
LANGUAGE COMMITTEE: MONDAY, 24 OCTOBER 2023

PRESENT:

Councillors:

Elfed Wyn ap Elwyn, Jina Gwyrfai, Olaf Cai Larsen, Gwynfor Owen, Elfed Williams, Menna Baines, Llio Elenid Owen and Meryl Roberts

Officers: Llywela Haf Owain (Senior Language and Scrutiny Adviser), Gwenllian Mair Williams (Language Adviser), Bet Huws (Welsh Language Learning and Development Officer) and Rhodri Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillor Menna Trenholme (Cabinet Member for Corporate Support).

Item 5: Gareth Jones (Assistant Head of Environment Department) and Carwyn Meredydd (Senior Executive Officer, Environment Department).

Item 6: Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Sasha Williams, Alan Jones Evans and Peter Thomas.

The Chair extended sympathy on behalf of the committee to the family of the late Councillor Eirwyn Williams who had recently passed away. He was a former chair and a loyal member of the committee for many years and had provided a valuable service to the residents of Cricieth as a County Councillor.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

3. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent items were received.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous committee meeting held on 27 June 2023 as a true record.

5. WELSH LANGUAGE PROMOTION PLAN – ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

The report was submitted by the Head of Environment Department, and he highlighted the following main points in brief:

He reported that the Supplementary Guidance of the Planning Policy gave detailed consideration to the Welsh language in order to promote it in Wales and beyond.

He drew attention to the work of the biodiversity, grounds and nature officers who organised walks for learners so that they can teach them about new terms in Welsh within the field.

He reported that 76 requests to change the name of a property had been received last year. He confirmed that 95% of these properties had retained or were now using the Welsh name. He added that the names of the properties falling into the other 5% were difficult to change, such as the names of companies and businesses. He explained that the legislation that granted requests to change the language on a place name dated back to 1925 and that considerations included checking whether there were similar names on nearby buildings, and suitability. He confirmed that applicants could not be forced to put Welsh names on their buildings, they could only be encouraged to use Welsh. He noted that considerations were being given to the need to tighten this legislation. Despite this, the department's officers had been successful in encouraging owners to use the Welsh language in the vast majority of cases.

He noted that more work needed to be completed to ensure that people did not put English names on their businesses. It was accepted that some regulations were in place in order to ensure that the Welsh language was prominent within businesses, but we need to do more promotion work to ensure that companies used the language. He drew attention to the fact that planning permission was required for any illuminated business sign. Consequently, language requirements stated that those signs must be bilingual in order for them to be approved.

In response to an enquiry on street names and the names of other locations in Welsh only, the Assistant Head of Environment Department confirmed that this was a matter for the whole of Wales to consider. The Language Adviser emphasised that work was being undertaken by the Council to investigate this matter and that discussions were being held to explore what regulations were possible. Because of the national nature of the issue, it was important to ensure that the Council shared good practice with other organisations to ensure that the Welsh language was being used, in the hope that regulations would be formed in the future.

It was confirmed that 91% of the department's staff who had completed the language self-assessment, met the designation for their job. However, it was acknowledged that 111 members of staff in the department had not completed the self-assessment and it was thought that this was due to the waste and recycling service recently being moved from another department to the environment department. It was also noted that it was not easy for many staff to complete the self-assessment because they did not use computers in their front-line jobs. It was emphasised that ensuring that everyone completed the language self-assessment was a priority for the department's managers, and that the language self-assessment was included as part of an updated welcome pack for new staff.

It was explained that the recruitment of qualified officers with the required language skills had been a challenge for the Department over the last period. Nonetheless, the officers were proud of the fact that the Department had managed to appoint two professional trainees within planning as well as three trainees within public protection.

It was mentioned that the department had received complaints of concern regarding the use of place names on road closure notifications. It was confirmed that the department needed advice from the legal team in order to respond to these enquiries.

They discussed new opportunities to encourage use of the Welsh language within the department over the next period. Car charging points were cited as a particular example where users could be encouraged to use the Welsh terms for charging and fast charging (*'gwefru'* and *'gwefru chwim'*).

Members expressed their gratitude for the report.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and note the observations received.

6. WELSH LANGUAGE PROMOTION PLAN: FINANCE DEPARTMENT

The report was submitted by the Head of Department, and he highlighted the following main points in brief:

Members were reminded that the Department was unique in the sense that it was a mixture of services that supported the Council's other departments but also provided front-line services directly to the public.

He reported that all computers used by the Council had settings which ensured that Welsh was used as the computer's default language. He confirmed that computers that were provide to schools by the Digital Learning Service, which had become part of the department's services when the Council internalised the Cynnal company, also had Welsh language settings on them. He explained that every teacher had received a laptop, and work was underway to ensure that every secondary school pupil received a laptop to do their educational work.

He stated that the department had been receiving calls to try to revert their computers' language setting back to English as this change was taking place. He confirmed that this was possible, but officers encouraged everyone to try to continue with the Welsh systems. It was confirmed that the numbers of calls about the Welsh-medium computer systems had reduced significantly since the change was first made.

It was confirmed that the Gwynedd Pension Fund was moving to a new system called 'My Pension Online' which everyone who was a part of the fund would be able to access – whether they were still in employment or had retired. He elaborated that a Welsh language interface had been established for this system, and this interface would be shared with the seven other pension funds in Gwynedd. It was explained that these developments were taking place following the success of the Gwynedd Pension Fund stand at the National Eisteddfod in Boduan this year, where individuals had the opportunity to update information, learn more about the service, and where the Fund's new logo was revealed.

