

The Education Department's response to the Recommendations of the Task and Finish Group

The Education Department appreciates the interest of the members of the Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee in the draft education language policy drawn up by the Education Department as a model policy for schools.

The draft policy drawn up by the Department is an attempt to set Gwynedd's ambition to ensure that the County's children and young people grow up to be proficient users of Welsh and develop bilingual or multilingual skills within our Education System. The draft policy is meaningful of Gwynedd's linguistic diversity, and is an attempt to guide stakeholders with us on the journey to increase the provision of Welsh language education in Gwynedd schools.

Drawing up a language policy is a complex process, and there are legal contexts that need to be taken into account when drawing it up. As a result of this, the Education Department commissioned Meirion Prys Jones as a consultant and expert on linguistic planning - who has played a key role in shaping the current non-statutory system of categorising schools according to their Welsh-medium provision - to assist and collaborate with the Education Department to re-examine the current language policy, engage with stakeholders, and on that basis, draw up the draft education language policy.

In terms of context, the draft policy considers and addresses the Welsh Government's requirements in relation to the Welsh Language in Education Strategic Plan (WESP), Cymraeg 2050: A Million Speakers, the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, Our national mission: high standards and aspirations for all (Welsh Government; 2023) and School improvement guidance: a framework for evaluation, accountability and improvement (Welsh Government; 2024).

As well as addressing all the above requirements, the draft policy also reflects the views of various stakeholders gathered during the engagement period, including:

- Primary Schools
- Secondary Schools
- Special Schools
- Learners
- Language Organisations
- Education and Economy Scrutiny Committee
- Language Committee
- Gwynedd Governors' Forum

Based on the detailed work undertaken to draw up the draft policy, the Education Department is of the opinion that the proposals of the Task and Finish Group propose significant changes to the content and core principles of the Department's draft policy, and as a result, the tone and elements of the content of the Task and Finish Group

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policy document create some challenges that the Education Department is concerned about.

The Education Department does not intend to submit comments on minor changes presented in the policy document of the Task and Finish Group. However, the Department is prepared to give consideration to these, in order to be able to move forward with the process of consultation and present the draft policy to the Cabinet in due course.

In terms of the challenges, the draft policy, like the current Language Education Policy, is part of a wider strategy by the Council to ensure that children and young people up to the age of 18, have the opportunity to develop their linguistic skills in Welsh and English, so that they are proficient bilingually. This is achieved by teaching Welsh and English as a subject, and as a cross-curricular medium to varying degrees in accordance with what the policy says. It must be recognised that people need bilingual skills, and that has been, and continues to be, part of the Department's vision to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to develop their linguistic skills in Welsh and English. The Department's opinion is that it is necessary to state clearly and unequivocally that all learners will be proficient bilingually in the draft policy, in order to garner broad stakeholder support for the policy, and especially considering that parents are interested in their children's bilingual skills. In the same way, children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN) will receive equal linguistic opportunities in accordance with the general requirements of the policy.

Considering the legal context, the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill 2025 has been passed by the Welsh Parliament in May this year, and is currently moving to the next stage of receiving Royal Assent. However, there is a period of several years until we see the Bill and the statutory system of categorising schools become operational. In the meantime, therefore, the draft language policy is required to reflect the non-statutory categorisation system that is currently operational, transferring to the statutory system when it comes into force. Operating in this way will be a means of avoiding potential legal challenges when implementing the policy, as the policy would reflect and complement the Welsh Government's requirements.

It is recognised that definitions of the categorisation system vary between the current non-statutory system and what is specified as a minimum in the Welsh Language Bill, and over the next few years, the Education Department will need to pave the way and work with the schools to support them in reaching the requirements in order to facilitate an effective transfer from one system to the other in due course.

Immersion Education has been a core part of the implementation of the Gwynedd Education Language Policy since its establishment. The Council does not have the right to force learners who are newcomers to attend Language Immersion Units, and the success of the Immersion System in supporting learners to acquire the Welsh language, together with the success of our schools in encouraging and guiding learners over decades is proof that the current system of encouraging and guiding learners is appropriate. Learners in years 2-9 who are referred to the Immersion System, and for

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learners who arrive at our schools late as newcomers in years 10-11, the schools are expected to provide appropriately for them, with the Immersion System providing guidance and support to the schools as needed.

Children and young people's social use of the Welsh language and the implementation of the *Siarter Iaith* Language Charter are absolutely key, and through the draft policy it is expected that Welsh would be the medium of the majority of the extracurricular activities held. Promoting the Welsh language has been a core element of Gwynedd's Education Language Policy since its establishment, and in terms of international language planning, this is one of the things that is currently being emphasized, namely that language learning must be coupled with real opportunities to use it. Without this there is a danger that a language will not take root, and new speakers will not be keen to use it, even though they have the linguistic skills to do so.

In conclusion, it is considered that the policy document of the Task and Finish Group presents some practical challenges that the Education Department is concerned about. However, the Department is prepared to consider some minor adjustments to the draft policy when proceeding to consult on it and presenting to Cabinet.