

Welsh Language

The Welsh language is one of the oldest languages in Europe – one of the Celtic branches of the Indo-European family of languages. It developed from the Brittonic language of ancient Britain at some point after the withdrawal of Rome – between 400 and 700 AD. The earliest written works in the language are thought to have been composed around 595 AD. The language went through several phases of development: early Welsh up to 850 AD, old Welsh between 850 and 1100, middle Welsh for at least two centuries from 1100 before assuming something close to its recognisable modern form, cemented by the translation of the bible into Welsh in 1588.

Census data

Welsh was the language of the majority of the Welsh population throughout its history until the end of the 19th century. There was a consistent pattern of decline through the 20th century until the 1981 census saw the first upturn in any category – that of young children.

The 2001 Census recorded 582,368 or 20.8 per cent as able to speak Welsh, an increase of 82,400 on the 1991 census. However, in the 5-15 age group the figure was as high as 40.8 per cent. There was a marginal difference between men and women, with 21.6 per cent of women and 19.9 per cent of men claiming to speak the language.

1901	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
49.9%	43.5%	37.1%	36.8%	28.9%	26.0%	20.8%	18.9%	18.5%	20.8%
929.8	977.4	922.1	909.3	714.7	656.0	542.4	508.2	500.0	582.4

However, in the 2001 census another 215,292 people claimed some knowledge of Welsh, bringing the total with some knowledge to 797,660, or 28.4 per cent of the population. It has also been calculated that approximately 110,000 people in England speak Welsh, so that it can be said that approximately 900,000 people in the UK have some knowledge of Welsh.

Age analysis

Over the last four censuses, although the overall trend was negative until 2001, there was a positive trend in the youngest age groups.

Age	1971	1981	1991
3-4	11.3	13.3	16.1
5-9	14.5	17.8	24.7
10-14	17.0	18.5	26.9
15-24	15.9	14.9	17.1
25-44	18.3	15.5	14.5
45-64	24.8	20.7	17.3
65+	31.0	27.4	22.6

Distribution of Welsh speakers

While Welsh is spoken by more than half the population in only four of the 22 Welsh counties – Anglesey, Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire – Welsh speakers are widely distributed geographically, as well as through almost one third of the households in Wales.

Welsh speakers/Some knowledge by local authority at 2001 census*

	Pop. 3+ 000s	Can speak Welsh	%	Some knowledge	%
North West Wales					
Anglesey	64,679	38,703	59.84	45,534	70.40
Gwynedd	112,800	77,482	68.69	85,852	76.11
Conwy	103,316	30,168	29.20	40,985	39.67
Sub total		146,353		172,371	
North East Wales					
Denbighshire	90,085	23,539	26.13	32,466	36.04
Flintshire	143,382	20,231	14.11	30,655	21.38
Wrexham	124,024	17,896	14.43	28,401	22.90
Sub total		61,666		91,522	
Mid Wales					
Powys	122,473	25,511	20.83	36,852	30.09
South West Wales					
Ceredigion	72,884	37,775	51.83	44,634	61.24
Pembrokeshire	110,182	23,689	21.50	32,371	29.38
Carmarthenshire	167,373	83,803	50.07	106,432	63.59
Sub total		145,267		183,437	
Industrial South Wales					
West Glamorgan					
Swansea	216,226	28,585	13.22	48,585	22.47
Neath Port Talbot	130,305	23,203	17.78	37,553	28.82
Sub total		51,788		86,138	
Mid + South Glamorgan					
Bridgend	124,284	13,149	10.58	24,757	19.92
Rhondda Cynon Taff	223,924	27,497	12.28	47,203	21.08
Merthyr Tydfil	54,115	5,427	10.03	9,600	17.74
Caerphilly	163,297	17,815	10.91	27,221	16.67
Vale of Glamorgan	115,116	12,743	11.07	19,454	16.90
Cardiff	294,208	31,950	10.86	47,985	16.31
Sub total		108,581		176,550	
Gwent					
Blaenau Gwent	67,795	6,135	9.05	9,023	13.31
Torfaen	88,062	9,422	10.70	12,742	14.47
Monmouthshire	82,351	7,428	9.02	10,590	12.86
Newport	131,820	12,601	9.56	17,624	13.37
Sub total		35,586		49,979	

