



## Briefing Note: The Sustainable Farming Scheme (March 2024)

### A summary of the Welsh Language Commissioner's response to the consultation on the Sustainable Farming Scheme

The office of the Welsh Language Commissioner was created by the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 with the aim of promoting and facilitating the use of the Welsh language. The Measure states that the Welsh Language Commissioner in the exercise of her functions may offer advice and/or comments to any person. In that context, and in line with the Commissioner's role as an independent advocate for Welsh speakers, we offer the following comments regarding the Sustainable Farming Scheme (the Scheme).

#### Summary

- The agricultural industry is a vital part of the economy and culture of rural Welsh communities, where Welsh is an everyday natural language. Ensuring the prosperity of the rural and agricultural economy is therefore vital for ensuring the prosperity of the Welsh language.
- We are concerned that introducing the Scheme in its current guise would be detrimental to the vitality of the Welsh language in rural areas and would undermine the Welsh Government's (Government) *Cymraeg 2050* strategy. Both the economic impact assessment of the Scheme and the Welsh language impact assessment give credence to these concerns. These assessments estimate that the Scheme will reduce the size of the rural economy, an impact that is bound to have a negative effect on rural communities with a high density of Welsh speakers. It is concerning that neither the impact assessment nor the Scheme explains in detail how these negative consequences are to be avoided, nor how the Scheme can support the economic infrastructure of Welsh-speaking communities.
- It is essential that the Scheme does not lead to the destabilisation of the industry and its workers, and therefore does not destabilise Welsh-speaking communities. Through the consultation and the public commitment to revisit the Scheme, we hope the Government will succeed in finding ways of strengthening the Scheme that meet our concerns.
- In essence we believe that the Government must ensure that the Scheme meets all the objectives of the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023 (Agriculture Act), and in particular, the objective of 'maintaining the Welsh language and promoting and facilitating its use'. The Welsh language impact assessment and the economic assessment suggest that the Scheme does not currently meet this objective.

## 1. Background

- 1.1 Following the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, support for farmers through the Common Agricultural Policy ceased. In response to this far-reaching change the Government passed the Agriculture Act.
- 1.2 The Scheme has derived from the Agriculture Act, and details how farmers will receive support from 2025.

## 2. The impact of the Scheme on the rural economy and the Welsh language

- 2.1 The agricultural industry is the employment sector with the highest proportion of Welsh speakers in Wales. Agricultural businesses maintain many rural communities where Welsh is naturally spoken. Ensuring the prosperity of the rural and agricultural economy is therefore vital for ensuring the prosperity of the Welsh language.
- 2.2 As part of its strategy for supporting Welsh-speaking communities, the Welsh Government has established a Commission for Welsh-Speaking Communities, which will be responsible for considering ways to strengthen Welsh as a community language. In its [initial position paper](#) the Commission states that the agriculture industry and its culture are at the core of the social fabric of Welsh-speaking rural areas.
- 2.3 The Scheme's impact assessment on the Welsh language recognises the indirect importance of the agricultural sector to the Welsh language. We agree with the impact assessment's analysis that changes to the support system could negatively affect rural Welsh-speaking communities. We also agree with the conclusion that disruption to the sector needs to be minimised to lessen the negative side effects on the Welsh language in rural communities. However, neither the impact assessment nor the Scheme explains in detail how this will be achieved. There is therefore a significant risk that the introduction of the Scheme will have adverse implications for the Welsh language.
- 2.4 The document [Potential economic effects of the Sustainable Farming Plan](#) exacerbates the concerns outlined above. It estimates that the introduction of the Scheme will mean overall output losses of £125m a year, reductions in livestock numbers of 122,000, and an 11% reduction in farm labour. The overall picture of the economic impact of introducing the Scheme suggests a decline in the size of the rural economy. It is not clear the extent to which the findings of the impact assessment on the Welsh language, nor the implications of the economic impact assessment on the Welsh language, were considered in the development of the Scheme. This is a glaring weakness given that the impact assessment recognises that the Scheme could negatively affect the Welsh language. We are therefore concerned that the Government has produced a Scheme that could undermine one of the intended objectives for sustainable land management in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023, which is to 'maintain the Welsh language and promote and facilitate its use'. It would also, as a result, undermine Theme 3 of the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy of supporting the socio-economic infrastructure of Welsh-speaking communities.

