflect the later introduction of Welsh Language Standards in the NHS. Because social care organisations have followed these duties for longer, people often encounter more consistent Welsh-language support there than in healthcare settings.

Here are the main themes we heard from people about their experience of using the Welsh language in health and social care services:

Pride & inclusion

“It was great to be able to discuss with a doctor in Welsh when arranging the appointment. But I felt that I had created work and caused inconvenience when submitting a form in Welsh.”



People felt pride and a sense of inclusion when they could use Welsh. Speaking Welsh helps people feel involved, valued, and respected. When services don't offer the use of Welsh, people often feel dismissed or unimportant.

Several children at Eisteddfod yr Urdd told us about being able to speak Welsh when seeing a dentist.



“Good experience in the dentist because they speak Welsh.”

Quality of care

People told us of instances where not having access to Welsh language materials impacted the quality of their care and potential diagnoses. This fits with research showing that using a patient's second language can lead to misdiagnosis, delays in treatment, and poorer psychological support.

“Department wouldn't provide Welsh language material for my daughters eye test so test wasn't true reflection – disappointed.

“Children first language Welsh – eye test in English, couldn't read words as no knowledge of English.”



Inconsistent provision

Access to Welsh services varies widely across regions.

While 27% of the population can speak Welsh, StatsWales data from 2024 shows that only 12.6% of GPs report higher or proficient Welsh language skills. In some Health Boards, this figure is as low as 5%. This leaves a big gap between what people need and what services can provide.

In some areas where Welsh is spoken by more people, like North and West Wales, we have heard of better access to services in Welsh. In areas with less Welsh speakers, like Cardiff and Newport, we have heard it can be more difficult for people to use their Welsh.

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“After having to move (GP) surgery, I asked if they had a doctor who spoke Welsh at all. Although the woman wasn’t rude, she didn’t know if they had a doctor who could speak Welsh, and she seemed surprised that I was asking.”



Signage, leaflets, forms, and questionnaires aren’t always available in Welsh at the same time as the English versions, this can lead to people feeling frustrated or that they are an inconvenience for requesting.

Some mentioned issues with registration systems going to English, even when Welsh was selected as a language option. They felt that this reflects broader problems in services where Welsh language preferences are not prioritised or respected in practice.



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“When filling in a questionnaire at the end of the visit to give feedback on the service, there was no Welsh form available. I had to ask for a form in Welsh and it was not available on the spot. The member of staff had to go and look for one and therefore there was a delay in waiting.”

Well-being

For many, speaking Welsh isn't just practical, it improves emotional well-being. They appreciated it when carers or medical staff spoke Welsh, particularly when they were unwell, as it made them feel happier and made communication easier.



“Very positive... staff were fantastic. They enquired about language preference and accommodated choice to speak in Welsh. Being a patient is very different to my usual day to day work in the health world - being in pain and slightly disorientated, using my first language to explain symptoms was incredibly important if not vital.”

“The staff were lovely, but being able to speak to someone in Welsh would have eased the pain for me.”

Not being able to use Welsh had a deeper emotional impact for some, leading to feelings of embarrassment, sadness, or even depression. They felt they had poorer care when they couldn't communicate in their first language, especially in sensitive situations such as discussing health concerns.

This is especially true for people in vulnerable situations, like children, older people, and those with mental health issues. Some people say it worsened their conditions. Being unable to express personal emotions and feelings in Welsh created a barrier to receiving effective care.

We also heard about the impact on children in care when they are not able to use Welsh.

“I suffer from depression and find it difficult to communicate my feelings when not using the language I was brought up to speak.”

“Terrible. Feeling like I wasn’t important enough for them to consider that I needed to handle and discuss in my first language. Can’t explain things well in my second language of English.”



We’ve heard that children placed away from Welsh-speaking areas, or in settings where Welsh is not supported, can experience a loss of identity, confidence, and connection.

For children and young people already facing disruption and instability, not being able to use their first language can increase feelings of isolation and make it harder to express themselves, build relationships, and feel settled. This shows that access to Welsh is not just about communication, but about emotional security, belonging, and providing safe, child-centred care.



Isolation

People often feel isolated when they can't use Welsh. We heard that hospitals and care services don't always ask about language preferences, leaving people feeling lonely and disconnected.

“People with dementia can get very isolated in hospital when people don't speak the same language – they don't understand what they are being told and can't ask what they need to know.”

“My husband was a Welsh speaker, he often felt alone in the hospital as none of the staff spoke Welsh to him, he was happy when a patient was admitted who spoke Welsh, it made him feel comfortable. I wasn't with him when he died, his friend told me he spoke to him before he passed. It gave me some comfort to know that he heard some Welsh before the end.”



Not being asked about their language preference, especially in vulnerable situations, exacerbated these feelings.

“I was under huge stress worrying about the test, because of concerns that it could be quite a serious illness. No person I saw spoke Welsh and I was not asked about my choice of language.”

Our calls for change

From what we have learned, health and social services are inconsistently meeting their Welsh Language Standards duties.

The experiences shared with us show that people's experiences still vary depending on where they live or which service they use. The People's Principles set a clear expectation of consistency, but this is not yet the reality for many Welsh speakers.