*Derived from Table KS25 Census 2001: Report on the Welsh Language

Summary table*

	Can speak Welsh	%
Mainly urban		
Industrial South Wales	195,955	34.1
North East Wales	61,666	10.7
Sub total	257,621	44.8
Mainly rural		
North West Wales	146,353	25.5
Powys	25,511	4.4
South West Wales	145,267	25.3
Sub total	317,131	55.2

*Derived from 5 Census 2001: Report on the Welsh Language

Welsh in the household

Welsh speakers are not all neatly grouped into discrete Welsh-speaking households. Census based research done for the Welsh Language Board showed that although only one fifth of the population claimed to speak Welsh at the time of the 2001 Census, 1 million people – a third of the Welsh population - live in households which contained at least one Welsh speaker. Nearly 23 per cent of Welsh speakers live in households where no one else can speak the language.

Less than half of Welsh speakers (45 per cent) live either by themselves or in households where everyone could speak Welsh. There are 135,000 households – less than 10 per cent - where everyone speaks Welsh, although as a percentage of all households this has declined from 54per cent to 40per cent between 1991 and 2001. Of households with two adults, in only 8.2per cent (40,000 households) could both adults speak Welsh.

Legal Status and policy aims

Legal recognition of the Welsh language in the 20th century began with the Welsh Courts Act 1942 which did away with the proscription of the Welsh language in the courts that had been in place since the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1542.

The Welsh Language Act 1967 was passed following extensive campaigning by the Welsh Language Society and its supporters, in the wake of the 1962 radio lecture by the writer and Plaid Cymru founder Saunders Lewis. The 1967 Act enshrined the principle of ‘equal validity’ in legal matters, although this was narrowly interpreted and did not imply equality in public administration.

The Welsh Language Board was established by the Conservative Government in 1988, but as an advisory body with no statutory foundation. Its main achievement was to persuade Government that a new Welsh Language Act was needed. This became the Welsh Language Act 1993.

The purpose of the 1993 Act as stated in its preamble was

“...to establish a Board having the function of promoting and facilitating the use of the Welsh language, to provide for the preparation by public bodies of schemes giving effect to the principle that in the conduct of public business and the administration of justice in Wales the English and Welsh languages should be treated on a basis of equality, to make further provision relating to the Welsh language, to repeal certain spent enactments relating to Wales, and for connected purposes.”

The Act's main impact has lain in the public sector since it deals mainly with public business and the administration of justice. It obliged all public sector organizations that provide services to the public to do so in both languages, requiring them to register Welsh formal Welsh language schemes with a new statutory Welsh Language Board. The Board was accountable to the Secretary of State for Wales until 1999 when its powers were transferred to the National Assembly.

The Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition Assembly Government published a policy statement in July 2002 – *Dyfodol Dwyieithog: A Bilingual Future*. This was followed in 2003 by *Iaith Pawb (Everyone's language)*, *A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales*. This set out the intention of creating “a truly bilingual Wales, by which we mean a country where people can choose to live their lives through the medium of either or both Welsh and English and where the presence of the two languages is a source of pride and strength to us all.” This began a process of “mainstreaming consideration of the Welsh language into the policy-making portfolios of all Assembly Ministerial portfolios.”

In 2009 the Assembly Government sought primary law-making powers Welsh language matters through the Legislative Competence (Welsh Language) Order. If passed the Assembly Government planned to bring forward a new Welsh Language Measure by the summer of 2010.

Education

A consensus in favour of the language has been built despite a long period of civil disobedience over language issues in the 1960s and 1970s, that led to the founding of the Welsh language television channel, S4C, in 1982. These developments ran alongside significant growth in Welsh language education at nursery, primary and secondary level.

