**AS DELIVERED**

# **Legal Wales Conference speech October 2025**

1. Good afternoon and thank you for having me at this year’s Legal Wales Conference here in Bangor. It’s wonderful to be here again. P’nawn da a diolch am fy ngwahodd i Gynhadledd Cymru’r Gyfraith eleni. Mae’n hyfryd i fod yma eto. Can I start by acknowledging the enormous contribution of Huw Williams. This legal conference was his brainchild, together with that of Winston Roddick KC back in 2001, and the first conference took place as long ago as 2003. This is your 21st conference and, Huw, I know, that you are going to stay around but your contribution cannot be overstated both in terms of personal support for me but also running such an extraordinary show for so many years. Thank you.
2. This is the third occasion on which I have had the pleasure of speaking at this prestigious and important conference. Last year I listed all the posts in and for Wales now held by women for the first time. I as Lady Chief Justice of Wales and England, Caroline Rees KC as Leader of the Wales Circuit, Professor Alison Young as the new Law Commissioner for Wales, Julie James MS as Counsel General and Baroness Eluned Morgan as the new First Minister.
3. I had genuinely thought that were no firsts left for women in Wales. But how wrong I was. For in July 2025, the Most Reverend Cherry Vann was elected the 15th Archbishop of Wales, the first woman in the British Isles to be a Primate in the Anglican church. I am delighted that she is going to be leading our service in the Cathedral on Sunday. So, the Welsh female trajectory does not stop.
4. The first Presiding Judges of Wales were appointed 55 years ago, when Sir George Baker, later President of the Family Division, and Sir Hilary Talbot took up the role in 1970. Their immediate successors were the formidable Welshmen Sir William Mars-Jones and Sir Tasker Watkins, the latter being only judge ever to have been awarded the Victoria Cross – although not for action in the courts.
5. Moving forwards, we have just marked the retirement of Lady Justice Nicola Davies, who was Presiding Judge of Wales 2014-2017, her successor as Presiding Judge, Lord Justice Clive Lewis, will now, like her, lead for Wales in the Court of Appeal. As I said at Nicola’s valedictory in the summer, Nicola Davies was a judge of exceptional distinction whose career has been defined by intellectual rigour, principled leadership and a profound commitment to equality and diversity. She was a judge and woman of many firsts, and I described her, in fact, as Wales’ own lioness.
6. Similarly, we will soon see a change in the Presiding Judges of Wales, as Mr Justice Griffiths’s term comes to an end. He has been an outstanding Presider. A fierce advocate for all matters Welsh. He gave a presentation to Judges’ Council in February 2025 that was remarkable, I still have the slides! I wanted to give you a flavour of his activities as Presider, as they show the role that the judiciary can play in promoting and advancing justice here in Wales.
7. He has visited every court in Wales and sat in most of them. He has visited every prison in Wales but happily not sat in any of them. He passed the first televised sentence in Wales (on St David’s Day, 2023 no less). He has sworn in two new First Minsters of Wales, and countless Cabinet Ministers, including the first black leader of Government in Europe (Vaughan Gething), his successor the current First Minister (Eluned Morgan), and (as a Cabinet Minister) former First Minister Mark Drakeford. He led the organising committee for the 2023 Commonwealth Magistrates and Judges Conference in Cardiff; the first time it had ever taken place in Wales. He brought the Legal Service to St David’s Cathedral for the first time in a generation, in 2024. He got Welsh translators in the Courts of Wales their first pay rise for 20 years.
8. He has sat on many interesting criminal trials and criminal appeals, and civil trials and civil appeals. He gave the judgment (in English and Welsh) of the Divisional Court in the first test case to clarify the interpretation of Wales’ radical new housing law, the Renting Homes (Wales) Act. As a fun fact: he sat in that Court with a druid! (HHJ Milwyn Jarman KC, a member of the Gorsedd of Bards).
9. He was a founder member of the Executive Council of the Law Council of Wales; as well as being Chair of the Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Committee on the Welsh Language. Finally, and perhaps the icing on the cake, he put a piano in Cardiff Lodgings – and played it.
10. A particular accolade must go for his work towards a new Cardiff Civil Justice Centre. I am certain that without his drive, and the combined tenacity and commitment of the Counsel General, Julie James MS, to whom I also declare a special tribute. I have no doubt that we would not be making the progress that we are. It is still early days, but I feel that there is a change in gear here, I believe for the first time that we are going to see a new fit for purpose building worthy of civil justice in Wales.
11. Change is in the air, but I am delighted to say that the next Presiding Judge of Wales, succeeding Mr Justice Griffiths, will be Mrs Justice Mary Stacey, starting in January. She will bring to the role a remarkable breadth of experience, from different jurisdictions of the law, and diverse parts of the judiciary.
12. She practised as a solicitor, before being appointed as a Tribunal judge, an Employment Judge, a circuit judge in the civil courts, and a criminal judge as a Recorder of the Crown Court and Probation Liaison Judge. She was appointed to the High Court Bench in 2020. Her father was an Olympic athlete, so she will know how to stay the course. And she is of partly Welsh descent; through both of her paternal grandparents she is a wonderful judge and person and will do you proud. I would like to thank her in advance but also Mrs Justice Morgan and Mr Justice Nicklin for all that they do for us.
13. Since the last conference in Wales, I returned in February, visiting Newport Crown Court, and sat in the CACD at Cardiff Crown Court. I also had the opportunity to meet with the First Minister and Counsel General and of course I visited the present Cardiff Civil Justice Centre along the way.