Local councils, who deliver social care services have followed Welsh Language Standards since 2016. Health boards and NHS Trusts joined later, after 2018, and are still working on key duties like offering Welsh language clinical consultations. This delay sometimes means health services lag behind social care, where access to Welsh is often better.

Healthcare Inspectorate Wales' findings in a [recent report](#) highlight both progress and ongoing challenges, reinforcing the need for stronger systems, workforce development and consistent implementation of Welsh language support across healthcare services.

Whilst we understand that there are many pressures and conflicting priorities, people are feeling the impact when the Welsh Language is not used in their health and social care services.

We welcome the launch of the new Cwrs Croeso course, announced recently by the Welsh Government, which aims to help staff use Welsh confidently in everyday interactions. This is a positive step toward improving the Active Offer and making services more inclusive.

We encourage all health and social care organisations to promote and support staff participation in this course, especially those who are non-Welsh speakers or new learners.

People shared practical ideas with us to improve services and we have used what they told us to call for the following action:





1. Active Offer

Call: NHS organisations and Local Authorities to ensure that the Active Offer is more widely implemented across Wales so that people don't have to ask for services in Welsh.

Health Boards, Local Authorities and partners must consider Welsh language needs when planning and commissioning services, including services across the border in England.

Why: People feel dismissed or like an inconvenience when they have to ask for Welsh services.

Not asking about language preference, or enabling people to speak in their own language, leads to feelings of isolation and poorer care, particularly for people in vulnerable situations.



2. Working together

Call: NHS organisations and Local Authorities must continue to work collaboratively with the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office and Welsh language organisations to meet Welsh language duties and improve access to bilingual services.

Why: Provision is inconsistent across regions.

Collaboration will help to improve shared learning, consistency, and momentum.

We welcome the work already happening across Wales, including:

- The Welsh Language Standards Joint Regulators Forum, which brings together professional regulators such as the General Medical Council, Nursing and Midwifery Council, General Dental Council, Health and Care Professions Council and others to share good practice and address challenges. These regulators influence professional standards and training, which can help make Welsh language use part of everyday care.
- The Welsh Language Officers Forum, co-ordinated by Mwy na Geiriau, supporting health boards to coordinate efforts and share learning.
- Social Care Wales have done a lot of work to promote the use of Welsh in social care, including the development of training and resources as such **Using Welsh in work.**
- Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) has embedded Welsh language considerations into its inspection programmes, including reviewing whether services record language preferences, provide bilingual information, identify Welsh-speaking staff, and deliver the Active Offer.
- Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) is now subject to Welsh Language Standards and is expected to play a role in strengthening Welsh language provision in the healthcare workforce. This means HEIW must integrate Welsh language skills into recruitment and training, support staff to develop confidence in using Welsh, and ensure that future workforce strategies reflect the needs of Welsh-speaking people.
- The **Welsh Language Commissioner's annual report 2024 – 2025** shows that progress on Welsh language dementia care has slowed since 2018, and momentum needs to be seen to urgently. The re-established dementia and Welsh language subgroup will help shape a new Wales Action Plan for dementia.
- The Health and Care Forum led by the Welsh Language Commissioner, a strategic forum established with Mwy na Geiriau helping health boards under Standard 110, the duty to establish a five-year plan to implement Welsh clinical consultation plans.

These forums show that organisations are coming together with shared purpose around the Welsh language. However, people's experiences tell us that these efforts must now translate into consistent changes that people can see, and hear, across all services. There is still more to do to ensure the Active Offer is not just policy but everyday practice.



3. Culturally sensitive services

Call: NHS organisations and Local Authorities must make sure staff are aware of the cultural significance of the Welsh language, even if they don't speak it fluently, avoiding remarks that could make people feel alienated or uncomfortable.

Why: People reported feeling alienated or undervalued when staff made dismissive remarks or failed to acknowledge Welsh identity. Cultural sensitivity improves trust, well-being, and inclusion, which are essential for quality care.



4. Awareness

Call: NHS organisations and Local Authorities to make sure all staff, especially at reception, know which health or social care workers can provide services in Welsh.

Why: People often weren't asked about language preference and didn't know who could speak Welsh. This lack of awareness creates barriers and frustration. Simple steps like visible badges and directories make services more accessible and reduce stress for people.



5. Translator support

Call: Alongside the priority of strengthening the implementation of the active offer, there must also be more consistent access to translators when Welsh-speaking staff aren't available. This is, particularly crucial especially for for important, sensitive, and high-risk conversations.

Why: Miscommunication in a second language can lead to misdiagnosis, delays, and emotional distress. For sensitive situations like mental health or end-of-life care, translation is vital for dignity, safety, and accurate care.



Llais' action

In response to what we've heard, we will:

- Continue listening to people's experiences of using Welsh in health and social care and speak up when things aren't right.
- Share good examples of the use of Welsh in health and social care with all services and encourage others to do the same if it is right for their services.
- Work with the Mwy na Geiriau team, and other Welsh Language organisations, to explore areas needing further research.
- Recruit more Welsh-speaking volunteers to strengthen our representation and amplify Welsh voices.

Together, we can ensure everyone in Wales receives the care and respect they deserve in their language of choice.

Contact us



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