

Welsh Culture, Language and Identity in Modern Health and Social care

Introduction

As a bilingual nation, Wales values and celebrates its linguistic heritage. The Welsh language is a core part of our identity and culture, connecting us to our history and communities. Recognising Welsh in public services reflects our commitment to inclusion, dignity, and equal access for all. This poster focuses on the themes of the importance of the Welsh Language in Healthcare and it's positive influence on patient care.

Welsh Health and Social care

Health services in Wales are devolved to the Welsh Government, with local health boards responsible for planning and delivering care such as dental, optical, pharmacy, and mental health services. They also work to improve health outcomes, promote wellbeing, reduce inequalities, and commission services to meet local needs. The structure of the NHS in Wales has evolved in response to changing population needs and political pressures, creating a complex, multi-layered system. (law.gov.wales 2021)
(Welshlanguagecommissioner.wales 2021)

The NHS faces growing pressure from an ageing population, with a rising proportion of people over 60 who are more likely to experience frailty and long-term health conditions. At the same time, health and social care waiting times are increasing. Integrated care, which brings services together, has the potential to improve efficiency and help reduce waiting times. (Health and care research Wales Evidence centre 2025).

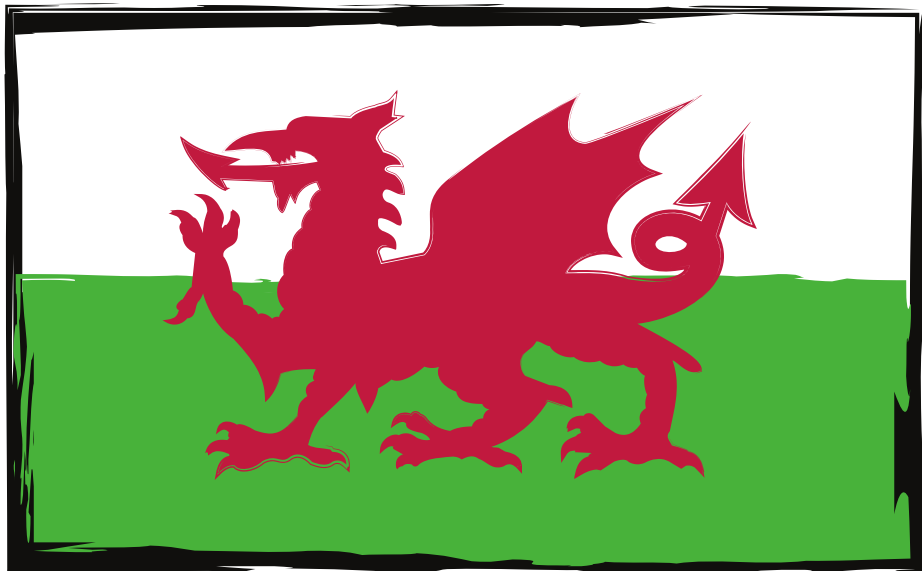


Health services in Wales are delivered through seven health boards and three all-Wales NHS trusts. The health boards work with community health councils to represent patients. A key difference for patients in Wales is that prescriptions are free. In contrast, health services in England are centrally funded by the Department of Health and Social Care using a tariff system based on treatment type and patient activity (UK Health Systems).

Welsh Culture, Language and Identity

The Health Board recognises that many people communicate their care needs most effectively in Welsh. For many Welsh speakers being able to use your own language has to be seen as a core component of care, not an optional extra. Effective verbal communication between the health professional and the patient is a core clinical function, with research showing that effective communication is an integral part of the quality and safety of health care (Policy for Welsh Language and Primary Care 2020).

Communicating in Welsh improves the quality and safety of care for Welsh speakers and a failure in communication may pose risks for the patient’s safety and welfare. With this in mind, the Health Board is committed to adopting a positive and proactive approach to delivering high quality services that are centred on users’ needs – ensuring that the linguistic needs of Welsh speaking individuals are central to their care (Powys Teaching Health Board 2024).



Ellen Bialystok, held a research theory in the early 2000's that shows that Bilingualism appears to have a modest effect in adulthood but a stronger protective role in older age by contributing to “cognitive reserve” and reducing cognitive decline. Evidence suggests it is associated with a delayed onset of dementia symptoms. As populations age and become more diverse, the potential role of bilingualism in building cognitive reserve is increasingly important. (Bialystok, E., Craik, F.I.M. and Luk, G. 2012)

Policy and Legislation in Wales

Under the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, the NHS in Wales has a statutory duty to provide services in both Welsh and English. The legislation gives Welsh official status and reinforces that it should not be treated less favourably than English. It also affirms people’s right to live their lives through the medium of Welsh if they choose (Public Health Wales, n.d.).

The Welsh Government aims to reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and double daily Welsh use. This depends on learners leaving school with the skills and confidence to use Welsh, supported by further education and work-based learning to meet growing demand for a bilingual workforce (Roberts, A. 2019)

For practitioners, this creates a professional responsibility to work within bilingual systems, seek language support when required and reflect on their own cultural competence, ensuring that policy commitments to equality and dignity are translated into meaningful, respectful care experiences for individuals and communities across Wales.

Bilingual and culturally informed care is essential in Wales because language and cultural identity shape how people understand illness and engage with services, therefore providing bilingual centred care is central to person-centred practice, supporting informed consent, effective communication and equitable access to services for Welsh-speaking communities.