

# Narratives for a Sustainable Wales

Values, language & identity

A report that examines the effect language, culture and identity has on communicating sustainable development and climate change to people living in Wales. The work draws on previously published literature and qualitative data collected specifically for this research (2012).

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# Preface

Effective communication and engagement requires an understanding of specific groups of people – what they value, what they identify with, who they are – and the language that resonates with them.

This interim report forms part of a bigger piece of work to develop narratives for sustainable development in Wales – a piece of work commissioned by the Welsh Government as part of its strategy to engage people on the issues of sustainable development and climate change and to encourage sustainable behaviours across Welsh society.

A consortium comprising experts in communication, Welsh life and networks, behaviour change, social psychology and sociology are delivering the work, using qualitative research, discourse analysis and semiotics in order to develop Welsh narratives.

This report combines the key findings of the research with literature reviews on identity and value in a Welsh context.

Outside the scope of this report is what it means to be Welsh and the inter-relationship between identity, gender, ethnicity, class, politics and religion.

Cynnal Cymru – Sustain Wales, using its own research in conjunction with research undertaken by COIN, Dr Catrin Ellis Jones, Dr Einir Young and the wider consortium, has produced this report.

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# Context

We explore Welsh values and how elements that comprise the concept of a Welsh identity can be understood in order to develop meaningful ways to communicate a broad range of issues, in particular, sustainable development.

Our research was conducted in five related phases:

1. Literature review (Welsh values and identity)
2. Survey
3. Face-to-face interviews
4. Focus groups
5. Data analysis.

Through our work, we see values and narrative themes beginning to emerge but recognize that these are not fully tested and, therefore, should be used only to give an indication of ideas to test further, rather than as a recommendation for their use.

Due to the complexities of defining national identity that people across Wales will connect with, it is unlikely to be possible to create a single narrative or small set of narratives that will reach all people across Wales.

We have, however, identified a list of key themes that emerged from our research, which will guide narrative development and testing. These are:

- Culture and identity
- Landscape
- Language
- Bodlon

## Key findings

- There are a variety of values that people attach to 'Welshness' but emotional response to them varies greatly.
- Welsh landscape is a strong anchor for Welsh identity that most audiences identify with and have an emotional response to: the landscape - a striking visual of home, a longing for home; hiraeth. It was by far the strongest value we found in our research.
- The Welsh language clearly plays an important role in Welsh identity, there is not broad agreement about why or in what way it is an important part of 'Welshness.'
- Welshness is often defined in linguistic, cultural and social terms, which creates a challenge in defining a nation, since there are areas in which the majority of residents were born outside Wales and have not integrated into the defining culture.
- There are striking regional variations in language, which make it difficult to attach a single narrative around this value.
- There is a strong link between language and landscape.
- Our research shows that the landscape is by far the strongest single point of reference to which people in Wales attach a sense of identity. Identification with landscape also presents an opportunity to create a compelling visual narrative.
- There is a strong relationship between people and their local landscape – the square mile in which they live.
- The Welsh word 'bodlon' (and its inherent SD values) is closely connected with natural and human landscape and contentment.
- There is a strong connection between 'bodlon' and wellbeing - proximity to landscape, re-assurance of the familiar, smallness of Welsh communities and connectedness with the human and natural environment.
- Co-operation, resilience, communitarian enterprise and self-reliance are defining values of both Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking, northern and southern, urban and rural communities.
- Humour and the ability to be self-deprecating is an important aspect of the Welsh identity (in both Welsh and English languages).

# Culture and identity

Interesting questions in the narrative dialogue and fundamental starting points are: What's Wales like? How has our history shaped us? What does it mean to be Welsh? Who are we?

Empirical data (2001 survey – see above) illustrates that Wales is a divided nation. This division is not linguistic since both Welsh and English-speaking communities can identify with the concepts of Cymru, Cymrodyr - looking after your locality, resilience, survival, communal endeavour and revival. These are Welsh values.

