

MEETING	Language Committee
DATE	25 January, 2022
TITLE	Report of the Housing and Property Department on the implementation of the Language Policy and activities to promote the Welsh Language
PURPOSE	To present information about the Department's contribution to promoting the Welsh Language
AUTHOR	Carys Fôn Williams, Head of Housing and Property Department

1. Background and context

- 1.1. This report has been prepared to present information to the Language Committee on the Housing and Property's contribution of the Welsh Language Policy.
- 1.2. The Housing and Property Department includes a combination of front-line services (such as Homelessness, Migrants, Housing Supply), corporate services (such as Estates, Property Safety, Offices and Cleaning) and commercial services (Pest Control).
- 1.3. This means that the Department deals with a number of customers and stakeholders, including Gwynedd Council staff and Gwynedd businesses and residents.
- 1.4. In light of this, we believe that it is crucially important to be able to offer our services bilingually, and respect the customer's chosen language.
- 1.5. The sensitive nature of some of the cases the department deals with demonstrates the importance of operating in the medium of Welsh to our service users.
- 1.6. For example, when staff deal with individuals who are facing homelessness, and who are already in an extremely stressful situation, dealing with these individuals with sensitivity is crucial. An obvious and important part of this is to speak with the individual in their chosen language.
- 1.7. The staff of the Housing Grants Unit deal with disable adults and children by offering them support to be able to live in their homes by installing equipment such as ramps, or by making adaptations to houses such as extensions or wet rooms. It is extremely important to be able to offer a service in Welsh when dealing with these situations also.
- 1.8. The Department also deals with service users who come to Gwynedd from beyond Wales and Britain, and who speak languages other than Welsh and English.

- 1.9. The Refugee Resettlement Unit works closely to help refugees coming to Wales seeking refuge. Generally, these individuals are eager to make a valid contribution to the society who takes them in, with a number learning Welsh as they settle and integrate well with their new communities.
- 1.10. In light of this, we often employ translators to communicate with refugees from Syria and Afghanistan.

2. Our Workforce's Welsh Language Skills

- 2.1. We place great emphasis on ensuring that we comply with the Council's Welsh Language Policy, and our ability to offer a Welsh language service to our service users, both in-house and externally.
- 2.2. According to the latest Language Designation Quarterly Report, **95%** of our staff either meet or exceed the Language Designations of their posts, which is slightly higher than the Council average (92%).
- 2.3. Of that 95%, **95%** of them have skills that exceed the language requirements of their posts.
- 2.4. Up to 22/12/2021, 67% of staff have completed a self-assessment, and we continue to encourage more staff to complete it to obtain the most comprehensive picture possible of the workforce's language skills.

3. Responding to the issues the members would like to discuss

- 3.1 The following pages provide a response to these issues

A matter that the members wish to discuss:

Boosting and promoting

Question 1: Can you highlight any projects within your department that contribute to one of the Council's language strategy priorities, namely the Welsh Language Promotion Plan for Gwynedd?

General

The Department places great emphasis on operating through the medium of Welsh, not only due to our feeling of pride and respect towards the language and what it means to the Council, but also as we are dealing with individuals.

- Allocation Policy - local person
- Gwynedd Housing Partnership - includes all housing associations, meetings are held in Welsh with a translator

Correspondence with Welsh agencies through the medium of Welsh

Homelessness

In responding to situations where family units are being made homeless, the Unit does the utmost to keep the families together when they are relocated. Apart from obvious advantages to the family's well-being in keeping them together, it safeguards the language as the language of the family and reduces the risk that individuals will lose the language as they are separated from the family.

Not only does the Homelessness Unit work reactively to situations of homelessness - a crucial part of its work focuses on preventing homelessness before it happens. In some such cases, this involves working as an advocate between family members to keep the family under the same roof, which could lead to safeguarding Welsh speaking households that would otherwise be lost.

Grants to adapt homes for disabled people

A number of people in Gwynedd are living in houses that are unsuitable for their needs. This could mean that residents are not able to climb the stairs to the first floor, or find it difficult to wash or bathe as their current bathroom is not fit for purpose. The Housing Grants and Projects Unit guides individuals through the process jointly with Occupational Therapists, and ensures there is a work programme in place that matches the needs of the individual. By making these adaptations, it is made possible for the people of Gwynedd to remain in their homes and therefore keep Welsh-speakers in their communities.

It is pleasing to note that the Unit is operated entirely bilingually, with every officer able to offer a service in Welsh. A very high percentage of the communication is done through Welsh (unless the need/a request for communication in English only reaches us) and the Occupational Therapists we work with are also Welsh speakers, along with the referral forms.

However, at the moment, our work programmes and technical documents are in English as this is the usual language of construction documents and specifications in the construction/architectural fields. Nevertheless, we are able to provide these through the medium of Welsh also as needed.

