



Survey of transport for post-16 learners attending Welsh-medium or bilingual education

Background

The Welsh Language Commissioner has received a number of requests for advice on transport for post-16 learners attending Welsh-medium or bilingual education. The requests were submitted by organizations and individuals in response to the revision of the provision of some local authorities in Wales. Following this, the Commissioner decided to collect evidence on post-16 learners and associated local authority transport arrangements.

On 2 April 2015 a letter was sent to all local authority Directors of Education in Wales, asking them to complete a survey on transport arrangements for post-16 learners. Questions were included about:

- the current arrangements and any fees charged
- the number and percentage of post-16 learners attending Welsh-medium or bilingual education
- revisions of the arrangements and any Welsh language impact assessment

By the end of July, 21 of 22 authorities had responded. The exception was Carmarthenshire Council. A summary of the main findings can be found below.

Current arrangements

Eight local authorities impose a fee on post-16 learners wishing to use transport, ranging from £60 to £380. The fees are summarised as follows:

Annual fee	Number of authorities
< £100	1
£100 - £200	3 (one charges £300 for transport outside the catchment area)
£250 - £300	2
> £300	2

One authority intends, as a first step, to increase the fee from £60 to £80 (an increase of 33%) from September 2015. Two other authorities had increased the fee since 2012/13. In one case, the fee was increased from £45 to £347 (an increase of 671%). Despite the fact that the authority concerned recognised the difficulties that the change would cause for families, it did not conduct an impact assessment as it was not a change of policy. The authority now acknowledges that this was an oversight. In the second case, the fee was increased from £255 to £380 (an increase of 49%). An equality impact assessment was held and the authority concluded that the change would have an equal effect on all learners using transport, considering matters of language, faith, mainstream provision and distance.

Learners who rely on transport

Fifteen authorities provided information on the percentage of learners who rely on free transport or assisted transport from the local authority. In most cases, this applies to 50% or more of the post-16 learners attending Welsh-medium or bilingual education. The information is summarised as follows:

Percentage of learners attending Welsh-medium or bilingual education who rely on transport	Number of authorities
< 10%	0
10% - 19%	1
20% - 29%	0
30% - 39%	0
40% - 49%	1
50% - 59%	5
60% - 69%	1
70% - 79%	1
80% - 89%	2
90% - 100%	4

One authority provided the number of post-16 learners but the percentage of all pupils who rely on transport. Two authorities provided the number of learners but not the percentage, and in the case of the other three no information was provided on this aspect. Two stated that no details were available on the learners who rely on free transport.

Not only were some authorities unable to provide information on the post-16 learners who rely on transport, but six of them were unable to identify the cost of the provision to the authority. In the case of two of them, they were unable to separate the cost of transport for post-16 learners from the total cost of school transport. In the case of the other four, they were unable to separate the cost of Welsh-medium learners' transport from that of English-medium learners' transport.

Progression

The authorities were asked to identify the number of learners who were likely to attend Welsh-medium or bilingual post-16 education in the future. Five authorities were unable to provide this information. One stated that a proposed change to its transport policy, namely the withdrawal of free transport, could affect the number of learners attending the Welsh-medium secondary school. However, there was uncertainty regarding the exact nature of the impact.

One authority gave a general estimate for post-16 education in the future, without detailing the number likely to attend Welsh-medium education. Another authority provided the number of learners who would be eligible to receive post-16 education during the next three years. Neither of these authorities provided the current number of post-16 Welsh-medium learners and therefore it was not possible to compare the figures.

Seven authorities anticipated that learner numbers would remain constant on the whole. One stated that it hoped to maintain the number of Welsh-medium learners in the context of a 10% fall in learner numbers in general. Seven authorities anticipated an increase in the number of learners, ranging from a small increase of 10 to a substantial increase of 148 by 2024. In the case of the authority experiencing the largest increase, namely 54%, it also stated that 84% of its post-16 learners relied on transport.

Proposed revisions

Thirteen authorities are revising their arrangements or considering doing so. Of these, three are considering withdrawing free transport, two are considering withdrawing the provision or introducing a fee, and another four are considering introducing a fee or increasing the current fee. Three authorities will introduce changes in September 2015 and another three are considering introducing changes in September 2016.

Of the 13 authorities concerned, two stated that they had conducted an impact assessment. Another three stated that they had conducted a consultation as well as an impact assessment. Copies were provided of a consultation document, three

impact assessments and a report on the outcomes of a consultation and impact assessment.

