

MEETING	Corporate Scrutiny Committee
DATE	16 February 2017
SUBJECT	Simple language
AUTHOR	Councillors John Wyn Williams and R.H.Wyn Williams

1. Which subject was being considered?

The investigation group's task was to consider how simple and easy to understand the terminology used by the Council in questionnaires is.

We had decided to look at this issue following previous work with the Gwynedd Engagement Group that identified that one of the weaknesses of the Gwynedd Challenge questionnaire was that sections of the questionnaire used complicated language and too much 'Council terminology'. This was true in both Welsh and English versions.

The group hoped to identify steps to assist officers to improve the quality of questionnaires and make them clearer to the people who were answering them.

2. What did the group do?

a) Understand what is happening now.

The group spoke with Sion Gwynfryn Williams (Communication and Engagement Manager) and Jen Rao (Engagement Officer), to understand the system that currently exists within the Council when creating questionnaires.

Sion and Jen explained that they and their team were responsible for helping to create the Council's main questionnaires. They also explained that they did not have enough staff to support every piece of work, and a vast number of questionnaires were created by officers in the various departments.

b) Speak with experts on clear language.

The group also decided to speak with experts from Canolfan Bedwyr in Bangor. Dr Llion Jones (Director, Canolfan Bedwyr) and Eleri Hughes (Principal Language Tutor, Canolfan Bedwyr) were able to share some of the main principles of Cymraeg Clir and Plain English.

- Use 'us' (Gwynedd Council) and 'you' (the people of Gwynedd)
- Write to convey information and not to create an impression
- Do not use unnecessary clauses, e.g. "Save £59,396" rather than "Remove the maintenance budget and save £59,396".
- Keep sentences short – no more than 25 words (computer settings can be changed so that a sentence defined by Cysill as too long is reduced to fewer than 25 words [when writing in Welsh])
- Use simpler, more common vocabulary, 'day-to-day' words, e.g. "create" rather than "develop"; "roads" rather than "network of roads"; "other plans" rather than "alternative plans", "look after" rather than "maintain".
- Use less of the negative, e.g. if you do not register, you cannot vote > if you register, you can vote.
- Use less of the imperfect, e.g. over 300,000 journeys are made > there are over 300,000 journeys.

- Use a verb-noun / adjective rather than a noun, e.g. overgrowth > overgrown / growing wild.
- Use the long form of the verb, e.g. 'We are writing to you', rather than 'We're writing to you', as the contracted form of the verb can sometimes suggest that something will happen in the future.
- Use active sentences rather than passive sentences, e.g. That overgrowth would not be controlled > unable to control overgrowth, in order to make the piece more lively, direct and easier to understand.

c) Look at recent questionnaires

In order to ascertain whether or not each questionnaire published by the Council used complicated language, the group decided to look at some recent examples. The group concluded that the questionnaires were easy to understand on the whole, but that there was room for improvement in places.

- There was room to improve the layout so that the Welsh and English versions did not overlap.
- Parts of some questionnaires were informal, e.g. used words such as '*amdan*' in Welsh, and other parts were more formal, which suggests that more than one author worked on the questionnaire. It is important to ensure that the style is consistent throughout the entire document.
- There is room to consider the statements and their order, i.e. they should run from one extreme to another, i.e. Strongly agree / Agree / Don't know / Disagree / Strongly disagree / Not relevant.
- It is important that the authors of documents check translations carefully to ensure that the meaning of the original has been conveyed correctly and in full.

3. What are the conclusions of the work?

Everyone who was part of the work saw that there was room to use plainer language in a number of fields across the Council, e.g. when writing committee reports. Everyone also agreed that one field needed to be identified initially to make a difference, and a decision was made to focus on questionnaires.

The following steps were decided upon:

- That the Communication and Engagement Unit and Canolfan Bedwyr jointly develop short guidelines (no more than two sides of A4) for staff on how to create questionnaires in simple language. It was also decided that a list of words / phrases to avoid would be created.
- That Canolfan Bedwyr provides input into an in-house pack of guidelines for arranging public meetings, press statements, etc., that is currently being created.
- Hold a pilot of the questionnaire guidelines with a specific Council department to see whether or not any impact has been seen following its introduction, before consideration is given to establishing a more extensive plan.