

Language Investigation Report – The Use of the Welsh Language at Meetings

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Content

Report	Page
1. Context	3
2. Purpose of the Investigation	3
3. Main Activities of the Investigation	4
4. Main Findings and Recommendations of the Investigation	5
Appendices	
Appendix 1 – Summary of the results of the Questionnaires for Managers and Council Members	
Appendix 2 – Summary of the results of the Questionnaires for External Bodies	
Appendix 3 – A list of those interviewed by the Investigation	
Appendix 4 – Analysis of results of questionnaires for staff working for Gwynedd Council on what they value in terms of working for the Council	
Appendix 5 – “Chairing Bilingual Meetings” Guidelines (published by Hunaniaith and the Welsh Language Board)	

1. Background

1.1 At its meeting on 23 October 2014, the Language Committee considered the need for a structure to look in more detail at specific elements which it was unable to address at the committee meetings.

1.2 The Committee resolved:-

- To undertake one investigation only at a time, with a maximum of two investigations within a calendar year (in accordance with the scrutiny investigation procedures).
- That the investigations should consider the Council's policies and procedures initially.

1.3 It was also resolved to establish the first investigation and to ask it to look at the use of the Welsh language and language awareness among Council staff and members, with a particular focus on the use of the Welsh language at external meetings.

2. Purpose of the Investigation

2.1 The Investigation agreed to the following brief for the Investigation:-

One of the Fundamental Objectives of the Council's Language Scheme is to promote the use of the Welsh language by other public bodies involved with the Council and support and promote the use of the Welsh language by bodies and businesses which provide services to the public in the Council's areas.

The purpose of the Investigation was:-

- a) to look at the use of the Welsh language at meetings as one method of doing so, and
- b) to ensure and facilitate compliance with clause 3.3.5 of the Language Scheme: "We will instruct staff to contribute through the medium of Welsh at externally-arranged public meetings, committees and conferences, and to request simultaneous translation."

- The fields in question could include:
 - Putting pressure on external bodies and organisations to provide simultaneous translation
 - Chairing bilingual meetings and how to encourage from the Chair
 - Contributing to meetings through the medium of Welsh
 - How to communicate the needs effectively and memorably

NB – It was noted that the Investigation would create a series of recommendations to be shared with the Language Committee before being implemented.

3. Main Activities of the Investigation

Language Investigation – The Use of the Welsh Language at Meetings - Final

3.1 A work programme which attempted to address the brief was agreed upon. There were several different steps to the work programme:

3.2 Step 1

- A questionnaire was created for external bodies (in consultation with the Research Unit and members of the investigation) asking about their provisions for Welsh at meetings and notifying them that their responses would be shared with Council representatives on the various bodies in order to check based on their experiences.
- A questionnaire was created for managers within the Council (in consultation with the Research Unit and members of the investigation) asking (anonymously) about their use of the Welsh language at external meetings.

3.3 Step 2

- Investigation meeting:-
 - (a) The Council Leader, the Cabinet Member for the Welsh Language and the Chief Executive were interviewed.
 - (b) Dr Enlli Thomas, Bangor University was interviewed about the psychology of language use.

3.4 Step 3

- A further meeting was held to question individual officers further about their experience of the use of the Welsh language at meetings outside the Council and about translation arrangements at such meetings and what the Council does to support its staff to develop their confidence in terms of using the Welsh language.

3.5 Step 4

- A report was prepared, which was discussed with the Council Leader, the Cabinet Member for the Welsh Language and the Chief Executive and recommendations are submitted to the Language Committee.

NB It should be noted that the Investigation focused on organisational meetings, or as the Language Scheme noted “externally-arranged public meetings, committees and conferences”. The Investigation did not look into small informal meetings of two or three people where it is accepted that the “one to one” language patterns of individuals are different and that it needs to be made clear that there is a difference in terms of expectations in organisational meetings which are larger and more formal.

4. Main Findings of the Investigation

- 4.1 The Investigation benefitted greatly from the input of managers across the Council through the questionnaire and individual meetings and is very much encouraged by officers' eagerness to implement the Council's Language Policy. It is also clear that a great number of staff appreciate the opportunity to work through the medium of Welsh in their everyday work and appreciate working for an establishment which encourages and promotes the use of the language.
- 4.2 Staff questionnaires regularly show that the "ability to use the Welsh language in my work" is the third highest reason every time why staff feel that Gwynedd Council is an excellent place to work (after terms and conditions of employment and the other people with whom they work). (See appendix 4). This is not the case in other public bodies within and outside the county and, clearly, the experiences of officers and members who attend external meetings vary somewhat.
- 4.3 The information gathered from the questionnaires also revealed a situation where Council managers and members face the following situations when attending meetings outside the Council.
- Occasionally, meetings are held without any translation facilities
 - When translation equipment is available, those who are non-Welsh-speakers are sometimes unfamiliar with using the equipment and are unwilling to use it as a result
 - When translation equipment is provided, those who are able to speak Welsh at meetings are in the minority and even fewer of those people use the Welsh language
- 4.4 As a result of the above, the Investigation has identified a number of recommendations for situations where it is considered that there is room for improvement.

