

The Development of Welsh Language Education since Devolution

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to consider some of the most critical factors that have been at play in the Education and Welsh language policy spheres during the twenty-five years in question. The article will analyse the policy development context and will also present data, focusing on statutory education, since the devolution of powers to Wales. Consideration is given to the relationship between the Welsh language portfolio and the Education portfolio at the national level as allocated by the First Ministers of Wales since 1999. In addition, there will be a focus on the development of strategies in these areas, in recognition of the importance of education in language policy and planning. It is not intended to offer a critical analysis of all strategic documentation published over the twenty-five years; however, reference is made to a selection of the areas and themes prioritized for policy and strategy development in Welsh language education. In the context of the above areas, we explore the development – or lack thereof – in Wales over the period in comparison to what happened in the Basque Country Autonomous Community during the same period. Finally, the full extent of the Welsh and Education Bill will be assessed, with consideration of whether it will be possible to achieve the necessary trajectory to meet the targets of the Cymraeg 2050: A Million Welsh Speakers strategy (Welsh Government, 2017a).

Keywords: Welsh Language and Education Bill; Welsh language; education; Welsh Government; Basque; language policy and planning; minoritized languages.

Introduction

The publication of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill 2024 (Welsh Government, 2024b) by the Welsh Government on the 15th of July 2024 has undoubtedly marked a significant milestone in the development of Welsh language education since devolution. For the first time in the quarter of a century since the Assembly was established, which evolved over time into the Senedd,¹ a bespoke bill has been drawn up in an attempt to ensure a coherent approach to Welsh language and Education, bringing these two policy areas together.

In attempting to define the extent of an evaluative overview of the policy and practice environment in the period since devolution, several aspects of the development of Welsh language education can be considered: Welsh-medium education, or Welsh language teaching; statutory education, or the non-statutory early years, post-16 education, post-18 education, language for adults, language training through workplaces and so forth. In addition, we may trace specific pathways within these sectors: from attitudes to progression, from resources to workforces, from pedagogy to accountability, with reference to macro, meso or micro levels.

The aim of this article is to consider some of the most critical factors at play in the fields of education policy and the Welsh language during the twenty-five years in question, seeking to analyse the policy development context as well as to assess the data regarding Welsh language education as a result of the devolution of powers to Wales.

Education and language planning

Education – particularly statutory education – is central to language policy and planning, whether as the official languages of states are

1 The appropriate terms are used when referring to the organisations according to the period in question.

presented as vehicles of learning to populations that do not speak them, or in the context of reviving or maintaining minoritized languages (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Lainio et al. 2016). The importance of education to language planning is highlighted in the formative scholarly literature of the field, as seen in the work of Fishman (1991), as well as in legislation, statutory instruments, strategies such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages of the Council of Europe (1992). Education policy is key in acquiring and passing on language to younger generations, socialising aspiring adults, developing workforces and creating linguistically cohesive communities or nations (Lainio et al. 2016).

The role of governments – the macro level – is crucial in language planning which drives and leads to formal language policies being designed and adopted (Liddicoat and Baldauf, 2008). This has been seen in education at local authority level in Wales. When the Welsh Assembly was established, one of the aspirations of *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* was that this body would place Welsh as the natural respective language of Wales within a framework of official bilingualism throughout the country, as outlined in their publications *Popeth yn Gymraeg, Y Gymraeg ym Mhopeth* (1999) and *Deddf Iaith Newydd i'r Ganrif Newydd* (2001). This echoes the relationship between Basque and Spanish in the Autonomous Community that had been articulated in the Normalisation Law of the Basque Language 1992 (Jones, 2022) and one of the cornerstones of the normalisation of the Basque language in that legislature was the education system. With the creation of an elected body at the Welsh level for the first time in centuries, how, therefore, was policy developed in Welsh language education?

