“Pursue Recognition and Build Capacity at the Same Time”

Advice from Wales to Kurdish Language Activists

An interview with Dr Eleri James

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Interview by Infowelat

How does a language that was once marginalised rebuild official status, create new speakers at scale, and keep those speakers using the language beyond the school gates? Wales offers one of the most closely studied contemporary answers. In this interview, Dr Eleri James of the Welsh Language Commissioner reflects on three decades of language legislation, the ambitious target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050, the strengths and limits of statutory standards, and the hard lessons of workforce planning for immersion education. She argues that legal recognition, education, community planning and workplaces form a single interdependent system. Her final advice to Kurdish language activists is both practical and hopeful: pursue legal recognition and build the capacity to implement it at the same time — and never forget to enjoy living through your language.

1. Looking back 33 years after the 1993 Act, what do you consider its most lasting contribution, and what were its main limits that the 2011 Measure and the standards system had to address?

The Welsh Language Act 1993 was a landmark in the history of the Welsh language. Its most lasting contribution was to establish the principle that, in the conduct of public business and the administration of justice in Wales, Welsh and English should be treated on the basis of equality. It also created the Welsh Language Board and required public bodies to prepare Welsh language schemes. This moved the provision of services in Welsh from being largely a matter of goodwill towards becoming an organised and increasingly normal part of public administration.

It should be emphasised that some organisations still operate Welsh language schemes under the Welsh Language Act, and that the Welsh Language Commissioner is responsible for overseeing them: Welsh language schemes.

However, the Act has notable limitations. The language schemes prepared differed between organisations, their commitments were not always sufficiently clear or consistent, and the system did not provide an adequately robust mechanism for enforcement. The principle of equal treatment was also qualified by what was ‘appropriate in the circumstances and reasonably practicable’. The Act did not give Welsh official status, create directly enforceable standards or establish an independent regulator with the full range of investigative and enforcement powers that exists today.

The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 addressed these weaknesses. It declared that Welsh has official status in Wales, established the office of Welsh Language Commissioner and created a system of statutory standards to replace language schemes progressively. Those standards place specific duties on organisations, while the Measure provides for investigations, enforcement action, appeals and the Welsh Language Tribunal.

The change was therefore not simply from one form of administration to another. It was a shift towards rights, accountability and regulatory clarity. However, legislation has to remain responsive to changing patterns of service delivery. In Our time to act — Welsh Language Commissioner’s

5-year report, the Commissioner called for a review of the standards so that they remain relevant to current and future service models, as well as a clear programme for extending them to further organisations and sectors.

2. In Our time to act you set out priorities for the next five years, with the goal of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. Which priorities do you see as most urgent, and how realistic is the target given recent speaker figures?

The Welsh Government's long-term and ambitious target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 remains both necessary and achievable, but it will not be achieved by continuing with existing approaches at their current pace.

The evidence is challenging. The 2021 Census recorded 538,296 Welsh speakers aged three or over, representing 17.8% of that population. This was 23,720 fewer speakers than in 2011 and the lowest percentage ever recorded in a census. It was also around 41,700 below the original 2021 trajectory towards a million speakers. The trajectory assumes that there will be 680,000 speakers by the end of the next Senedd term. That gap means that bold and transformative interventions are now required.

At the same time, we must interpret the figures carefully. The census is a self-assessment exercise and was conducted during the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other household surveys produce different estimates. Nevertheless, the census remains the most comprehensive and authoritative source for measuring progress, and its message cannot be ignored. The broad picture is, at best, static: the number of speakers has remained comparatively stable over four decades while the population has grown, leaving Welsh in a more vulnerable position.

Our time to act — Priorities identifies ten priorities, grouped around three urgent opportunities:

- Creating confident Welsh speakers through the education system;
- Strengthening the use of Welsh in communities; and
- Creating workplaces that support the use of Welsh.

Education is fundamental, but increasing the number of pupils who receive some Welsh-language teaching is not enough. Learners must leave school as confident speakers who continue to use Welsh. This requires more Welsh-medium provision and decisive investment in the language skills of teachers, early-years practitioners and the post-16 workforce. The recently introduced Welsh Language and Education Act aims to support this development.

We must also strengthen the areas where Welsh remains a community language, while creating more opportunities to use it in less densely Welsh-speaking areas. Children and young people need Welsh-language cultural, sporting, social and digital experiences beyond school. Finally, workplaces must turn linguistic ability into regular use. The workplace can reinforce skills, confidence and the practical value of Welsh throughout adult life.

The target is therefore realistic only if it changes present decisions about education, workforce planning, housing, the economy and community infrastructure. It cannot remain an aspiration sitting at the edge of government policy.

3. The standards now reach some private-sector services, for example banks, telecoms and energy. What have you learned about enforcement and compliance, and what would you advise a community that has no comparable regulator yet?

