

# Celsius Research Brief: Welsh language: A million Welsh speakers by 2050?

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## What we know:

- The proportion of people in Wales who were able to speak Welsh decreased from 20.8 per cent in 2001 to 19.0 per cent in 2011. Despite an increase in the size of the population, the number of Welsh speakers decreased from 582,000 in 2001 to 562,000 in 2011.
- The peak rate of Welsh speaking in 2011 was age 13.
- The odds of speaking Welsh declined post-school, but increased with age
- There were many Welsh speakers in England; this was strongest in people who had previously been in Wales for at least two censuses.
- There was also a relatively large group of people in England who had previously spoken Welsh.
- In 2011, 506,619 people were living in England who were born in Wales.

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## Policy background

In July 2017 the Welsh Government published its Welsh Language Strategy, [Cymraeg 2050: a million Welsh speakers](#).<sup>3</sup> In July 2021 it published the second of the strategy's work programmes, which form the basis of its annual action plans.<sup>4</sup> It reported that since 2017:

- 40 Welsh language nursery groups had been created with 620 additional places. The proportion moving from pre-school to primary Welsh-medium education rose from 86.4% in 2015/16 to 88.1% in 2019/20.
- The percentage of Year 2 children assessed through Welsh as a first language increased from 22.0% in 2015/16 to 22.8% in 2020/21.
- There were 2,789 Welsh-medium primary teachers in 2019/20: 311 short of its target of 3,100.

Targets for 2026 include:

- Increasing the percentage of year 1 learners taught in Welsh to 26% from 23% in 2020/21.
- 60 additional Welsh-medium nursery groups.
- Further updates on the education workforce.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is expected to publish the results of the 2021 Census in relation to the Welsh language by Spring 2023<sup>5</sup>. After that the Welsh Government will analyse the results in detail and will update statistical trajectory published as part of the 'Cymraeg 2050 strategy'. It will also be reviewing its priorities as required in order to reach a million Welsh speakers and to double the daily use of the language.

## Our research

How feasible is the Welsh Government's goal? We used the ONS Longitudinal Study to look at the characteristics of those who gained ability in Welsh over a 10-year period between 2001-11, and of those who retained an existing ability.

A question on Welsh language capabilities has been asked of people in Wales for many censuses. This is subjective in that respondents are asked to self-declare as to whether they can speak, read or write Welsh, but are not asked the level of proficiency they have. This is the question from 2011:

**17** Can you understand, speak, read or write Welsh?

↻ Tick all that apply.

- Understand spoken Welsh
- Speak Welsh
- Read Welsh
- Write Welsh
- None of the above

In 2011 a further question was asked in all parts of the UK about the main language used. In England a tick box was available for English, and in Wales for 'English or Welsh.' It was therefore not possible to distinguish Welsh as opposed to English unless it was specifically stated in the write-in box.

We looked at the odds of gaining or retaining Welsh by age, by relationship status, by level of education, by gender and by total number of Welsh speakers in a household.

We found the odds of gaining or retaining Welsh increased with age and with the number of other Welsh speakers in the household. The odds of retaining Welsh speaking ability were lower for married or partnered people than for those who were single. Women were more likely to gain Welsh speaking ability, as were people with a degree. The reverse was true for those aged 25-44.

## Tables

These tables are based on LS members resident in Wales in both 2001 and in 2011.

In summary, gender, marital status, education and the number of co-resident Welsh speakers were all associated with change in Welsh language speaking.

Table 1: Odds for gaining Welsh language compared with losing it n=1713

<b>Factor (base category)</b>	<b>OR</b>	<b>P-value</b>	<b>Confidence</b>	<b>Intervals</b>
<i>Age (16-24 years)</i>				
<b>25-34 years</b>	<b>5.54</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>3.76</b>	<b>8.16</b>
<b>35-44 years</b>	<b>5.24</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>8.18</b>
<b>45-54 years</b>	<b>5.62</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>9.23</b>
<b>55-64 years</b>	<b>6.92</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>4.17</b>	<b>11.50</b>
<b>65-74 years</b>	<b>5.72</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>10.11</b>
<b>&gt;74 years</b>	<b>6.50</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>12.46</b>
<i>Number of co-resident Welsh speakers (0)</i>				
<b>1</b>	<b>6.94</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>4.99</b>	<b>9.66</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>9.80</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>5.85</b>	<b>16.42</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>19.41</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>8.90</b>	<b>42.34</b>

Adjusted for sex, highest education qualifications, socio-economic status, marital status

(Data ONS LS, Analysis authors' own)