The division is in fact between those born in Wales and those who have migrated to Wales, seeking a better quality of life. This division is further compounded by a rural/urban split. What is unclear, however, is to what extent incomers, who seek tranquillity, simplicity, closeness to nature and bodlon, can also identify with the idea of the small nation clinging on doggedly by sheer force of will.

Incomers to Wales have made an enormous contribution to the growth of a pro-environmental culture, (mainly in rural Wales and in pockets such as the Dyfi valley and Machynlleth) and this has given rise to an association of pro-environmental values with incomers.

Wales, the country with the highest concentration of medieval castles and ancient monuments in the world, has been characterised by both its natural and industrial landscape. Two hundred years of heavy industry and mineral extraction has left its mark on the Welsh landscape.

The census map of 2011 shows the highest percentage concentration of those born in Wales is in the Welsh Valleys and South Wales.

The Welsh Valleys have the highest benefit claim rates not only in Wales but also in Britain. In Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil, one in four adults of working age are out-of-work and in receipt of benefits. Historically, rural Wales was also a place of poverty.

According to the Office for National Statistics, the unemployment rate in Wales and the proportion of children living in workless households is higher than the UK average, labour productivity is lower and life expectancy shorter. As national averages, these figures do not show the wide variation between the Valleys or industrial parts of the north, and the affluence of Cardiff, the Vale of Glamorgan, parts of Monmouthshire, Powys and Ceredigion.

What accompanies this depressing economic picture, however, is a rich and complex culture of identity.

Cymru and Cymrodyr are expressions of values and identity that stretch back into pre-history and have been carried over into English speaking industrial communities through non-conformist religion and organised labour. These are now arguably the central elements of a founding mythology; that we are a small nation in which co-operation and

communitarian endeavour has seen off numerous tyrants and traitors and as long as we all stick together we will survive.

Our research reached broad agreement that co-operation, resilience, communitarian enterprise and self-reliance are defining values of both Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking, northern and southern, urban and rural communities, firmly based in a shared experience of a harsh past.

## Conclusions

- Humour and the ability to be self-deprecating is an important of the Welsh identity (in both languages) and should be used (carefully) to create an emotional connection.
- Data shows that the highest percentages of people born in Wales are found in the areas that are most economically inactive. Aside from the political implications of this, it indicates a cause for caution in employing narratives that draw on the industrial past or notions of resilience in the face of exploitation and oppression since these would not resonate in places like Powys or eastern Monmouthshire.
- There is an exciting possibility for a narrative that draws attention to the contrast between the social inequality and environmental destruction caused by heavy industry, and an emerging renaissance of local activism in coal and slate communities powered by local renewable energy sources.
- The link between the endurance of Welsh language and culture in the north, and the concept of biological resilience in the face of environmental stress is also resonant.
- Endurance, resilience, care for locality, a sense of belonging and a willingness to defend a rich cultural and natural heritage are identified as Welsh values.

# Landscape

The views expressed during this research identified the Welsh landscape as by far the strongest single point of reference to which a sense of identity was attached.

Through the centuries Welsh culture and identity have been characterised by natural and industrial landscape. Wales has the highest concentration of medieval castles and ancient monuments in the world.

There is a very deep sense of relationship between the Welsh and their local landscape – their ‘milltir sgwar’ (square mile), bro (borough), cynefin (habitat) – it is a profound and deep relationship that could have been lost with urbanisation.

The relationship with the natural landscape cuts across the language divide and is also cited by the various interviewees as the principle reason why people migrate into Wales.

The Welsh language itself is deeply rooted in landscape and culture. You only have to look at a map to see this – every hill and stream carries an old Welsh name – and there are several powerful examples of this relationship in Welsh literature. The proximity to impressive or beautiful landscape has a strong influence on the national character.