It is important to clarify the current position. The Welsh language standards apply to a wide range of public bodies and certain other organisations named in legislation. However, banks, telecommunications companies, energy providers and private-sector businesses are not generally subject to the Commissioner's enforcement powers. Our work with businesses and charities is normally based on support, persuasion and voluntary commitments rather than statutory enforcement: Businesses and Charities (Cynnig Cymraeg).

Within the statutory system, our experience shows that clear duties, independent monitoring and credible enforcement make a difference. Compliance is generally highest where responsibility is centrally controlled, for example corporate identity, websites and social media. There has been a steady improvement in many areas, suggesting that the standards have become embedded in organisations' governance and day-to-day activity.

However, progress is uneven. Telephone services remain a particular challenge. The proportion of organisations surveyed that dealt with calls in Welsh was 56% in 2021–22, 61% in 2022–23, 56% in 2023–24 and 63% in 2024–25. This is an improvement, but it is too slow and inconsistent. The lesson is that publishing a policy or translating a website is not enough. Organisations need trained staff, clear internal accountability, effective workforce planning and regular monitoring of the service that users actually receive.

Where statutory powers do not apply, our Hybu team works with businesses and charities to develop voluntary Welsh-language plans. The Cynnig Cymraeg, or Welsh Language Offer, gives official recognition to organisations that plan and deliver Welsh-language services successfully. By the end of the reporting period, 169 organisations had received that recognition. This approach formalises commitments, encourages workforce planning and creates public visibility without pretending that voluntary recognition is equivalent to regulation.

My advice to a language community without a regulator would be to begin by establishing:

- clear and measurable duties or commitments;
- reliable evidence about language demand and users' experiences;
- an independent body able to monitor progress and report publicly;
- practical support to help organisations build capacity;
- direct routes for individuals to raise concerns; and
- proportionate mechanisms for securing improvement.

A regulator should not be established merely to investigate failings. We regulate with the clear aim of ensuring an increase in the opportunities available to use the Welsh language: Regulation. And have adopted a proactive approach to co-regulation: Regulatory Outcomes. We believe that the regulator's greatest value is in changing systems, making responsibilities clear and ensuring that language rights do not depend on the goodwill of an individual official. But persuasion, partnership and public recognition remain important, particularly while the legal framework is being developed.

4. How important is official legal status compared with community language planning, workplaces and education? Where do you see the greatest returns?

We believe that it is artificial to separate these things: they are all essential parts of the jigsaw. Official legal status is essential because it changes the relationship between the state, organisations and language users. It makes clear that using the language is not a favour that may be granted or withdrawn. In Wales, official status, statutory standards and an independent Commissioner provide a foundation for rights, accountability and the provision of services. It is also a bold and public declaration of confidence in the language and its relevance to future generations.

However, legal status does not by itself create speakers or guarantee that a language will be used. A language can have strong symbolic recognition while continuing to weaken within families, neighbourhoods and everyday social life. Laws can create the conditions for language use, but people need the skills, confidence, opportunities and social networks to use the language naturally.

The strongest returns, therefore, come from an integrated approach. Everybody has a part to play. Education has the greatest capacity to create new speakers at scale, but its long-term effect depends on what happens beyond the school gates. Our time to act — Welsh Language Commissioner's 5-year report warns that English is increasingly the language of play, entertainment and digital life for many young people, creating a risk that progress achieved through education will remain confined to school.

Community language planning is especially important in areas where there is still a high density of speakers. Such areas support intergenerational transmission and make daily use easier and more natural. But planning must also support geographically dispersed communities of speakers, including through Welsh-language cultural, sporting and social activity.

Workplaces can provide particularly significant returns because people spend so much of their lives at work. A supportive workplace can turn language ability into daily practice, strengthen confidence and demonstrate the practical value of the language. It can also improve services by creating a workforce capable of serving people in their preferred language.

We would therefore be cautious about creating artificial divides between legal recognition, education, community planning and workplaces. Legal status provides the architecture. Education creates speakers. Communities sustain intergenerational and social use. Workplaces and services give the language contemporary purpose and economic value. Language policy succeeds when those elements reinforce each other.

5. Your manifesto calls for a Welsh-language training framework for the education workforce. What lessons does Wales offer for countries trying to build mother-tongue or immersion education from a very low base?

The first lesson is that ambition for pupils must be matched by investment in the workforce. Schools cannot expand immersion education without sufficient teachers, assistants, leaders, early-years practitioners and specialist staff who can work confidently through the language.

The Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 provides a more coherent statutory planning framework. Among other provisions, it places the Cymraeg 2050 targets on a statutory basis, provides for a national framework for Welsh-language education, requires school-level delivery planning and creates a stronger chain of accountability between national targets, local authorities and schools.

But legislation will not deliver the necessary change unless the workforce has the capacity to implement it. Our time to act — Priorities therefore calls for a Welsh-language training framework to form a compulsory part of the training, induction and continuing professional development of every teacher. It also calls for much greater investment in the Welsh-language skills of the early-years workforce.