The role of education in minoritized language policy and planning

The key relationship between Education and Minoritized Language Planning was articulated by Colin H. Williams (2002: 95) at a conference in the early days of devolution:

The role of education, as a key agency of socialisation, has become central to the language struggle. It is the most fundamental feature of language revitalisation in Wales and has been very well documented. (Williams, 1998; Baker, 1993; Jones and Ghuman, 1995; Williams, 1999a)

This suggests that there is a strong case for combining the two policy areas in one ministerial portfolio. At the same time, there is a recognition that policy needs to consider factors beyond education to complement what is delivered through the education system, such as language acquisition and transfer, socialisation and language use, workforce development and the creation of linguistically cohesive communities. Liddicoat (2007:12) notes:

Education does not itself mean that languages will come to be used, or even usable, in valued contexts within a society, other than admitting the language to the school context itself. In fact, by developing language capabilities that have little or no opportunity for use outside the classroom, they may further undermine the perceived prestige and value of the language.

Although the above quote is used in the context of Australia's indigenous languages, it is recognised as being relevant to Wales in a minoritized language context, where there is an undeniable reliance on the education system to meet ambitious targets for increasing the number of speakers, as seen in *Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2017a). This is further supported by research in specific areas of Wales which points to the lack of need and lack of practical opportunities to use Welsh outside of school (Hodges, 2009), particularly when the use of Welsh by pupils within school walls is already challenging (Thomas and Roberts, 2011).

Furthermore, Davies's work in her review *One Language For All* states that it is the eleventh hour for Welsh second language (Davies, 2013: 1), stating:

According to the evidence, this is a very tedious experience for large numbers of them [pupils studying Welsh second language] – they do not regard the subject as being relevant or of any value to them. They are not confident enough to use Welsh outside the classroom – the opportunities to do so are actually very limited – and there is no incentive therefore to learn the language.

In the above arguments, the significant relationship between Welsh language and Education is debunked, recognising that overarching linguistic planning in other key areas is necessary to lead to successful language outcomes in education policy. Similarly, it could be argued that linguistically successful education policies are necessary to enable effective language planning across other policy areas. In short, cohesive policies should be developed and implemented between the Welsh language, Education and other fields.

The development of the relationship between Welsh language and Education in the ministerial portfolio

Over the quarter of a century and during Wales's constitutional evolution, the journey of the Welsh language and Education policy areas can be followed by tracing the responsibilities of holders of the Education portfolio and the Welsh language portfolio over the years.² Table 1 below identifies the ministers who have been responsible for the Welsh language portfolio during devolution and Table 2 identifies the ministers who have had responsibility for the Education portfolio including statutory education in the same period.

These two tables demonstrate that very rarely during the devolution period have the two policy areas come together within the portfolio of a single minister or cabinet secretary. Indeed, the ministerial portfolio has only combined Education and the Welsh Language on three occasions – one of which was for a very short period – for a total of around five years over a period of twenty-five years.

Table 1: Ministers responsible for the Welsh language, their official roles and their time in post in the Senedd since devolution

<i>Minister responsible for the Welsh language</i>	<i>Portfolio / Role³</i>	<i>Period</i>
Tom Middlehurst	<i>Education and Training</i>	May 1999–October 2000
Jenny Randerson	<i>Culture, Welsh Language and Sport</i>	October 2000–April 2003

2 From 1999 to 2002, the Assembly was a single corporate body, with Secretaries as members of the Assembly's Executive Committee acting as portfolio holders. In 2002 the term Welsh Assembly Government was coined to describe the body responsible for the policies and actions of the Cabinet. In the Government of Wales Act 2006, the Welsh Government (including the First Minister of Wales, Welsh Ministers, Deputy Ministers and the Counsel-General) became responsible for the making and implementation of decisions, policy and secondary legislation (Welsh Parliament, 2021).

3 Note that the order of the wording of responsibilities differs in the Welsh version and the English version of the portfolio, e.g. Alun Davies, *Y Gymraeg a Dysgu Gydol Oes / Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language*.