Housing Action Plan Projects

The Department's Housing Action Plan, a Plan of 33 projects worth £77 million over a six year period, outlines our objectives as we address the housing needs of the people of Gwynedd. The Plan will benefit a number of key fields, and one of those is the Welsh language and Welsh communities. Projects such as those named below will provide the opportunity for Gwynedd residents to have access to suitable and affordable homes:

The Plan	Description	Further information
Develop our own housing in order to increase the opportunities for Gwynedd residents to compete in the housing market.	Develop our own houses which will increase the housing stock in those communities where demand exists to purchase or rent on intermediate rent levels.	We intend to include a condition that any owner must be a local person.
Purchasing private housing	Use the existing housing stock that would be suitable to house local people, while considering buying houses and allocating them to local people on an intermediate rent.	We will prioritise local people when allocating these houses
Refuse applications to remove a local person condition on former "Council houses"	Consider being more challenging with applications to remove 'local person conditions' from former Council houses and adhere to the original purpose of such clauses. We will not revoke a condition unless there are extremely unusual circumstances.	It is intended to adopt an in-house policy that will protect this condition in future
Self-build plots	Take advantage of Welsh Government's scheme to prepare sites for housing developments through the 'self-build' model.	
First Time Buyers' Grants to renovate empty houses	Extend the previous scheme, which has helped approximately 70 first-time buyers to renovate empty houses and return empty houses to the use of local people.	
Council Tax Exemption on empty houses for first time buyers	Extend the exemption period for paying Council tax on empty houses (main or sole house), giving first-time buyers an additional year to complete essential renovation work before the house may be occupied.	
Finding and purchasing building land for the future	Use some development sites already in our possession make a start on our plans in some areas where the need from local residents is evident. If we are to continue after that, we will need to be prepared to respond quickly to purchase building land when the opportunity arises in the right places.	

Our Equality Impact Assessment for this Plan noted that it would have a positive impact on the Welsh Language:

"It is estimated that 60% of buyers are priced out of the local market. Increasing the number of affordable housing units, as well as the proposed support packages in the form of loans and tax relief, can mean that more local people choose / are able to stay in Gwynedd."

There are consultations in the pipeline and the "Dwyfor Pilot".

Welsh Government has recently published two consultations, namely [Consultation on the Welsh Language Communities Housing Plan](#) and [the Consultation on Planning Legislation and Policy for Second Homes and Short-term Holiday Lets](#). The Environment Department will prepare a response on behalf of the Council for the consultation on Planning matters, and we will prepare a response to the Welsh Communities Housing Consultation. The consultations will close on 22 February, 2022 and we are currently gathering responses from the Council's various departments.

In November, 2021, Welsh Government announced its intention to hold a pilot scheme to address the housing problem in the Dwyfor area. The Council has been at the forefront of this work in recent years, and as a Department we welcome this recent announcement and look forward to contributing to this scheme in any way we can. We are currently awaiting further information from the Government before being able to move forward.

Systems and Technology

The Department makes very extensive use of systems, including systems to store and analyse information about Council property such as maintenance, Legionnaires' Disease and energy use and expenditure; and in the field of housing to maintain the housing register and information about the County's homelessness situation, and systems that the Housing Enforcement Unit and the Housing Grants and Project Unit use to facilitate their work.

We have also developed our own systems recently within the Homelessness Unit and the Maintenance Unit. Both were developed jointly with the in-house Information Technology Service, and are available entirely in Welsh. We believe that this is important as it enables us to maintain our internal operations in Welsh without having to translate, interpret or share information in English.

Although a number of other systems are provided in English (due to the language of the supplier), we have the ability to create or amend elements within some of these systems, and create and generate our own reports, either in Welsh or bilingually.

A matter that the members wish to discuss:

Externalisation of work and awarding third party contracts

Question 2: If the department awards work externally on contract, can you refer to any good practice, either when imposing conditions or when monitoring in order to ensure compliance with the linguistic conditions?

The Department is involved in a number of agreements with contractors in terms of work carried out on Council property in addition to the field of housing.

Property Services

Generally, work is awarded externally on contract by the Property Development and Maintenance Services and the Housing Grants and Projects Unit. For example, the Property Development Service will award tenders for all types of construction work, and the Maintenance Service looks for specialist companies to award contracts for work such as the Council's smoke alarms. In doing this, we use the extensive experience of our officers along with the expertise of the Corporate Category Team to ensure that we complete the work to an appropriate standard.

We feel that good practice is highlighted when contracts are awarded where efforts are made to ensure that the standard of the Welsh medium service is secured and maintained. A copy of the Language Policy is included in the tendering documents, and every applicant is asked to read it to ensure that they understand what is required of them (such as if they need to use signage, they must be bilingual), but also that they understand the importance of the Welsh language to Gwynedd Council.