1. Information for External Bodies
Findings – The culture and practices of other bodies and establishments are completely different in terms of the expectation to be able to speak Welsh at meetings.
Evidence – The experience of managers and members when attending external meetings.
Recommendation to the Cabinet Member – It is recommended that the Council contacts every external body for which it nominates managers and members to draw attention to the fact that the Council:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expects Council representatives to contribute to those meetings through the medium of Welsh.

- Expects simultaneous translation provision at such organisational meetings.
- Expects that papers for the meetings are prepared bilingually.
- Expects encouragement for Council representatives, and others, to contribute through the medium of Welsh.

2. Representing the Council at external meetings

Findings –

There is a perception that managers and members are not aware of the Council’s current policy to “instruct staff to contribute through the medium of Welsh at externally-arranged public meetings, committees and conferences, and to request simultaneous translation.”

Evidence –

Responses to the questionnaires and individual conversations with managers suggest that there is eagerness to use the Welsh language at meetings but that some feel hidden pressure not to do so in case they appear as troublesome to fellow members and colleagues.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –

It is recommended that the Council, when nominating representatives to external meetings (whether that be managers or members) reminds them that:-

- The Council wishes to support them in their use of the Welsh language at such meetings.
- They are implementing the Council’s policy in doing so and not acting on a personal whim.
- External bodies should be contacted prior to attending meetings to enquire as to whether simultaneous translation provision will be available.
- They should report back to the Council about any situations where it is obvious that an external body or other establishment has not given opportunity or encouragement to use the Welsh language.
- Techniques can be used to make it easier to use the Welsh language at meetings (e.g. giving non-Welsh-speaking individuals time to wear their headphones if they aren’t already wearing them by giving a short preamble).

3. Chairing Meetings

Findings –

The Chairman’s role at meetings is crucial in terms of setting the tone for a meeting including the linguistic pattern.

Evidence –

The guidelines on “Chairing Welsh and Bilingual Meetings” (see Appendix 5) offer clear and effective guidance for doing so but there is very little evidence of chairs setting a positive context for the use of the Welsh language at external meetings.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –

It is recommended that the Council draws the attention of external bodies and agencies to the guidelines on chairing Welsh and bilingual meetings and encourages them to share the guidelines with their chairs in order to equip them to encourage the use of the Welsh language at meetings.

4. Influencing Public Partners in the County

Findings –

The Council has a key lead role to seek to have a positive influence and gain support for the Welsh language.

The level of provision of Welsh-medium service across the public sector in Gwynedd varies and residents cannot be certain of the level of service which they can expect.

Evidence –

The Local Services Board is commissioning work to create a definition of a bilingual workplace that the Council and its partners would adopt as a standard definition in order to seek to “ensure clarity and a consistent standard of bilingual public services for residents” over time.

The Welsh Language Standards, as drafted, offer a minimum standard but one which is not adequate for residents in a county such as Gwynedd which has such a large percentage of Welsh-speaking residents.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –

It is recommended that a report be submitted to the Council’s Language Committee on the progress of the Local Services Board’s project.

5. Influencing Other Councils

Findings –

The Council has a key lead role to seek to have a positive influence and gain support for the Welsh language.

More needs to be done to seek to influence other councils regarding the importance of promoting and allowing the use of the Welsh language.

Evidence –

The pattern of Welsh-language provision across Welsh councils varies greatly. There is no structure in place in order to seek to influence and support councils to improve their provision.

Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –

It is recommended that the Cabinet Member seeks to convene a group of Cabinet Members responsible for the Welsh Language Portfolio within other councils as a starting point in persuading those councils to promote the use of the Welsh language.

6. An Audit of the Welsh Language within the Council

<p>Findings –</p> <p>The Council needs to satisfy itself regarding the confidence and willingness to use the Welsh language across its services and work to promote and develop skills among staff needs to be targeted.</p>
<p>Evidence –</p> <p>In its Strategic Plan, the Council has committed to establishing an understanding “of the way in which the Council promote the Welsh language currently, and the additional opportunities available to the Council to promote the Welsh language with the county’s residents”.</p> <p>Currently, work to promote and develop Welsh language skills is a response to requests rather than having been targeted based on assessment.</p>
<p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that the Cabinet Member reports back to the Language Committee on the results of the Audit early in 2016/17 and reports on the proposed action arising from the Audit.</p>
<p>7. Language Clarity and Simplicity</p>
<p>Findings –</p> <p>There is a perception that the Council’s official Welsh can be complicated and difficult to understand and can be a reason for those who aren’t as confident in using their Welsh not to venture.</p>
<p>Evidence –</p> <p>Evidence submitted to the Investigation and the perceptions of the members of the Investigation.</p>
<p>Recommendation to the Cabinet Member –</p> <p>It is recommended that a clear message be sent out to Council staff that the Council is eager for its staff to use simple and clear Welsh in order to develop their confidence and skills further.</p>