
LANGUAGE COMMITTEE: 22 OCTOBER 2024

PRESENT:

Councillors: Meryl Roberts (Vice-chair)

Alan Jones Evans, Jina Gwyrfai, Olaf Cai Larsen, Elfed Williams, Rhys Tudur, Anne Lloyd Jones, Hefin Underwood and Peter Thomas.

Officers: Vera Jones (Democracy and Language Services Manager), Llywela Haf Owain (Senior Language and Scrutiny Adviser), Llio Mai Dafydd (Welsh Language Learning and Development Officer), Nia Lewis (Language Adviser), Anthony Caradog Evans (Assistant Language Officer) and Rhodri Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

- Item 5: Gareth Jones (Assistant Head of Environment Department) and Carwyn Meredydd (Senior Operational Officer).
- Item 6: Ffion Madog Evans (Assistant Head of Finance Department – Accountancy and Pensions) and Huw Ynyr (Assistant Head of Information Technology)
- Item 7: Steffan Jones (Head of Highways, Engineering and YGC Department) and Siôn Arwel Jones (Business Development Manager).
- Item 8: Rhys Meredydd Glyn (Head of Gwynedd Immersion Education System).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Menna Baines (Chair), Elfed Wyn ap Elwyn, Llio Elenid Owen and Menna Trenholme (Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services), Dafydd Williams (Head of the Environment Department) and Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department).

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

A declaration of personal interest was received from Councillor Rhys Tudur, as he was a member of the Gwynedd Planning Policy Working Group. It was noted that it was not a prejudicial interest, and he did not withdraw from the meeting for the item.

3. URGENT ITEMS

No urgent items were received.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 25 June 2024 as a true record.

5. WELSH LANGUAGE PROMOTION PLAN – ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

The report was presented by the Assistant Head of Environment Department who referred briefly to the following main points:

It was noted that the front-line nature of the Department led to daily contact with the public and Councillors, therefore every effort was being made to promote the language from day to day, through the work and actions of the staff.

He confirmed that the Department's policies promoted and supported the Welsh language, since consideration of the Welsh language had been central to the development of the Joint Local Development Plan. He added that there was a dedicated Planning Policy in place for dealing with language matters and noted that the Supplementary Planning Guidance provided further detailed guidance on how the Welsh language should be taken into account through all types of developments. He highlighted that the process of developing a new Local Development Plan was currently underway as one of the priorities of the Council Plan. He emphasised that the Welsh language was central to the development of this Plan.

The Members were reminded that the Council had introduced an Article 4 Direction across the Gwynedd Local Planning Authority Area (noting that this did not include areas that are within the Eryri National Park boundaries). It was reported that planning permission was required to change a property from a main residency into a second home or short-term holiday let since the Article 4 Direction had come into force on 1 September 2024. He explained that the objective was to have better control of the housing stock within the County, to meet the housing needs of Gwynedd's residents. He elaborated that the Direction was a means of assisting the aim of supporting and promoting the Welsh language.

He reported that there had been significant progress in terms of the Department's language skills statistics during the past year, through the self-assessment questionnaire. It was noted that a high number of staff were front-line workers, such as the Waste and Recycling services, where they do not have easy access to the staff intranet site. Consequently, the self-assessment questionnaires were completed with team leaders to gain an understanding of the workforce's language needs. It was highlighted that 81.4% of the Department's staff had completed the questionnaire, and that 83.6% of those employees reached the language designations for their posts. It was acknowledged that the Department needed to continue developing this field, but the officers were confident that they would see progress in future as the work continued.

The efforts of the staff to learn the language and improve their language skills were praised.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

A member drew attention to a statistic within the report that noted that three planning applications had been refused partly due to various language issues, and that 13 planning applications had been granted permission with a planning condition for language alleviation measures. More information was requested regarding on what language reasons could planning permission be refused, and what language alleviation measures could the Department impose on successful applications. In response, the Assistant Head of Department confirmed that he was not able to share specific details about cases. However, it was considered that planning applications would be refused because of lack of evidence about the development's impact on the Welsh language. He elaborated that the department could impose language alleviation conditions that related to the use of Welsh names and signs. He emphasised that a condition had been imposed on 35 successful planning applications to ensure a Welsh name on businesses and on over 120 new dwellings.

The Members were reminded that the Council does not assist any planning application with language statements or any other assessments for planning purposes, as the Council must be impartial. It was acknowledged that language statements were developed by individuals who tended to support the planning applications. Nevertheless, it was emphasised that every application was assessed and challenged based on the evidence submitted. Reference was made to the need for clearer and definitive guidance from the Welsh Government in order to change this situation in future.

It was questioned that the Department was implementing to assess the effect that the Article 4 Direction would have on the housing stock in Gwynedd. In response to the enquiry, the Assistant Head of Department confirmed that there was a monitoring framework in place and that the Planning Service received regular reports from the Taxation service to identify changes in the market as time went by. He elaborated that they would be able to confirm whether more houses are paying the basic council tax rate and whether or not house use was changing as this process continued in the future.

