

MEETING	Language Committee
DATE	30 January, 2024
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 and advancing the Welsh language
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1. Background and context

- 1.1. This report has been prepared in order to present information to the Language Committee on the Housing and Property Department's contribution to the Language Policy.
- 1.2. The Housing and Property Department comprises a mix of frontline services (such as Homelessness, Refugees, Housing Supply), corporate (such as Estates, Property Safety, Offices and Cleaning) and commercial (Pest Control) services.
- 1.3. This means that the Department deals with a number of customers and stakeholders, which include the staff of Cyngor Gwynedd, Gwynedd businesses and residents.
- 1.4. As a result, we believe it is extremely important to be able to offer our services bilingually, and to respect the customer's language choice.
- 1.5. The sensitive nature of some of the cases faced by the department shows the importance of operating through the medium of Welsh for our service users.
- 1.6. For example, when our staff deal with individuals facing homelessness, who are already in a situation of extreme stress, dealing with these individuals in a sensitive manner is vital. An obvious and important part of that is speaking to the individual in the language of their choice.
- 1.7. The staff of the Housing Grants Unit deal with disabled adults and children by offering them support to be able to live in their own home by installing equipment such as ramps, or making modifications to houses such as extensions or wet rooms. It is also extremely important to be able to offer a service in Welsh when dealing with these situations.
- 1.8. The Department also deals with service users who come to Gwynedd from outside Wales and Britain, and who speak languages other than Welsh and English. The Refugee Resettlement Unit has been a key part of the Council's response to the situation in Ukraine, accepting, supporting, and accommodating refugees in Gwynedd over the past two years.

1.9. The Unit works closely with agencies such as interpreters to support refugees who come to Gwynedd to seek asylum. In general, these individuals are keen to make a meaningful contribution to the society that accepts them, with many learning Welsh when settling, and fitting into their new communities well.

2. Responding to the matters that members wish to discuss

2.1. The matters are responded to on the following page

Question 1. Promoting and advancing

How does your department go beyond offering bilingual services and contribute to the objectives of the county's language strategy (what activities and projects have been carried out during the past year which raise the status of the Welsh language and ensure opportunities for people to use Welsh in the community)?

Generally, the Department attaches great importance to operating through the medium of Welsh, not only because of our feeling of pride and respect towards the language and what it means to the Council, but also because we deal with individuals who are often in vulnerable situations and who come to us when they have nowhere else to turn, and we fully realise how important it is to use the language of their choice when supporting individuals in such a situation.

Common Housing Allocation Policy

The Welsh Language Promotion Plan states that mobility and migration are one of the main challenges for the Welsh language in Gwynedd. We believe that our Common Housing Allocation Policy, which gives priority for social housing to individuals with a connection to Gwynedd, contributes to the goal of ensuring that local people can live and stay in their communities. The latest data shows that 97% of social housing allocations in Gwynedd have gone to a person with a local connection between November 2022 and 2023. Furthermore, approximately 55% of allocations have been made to individuals or families with a connection with the local community – a step which goes the extra mile to what is required of us as a Council to ensure a home for local people.

National Eisteddfod of Wales 2023, Boduan

As part of the provision on Cyngor Gwynedd's stall in the Eisteddfod in August 2022, the Department held a day full of activities and events on the theme 'Homely Gwynedd' (as per the Council Plan). Awareness was raised about the schemes offered by the Council to tackle the county's housing emergency, and the opportunities available to help Gwynedd residents live in their community. It was also a chance to bring attention to prominent issues the Department is responsible for such as homelessness, empty homes and fuel poverty. In the Eisteddfod, we launched an exciting adaptation to our Empty Homes Grant to First Time Buyers, meaning that empty homes which used to be second homes are now eligible for the grant.

The Language Specification Forum and Quarterly Report

The Department attends and takes an active part in the activity of the Language Specification forum and believes that it is an important and useful medium to raise matters, discuss solutions and share good practice with colleagues and others.