The type of information provided in these documents varied. One impact assessment contained the outcomes of a consultation, which asked the public whether the withdrawal of free transport was likely to affect Welsh-medium education and whether Welsh-medium schools should be protected. A list of protected characteristics was presented, including the impact on Welsh-medium learners and their families under the 'race' characteristic. In another impact assessment, the Welsh language was one of a number of listed characteristics, along with possible impacts and mitigation measures. There was no reference to the Welsh language in another impact assessment. In the case of the report, a response was included to a comment made during the consultation on the possible impact on Welsh-medium schools of changing the travelling distance criteria. A policy impact assessment was included in an appendix, with the Welsh language listed alongside other equality elements.

The way in which authorities analysed the possible impacts of policy changes also varied. One authority stated that some of its consultees believed that the withdrawal of free transport would have a disproportionate impact on the Welsh-medium secondary school due to the school's large catchment area. The authority acknowledged that the number of Welsh-medium post-16 learners could fall as pupils could choose to continue their education in another institution. This could mean that post-16 Welsh-medium education was no longer viable, leading to a significant impact on the number of Welsh speakers and the promotion of the Welsh language in the county. It was noted that this impact would have to be considered immediately.

Another authority referred to the Welsh language in assessing the impact of the proposal to withdraw free transport for post-16 learners. It acknowledged that the proposal could affect learners' ability to access further education and that there were limited choices for learners wishing to receive Welsh-medium post-16 education.

Another authority had decided, from September 2015 onwards, to provide transport from specific pick-up points within three miles of the homes of secondary school pupils. In its response to the survey, the authority stated that the change would not have a disproportionate impact on the Welsh language and that it would affect all pupils wishing to use the service. There was no reference to the Welsh language in the relevant impact assessment document.

Another authority intends, from September 2015 onwards, to provide transport for post-16 learners living three miles away from their education institution, rather than

two miles away. In assessing the impact of the change in terms of equality, the authority noted that there would be no impact on the Welsh language.

Four other authorities stated that they intended to conduct an impact assessment when reviewing or adapting their policies. One of these authorities stated that it did not anticipate that the proposed change (a fee increase) would have an impact on the Welsh language in particular. Another authority made the same comment on the same change, without any commitment to conducting an impact assessment.

Another authority stated that it might review learner transport in the near future, despite conducting a consultation in 2014. The options considered at that time included introducing a fee of £230 for post-16 learners and withdrawing free transport. However, a decision was made to continue providing free transport for post-16 learners, to specific local institutions from September 2015. The authority stated that it had considered the impact of the proposed changes on the Welsh language in reaching its decision.

Past revisions

The authorities were asked to provide information on any changes to their transport arrangements since 2012/13. As stated above, two authorities had increased learners' fees. One authority stated that it did not anticipate a reduction in the number of post-16 learners in the coming years. The other authority explained that the change had not led to a reduction in the number of post-16 learners receiving a transport grant to attend Welsh-medium education outside the county. It also explained that it was conducting a consultation on the establishment of a Welsh-medium secondary school in the county.

Another authority had revised its arrangements but did not provide details. It did not conduct an impact assessment as it considered the situation to be neutral in terms of benefits and drawbacks. It referred to the percentage of learners who remained at the Welsh-medium secondary school in order to receive post-16 education after 2012/13 and stated that it had reached the target set in its Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (70%).

Impact assessment

The differences described above highlight inconsistency in the way in which authorities conduct impact assessments and reach conclusions based on those exercises. Furthermore, the way in which authorities decide whether or not an assessment should be conducted is inconsistent. This is highlighted by the decision described above by two authorities to increase fees. As noted, an impact assessment was held in one instance but not in the other, as the authority concerned

did not consider that a change of fee was tantamount to a change of policy. Although the decision to conduct an impact assessment is commended in the second instance, it is not possible to agree with the conclusion that introducing the same fee for every learner has an equal effect on every learner. No evidence was provided to support this standpoint.

The survey's main findings

To conclude, the following findings are noted.

1. In terms of learners' transport costs, there is a wide variety not only between the authorities providing free transport and those charging a fee, but between those charging a fee. The highest fee is over six times higher than the lowest.
2. Of those post-16 learners attending Welsh-medium or bilingual education, 50% or more rely on transport, in the case of the majority of authorities who responded to the survey.
3. Not all authorities who responded to the survey were able to provide information on the post-16 learners who rely on transport, the cost of the provision to the authority or the likely number of learners in the future.
4. Over half the authorities are revising their arrangements or considering doing so, and over a quarter intend to introduce changes during the next two academic years.
5. The way in which authorities assess the impact of policy changes on the Welsh language lacks consistency. As a result of this, and the lack of detail referred to above, it is unclear whether every authority recognises the long-term implications of changes to transport arrangements for Welsh-medium and bilingual education.