



Welsh Culture, Language and Identity in Health and Social Care in Modern Wales

Both Welsh and English are official languages, and language plays an important role in communication, dignity and wellbeing. This poster explores the Welsh context of health and social care, including population needs and the importance of the Welsh language in care services.



The Welsh Context of Health and Social Care

According to the Office for National Statistics (2022), 17.8% of people aged three and over in Wales said they could speak Welsh in the 2021 Census. Although this percentage has dropped slightly compared with previous years, Welsh is still an important community language, especially in rural areas such as Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire. The Welsh Government reports slightly higher figures through the Annual Population Survey, which suggests that up to 27% of people say they have some ability to speak Welsh.

These figures matter in health and social care because the language someone prefers can affect how easily they access services, understand information, and engage with professionals. Wales also faces specific demographic challenges, including an ageing population and health inequalities linked to rural living and deprivation. In rural communities, services can be harder to access and Welsh is often the main language used in everyday life. Because of this, not providing services in Welsh can create extra barriers for people who need support.

Health and social care in Wales is devolved, which means policies are developed to meet the needs of Wales rather than following the same model used in England. This allows Welsh policies to place more focus on culture, language and community needs when planning and delivering services.



Policy and Legislative Framework

The laws in Wales strongly support the use of Welsh in public services. The Welsh Language Act 1993 introduced the idea that Welsh and English should be treated equally in public services and in the legal system. This was an important step in officially recognising bilingual services in Wales.

This was later strengthened by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, which gave Welsh official language status and introduced Welsh Language Standards. These standards require public bodies, including NHS organisations and local authorities, to provide services in Welsh in certain situations.

In social care, the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 focuses on wellbeing, voice and control in care planning. It highlights the importance of people being fully involved in decisions about their care, including being able to communicate in the language they prefer. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 also supports cultural wellbeing and sustainable communities, recognising that language plays an important role in the future of Welsh society.

Together, these laws make Welsh-language services a clear responsibility for public organisations. However, having legislation in place does not always guarantee that services will be delivered consistently. Strong leadership and good workforce planning are needed to make sure these policies are put into practice. Unlike England, Wales has a clear bilingual framework in law, which recognises language and identity as an important part of wellbeing rather than something only offered to a small minority.

Critical Reflection

Although Wales has one of the strongest legal frameworks for language rights in the UK, there is still a gap between what policies say and what happens in practice. Some service users still report that they are not always actively offered services in Welsh. Wider research also shows that language differences between patients and professionals can lead to poorer health outcomes and lower engagement with services (Cano-Ibáñez et al., 2021). This suggests that workplace culture and staff training are just as important as the policies themselves.

Cultural competence also involves more than just language. Welsh identity is closely connected to community values, traditions and social relationships. Health and social care professionals therefore need to understand this wider cultural context in order to provide truly person-centred care.

Overall, the Welsh approach shows how language and identity can be built into public service design. However, services still need regular review and continued workforce development to make sure bilingual care remains accessible and sustainable. Welsh language provision should not only be seen as a legal requirement but also as an important part of professional and ethical practice. The values behind person-centred care, such as dignity, respect and partnership, are closely linked to language rights. If people cannot communicate in their preferred language, their ability to make informed decisions about their care may also be limited. In this way, providing services in Welsh supports empowerment and co-production, which are key ideas in modern Welsh health and social care policy.

Conclusion

Welsh culture, language and identity play a central role in shaping modern health and social care in Wales. The bilingual nature of the country creates specific service requirements, particularly in communication and workforce planning. Legislative frameworks such as the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 provide strong foundations for culturally competent care. However, successful implementation depends on consistent practice and commitment at all organisational levels. Ensuring that individuals can receive care in their preferred language is essential to dignity, equality and improved wellbeing.

In practice, this means health and social care services must continue to develop a workforce that is confident and able to communicate in Welsh when needed. Training, recruitment and ongoing professional development all play an important role in supporting bilingual service delivery. It is also important that organisations regularly review how effectively Welsh language services are being provided, so that any gaps can be identified and addressed.

The Role of the Welsh Language in health and social care

The Welsh language plays an important role in delivering person-centred care. Communication is essential for safe and effective practice. Research shows that when healthcare professionals and patients share the same language, the quality of care and health outcomes can improve (Diamond et al., 2019). When people cannot express themselves in their preferred language, there is a greater risk of misunderstanding, reduced independence, and poorer outcomes.

The Welsh Government framework More Than Just Words (2022–2027) highlights the principle of the “Active Offer.” This means services should provide care in Welsh without the individual needing to request it, placing responsibility on the service provider rather than the service user.

However, challenges remain, particularly workforce shortages that make it difficult to guarantee Welsh-speaking professionals. Despite this, using Welsh in care services supports dignity, equality, and respect. Language is closely linked to identity, and respecting a person’s language preference can improve wellbeing, increase satisfaction, and strengthen trust between patients and professionals (Diamond et al., 2019; Daggett et al., 2023).