### **3. The potential of strengthening the rural economy by coordinating the agricultural and net zero sectors, not reducing it**

- 3.1 The Scheme demonstrates the Welsh Government's ambition to improve Wales' biodiversity and natural environment to contribute to efforts to tackle the global climate crisis, and we fully support those objectives. However, the Scheme doesn't maximise the potential that exists to integrate net zero, Welsh language and agriculture policy. For example, the Commission for Welsh-Speaking Communities' position paper sees potential for the economy of the western areas of Wales to strengthen from the economic opportunities of the green transition. It makes the connection between the need to support the economic prosperity of Welsh-speaking communities, and the exciting opportunities that exist from net zero economic development.
- 3.2 We agree with the Commission's assessment that it's important to interlink agriculture, countryside development, and nature conservation, and that doing so could support the prosperity of Welsh as a community language. Our concern is that the current Scheme, and the potential economic impact outlined in the economic assessment, is going to undermine our rural communities, and therefore the vitality of the Welsh language. The Welsh language impact assessment does not adequately consider how to mitigate the effects of the Scheme on the agriculture sector and the rural economy. The Government's wider plan for regenerating and growing the rural economy need to be explained, along with how they intend to take advantage of the economic opportunities that will come from the green transition, for example in developing and upskilling the existing workforce.
- 3.3 To support the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy the rural economy and agricultural sector must be strengthened, not weakened. It is vital that the Scheme does not destabilise efforts to support the socio-economic infrastructure of Welsh-speaking communities. The Government needs to ensure that the Scheme meets all the objectives of the Agriculture Act and ensures that there is a prosperous future for the rural economy in Wales, thereby 'maintaining the Welsh language and promoting and facilitating its use'.

### **4. Measuring the contribution and impact of the Scheme to support the socio-economic infrastructure of Welsh-speaking communities**

- 4.1 It was disappointing that the Welsh language had not been considered as part of the work commissioned by the Government to assess the evidence on the social value of changes in natural capital and how this could be reflected in the Scheme's payment levels. The health of the Welsh language within agricultural communities should have been one of the outputs used to evaluate the socio-economic impacts of the Scheme.
- 4.2 This is something that we have raised in previous consultations and in correspondence with the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales and the Trefnydd. There does not seem to be a method in place to monitor the effects of the Scheme on the Welsh language. That would make it difficult to report on how the Scheme achieves the objectives of the Agriculture Act from a Welsh language perspective. We would like to know how the Government will measure the Scheme's contribution towards supporting Theme 3 of the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy of supporting the socio-economic

infrastructure of Welsh-speaking communities and the objectives of the Agriculture Act 2023. That should happen in the Scheme's Annual Report and the Impact Report.

4.3 The Government should ensure that evidence is consistently collected to measure the health of the Welsh language in the rural areas where farms currently receive support, especially in terms of monitoring any changes (as has been done in the Welsh language impact assessment). There are many current projects that are relevant in the above context:

- the work between the Welsh Government and the Office for National Statistics to better understand the main sources of administrative data and surveys used to compile statistics on the Welsh language
- the work of the Commission for Welsh-Speaking Communities
- The work between the Welsh Government and external stakeholders to carry out a comprehensive socio-linguistic survey of the Welsh language in its heartlands.

We suggest that the authors of the Scheme discuss with the Welsh language division of the Welsh Government and with Government statisticians to understand more about these projects, and their relevance to the Scheme.

## 5. Mainstreaming Welsh language considerations within the Plan

5.1 Our main response to the consultation is that the Government needs to ensure that the Scheme meets the objective of the Agriculture Act from a Welsh-language perspective. The Scheme therefore needs to ensure that the rural economy in Wales has a prosperous future, thereby 'maintaining the Welsh language and promoting and facilitating its use'. We don't think the Scheme should be implemented until these concerns have been addressed.

5.2 In our response to the consultation, we suggest that the Welsh language could be incorporated into the Scheme by amending the Universal Actions or the Optional and Collaborative Layers. For example:

- Under Universal Action 2 it should be explained that upskilling in the Welsh language could contribute to the continued personal development of farmers
- Universal Action 14 should be changed from "historic environment – maintaining and improving" to "Historic **and cultural** environment – maintaining and improving". This would facilitate the inclusion of acts that could contribute to realising the objectives of the Agriculture Act and the Sustainable Land Management from a Welsh language context
- Encouraging farmers who are Welsh speakers and who choose to carry out the act of "care and educational visits to the farm", to provide visits through the medium of Welsh
- Encouraging and supporting farmers to use Welsh as a unique marketing tool that can increase market potential by making produce stand out, reinforcing the local origin of produce, and as an indicator of quality
- Support farmers to share valuable linguistic knowledge they have about dialects, terminology, place names and landscape features specific to the agriculture sector through the medium of Welsh
- Supporting farmers who cannot speak Welsh to become aware of the wealth of information about their farm that derives from the names of landscapes associated with it

- Detail what evidence will be collected to measure the health of the Welsh language in the rural areas where farms receive support through the scheme, how the information will be monitored, and publish the results in the Annual Report and Impact Report.