A member enquired whether the Assistant Head was aware of any discussions by other Planning Authorities to introduce an Article 4 Direction in future? In response, the Assistant Head confirmed that Eryri National Park had decided to look into introducing an Article 4 Direction. It was reported that the evidence and information gathered by Cyngor Gwynedd was of huge help to them as they prepared to introduce the Direction and that the two Authorities worked closely together. He noted that they had carried out a formal consultation and that a final decision would be made by the Authority soon.

It was considered that the front-line staff of the Department's services, such as Waste and Recycling, did not reflect the language of the communities they served in some areas of the County. It was noted that recruitment challenges were considered a contributing factor to this problem. In response, the Assistant Head agreed that recruitment was difficult for the Department in general. He emphasised that the Department was making efforts to address this situation and it was hoped that the receipt of information from language skills self-assessment questionnaires would enable the Department to address this situation in future. The Senior Operational Officer added that a lack of confidence amongst staff members to use language skills had also contributed to this challenge. It was reported that work was ongoing to encourage all employees to make use of the Welsh language skills they already possessed.

It was asked if the Department used agencies to advertise job applications, or were these applications made internally within the Council? In response, the Assistant Head confirmed that job advertisements were made bilingually and internally within the Council. It was elaborated that the Senior Operational Officer had been developing recruitment packs so that Council benefits could be more attractive to companies.

A member enquired about an update on the development of the Tir a Môr pack since the Department's presentation to the Language Committee in 2023. In response, the Assistant Head noted that considerable progress had been made on this scheme as the Department had received feedback that it was a very valuable pack. It was added that the use of the pack was being widened, as Anglesey County Council had expressed an interest in using it. Assurance was given that data on this pack would be presented to the Language Committee during the Department's update in 2025.

The members expressed their thanks for the report.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and note the observations received.

6. WELSH LANGUAGE PROMOTION PLAN – FINANCE DEPARTMENT

The report was presented by the Assistant Head of Finance (Accountancy and Pensions) and the Assistant Head of Information Technology. They referred briefly to the following main points:

The members were reminded of the Digital Plan which the Cabinet had adopted in November 2023. They noted that the Welsh language was a central element of the Plan, and recognised the need to have a Welsh-medium provision for any public facing software. They elaborated that every effort was being made to also ensure a Welsh-language provision in every other aspect of the Council's work. They referred to the Digital Suitability Assessment that was used for any product being developed or purchased by the Council, ensuring that the Welsh language was an important element of those requirements.

It was detailed that the Department had sourced a Welsh-language software package for the new Council Tax self-service site, noting that there was no Welsh-language provision available in the standard package. They explained that this enabled the Council to provide the site bilingually to the public when it became operational.

It was emphasised that a large number of the department's staff reached the language designations for their posts. They added that two members of staff were receiving additional Welsh language training, including a course in Nant Gwrtheyrn recently. It was ensured that every member of staff had some level of Welsh skills within the Department, therefore it was emphasised that all internal correspondence within the Department was shared in Welsh only.

It was confirmed that the Department was currently working with Audit Wales. It was elaborated that the Department had produced six packs of 2023/24 final accounts for Cyngor Gwynedd, Ambition North Wales, GwE and Gwynedd Harbours. It was explained that Audit Wales carried out detailed external audits on all the accounts. They expressed how pleased they were that Audit Wales had appointed more Welsh-speaking auditors following a recent recruitment drive, which meant that meetings were held through the medium of Welsh.

There was pride that the Department had managed to attract trainees for the fields of Finance and Information Technology, and that they were developing their careers through the medium of Welsh.

It was explained that the Pensions Unit had been working with an external company to develop Welsh-medium annual personal video statements. They elaborated that this meant that a virtual person within the video guided individuals through the annual statement of their pension, in Welsh. It was recognised that this had been challenging work for the unit.

It was noted that a new bilingual self-service system for the pension fund had been launched in April this year. Pride was expressed in the fact that the Gwynedd Pension Fund had been the first fund in Wales to upgrade the new site with the support of an external company. It was confirmed that this work was spreading throughout Wales, since the Powys Pension Fund now used it, and there were further plans for other pension funds across Wales to upgrade and use it.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

The report explained that every laptop provided by the Council was provided with the operational platform set in Welsh. It was asked whether the Department had obtained further statistics to check the number that chose to continue with the Welsh setting. In response, the Assistant Head of Information Technology confirmed that 63% of the devices were still in Welsh, and 37% had been switched back to English settings. It was ensured that all Heads of Department encouraged staff to use the Welsh-language interface on their devices, but it was acknowledged that this could not be made compulsory.