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<i>Minister responsible for the Welsh language</i>	<i>Portfolio / Role³</i>	<i>Period</i>
Alun Pugh	<i>Culture, Sport and the Welsh Language</i>	May 2003–June 2007
Carwyn Jones	<i>Education, Culture and the Welsh Language</i>	June–July 2007
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	<i>Heritage</i>	July 2007–July 2008
Alun Ffred Jones	<i>Heritage</i>	July 2008–May 2011
Leighton Andrews	<i>Education and Skills (including the Welsh Language)</i>	May 2011–June 2013
Carwyn Jones	<i>First Minister with responsibility for the Welsh Language</i>	June 2013–May 2016
Alun Davies	<i>Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language</i>	May 2016–November 2017
Eluned Morgan	<i>Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning</i> <i>International Relations and the Welsh Language</i> <i>Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language</i>	November 2017–May 2021
Jeremy Miles	<i>Education and Welsh Language</i>	May 2021–March 2024
Jeremy Miles	<i>Economy, Energy and the Welsh Language</i>	March 2024–July 2024
Eluned Morgan	<i>Health, Social Care and the Welsh Language</i>	July 2024–submission of this article ⁴

4 This article was finalised during one of the most turbulent weeks in Welsh politics. A day after he introduced the Welsh Language and Education Bill, Jeremy Miles MS resigned from his role as Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and the Welsh Language along with two other Cabinet Secretaries and the Counsel General. Within hours Vaughan Gething MS declared that he was initiating the process of resigning as First Minister of Wales and two days later he announced that the Welsh language portfolio would be in the hands of the Health and Social Care Secretary, Eluned Morgan MS.

Table 2. Ministers responsible for Education, their official roles and their term in post in the Senedd since devolution

<i>Minister responsible for Education</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Period</i>
Rosemary Butler	<i>Minister for pre-16 Education and Children</i>	May 1999–October 2000
Jane Davidson	<i>Education and Lifelong Learning</i>	October 2000–June 2007
Carwyn Jones	<i>Education, Culture and the Welsh Language</i>	June–July 2007
Jane Hutt	<i>Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills</i>	July 2007–December 2009
Leighton Andrews	<i>Children, Education and Lifelong Learning (2009–11) Education and Skills (including the Welsh Language) (2011–13)</i>	December 2009–June 2013
Huw Lewis	<i>Education and Skills</i>	June 2013–May 2016
Kirsty Williams	<i>Education</i>	May 2016–May 2021
Jeremy Miles	<i>Welsh Language and Education</i>	May 2021–March 2024
Lynne Neagle	<i>Education</i>	March 2024–submission time for this article

As highlighted in the tables, and unlike Education, in this quarter of a century the Welsh language has not been a portfolio in its own right, but rather was combined with a range of other policy areas. This is arguably compatible with an attempt to respond to the narrative that Welsh needs to be mainstreamed horizontally across all policy areas. Similarly, it could be claimed that placing the Welsh language in the First Minister’s portfolio, as happened between 2013 and 2016, is an attempt to bring this policy area to the heart of Welsh political power.

It could be argued that there are also other factors behind the decisions made regarding the consolidation of portfolios in relation to the Welsh

language and Education. These include the balance of responsibilities and the distribution of portfolios between the Labour Party and the parties or individual elected members that formed the government at different times.

During the first eight years of the Assembly, the Welsh language portfolio holder did not have communication skills in the language. However, as shown in Table 1, since 2007 all ministers who have been responsible for the Welsh language can communicate in the language, enabling them to discuss the portfolio in the language itself.

When considering the Welsh language skills of the Education portfolio holders since 2007,⁵ the two policy areas were combined only when the Education portfolio holders were Welsh-speakers. This pattern of political appointments suggests that the First Ministers of Wales from 2007 onwards have been of the view that the Welsh language portfolio cannot be given to those who do not speak the language. Consider also the recent transfer of the Welsh language to the Minister for Health and Social Services and not to the Minister for Education around the time of publication of the Welsh Language and Education Bill.

Therefore, one could consider the extent to which these factors relating to the distribution of ministerial portfolios has influenced the development of coherent policy between the fields of Education and the Welsh language.

Welsh Language and Education Strategies over the devolution period

In 2021, the Collaborative Research Network: Bilingual Education and the Welsh Language presented a Scoping Paper to the Welsh Government outlining the priorities for research in the field. It referenced over 30 strategic documents commissioned by the Government and by Senedd, or Assembly as it was previously known, Committees since devolution, where there was a clear focus on Welsh language and Education.