Additionally, in high value tenders, we ask companies to provide a Social Benefit Response that covers the Well-being Act 2015. This means that prospective contractors are required to consider how they can contribute to society locally, by taking steps to create jobs locally or offer work experience opportunities. The side-effect of this of course is that it creates opportunities for the people of Gwynedd to remain in their area, and increases the opportunities to use the Welsh language as a working and living language in the County.

Construction Contracts

As construction contracts must be advertised outside the boundaries of Gwynedd, and in order to gain access to the broader market, tendering advertisements are published in English.

For larger contracts, where it is necessary to advertise them nationally, there is a legal requirement to advertise them in English (or one of the EU's official languages). We experimented by including a title and short description of the work bilingually, but this caused some confusion as only the Welsh language came up first on the systems, and a number of contractors missed or ignored the advert.

All of the contract's documentation is in English. This corresponds to:

- The standard contract document that is used
- The majority of contractors that are employed work through the medium of English
- English is the technical language of the construction world
- Translating technical documentation / contracts could lead to misinterpreting meanings

Clauses within our contracts ensure that any signage, information boards or circulars that contractors use as part of the project are bilingual. English-only signs are not permitted. If the project includes a public consultation, the contractors are expected to hold them in Welsh/bilingually or, if this is not possible, to provide representatives who area Welsh-speakers or to provide a translator.

Property construction/development external consultants

Generally the conditions are the same as for the contractors (above), standard documentation, contracts etc. If there is a need to provide designs, or brief reports on a project for the purpose of a consultation with the public, then they are expected to be available in Welsh and English. The only exception is the very technical documentation for the use of designers only. Any consultant able to participate in consultations with stakeholders or the public is expected to have a Welsh speaker or to provide translation facilities.

Housing Services: Housing Grants and Projects

The Housing Grants and Projects Unit deals often with contractors when commissioning work on behalf of some of the county's most vulnerable individuals. The construction work is carried out by local contracts, and the vast majority of them are Welsh speakers. This is very important to us, as the ability to communicate with applicants (especially the elderly) in Welsh can offer people comfort and assurance at times that are very often difficult and tragic situations.

The Estates Service is responsible for all of the Council's property, and has recently decided to outsource the management of our Smallholdings Estate. In considering this process, the requirement for the service to be provided bilingually was noted to facilitate the relationship with our tenants - the vast majority of whom are fist language Welsh-speakers.

A matter that the members wish to discuss:

Operating bilingually

Question 3: Are there any obstructions that prevent you as a department to offer a full service in Welsh?

Generally, there are no obstructions to our ability to offer a full service in Welsh. Our in-house administration is entirely through the medium of Welsh, and we take pride in our ability to offer support to our service users, a number of whom are some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society, in their mother tongue. We encourage staff members who lack confidence in their Welsh language skills or who wish/ need to improve their language skills to seek opportunities to learn/develop their skills (details are provided below).

Regional and national meetings

It has already been noted that as a Department, we have succeeded in offering all of our services in Welsh and bilingually, however the picture is very different as we look beyond the Council. Regional and national meetings are generally held in English, and although translation is available at some of them, along with Welsh medium material, it can be an obstacle when it comes to offering a Welsh medium service to our service users.

Staff language skills - Language Refresher courses

During 2020 and 2021, 26 staff from the Department attended Language Refresher courses in Nant Gwrtheyrn, and another three have arranged to attend them in coming months. It is pleasing to see that the department's staff members are seeking opportunities to improve and/or maintain the standard of their language skills and take ownership of this in the interest of our service users.

It must be acknowledged that the demand on our front-line services that respond to calls and enquiries from the public as they arise, for example Homelessness and Housing Options, means that it is difficult for some members of staff to commit to Welsh language learning or development courses. However, this does not restrict the learning/development opportunities, rather it means that different work patterns must be considered from time to time when planning joint training provision with the Organisation Learning and Development Service - which is effective every time.

A matter that the members wish to discuss:	<u>Developing new opportunities</u>
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Question 4: Do you have ideas about new ways we can promote the Welsh language in the county's communities - either in your own services or by collaborating with others?

- In Service Level Agreements to provide supported accommodation, we will impose a condition that service/support providers must be able to speak Welsh. An example of this is the Service Level Agreement for Tŷ Adferiad, Porthmadog, 137 High Street Bangor and 35 College Road, Bangor
- In making significant contribution to the 'Bwyd Da Bangor' project (an enterprise that combines a food sharing membership programme, redistributing leftover stock from supermarkets with a high quality café that also offers training) staff at the café were encouraged to communicate with customers in Welsh and English. We feel that this is an example of good practice in this type of project, and is something that we will repeat in other similar schemes should the opportunity arise
- We feel that more bespoke training through the medium of Welsh should be developed for the housing field - most training is provided in English, and although this does not obstruct or prevent our ability to operate, it would be good to receive the training in Welsh, or bilingually at least.