The voluntary Welsh language school movement in Wales has been the foundation of attempts to safeguard and restore the position of the Welsh language. Education authorities did not gain the power to fund Welsh-medium schools until the 1944 Education Act. The first Welsh-medium primary school was established in 1947 and the first Welsh-medium secondary school in 1956. In 1990 Welsh became a compulsory subject for all pupils up to the age of 14.

In 2000-1, 445 (27 per cent) of Wales's 1,660 primary schools had classes where Welsh was the sole or main medium of education, and 51,600 (18 per cent) primary school pupils were being taught in such classes. A further 78 per cent were being taught Welsh as a second language. By 2007-8 the number of such schools had risen to 464, and the number of pupils being taught in them to 54,895.

At secondary level, there were 52 Welsh-medium or bilingual schools, out of 225 maintained secondary schools – 23 per cent of the total - accounting for 36,289, or 18 per cent of all secondary pupils. In 1996-97 more than 20 per cent of pupils in maintained secondary schools in Wales were taught no Welsh at all. By 2001-2 this percentage had reduced to 1 per cent.

In the 20 years between 1989-90 and 2008-09 the number of Welsh medium secondary schools had risen from 42 to 55, an increase of 31 per cent, with the number of pupils rising from 26,058 to 41,916, an increase of 61 per cent

The movement has affected both urban and rural areas. For instance, in 1975 Cardiff had one Welsh-medium primary school and no Welsh medium secondary school. It now has 10 such primary schools plus two primary schools classed as bilingual, and two Welsh-medium secondary schools.

Comparisons with other Celtic languages

Welsh is the most widely spoken of all the indigenous language of these islands, apart from English. Data on language knowledge and use is drawn mainly from Census data, but this has to be treated with care, particularly in making comparisons between Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Questions relating to linguistic capability have varied over time. Official census reports from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not always consistent in their presentation of data. In the Republic of Ireland, the 2006 census dealt only with the ability to speak Irish.

Indigenous languages of the UK and Ireland*

Capability	Wales		Scotland		N Ireland		R of I	
	Welsh	%	Gaelic	%	Irish	%	Irish	%
Some knowledge	797,717	28.4	92,396	1.9	167,490	10.3		
Understand	661,526	23.5	78,402	1.6	133,352	8.2		
Speak	582,368	20.7	58,652	1.2	115,731	7.1	1,656,790	40.8
Read	567,152	20.2	45,320	0.9	102,784	5.2		
Write	495,519	17.7	33,815	0.7	90,879	5.6		

*Data from UK Census 2001 and Republic of Ireland Census 2006

In all four jurisdictions the recorded ability to speak the language gives no indication of the known wide variations in fluency. There are interesting differences in the way abilities vary up to and beyond the central verbal facility. For instance, the number professing some knowledge of a language though unable to speak it, is 27 per cent greater than the number of speakers of Welsh, 57 per cent greater than speakers of Gaelic, and 45 per cent greater than the number of speakers of Irish in Northern Ireland. This figure can be interpreted in a positive or a negative way – either as representing a body of sympathetic support and potential for growth, or as an indicator of the fragility of a language and the lack of engagement of its natural community.

Indigenous languages - capability range

	Welsh	%	Irish (NI)	%	Gaelic (Scotland)	%
Speakers	582,368		115,731		58,652	
Some knowledge	797,717		167,490		92,396	
Difference (A)	215,349	+26.9	135,771	+44.7	33,744	+57.5
Speakers	582,368		115,731		58,652	
Can read	567,192		102,784		45,320	
Difference (B)	15,176	(2.6)	12,947	(11.2)	13,332	(22.7)
Speakers	582,368		115,731		58,652	
Can write	495,519		90,879		33,815	
Difference (C)	86,849	(14.9)	24,852	(21.5)	24,837	(42.3)
Range in % points (C+A)		41.8		66.2		99.8