Not only is the landscape a source of pride and identity for both those born in Wales and those who have migrated to Wales but our research suggests that its proximity also acts as a calming influence. This contributes to another defining characteristic identified in our research – calmness, contentment or in Welsh ‘bodlon.’

## Conclusions

- Landscape is a common reference point for both those born in Wales and those who have migrated to Wales, although there are strong differences in the cultural resonance of landscape. The landscape therefore would be a rich context within which to frame narratives for a sustainable Wales.
- There is a rich history of poetry and song particularly in Welsh that celebrates landscape and there is precedent for drawing on this to connect messages to values.
- Bodlon (and its inherent SD values, especially wellbeing) is closely connected with landscape and contentment and there are opportunities to create a strong visual narrative that highlights this connection.
- The current (March 2012) Snowdonia National Park publicity and marketing materials use landscape imagery to give context and cultural connection, using different phrases (in English and Welsh) to convey messages that offer significantly greater meaning than a direct translation.

# Language

Language, culture, and traditions are all well documented features of a Welsh identity. Welsh language has played (and continues to play) an important role in Welsh culture and identity.

The Welsh population is made up of those who speak Welsh, those who do not speak Welsh and those who are learning Welsh. Place of birth and locality of residence greatly influence commitment to the Welsh language and emotional response to language as an aspect of Welsh identity.

The interviews and the online survey explored what it means to be Welsh and the inter-relationship between identity, values and language.

The Welsh language serves as a strong symbol of Welsh identity. Since the Second World War, constitutional and legal concepts of Wales and Welshness have been intimately bound up with the struggle to maintain the vitality of the language and the linguistic culture.

Our research shows that there was broad agreement that the Welsh language is something to be proud of and that it adds to a sense of distinctiveness. The Welsh language was identified as more likely to attract incomers to Wales than act as a barrier.

Welshness is often defined in linguistic, cultural and social terms, which creates a challenge in defining a nation, since there are areas in which the majority of residents were born outside Wales and have not integrated into the defining culture.

There are striking regional variations in language, which make it difficult to attach a single narrative around this value.

Both the literature review and qualitative data collected suggest that Welsh language and culture are complex and that, even among Wales-born non-Welsh speaking majority, there is disparity of identification with Welsh language, within the concept of Welshness.

In Victorian times the Welsh language was forbidden in schools, and since the Second World War there has been a 'Welsh consciousness' not just to keep the Welsh language alive but to encourage all those within Wales to speak/learn Welsh, now it is part of schools' curriculum. It is believed that the Welsh language is the oldest surviving 'speaking tongue' in Europe.

A literature review of Welsh language and values highlighted the emotional bases of the Welsh language in relation to Welsh poetry and song and how (in Welsh language in particular) these are used as mechanisms to convey emotion.

The use of language and specifically the use of English words borrowed from a policy or scientific context are barriers to connection with subject matter. Simple and relevant words that are meaningful and expressed within the appropriate context of the language - not directly translated – will convey messages that people can connect with.

## Conclusions

- The aspiration in One Wales: One Planet to create 'a fair, just and bilingual nation' has to be the central organising principle of the narratives approach.
- Without boldly addressing the complexities of bilingualism and questioning what this means in theory and practice, the narratives approach will be profoundly compromised in its ability to deliver.
- Any communication or engagement that uses scientific or policy phraseology will struggle to communicate anything that people can connect with. Translations of these (that are already ungainly in English) upon the Welsh-speaking minority, will undoubtedly fail.
- Jargon and direct translations are not adequate for conveying complex concepts with deep emotional resonance.
- There is a strong link between language and landscape and opportunities to connect the two should be used.

# Bodlon

Our research shows that in communities of both English and Welsh speakers there is strong identification with the local and contentment in not being 'part of the rat race.' Instead an older tradition and a slower way of life is embraced.

Source elements of this bodlon are identified as proximity to landscape, the re-assurance of the familiar or a consequence of the smallness of Welsh communities and a sense of wellbeing from connectedness with the human and natural environment.

