

WELSH LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN HEALTHCARE

INTRODUCTION

Welsh is a living language – in work, in school, at home and in our Communities. “It’s important that people working in social services and social care recognise that many people can only communicate their care needs effectively through the medium of 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.” (*Denbighshire County Council, 2025*).

To deliver a service which meets people's individual needs and respects their diversity, services must be able to support Welsh language and culture and be able to communicate with people whose first language is Welsh. It is important to recognise that:

- People are better able to express their views and needs in their language of choice.
- Language is an essential part of a person’s identity - responding sensitively to language, whilst focusing on the individual, is an essential principle of maintaining dignity and respect.
- to provide high-quality care, there has to be an appreciation that language is a matter of need.

Recognising that the ability to speak Welsh is a skill of its own, which should be valued and used in a positive manner in the workplace will ensure that it is seen as a professional skill.

UNDERSTADING WELSH CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HEALTHCARE

Trust, communication, and the overall value of service are all significantly impacted by Welsh culture and identity in the healthcare industry. The mixture of Welsh language and culture affects how people see illness, well-being, and treatment. To be able to please patients and make them feel heard and valued, it is important that healthcare providers, as cultural components, respect the Welsh language and its history.

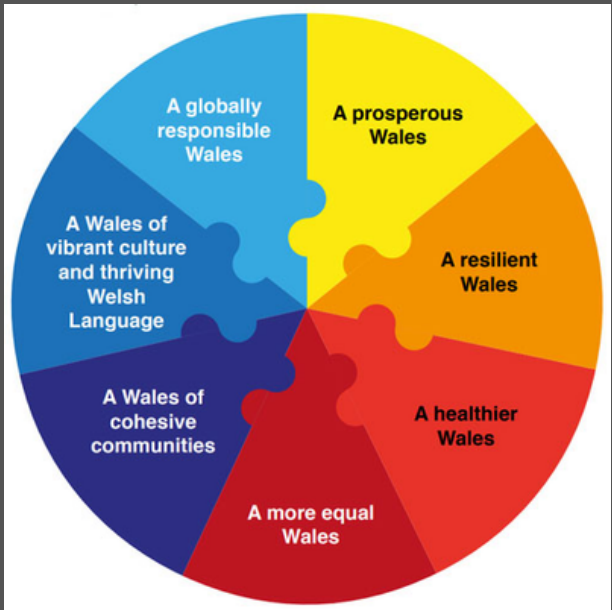
According to the Care Quality Commission (CQC), culturally appropriate care means being sensitive to people’s cultural identity or heritage when providing care. Such cultural identity might be based on ethnicity, nationality or religion. Culturally appropriate care might also relate to a person’s sexuality or gender identity.

In addition, healthcare studies have found that the language barrier between people and providers prevents people from accurately describing their symptoms and causes problems for providers when fully explaining diagnoses, leading to adverse health effects. In fact, healthcare environments that show an awareness of and respect for differences create more satisfying experiences for patients. (*Care Management Matters, 2023*).

THE WELSH LANGUAGE IN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

The ‘active offer’ means providing a service in Welsh without having to ask for it. Welsh language services should be as available to users in the same way as English language services. Actively offering Welsh language services makes sure that people’s needs are understood and met and that those who access care services can rely on being treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. Not actively offering Welsh language services may result in people’s dignity and respect being compromised, (*Welsh Government, 2015*).

More than just words and the focus on the Active Offer (providing a Welsh language choice to patients without them having to ask for it) has encouraged good positive progress in terms of raising awareness of the need to deliver services in Welsh to Welsh speaking service users. The main challenge that remains is in supporting the sector to put in place practices and systems that enable and ensure that the Active Offer is delivered across all settings, (*Morgan, 2021*).



(WELSH GOVERNMENT, 2020)

CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS

Welsh-speaking patients are suffering and may even be put at risk if they cannot communicate with health professionals in their own tongue, the country’s language commissioner has warned. The Welsh Language Commissioner is launching a campaign highlighting that speaking to a patient in Welsh if it is their first language is a need rather than a choice for many. The number of Welsh speakers in the health service varies greatly across Wales. Some areas report that almost all staff can speak some Welsh while elsewhere it may be less than a fifth. “We cannot emphasise enough the difference it makes to a patient to be able to speak their first language when unwell, and that speaking Welsh is a necessity, not an option, for many patients,” (*Aled Roberts, 2025*).

The main challenge that remains is in supporting the sector to put in place practices and systems that enable and ensure that the Active Offer is delivered across all settings. A comprehensive view should be taken of how primary care services in Wales should be developed to meet the needs of its bilingual population and should therefore be responsive to the needs of the Welsh speaker regardless of the number of Welsh speakers living in the local area. The Health Board is required by statute to comply with the standards regime under the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and has legislative requirements under the overarching principles of the Measure to ensure that: ☐ In Wales, the Welsh language should not be treated no less favourably than the English language and; ☐ Persons in Wales should be able to live their lives through the medium of Welsh should they choose to do so. (*Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board, 2020*).

I acknowledge that there are challenges facing the primary care sector as it develops for the future, but alongside those challenges and changes, there are opportunities.

POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

Following legislation and developments in language policy, service providers need to take reasonable steps to make sure they have proportionate, appropriate and adequate staffing arrangements in place to provide a bilingual care service. Further legislation established new Language Standards for public bodies in Wales. These Language Standards also apply to third party bodies, agencies, companies and organisations that provide care services on behalf of public bodies such as local authorities.

Legislation and policy in Wales require that:

- Welsh language services in social care are of the same standard and are as easily and promptly available as English language services
- organisations shouldn't assume English as the default language when providing their services
- Welsh speakers shouldn’t have to ask for a service in Welsh, (*Social Care Wales, 2025*).

‘More than just words’ is the Welsh Government’s Strategic Framework for the Welsh Language in Health and Social Care. Its aim is to:

- make sure the language needs of Welsh speakers are met
- provide Welsh language services for those who need it
- show that language plays an important part in the quality of care and isn’t seen as an “add-on”.

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