# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **The Welsh Government response to the Report of the Working Group on the Welsh Language and Local Government** |
| **DATE** | **20 October 2016** |
| **BY** | **Mark Drakeford AM, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government** |

I published *Language, Work and Bilingual Services*, the Report of the Working Group on the Welsh language and Local Government, following an oral statement in the Senedd on 14 June.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Report contains a number of recommendations which are, in the words of the Chair, Rhodri Glyn Thomas, "challenging but practical". At the time, I promised to listen to the views of Local Authorities and others before responding. Today I am publishing the Welsh Government's response.

The Report was commissioned following concerns expressed by Assembly Members during discussions on Local Government reform. Those concerns related to the position of Welsh as the language of administration if a programme of Local Authority mergers was implemented.

Since then, a lot has happened, including the publication of the programme for government, *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021*, which set out the Welsh Government’s new priorities for the Welsh language and Local Government.[[2]](#footnote-2)

On 4 October, following meetings over the summer with the Leaders of Local Authorities, I made a statement to the Assembly on the way forward for Local Government. The programme of Local Authority mergers will not be implemented, unless Authorities wish to do so voluntarily. I will engage further with Local Authorities on proposals to extend and deepen their functions which are delivered at regional level, and the Principal Authorities will continue as the local democratic tier and the way in to local services.

In August, the Minister for Lifelong Learning and the Welsh Language launched a consultation on the Welsh Government’s new draft strategy for the Welsh language, which includes the goal of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. This goal is ambitious but it builds on the firm foundation already laid through policies and legislation to ensure the vitality of the language. The Minister has also announced that he will review the 2011 Welsh Language Measure with the intention of introducing a new Bill, noting *"I’m keen to look again at the Measure to ensure that the legislative basis for the Welsh language is appropriate, up to date and makes the process for imposing standards less bureaucratic."*

In the field of further and higher education, the Cabinet Secretary for Education has announced a review of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. After five years, it is an appropriate time to look again at the responsibilities of the Coleg, including whether the Coleg should have responsibilities in the field of further education.

In addition, in the referendum of 23 June, the UK voted by a small majority to leave the European Union. The implications are far-reaching for everyone in Wales, particularly in terms of economic development and rural development policy, employment and training, and programmes financed by European structural funds. The Welsh Government’s main priority is to protect the interests of Wales as the UK leaves the European Union.

Taken together, these important developments impose a new context for considering the Report of the Working Group.

We are unable to accept two linked recommendations, namely recommendations 2 (a) and 3, which would impose minimum language skills on every post in the Local Government workforce, whatever the requirements of those posts. The standards regime, as it has been applied to Local Authorities by the Welsh Language Commissioner, already requires Local Authorities to assess every new or vacant post for language skills requirements prior to recruitment and appointment. The standards adhere to the basic principle that there should be a direct link between job requirements and language skills requirements.

The new draft strategy for the Welsh language focuses on the need to plan, through the education system, in order to *"increase the number of people who can work through the medium of Welsh in a number of specialist fields and services, so that Welsh services are available to people."* We believe that this is the most immediately effective way of meeting the objective of increasing the number of people who can use Welsh in the workplace.

It is clear that it is possible to move forward with most of the Report’s other recommendations, and we support the focus on leadership, Welsh in the workplace and as a language of administration in Local Government, training, digital opportunities, behaviour change and the resilience of communities where Welsh is strong. We recognise the role of the Welsh language in economic development, including the role of university towns such as Carmarthen, Aberystwyth and Bangor, and this will feature within our broader approach.

One of the main goals of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is to set out a framework for sustainable development that promotes integrated economic and language planning through local well-being plans. We would encourage Local Authorities to work together on this in order to determine their local and regional priorities, through established partnerships such as the North Wales Economic Ambition Board and the Growing Mid Wales Partnership. The Welsh Government will continue to support and promote such local and regional collaboration.

Rather than implementing the recommendations one by one, however, we are of the view that the new draft strategy for the Welsh language and its action plans will provide us with the opportunity to draw the strands together in a powerful and effective way. This would enable the Welsh Government to give a clear direction to Welsh language policy which has support in all parts of Wales, is integrated, and makes the most of scarce resources.

I am grateful again to Rhodri Glyn Thomas and members of the Working Group for their work and on behalf of the Welsh Government, I encourage everyone to have their say on our proposals for Local Government and on the new draft strategy, *A million Welsh speakers by 2050.*

1. <http://gov.wales/topics/localgovernment/language-work-and-bilingual-services/?skip=1&lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://gov.wales/about/programme-for-government/?skip=1&lang=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)