



WLGA & ADEW's Consultation

Response: Welsh in Education
Strategic Plans Regulations (Wales)
2019 & Guidance (WESPs)

13 September 2019



CLILC • WLGA



INTRODUCTION

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales. The three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.
2. It seeks to provide representation to local authorities within an emerging policy framework that satisfies priorities of our members and delivers a broad range of services that add value to Welsh Local Government and the communities they serve.
3. The WLGA is pleased to be able to respond to Welsh Government's consultation paper on the proposed changes to *Welsh Education Strategic Plans (WESPs)* and associated Regulations and statutory guidance. This response has been informed by the knowledge and expertise of the Association of the Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW) who have submitted a detailed response. This response from the WLGA is strategic in nature however, and as such does not go into matters of detail.
4. It reflects views expressed by elected members from authorities across Wales in meetings held in the September, 2019.
5. The following response is structured around the specific questions set out in the proposal for a new legislative framework where those questions enable a strategic response to be made.

Question 1 - We would like to know your views on our proposals to:

- (a) extend the implementation period of a Welsh in Education Strategic Plan to 10 years*
- (b) commence the next Plan in 2021 and for progress to be reported according to the academic school year*

The potential benefits of extending the implementation period of a Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), need to be balanced against the likely disadvantages that such a change would bring. The potential benefits and disadvantages are summarised below:

Potential Benefits

- A 10 year planning cycle can facilitate and support implementation over a long term period, ensuring a longer-term commitment that would allow authorities to anchor the plan in the context of other relevant programmes such as 21st Century Schools, Flying Start etc. and facilitate planning in partnership with other organisations. This should allow for a more strategic approach.

- A 10 year plan would offer clear statement of an authority's intentions and set out clear objectives to be reached at the end of the period.
- Similarly, planning over a 10-year period would identify the challenges facing authorities in expanding Welsh-medium education and provide them with an extended opportunity to address them.
- It should lead to a reduction in the planning burden placed on local authorities.
- Linguistic shift will not occur in the short term, so a longer planning cycle makes sense in that context.

Disadvantages

- Funding - local authorities will not be aware of the funding available over the extended period of the WESP - The Welsh Government needs to give a very clear outline of the resource that will be available over 10 years in order that authorities can achieve the objectives identified in plans. Otherwise, their value and relevance will be questionable.
- The 10 year concept means challenge in terms of quantifying ambitions and targets that will apply over the life-time of the WESP.
- Local planning needs to be more closely aligned with national planning. Government plans do not currently extend beyond 2021 and many important aspects, such as the Welsh continuum of teaching and learning, have not been developed, though this would be pivotal in long term plans
- Uncertainty over the political climate at both a national and local level over a 10 year planning period could raise challenges, as priorities and emphasis may change as a result of national and local elections.
- The above issues need to be addressed to mitigate the risk that authorities will only be able to submit detailed plans over a short period of time and general outlines over a longer period. This raises the question of the potential merit in developing a plan that sets a strategic direction over 10 years, but with an action plan detailing progress over a shorter period, possibly 2- 3 years?

Though the 2021 suggested starting date is not seen as a problem, please see the question raised in (a) above as regards frequency of reporting progress, that is over a longer period than each academic year. That has the added benefit of working out whether academic or financial year reporting makes most sense.

Question 2 - We would like to know your views on our proposals to:

(a) remove the duty for local authorities to Plan their provision of Welsh- medium education based on the results of a parental assessment?

(b) replace this duty with a new provision in the regulations for local authorities to set their own targets in their plans to increase the percentage of Year 1 learners taught through the medium of Welsh.

(c) require local authorities to have due regard to Welsh Government guidance when calculating the targets to be included in the local authority Plan.

This is again a question of balance: The removal of the duty to plan based on the outcomes of a parental demand assessment can be seen to remove an element of bureaucracy. That said, the value of collecting data and information about parents' intentions and requirements in relation to Welsh- medium education is important in the planning process. It can allow for dialogue which can be helpful to parents , the local authority and other interested parties.

Effective planning for the provision of Welsh-medium education should be based on aspiration, information and local knowledge.

Removal of the duty whilst still allowing for local flexibility in approach would also align all authorities including those not currently required to 'measure demand'.

There is no fundamental objection to the requirement to set a target over the lifetime of the Plan for increasing the percentage of Year 1 learners taught through the medium of Welsh, although maintaining the current percentages is probably a rational expectation in some parts of Wales.