The Department is also grateful for the quarterly report detailing its performance in regard to the Language Specifications and it is used as a way of monitoring how many members of staff have received a language assessment or training, and to promote Welsh learning and development opportunities among our staff.

Department Newsletter

The Housing and Property Department's newsletter celebrated its first birthday in December 2023, in which matters of interest is shared with staff, along with providing staff with the opportunity to get to know each other. It also is a place to bring attention to important corporate announcements such as the recent changes to the Council's language policy and promote training opportunities such as language improvement courses.

[Housing Action Plan Schemes](#)

The Department's Housing Action Plan, a Plan with over 30 schemes over a period of 6 years, outlines our objectives in addressing the housing needs of the people of Gwynedd. The Plan will be beneficial in several key areas, one of which is the Welsh language and Welsh-speaking communities. Projects such as those named below will give Gwynedd residents opportunities to access a suitable and affordable home.

A grant for residential elements in community regeneration schemes

One of the latest schemes to launch is project 3g in the Housing Action Plan. This scheme provides financial support in the form of a grant for community-led schemes to create living units for local people. The Department. Two groups have already expressed interest and the application forms have been shared.

We have already received forms back from one group, and the information is currently being considered. Our hope by providing this grant and supporting communities in this way is that further opportunities will be available for local people to live in their community.

Scheme	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 for buying or renting at an intermediate rent.	We intend to set a condition so that any owner must be a local person.
Purchase private housing	Use a ready-made stock of houses that would be suitable for housing local people, while considering buying houses and letting them to local people at an intermediate rent.	We will give priority to local people when letting these houses.
Refuse applications to remove a local person condition on former 'Council houses'.	Consider being more challenging with applications to remove the 'local person condition' from former Council houses and to adhere to the original purpose of such clauses. We would not lift the condition unless there were extremely unusual circumstances.	It is intended to adopt an internal policy that protects this condition for the future.
First Time Buyers' Grants to renovate empty houses	Extend the previous scheme, which has helped more than 90 first time buyers to renovate empty houses and therefore bring empty houses back into use for 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 restoration work before the house may be occupied.	
Purchase building land for the future	Use some development sites that are already in our ownership to make a start on our plans in some areas where the need from local residents is clear. However, if we are	

	to continue after that, we will need to be prepared to respond quickly to purchasing building land when the opportunity arises in the right places.	
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It was noted in our Equality Impact Assessment for this Scheme (dated 12 June 2023) that it would have a positive impact on the Welsh language: *"It is estimated that 63% 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."*

Pilot Dwyfor

In November 2021, the Welsh Government announced its intention to carry out a pilot scheme to address the housing problem in the Dwyfor area. We have been working with the Government for months on various projects that either strengthen those already in our Housing Action Plan (such as the Homebuy Scheme) or which are new schemes to be trialled in the Pilot area.

Systems and Technology

The Department makes extensive use of various systems, which include systems to capture and analyse information about the Council's properties such as maintenance, Legionnaires' Disease and energy use and expenditure; and in the housing field to keep housing registers and information about the County's homelessness situation, and systems that the Housing Enforcement Unit and the Housing Grants and Projects Unit use to facilitate their work.

We are currently procuring new systems for homelessness and housing options. An important and fundamental part of the process was to ensure that it was possible to use the systems in Welsh, and it is pleasing to say that we succeeded in this by ensuring that the supplier builds a Welsh interface to the system. We believe this to be important as it allows us to conduct our internal operations in Welsh without having to translate, interpret or share information in English. We also hope that this will positively influence our partners who will also be using the systems.

Although many of the other systems are provided in English (due to the language of the suppliers), we can create or modify elements within some of these systems, and create and produce our own reports, which are done either in Welsh only or bilingually.

Communications

We have been collaborating and supporting our housing partners recently with bilingual communication material, what has led to ensuring that signs, marketing material and correspondence gives a prominent place for the Welsh language.