Among the most significant are the three strategic documents focusing on the Welsh language. *Iaith Pawb* was published in 2003 (Welsh

5 The One Wales Government was formed between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru in July 2007. The Government of Wales Measure (2008) was passed. Both of these events could be interpreted as significant political and constitutional turning points in the devolved context.

Assembly Government, 2003) as an action plan that considered actions to support the Welsh language and try and promote bilingualism with the aim of increasing Welsh speakers by 5% by 2011. However, despite these targets, the number of Welsh speakers fell between 2001 and 2011, down from 20.8% to 19%. This was followed in 2012 by *A Living Language: A Language for Living* (Welsh Government, 2012) which aimed to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh in everyday life in six specific areas: children and young people, the family, the community, the workplace, Welsh-language services and infrastructure. In 2011 came the publication of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 (Welsh Government, 2011), giving the Welsh language official status in Wales, and the establishment of the role of Welsh Language Commissioner. The Commissioner has legal powers to investigate cases brought before the Welsh Language Tribunal for failure by county councils to comply with laws and policies relating to the Welsh Language Standards Regulations 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011.

In 2017, the Welsh Government's long-term strategy, *Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers* (Welsh Government, 2017a) was published, with the aim of doubling the number of Welsh speakers and doubling daily use of Welsh by 2050. However, the 2021 Census (Welsh Government, 2022c) saw a further decline in the number and percentage of Welsh speakers.⁶ In addition, recent statistics from the Annual Population Survey (Welsh Government, 2024dd) show around 44,100 fewer three-year-olds or older people being able to speak Welsh compared to last year. Dyfodol i'r Iaith (Evans, 2024) states that 50% of the Million speakers target goal cannot be reached by 2050 unless the effort to build more Welsh schools is tripled.

Furthermore, strategic documents focusing specifically on Welsh-medium education have been published, including the *Welsh-medium Education Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2010) along with a revised version (Welsh Government, 2016a) which set out the vision for an education and training system to enable people of all ages to develop their Welsh-medium skills. *Evaluation of the Welsh-medium Education Strategy* (Welsh Government, 2016a) showed support for the vision and aims of the strategy among officials (at national and local level) responsible for

6 The 2021 Census was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic period when schools were closed and it is argued that this has led to a reduction in the Welsh language skills of statutory education pupils (Estyn, 2021).

delivering it, and among stakeholders and practitioners. This was followed by *Welsh-medium Education Strategy: next steps* (Welsh Government, 2016b) which outlined the priorities for the development of Welsh-medium and Welsh language education during 2016–17, while a long-term policy for the language was developed. Next came *Taking Wales Forward 2016–2021* (Welsh Government, 2016ch), which set out the priorities for ensuring an ‘ambitious and learning’ Wales along with priorities for achieving this. It also stated that the programme for government would ‘work towards one million people speaking the Welsh language by 2050’ and committed to reshaping Welsh teaching in our schools to enable young people to utilise their Welsh language skills in wider society’. In 2017, Aled Roberts conducted a Review of the Welsh Language in Education Strategic Plans and published *Welsh in education: Action plan 2017–21* (Welsh Government, 2017b) in 2017, followed in 2019 by *Improving the Planning of Welsh-Medium Education – Recommendations of the Welsh in Education Strategic Advisory Board* (Welsh Government, 2019).

In the documents outlined here, there is an increased emphasis for all pupils to acquire language skills during their time in statutory education and be able to use of them outside and beyond school. The same emphasis can also be found in the Curriculum for Wales documents online (Welsh Government, 2022b; Welsh Government, 2024ch). Donaldson’s review (2015) led to the adoption and publication of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021). This act refers to the four purposes of the curriculum by law and one of the mandatory elements within the Curriculum for Wales is the Welsh language. In addition, the Curriculum refers to the learning continuum where the focus is on ‘supporting each individual learner to make progress along the same continuum at an appropriate pace, ensuring that they are both supported and challenged to reach their potential’ (Welsh Government, 2024a). It is also significant to this discussion that a focus on progress along the learning continuum also includes Welsh language skills (see Lovell, 2023).