The Department was congratulated on the fact that 99.5% of the Department's staff (218 members of staff) had completed a language self-assessment. It was asked if officers had any good practice that could be shared with other Council departments, so that more members of staff completed it. In response to the observations, the Assistant Head of Finance Department (Accountancy and Pensions) confirmed that there were arrangements in place to remind the Management Team to remind the staff regularly, rather than attempting to hold a campaign to get every member of staff to complete it at the same time. It was acknowledged that it was easier for the officers to contact all members of staff because a greater number of them had technological equipment, compared with some other Council departments that dealt with front-line work, where employees did not have laptops.

The members expressed their thanks for the report.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and note the observations received.

7. WELSH LANGUAGE PROMOTION PLAN – HIGHWAYS, ENGINEERING AND YGC DEPARTMENT

The report was presented by the Head of Highways, Engineering and YGC and the Business Development Manager. They referred briefly to the following main points:

It was reported that the Department's work was front-line in nature and that employees had frequent contact with the public. It was stressed that most staff were expected to be able to speak Welsh to an acceptable level so that queries could be dealt with directly and provide a better customer experience as a result.

They provided a list of different training that had been provided to support staff to develop and foster their skills. They were also pleased that the Department had managed to attract apprentices to the fields of civil engineering, electrician and fleet technician. It was emphasised that the Welsh language was focal to their development within the Department.

They expressed pride that 96.6% of the Department's staff reached the language designations for their posts. It was noted that this was a significant increase since the Department had previously reported to the Language Committee and that the Department had worked consistently to ensure that employees had the opportunity to complete the self-evaluation questionnaire. It was elaborated that work continued within all services across the Department to encourage language use and build confidence in language skills.

It was noted that three engineers from the YGC service were members of the Institution of Civil Engineers North Wales's Graduate Student Technician board. It was elaborated that one of the members chaired the group, reporting on technical issues to other groups across the United Kingdom regularly.

It was confirmed that joint working took place with the Environment Category Team and the Council's Business Support Team for attending events across the County. It was explained that the aim of the events was to raise awareness of opportunities for local subcontractors to register on the Council's list of Subcontractors or to provide a service through the Council's frameworks. They elaborated that information was shared as part of the Council's Business Support Bulletin which was issued on a weekly basis. It was hoped to hold further events with Adra, the Council's Departments and more businesses in the future.

They reported that the department had received positive feedback during this year's Anglesey Show and also in careers events. It was noted that these included comments about the service being delivered to residents as well as the department's work to promote the Welsh language.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

It was noted that the Department had received several complaints about issues such as English-only signs. It was asked what steps the Department was taking to reduce the number of complaints in the future. In response, it was acknowledged that this had been a challenge over the past year because the Department had been working with specialist external contractors. It was emphasised that contracts, by now, emphasised the need to introduce all signage for sites bilingually and that sanctions can be introduced if the conditions of the policies are breached. They confirmed that no difficulties had arisen since this change was introduced and that the Department was keen to build on these procedures in the future, as it was inevitable that use of external contractors would continue due to the specialised nature of aspects of the Department's work.

The members expressed their thanks for the report.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and note the observations received.

8. ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS TO DISCUSS GWYNEDD'S EDUCATION LANGUAGE POLICY

The report was presented by the Head of the Gwynedd Immersion Education System who referred briefly to the following main points:

He explained that the Education department was currently holding a series of sessions to discuss the current Education Language Police. He noted that the sessions were an opportunity to discuss ideas and suggestions relating to the policy. He elaborated that it was also an opportunity to consider whether the current Education Language Policy needs revising following the results of the 2021 Census as well as several policy developments in the field of language and education nationally.

It was confirmed that the Department had commissioned Meirion Prys Jones (freelance language consultant) to act as facilitator during all the sessions.

It was reported that some of the sessions had already been held across Gwynedd, in order to receive input from the headteachers of primary, secondary and special schools.

It was noted that the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee had already elected five members to attend the engagement meeting, namely Councillors Elwyn Jones, Jina Gwyrfai, Beth Lawton, Rhys Tudur and Richard Glyn Roberts.

The Language Committee was asked to elect an additional 5 representatives to join in the engagement meeting to be held on 4 December 2024.

During the discussion, the following observations were made:-

It was confirmed that Councillors Menna Baines and Elfed Wyn ap Elwyn had indicated their desire to attend the engagement meeting, when submitting their apologies for this meeting of the Language Committee.

Councillors Cai Larsen, Alan Jones Evans and Meryl Roberts expressed an interest in attending the engagement meeting.

RESOLVED

To elect Councillors Menna Baines, Meryl Roberts, Elfed Wyn ap Elwyn, Alan Jones Evans and Olaf Cai Larsen to attend an engagement session to discuss the Council's current Education Language Policy on the afternoon of 4 December 2024.

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and concluded at 11.15am.

CHAIR