However, there are factors which lay outside of the control of local authorities: Finance, an adequate workforce of good quality, and parental preferences are some examples. School governing bodies who are responsible for recruiting school based staff can struggle to secure sufficient recruits with the necessary language skills in the numbers needed.

That is the case now, so expansion of learner numbers is sustainable only if accompanied with, or more preferably preceded by, increased staff availability.

Not all authorities start their journey from the same place, but all must have the opportunity and time to plan provision and progression in terms of Welsh-medium education: There would be no value in increasing the numbers of Year 1 learners being taught through the medium of Welsh without understanding and planning the progression in provision needed for expansion until the time these learners reach the end of statutory school education and beyond in a variety of post-16 settings.

It also needs to be acknowledged that there are significant additional revenue costs involved in changing the language medium of a school or parts of schools, which places significant financial burdens on budgets which are already overstretched. The fact that the

numbers of learners in the system, whichever the language through which they are taught, may remain even, as shifts between the medium of instruction occurs, so authorities must maintain some duality in funding to meet statutory requirements and retain standards.

Whilst the proposed methodology for calculating targets appears workable, both the WLGA and ADEW would be happy to engage in discussions with Welsh Government to ensure all understand this area before firm commitments are made. There is a wider discussion to be had as well about how schools are defined or categorised linguistically, and assessment in the context of the new curriculum for Wales.

Question 3 - We would like to know your views on:

(a) the new statements included in the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (Wales) Regulation: 2019?

(b) setting out in statutory guidance what supporting information local authorities should be including in their Plan?

There is a case to be made for reducing prescriptive statements in Plans. The point has been made earlier about the need for allowing local flexibilities, and prescription can both increase unnecessary bureaucracy, and diminish the benefits that can arise from enabling authorities to sensibly arrive at a list of statements fit for purpose in their circumstances.

This seems to link with the views above at 3(a), about local and locally important issues and partners, balanced against national expectations and prescription. As statutory responsibilities, and hence, risks, rest with local authorities, funding once again has to be raised: Grants are useful but can be divisive, and as the climate of partnership between local and central government with Estyn grows, a fresh look at grants and funding generally might be needed if the national model for change is to be rationally achieved.

Outcomes should not be risked by requirements for too many demands for detailed information that may be a distraction from the overall aims of increased numbers of learners in Welsh-medium settings.

Question 4 - We would like to know your views on our proposals to:

(a) Require local authorities to review their Plans annually and submit an annual progress report to the Welsh Ministers based on the review.

(b) The requirement that local authorities to submit their revised Plan to the Welsh Ministers for approval within 4 months of the review if the local authority deems it necessary to revise the Plan.

The WLGA believes that an annual progress report would be bureaucratic, and would suggest a three year period would be preferable.

Where revisions are necessary to an authority's Plan, that should normally tie in with the three year suggestion in (a) above unless there are exceptional circumstances.

Question 5 - Do you have any other comments on the draft 2019 Regulations and statutory guidance?

No, but the WLGA would reinforce its earlier comments and make clear that it does not believe this to be a cost neutral set of proposals, and has outlined where costs will fall to local authorities.

Other strategic matters of concern are largely around workforce planning and availability, which is variable across Wales, but overall means there are too few appropriately skilled people to meet current demands, and expansion will mean greater problems. So training and quality of staff now and over the life of ten year plans must be in place, and that may also have resource implications.

As with any new initiative which has resource implications, the WLGA position is that it should be fully funded.

Question 6 - We would like to know your views on our approach for the Regulatory Impact Assessment. Do you have any comments regarding the costs outlined for the options, or any comments regarding the benefits and dis-benefits identified for both options?

The inclusion of the Regulatory Impact Assessment is welcome, but the WLGA believes aspects of the Assessment are fundamentally flawed.

As stated in question 5 and earlier in this response, there are undoubted additional costs that will fall to local authorities, both in terms of administration and planning processes, and at school level as changes in the medium of teaching increasing numbers of learners through Welsh occur, and dual streams inevitably emerge as choices are made by parents and learners.

It cannot be assumed that this shift incurs no costs. And as other funding pressures bite, it must not be assumed that local authorities can simply switch funding from other areas.

Question 7 - We would like to know your views on our approach for the Impact Assessments. We would particularly value your view on the the proposed impacts on groups with protected characteristics.

Please see the response in question 6 above.

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