The latter is itself a function of the topography and landscape: Wales is a country of high hills and narrow valleys with few plains, plateaus or large river basins which cannot physically accommodate large sprawling urban conurbations.

Small communities, in many cases, have been forged from a shared experience of industrialism and have produced a communal, co-operative culture.

In such communities, networks and partnerships are easy to establish. Trust is possible, communitarian values are to the fore. There is an appreciation of the local and an investment in the concept of family. Within the conformity of the group, there is tremendous scope for action.

Welsh culture and values are founded on this idea of the 'Cymrodyr' (fellows, fellowship) which found expression in the labour union movement, in non-conformist religion, in co-operatives and credit unions and produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notable achievements.

There is a strong historical precedent for communal enterprise in Wales, motivated to deliver social benefits. A good example of this is the many miners' halls and institutes, paid for by subscription and providing not just a source of leisure but also acting as powerhouses of learning and self-improvement in the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century.

The smallness of the population and individual settlements means that ethnic minorities have to integrate.

The strong sense of community, the proximity of landscape and the sense of otherness and minority culture were also cited as elements that ethnic minorities could relate to (although it is worth pointing out that the survey data we refer to revealed that only 2% of the population were from an ethnic minority group).

Bodlon – the quality of life, the beauty of the landscape and access to nature, low crime levels, higher personal safety and lower house prices – is a perennial attractor to people born outside Wales.

## Conclusions

- Community, support and wellbeing are key elements of 'bodlon' and should be used to develop a narrative around the contentedness. The clear links with landscape and locality should be drawn on to create a complementary visual narrative that will give context when bilingual language is developed for the narrative.
- Wellbeing is a strong feature of 'bodlon.' There are opportunities to make connections between slower paced ways of living, greater connectedness with community and environment and less emphasis on consumerism within this narrative.
- Bodlon's inherent team spirit and fellowship – Cymrodyr – present opportunities to develop narratives around collaboration and mutual support. Community readiness (and resilience) for change.

# Recommendations

- Communication and engagement on sustainable development should be developed bilingually. They should not merely be a translation from English into Welsh or vice versa.
- Phrases and images used in narratives for a sustainable Wales should have deep cultural resonance.
- Landscape is a common reference point for those born in Wales and those who have migrated to Wales although there are strong differences in the cultural resonance of landscape.
- The landscape therefore would be a rich context within which to frame narratives for a sustainable Wales.
- There is a rich history of poetry and song particularly in Welsh that celebrates landscape and there is precedent for drawing on this to connect messages to values.
- The idea of survival offers a link between our concept of ourselves and notions of sustainability and resilience in an ecological sense. Welsh people are like the Snowdon Lily – rare, tenacious, clinging on in defiance of expectation. The irony being of course that the Snowdon Lily is a species that might disappear from Wales as a consequence of global warming.
- Pro-environmental champions from within the Welsh speaking community should be found to support Welsh language narratives.
- The importance of community, family and landscape are good, cross-cultural reference points for starting a dialogue on sustainability with migrants from outside the UK who have a different ethnicity or culture.

# Appendix

# Methodology

The research was conducted in five related phases:

1. Literature review (Welsh values and identity)
2. Survey
3. Face-to-face interviews
4. Focus groups
5. Data analysis

A review of the existing literature and research on Welsh values and culture was conducted and, in particular, the following questions were explored:

- What are the key cultural/historical/visual/language qualities that give rise to a shared Welsh identity?
- Is there a particularly 'Welsh' relationship to landscape and environment?
- Is there anything in Welsh culture/history/mythology that relates metaphorically to SD and climate change?
- Is there a historical narrative of Wales (where we have come from, where we are now, where we are going) that can be applied to a wider SD narrative?
- What is the Welsh relationship to political self-determination and can this relate to a Welsh Government led narrative?

The research was carried out between November 2011 and January 2012.

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