14. Going back to the First Minister and engagement with Parliament, I had a meeting with the Llywydd and I attended a reception with officials at the Senedd. These visits have been really productive in enhancing and developing relationships in getting better visibility for the work of the judiciary. I know that I am going to be working on relations there, and next year, I will be giving evidence in February to the Legislation Justice and Constitution Committee of the Senedd. I am planning to talk about the operation of the judiciary in Wales, the court estate and my priorities as Lady Chief Justice of Wales.
15. What are my key themes and takeaways from my visits in Wales:
* Increase in case receipts and complexity of work.
* Issues over staff recruitment and retention, in particular loss of experienced staff members.
* Estate issues, including broken lifts and front doors (significant issues at particular court centres).
1. So here in Wales we are not immune from the challenges facing the courts and tribunals in England as well, but the justice system in Wales has more than held its own, quite remarkably delivering excellent performance in multiple areas.
2. So, without any of the reforms that are coming down the line we are disposing of more Crown Court cases than we are receiving.
3. In the civil courts, over 94% of civil and family work is being processed within five days of receipt, and the speed of final disposals in both civil and family work is well above the national average.
4. Wales continues to be a jurisdiction of choice for pilots which is a real compliment. Pathfinder which is a pilot that is being rolled out we hope nationally, it has certainly extended to the whole of Wales. It has seen remarkable results “front loading" cases that involve children by getting Cafcass involved at an earlier stage bringing parents in right at the beginning to hear the child’s voice.
5. Can I say a word about tribunals. I know Sir Gary Hickinbottom is here, I commend to you his recent annual report of the President of the Welsh tribunals, it is concise and informative. He highlights suggestions for meaningful reform to the tribunals. His vision is to create a single, unified structure for the devolved tribunals with a new appeals process. It is fair to say that it is a significant disappointment to him and us that the necessary legislation to achieve all this was not included in the Welsh Government’s legislative programme for the remainder of the current Senedd. We had high hopes, but I am sure we will get there, perhaps just not as quickly as we wanted.
6. There have been some key developments in the devolved tribunals space, pay parity between the Welsh and HMCTS-governed tribunals. The Welsh tribunals are being included in the ongoing SSRB Major Review which is welcome. There has also been the appointment of a Training Lead Judge, to oversee and support Welsh-specific training, and the outstanding capital expenditure requirements.
7. More generally, work continues to move on embedding equality between the Welsh and English languages throughout the justice system in Wales. I am still learning Welsh and currently up to section 2 on Duolingo! For those of you that do it the little owl is my best friend. Boyd ee hun-ee bar-high. Long may it continue. I am immensely grateful to HHJ Mererid Edwards, my judicial linguistic coach, who is ever ready to support me at short or even no notice. My inbox is fully of her audio clips repeating everything I am trying to say. Thank you.
8. In order to secure the future of Welsh-speaking judiciary in Wales, both full-time salaried judges and part-time fee paid judges have reached a historic agreement with the Judicial Appointments Commission, under the leadership of your former archbishop Dr Barry Morgan. It devises and establishes an improved procedure for identifying and appointing judges who not only meet the standards of excellence required of any judge, but who are also either already either proficient in Welsh to the standard required, or who have enough conversational Welsh to be trained up to higher levels after appointment. I am very grateful to the Welsh Matters Committee of the Judicial Appointments Commission for the work done over many months on this issue.
9. I would like to turn to the magistracy. There is much pressure and change in governance and structure, including the consultation on LJAs which ran until the summer. I would like to acknowledge the most unfortunate oversight that no Welsh Language Impact Assessment before the consultation was undertaken.  I well understand why this omission went down like a lead balloon. The position is being mitigated but things like this are easy to avoid, and cause real anxiety and concern. Please do relay my comments to the magistrates whom you meet and work with the acknowledgement that it is our undertaking together to make sure that these things do not happen again.
10. As we reflect upon our progress and the times to come, can I ask you also to indulge me on a final thought. In preparing my remarks for the conference, I noted that this year is the 10th anniversary of the Welsh Language Tribunal. I enjoyed this afternoon’s breakout session celebrating the same.
11. I have already spoken about the value and importance of the Welsh language. During my learning process, I have found great value in learning the etymology of words too. For example, a Welsh word with which many non-speakers are familiar is ‘cwtch’ – meaning a cuddle, hug or safe place. Its origin is from the Middle English ‘couche’, meaning to lie down or a hiding place, which itself comes from the Old French ‘coucher’.
12. In the legal sphere, the word ‘cyfraith’ is Welsh for law. It derives from ‘cyf’, meaning together, and ‘rhaith’, meaning a judgment or decision. Together, this means a shared judgment or common rule, reflecting the communal nature of the laws by which we all abide – or, perhaps, the rule of law.
13. For me breaking down the etymology of words encourages me to reflect upon their true meanings and remind me of the power of words. In fact, the reason we are all here today is our belief in the rule of law, the ‘cyfraith’.
14. But perhaps my favourite Welsh word is ‘cartref’ – home – which is a compound of ‘car’ (meaning love) and ‘tref’ (meaning settlement or town). So, the literal meaning of ‘cartref’ is ‘a place of love’.
15. I can hardly think of a more fitting word for Wales and for its people – every time I visit I am struck once more by the community, friendship and kindness, and of the fierce Welsh patriotism. Thank you for inviting me once again to spend some time with you all today – and for making me feel quite at ‘cartref’!
16. Thank you. Diolch.