It was confirmed that the department had received a critical report from the Welsh Language Commissioner recently, after a member of the public had been sent a letter that was in English only. It was explained that this error had happened because of a fault in the templates used. Unfortunately, it was noted that a further error had occurred when sending a second letter to the individual, as it contained basic language errors and a mixture of Welsh and English words such as 'Dear' and 'Yours Sincerely'. It was emphasised that this situation was a one-off, and that the department was doing everything in its ability to ensure that incidents like these were not repeated.

It was explained that 220 (98%) of the department's members of staff had completed the language self-assessment. It was added that 214 of those members met the language designation for their post, and that support was provided to anyone who felt that they did not reach their post's language designation to improve their skills. It was emphasised that there was no-one in the department without any Welsh language skills at all, therefore the fact that not everyone reached the language designation for their post did not affect the ethos and language of the office. It was acknowledged that the department's staff were more likely to complete the language self-assessment than some of the other departments because the nature of the work in the department was more technological, therefore the staff used computers more often.

The officer highlighted the fact that the Council was a host authority for several bodies such as the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee. He noted that since these bodies had been established with Gwynedd as the host authority, those bodies were run through the medium of Welsh naturally, and the department had a role to play in ensuring this.

Reference was made to the department's relationship with Audit Wales, noting that auditors who visited the Council were now individuals with Welsh language skills. It was noted that this was following a recent audit where no Welsh-speaking auditors had attended the meetings, as Audit Wales had not anticipated the need. It was confirmed that the department had since received feedback from Audit Wales stating that the auditors were glad of the opportunity to practise their language skills when visiting Cyngor Gwynedd.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

They expressed their gratitude for the report.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and note the observations received.

7. DRAFT MONITORING REPORT ON THE PROMOTION PLAN 2018-2023

The report was presented by the Language Adviser, and she briefly highlighted the following main points:

She explained that officers were looking back at the current plan as part of the process of drawing up a new Language Strategy for 2023-2033, to consider its successes and whether the targets set had been achieved. She noted that the new strategy had been presented to the Cabinet recently and that it would be presented to the Full Council in December 2023.

It was emphasised that this item before the committee today only contained a draft of the final report because further monitoring was required before producing an official report.

The members were reminded that the main aim of the promotion plan 2018-2023 had been to increase the opportunities to use the Welsh language and try to encourage people to use Welsh in as many contexts as possible, across five work areas:

- Language of the family,
- The language of learning
- Language of the Community
- The language of the service's work
- Research and technology

It was acknowledged that the timetable for implementing the existing plan had been very challenging. It was emphasised that the pandemic in 2020 had greatly impacted what had been possible to achieve, as there had been restrictions on social activities. The pandemic had had a far-reaching impact on individuals' language use. Despite this, the pandemic had created an opportunity to do some new things to increase use of the Welsh language.

She explained that the report reported on each action area as stated above, and it also highlighted specific projects that had been produced in response to the Language Strategy's objectives.

She noted that there had been successes in supporting families because of the promotion work that was being undertaken within the Early Years field, supported by Hunaniaith. She explained that work had also been undertaken by the language immersion units as well as through the 'Aberwla' virtual world to ensure that children gained confidence in the language. It was reported that another technological project had also been delivered, namely Prosiect 15. She explained that the aim of the project was to encourage use of the Welsh language amongst young people on social media.

The Adviser drew attention to the Place Names project that had been established during the past two years in response to the community objectives of the Strategy.

It was emphasised that working jointly with partners was very important and she drew particular attention to the need to work with the Gwynedd Language Initiative. The members were reminded that the Initiative would move to operate outside the Council in the coming months and it was emphasised that maintaining a close relationship between the Council and the Language Initiative was essential. It was assured that there would be no change in the support provided to the community, and meetings would take place between the Initiative and the Council to discuss projects and schemes to prioritise.

It was recognised that some unexpected challenges had affected officers' ability to meet some objectives within the Plan. Public engagement had been challenging at times, and response numbers had been low. It was also explained that the Covid-19 Pandemic had led to the need to revise priorities, and lessons had been learned.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations. During the discussion, the following matters were raised:

The Early Years Unit and Hunaniaith were thanked for their work in encouraging the parents of young children to use the Welsh language. It was asked whether the Council's partnerships continued to share the benefits of a Welsh upbringing for children with new parents, and the effect this could have on their children. In response to the enquiry, the Language Adviser noted that services such as Health Visitors did not have much time on their hands at present due to their workload, and language matters such as this were being adequately addressed through the other matters that came up during their visits. The Senior Language and Scrutiny Adviser added that the Gwynedd Language Forum had been formed by now and there were representatives from various partners including Mudiad Meithrin on the forum – she would ask them. The Welsh Language Learning and Development Officer added that Hunaniaith had been doing work with parents and children alongside the immersion centres. It was explained that Hunaniaith had undertaken community-based work in this field too.

Matters within the planning field were discussed in order to see how more emphasis could be placed on language thresholds when submitting applications and allocating housing.

The members expressed their gratitude for the report and thanked the Language Adviser for her work over the past 10 years. It was confirmed that this was her last meeting as she had accepted a new post. It was noted that the Committee wished her well to the future.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and note the observations received.

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and concluded at 11.35am.

CHAIR