For countries beginning from a low base, I would draw attention to several practical lessons.

First, workforce development must begin before, or at least alongside, the expansion of provision. Waiting until new schools or classes have opened creates shortages and places unsustainable pressure on existing staff.

Second, training needs to be differentiated. A framework should provide routes from beginner level to the advanced professional language required to teach subjects, manage classrooms and communicate with families. Training must be accompanied by protected learning time, mentoring and opportunities to use the language at work.

Third, immersion support is indispensable, particularly for pupils entering the system without the language. The experience of schools such as Bro Hyddgen in Machynlleth (which is highlighted in our 5-year report) demonstrates that structured immersion can enable pupils who begin with no Welsh to progress to studying GCSE subjects through Welsh.

Fourth, the system must maintain progression. Learners need a continuous pathway from early years through primary and secondary education and into vocational training, further education and higher education. Breaks in provision can result in the loss of both skills and confidence.

Finally, success should not be measured only by enrolment or the number of schools. The real test is whether learners leave education able and willing to use the language confidently in employment, community life and their own families.

6. How do you work with civil society, language bodies and local authorities, and how important is international cooperation with other minoritised-language communities?

The Commissioner's functions combine regulation, promotion, research and policy work. This means that partnership is essential. We work with local authorities, health boards and national parks through statutory standards, including promotion standards, which require them to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh in their areas. We also work with the Welsh Government, education bodies, public services, businesses, charities and community organisations to strengthen opportunities to learn and use the language.

Civil society provides both expertise and linguistic spaces. Organisations such as Mudiad Meithrin, the mentrau iaith, the Urdd, the National Eisteddfod and the National Centre for Learning Welsh have different but complementary roles in early-years provision, community planning, youth participation, cultural activity and adult learning. The report calls for greater investment and stronger collaboration so that such organisations can work at the scale required.

Partnership is most effective when responsibilities are clear and tangible outcomes are agreed. A good example is the Cynnig Cymraeg. Collaboration with bodies such as the Arts Council of Wales and ARFOR has enabled us to reach new organisations because those funders make progress towards the Cynnig Cymraeg part of their grant conditions. This links language planning with funding and organisational development.

International cooperation is also extremely valuable. We are proud to be amongst the founding members of the International Association of Language Commissioners. Minoritised-language communities differ greatly in their constitutional position, demography and history, so policies cannot simply be copied from one country to another. Nevertheless, we face common questions about language transmission, education, digital technology, public services, migration and the relationship between individual rights and collective language vitality.

Working with commissioners and language bodies from Canada, Ireland, Northern Ireland, the Basque Country, Kosovo, Catalonia, and other contexts allows us to compare evidence, learn from different models of regulation and share practical experience.

International cooperation is particularly important in areas such as technology and artificial intelligence, where smaller languages face shared market pressures and need coordinated action to ensure that their languages are included.

The essential principle is reciprocity. Wales has useful experience to share, but it also has much to learn. Our own report makes clear that, despite the progress achieved, the position of Welsh remains vulnerable and substantial intervention is still needed.

7. If you could offer one piece of advice to Kurdish language activists who are seeking recognition and mother-tongue education, what would it be?

My central advice would be: pursue legal recognition and build the practical capacity for implementation at the same time.

Legal status matters profoundly. It can affirm dignity, create enforceable rights and place responsibilities on governments and public bodies. But recognition without institutions, trained teachers, educational materials, and opportunities to use the language may remain symbolic. Conversely, community activity without legal protection can be vulnerable to changes in political will. It is therefore important to connect a clear rights-based case with a practical, long-term strategy.

The Kurdish context is not the same as the Welsh context. Wales's model cannot simply be transferred. Nevertheless, one lesson from Wales is that progress is most durable when legislation, education, public services, community planning and everyday opportunities to use the language are developed together.

A language lives through its speakers. The ultimate aim should not only be recognition of Kurdish as an abstract principle, but the creation of conditions in which children can acquire it, families can transmit it, adults can use it at work and citizens can receive education and public services through it without disadvantage or fear.

One final and crucial word of advice: enjoy your language and living through your language!

About Dr Eleri James

Dr Eleri James is Senior Research and Place-names Officer at the Welsh Language Commissioner. Since 2012 she has led work on the standardisation of Welsh place-names and contributes to research and policy on the revitalisation of Welsh. She regularly shares experience with other minority-language communities in Europe.

Further reading and links

• Welsh Language Commissioner: https://www.welshlanguagecommissioner.wales/

• Standard Welsh Place-names Dataset: https://www.welshlanguagecommissioner.wales/standard-welsh-place-names

• Cymraeg 2050 (Welsh Government): https://www.gov.wales/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy

• International Association of Language Commissioners: https://languagecommissioners.org/

• Cynnig Cymraeg (Welsh Language Offer): https://www.welshlanguagecommissioner.wales/using-the-welsh-language/businesses-and-charities-cynnig-cymraeg