Question 2. Policy and Standards Matters

- i. Staff language skills – the number of Welsh speakers and learners within the department (latest Language Designations data).
- ii. Barriers – are there any barriers to your ability as a department to offer a full service in Welsh (i.e., act on the requirements of the Language Policy and Welsh Language Standards)?
- iii. Compliments and Complaints – provide information on any compliments or complaints that the department has received during the year about Welsh/bilingual services.

i) Staff language skills

We place significant importance on ensuring that we comply with the Council's Language Policy, and on our ability to offer a Welsh language service to our service users, whether internal or external.

According to the latest Language Designations Quarterly Report, **96%** of our staff achieve or surpass the Language Designations of their posts. Of those 96%, **60%** has skills that exceed the language requirements associated with their posts.

Up to 05/12/2023, **99%** of the Departments' staff have received some form of assessment (self-assessment or line manager assessment) with only 7 remaining unassessed (of which one has since left the Council, and a line manager assessment is underway for the other).

85% has completed an assessment i.e., what we wish for in order to achieve the best picture of the language skills of our staff. This is an improvement of 6% over the last year following a robust campaign asking staff to complete a self-assessment. Those who have only received a line manager assessment is mostly front-line staff, such as office cleaners, and we recognise it may take some time for a self-assessment to be completed due to the nature of their work.

Considering the Department has grown over the last year, we are proud of these statistics, and we consider is a testament of the Department's commitment towards the Welsh language and its decisiveness to provide a dully bilingual service to the people of Gwynedd.

ii) Barriers

Generally, our ability to offer a fully Welsh service is robust and we do not feel that barriers exist in this regard. The Department's internal administration is fully through the medium of Welsh, and we are proud in our ability to offer support to our service users, many of which are some of the most vulnerable members of our society, through the medium of Welsh. Encouragement is given to members of staff who are less confident in their Welsh language skills or wish/need to improve their language skills to search of opportunities to learn/develop their abilities. We believe there is room to celebrate that members of the Department's staff proactively look for opportunities to improve and/or maintain the standard of their language and take ownership of that for the benefit of our service users.

Regional and national meetings

As stated in our last report, although as a Department, we manage to offer all our services in Welsh or bilingually, the picture is quite different when we look outside the Council. Regional and national meetings are generally held in English only, and although translation and Welsh material is available in some of them, that can be laborious and generate a sense that the one requesting translation is causing a nuisance. This can become an obstacle when it comes to offering a Welsh language service to our Service users.

iii) Compliments and Complaints

In terms of compliments, although that we haven't received correspondence specifically praising the Department's Welsh/bilingual provision, officers receive regular praise by many members of the public we deal with every day praising the overall general service provided, including communications, and we consider that our ability to provide a fully Welsh/bilingual service is a core part of that.

In terms of complaints, we are happy to report that the department has not received any complaints pertaining to the Welsh/bilingual language service provided.

Question 3. Development Opportunities

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?

General

We feel that the Language Specifications Forum is a particularly good vehicle for sharing good practices across the Council, together with having experts and champions "around the table" to discuss obstacles and opportunities. It also gives us as a Department the incentive to take a step back every now and then to see if anything needs to be addressed or to celebrate any successes too. Similarly, we see that the Quarterly Report is extremely beneficial as a means of providing an overview of our department.

Having been working from home or in a hybrid arrangement since the pandemic period, it has become apparent that staff miss seeing each other in the office and having the opportunity to chat informally with each other. We believe that is even more relevant in the case of staff who are learning or developing their Welsh. With the introduction of the new Working to the Future policy, we anticipate it will surely help the situation as more and more staff work in the office and see each other. However, we believe there is room to look at how these groups could be brought together in an informal way.

The housing and property field

In Service Level Agreements to provide supported accommodation, we will impose a condition that the 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.

Once again, we state our feeling that more specific training should be developed in the Welsh language in the housing field - most training takes place in English, and although that does not hinder or prevent our ability to operate, it would be good to be able to receive the training in Welsh, or at least bilingually.