Table 2: Odds for retaining Welsh language compared with losing it n= 3533

Factor (base category)	OR	P-value	Confidence	Intervals
<i>Age (16-24 years)</i>				
<b>25-34 years</b>	<b>2.68</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>1.97</b>	<b>3.64</b>
<b>35-44 years</b>	<b>2.99</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>2.08</b>	<b>4.32</b>
<b>45-54 years</b>	<b>4.83</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>3.28</b>	<b>7.11</b>
<b>55-64 years</b>	<b>7.07</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>4.73</b>	<b>10.57</b>
<b>65-74 years</b>	<b>8.64</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>5.62</b>	<b>13.28</b>
<b>&gt;74 years</b>	<b>13.64</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>8.26</b>	<b>22.53</b>
<i>Marital status (Never married/partnered)</i>				
<b>Married/ civil partnership</b>	<b>0.63</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>0.83</b>
Separated/ divorced	0.94	0.728	0.64	1.36
Widowed	1.01	0.972	0.63	1.62
<i>Number of co-resident Welsh speakers (0)</i>				
<b>1</b>	<b>11.79</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>8.83</b>	<b>15.73</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>22.00</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>13.87</b>	<b>34.91</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>54.68</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>26.54</b>	<b>112.63</b>

Adjusted for sex, highest education qualifications, socio-economic status (Data ONS LS, Analysis authors' own)

Table 3: Odds for gaining Welsh language compared with not gaining it n=18327

Factor (base category)	OR	P-value	Confidence	Intervals
<i>Sex (Male)</i>				
Female	1.23	0.017	1.04	1.46
<i>Age (16-25 years)</i>				
25-34 years	1.08	0.653	0.78	1.50
<b>35-44 years</b>	<b>0.60</b>	<b>0.004</b>	<b>0.42</b>	<b>0.85</b>
<b>45-54 years</b>	<b>0.64</b>	<b>0.020</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.93</b>
55-64 years	1.21	0.336	0.82	1.78
65-74 years	1.20	0.401	0.78	1.84
>74 years	1.15	0.574	0.71	1.84
<i>Marital status (Never married/partnered)</i>				
<b>Married/ civil partnership</b>	<b>0.47</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>0.38</b>	<b>0.59</b>
Separated/ divorced	0.66	0.008	0.49	0.90
Widowed	0.82	0.324	0.55	1.22
<i>Qualifications (None)</i>				
1-4 O Levels/CSE/GCSEs (any grades),	1.00	0.989	0.73	1.37
5+ O Level (Passes)/ equivalent	1.00	0.988	0.74	1.35
2+ A Levels/VCEs, 4+ AS Levels, HSC	1.22	0.232	0.88	1.68
<b>Degree / Higher Degree</b>	<b>1.93</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	<b>1.47</b>	<b>2.53</b>
Vocational/Work-related/ Foreign/ Apprenticeship	1.07	0.712	0.75	1.51
<i>Number of co-resident Welsh speakers (0)</i>				
1	18.15	<0.001	14.77	22.32
2	28.73	<0.001	21.56	38.28
3	110.47	<0.001	70.66	172.71

Adjusted for socio-economic status; Data ONS LS, Analysis authors' own

## Methods

We defined 'retaining ability' as those resident in Wales in both 2001 and 2011 who said they could understand, speak, read or write Welsh and who also said they could do so in 2011. We defined 'gaining ability' as not reporting those things in 2001 but doing so in 2011, and 'losing ability' as reporting a capability in 2001 but not in 2011.

### Conclusions:

- If all people retained their ability to speak Welsh, the one million Welsh speaker target would be easily surpassed by 2030.
- The target might be easier to achieve if it included Welsh-speaking people living in England, although it is recognised that this observation is driven by the way in which the census questions were asked
- Encouraging Welsh language retention in England would help build the overall numbers of Welsh

### The 2021 census will add:

- A further 10 years of observations, allowing retained ability to be explored over a longer period
- A second set of observations for main language spoken, both in England and in Wales - though the question does not fully capture all people in Wales for whom Welsh is their main language.

*We used the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study (LS) is a 1% sample of the population of England and Wales linking census and administrative data on births, deaths, and cancer registrations, since the 1971 Census."*

*The permission of the Office for National Statistics to use the Longitudinal Study is gratefully acknowledged, as is the help provided by staff of the Centre for Longitudinal Study Information & User Support (CeLSIUS). CeLSIUS is funded by the ESRC under project ES/V003488/1. The authors alone are responsible for the interpretation of the data.*

*This work contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.*

<sup>1</sup> 2011 Census: First Results on the Welsh Language, Statistics for Wales Statistical Bulletin December 2012: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-03/121211sb1182012en.pdf>;

<sup>2</sup> Nomis official census and labour market statistics, QS213EW - Country of birth (expanded): <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/QS213EW/view/2092957700?cols=measures>;

<sup>3</sup> Cymraeg 2050: A Mi <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Cymraeg 2050: work programme 2021 to 2026: <https://gov.wales/cymraeg-2050-work-programme-2021-2026-html>;

<sup>5</sup> A 2021 topic report (which will contain univariate data) on Welsh language has a provisional release date of Dec 6<sup>th</sup> 2022 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/welshlanguagecensus2021inwales>); multivariate data is due in Spring 2023.