The intention in this article is not to offer a critical analysis of all the strategic documentation referenced above, which in turn is a selection of all the documents that were published during the period. Rather the selection is a recognition of the areas and themes prioritised for policy and strategy development in Welsh medium education. To what extent is there truth in the cliché, as seen in other policy areas, that Wales is strong in its policies but weak in their implementation?

Data

When considering the longitudinal data available from the Welsh Government to track the number and percentage of schools in Wales according to their teaching medium, together with the number and percentage of pupils in those schools, it appears that different categorisation systems⁷ have been used to designate the medium of schools in the period between 2003/04 and 2022/2023. This complicates the process of comparing and analysing the statistics, which should be providing unequivocal insights for researchers and policy planners alike to be able to evaluate the actual situation over a period of time.

However, the data below suggests (although there has been no consistency in the categories) that there has been no significant increase in the number or percentage of Welsh-medium schools between 2003/04 and 2022/23. The total number of schools fell from 1,871 to 1,463 during the two decades. There has been an increase in the percentage of bilingual schools but there has been no significant change in the percentage of Welsh-medium or English-medium schools.

When considering the number and percentage of learners in these schools, similar patterns are found. We see a decrease of 24,289 in the number of learners in the schools during the period, there is an increase of 7% in the bilingual medium, a decrease of 6% in the English medium and of 2% in the Welsh medium.

These statistics also support comments made by the former chief executive of the Welsh Language Board, Meirion Prys Jones, back in

7 Up to 2007/08 the following six categories are used: (1) Primary: Welsh is the only or main medium of instruction; (2) Primary: Welsh is used for part of the curriculum; (3) Primary: Welsh is taught only as a second language; (4) Secondary: Welsh-medium school; (5) Secondary: English-medium school; (6) Not applicable (Nursery and Special).

Table 3 and Table 4 interpret the data as follows: (1) and (4) Welsh medium; (2) Bilingual; (3) and (5) English medium.

Since 2008/09 the following ten categories are used: (1) (Welsh medium; (2) Dual stream; (3) Transitional; (4) Bilingual – AB; (5) Bilingual – BB; (6) Bilingual – CB; (7) Bilingual – CH; (8) Predominantly English medium but with significant use of Welsh; (9) English medium; (10) Not applicable (Nursery and Special).

Table 3 and Table 4 interpret the data as follows: (1) (Welsh medium; (2)-(8) Bilingual; (9) English medium.

Table 3. Schools by local authority, region and Welsh medium type 2003/04–2022/23

	<i>Welsh medium</i>	<i>Bilingual</i>	<i>English medium</i>	<i>Excluded</i>	<i>Total</i>
2003/04	502 (27%)	58 (3%)	1,256 (67%)	55 (3%)	1,871
2012/13	434 (26%)	117 (7%)	1,043 (63%)	62 (4%)	1,656
2022/23	378 (26%)	96 (7%)	944 (65%)	45 (3%)	1,463

Source: Schools by local authority, region and Welsh medium type, StatsWales, Welsh Government. (Welsh Government, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2023b)

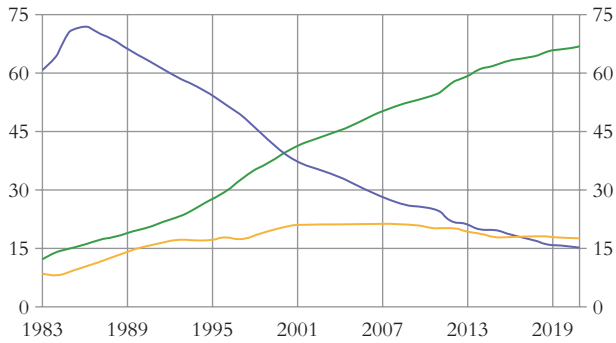
Table 4. Number of learners by school medium of teaching 2003/04–2022/23

	<i>Welsh medium</i>	<i>Bilingual</i>	<i>English medium</i>	<i>Excluded</i>	<i>Total</i>
2003/04	91,300 (19%)	8,930 (2%)	389,340 (79%)	4,591 (1%)	494,161
2012/13	73,888 (16%)	42,776 (9%)	342,449 (74%)	5,755 (1%)	464,868
2022/23	77,922 (17%)	42,160 (9%)	343,700 (73%)	6,090 (1%)	469,872

Source: Pupils by local authority, region and Welsh medium type, StatsWales, Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2023b)

2017, when he noted that the Welsh language had suffered a ‘lost decade’ since devolution (ap Dafydd, 2017). These statistics can be compared with similar data in the context of teaching models by language in the Basque Country Autonomous Community. There, there was a decrease in Model A (Spanish medium with Basque as a subject) from 68% of pupils in 1986 to 15% by 2021, an increase in the same period in model D (Basque medium with Spanish as a subject) from 15% to 67%, along with an increase in model B (Basque and Spanish bilingual medium) from 12%

Figure 1: Learners in education centres (excluding universities) by Language Model in the Autonomous Community (Basque Country).



Blue line = Model A: Spanish medium with Basque as a subject

Orange line = Model B: Bilingual medium

Green line = Model D: Basque medium with Spanish as a subject

Source: Eustat, Basque Country Government 2021

to 17%, with Model D (Basque medium) overtaking Model A (Spanish medium) at the turn of the century.

It should be noted that this increase is in this administration of the Basque language territory and not in the other Basque language territories in Navarre and in France, where Spanish and French alike remain the main learning mediums for the vast majority of the pupils. In drawing comparisons between Wales and the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, however, some structural differences between them must be acknowledged, such as the economic power and capital organisation of the Basque people, the persecution of the language under Franco's dictatorship and the priorities of their political parties over the past forty years, and its current social power as manifested with the language requirements in public sector jobs. Nevertheless, this comparison is appropriate – and among the most demographically suitable between minoritized languages – to consider levels of investment and governance arrangements. Relevant to the discussion of this article, the responsibility for strategic and operational planning in education lies

at the Government level of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, and is not the responsibility of individual local authorities. This has not been the case in Wales during the first quarter century of devolution. With the publication of the bill, there is an attempt to try to address this aspect.

The Welsh Language and Education Bill (2024): the way forward?

According to the Welsh Government, the main provisions of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill (Welsh Government, 2024b) will provide a statutory basis for the target of having one million Welsh speakers by 2050, as well as other targets relating to the use of the language, including in the workplace and socially (Welsh Government, 2024e). It will establish a standard method for describing Welsh language ability based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020). It will designate statutory language categories for schools, along with requirements relating to the amount of Welsh language education provided (including a minimum amount), and Welsh language learning goals for each category.

It will link the linguistic planning carried out at the three levels as follows:

- at a national level (by placing a duty on Welsh Ministers to produce a National Framework for Welsh Language Education and Learning Welsh),
- at local authority level (by placing a duty on local authorities to prepare Welsh in Education Local Strategic Plans), and
- at school level (by placing a duty on schools to prepare Welsh language education delivery plans).

It will also establish a statutory body, the National Institute for Learning Welsh.

In setting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as a standard method (B2) for describing learners' Welsh language skills when leaving statutory education, this vision is compatible with the foundation of the continuum of learning presented in the Curriculum for Wales. Putting language categories for schools on a statutory basis to provide stability to the categorisation and imposing a minimum requirement for Welsh language education required in all

schools, with the expectation of seeing an increase – not a decrease – over time, can be seen as steps forward.

However, significant challenges remain, not least the lack of capacity in the education workforce (see Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government (2024d); Lovell, 2023, p. 89). Overcoming this requires a commitment to invest in increasing teacher skills, and attracting and retaining a bilingual workforce in all sectors.

In resetting the chain of accountability, between schools, local authorities and Welsh Ministers, this bill arguably seeks to address one of the main stumbling blocks for progress in Welsh-medium and bilingual education in Wales over the past twenty-five years. Such a change through a legislative process takes several years to set in motion. Time will tell whether it is through this Bill that the necessary trajectory to achieve one million speakers by 2050 will be reached.

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