

REPORT TO CABINET
17 February 2015

Cabinet member: Ioan Thomas

Subject: to support an application to develop a Welsh Language Centre at the Old Clinic, Sackville Road, Bangor

Lead officer: Debbie Jones, Manager, Members and Democratic Services (and Language).

Decision sought

That the Council commits, depending on a grant offer for the development of the Old Clinic on Sackville Road, Bangor, and to the upkeep of the building should Menter Iaith Bangor fail to meet its obligations for any remaining period of a five year lease.

Local member's opinion

The matter is not a local one.

Introduction

To conform to the conditions of the Bwrw Mlaen Capital Fund, which had a closing date of 6 February, 2015, the Council is required to lease the former health clinic on Sackville Road from its owner on a rent-free basis. For the duration of that same lease the Council is to lease the building to Menter Iaith Bangor. Menter Iaith Bangor will manage the building as a Welsh Language Centre.

Despite the fact that the business case for the development depends on neither capital or revenue funding from the Council risks for the Council have been identified. Specifically, that if Menter Iaith Bangor fail to meet its obligations under the lease Gwynedd Council would be required to meet those obligations for the remaining period of the lease.

The following detailed risks have been identified should Menter Iaith Bangor withdraw from its lease:

- Decommissioning services and contracts
- Securing the building from vandalism and criminal damage

- Maintaining regular visits to prevent criminal behaviour and unauthorised access
- Menter Iaith Bangor will be eligible to register as a charity. Consequently there will no obligation to pay nondomestic rates
- Maintenance costs are expected to be low following grant based capital expenditure on the building.

The Council's Property Unit estimate that full term costs to cover the issues outlined above should not exceed £2,000.

However, it is not possible to set a maximum sum to meet unexpected costs resulting from vandalism or criminal damage. It is noted that this is the main risk facing the Council if the application succeeds and that the lease is signed.

Reasons for recommending the decision

The Welsh Government's policy statement: A living language: a language for living has identified Bangor as a regional urban centre within which language centres are to be developed to boost Welsh as a community and business language.

The Gwynedd Language Strategy 2014-2017 states that areas such as Bangor, where the use and status of the language is low, are seen as priorities that require considerable attention.

The 2011 Census showed that the percentage of Bangor residents who could speak Welsh had fallen from 46.7% to 36.4% since 2001.

The Welsh Government has awarded revenue funding, specifically targeted at supporting the Welsh language and developing a Welsh Language Centre in Bangor as part of hunaniaith's core funding for 2015/16.

Relevant considerations

It should be remembered that Hunaniaith's desire to support the project and submit this application to the Cabinet comes at a time when services are being cut to meet savings' targets.

Next steps and time table

Based on the need to meet the Welsh Government's time table a funding application as already been submitted (6 February 2015). This does not commit the Council to accepting any offer.

The Welsh Government will announce the successful applicants by the end of March, 2015. Any offer will be considered subject to the Cabinet's decision.

Statutory officers' opinion

Chief Executive:

As the report emphasises, there are extremely valid strategic reasons for supporting the recommendation. However, there is an element of risk, though a small one, linked to increasing the Council's asset base. All possible steps have been taken to control the risk and I support the recommendation.

Monitoring Officer:

The report addresses the risks involved in taking on a lease. It is expected that formalising the lease will allow the conditions agreed upon to be implemented as long as it is possible to manage the risks identified.

Head of finance:

The Council's own resources for supporting initiatives such as this are now very scarce, but the scheme's objectives is one of the Council's main issues. The Council must accept an element of risk such as this in moving forward and working with the third sector when looking for different ways to achieve our goals. There is a need to weigh the benefits that would come from the scheme if it were a success against the costs of being responsible for an empty building in the centre of Bangor for up to 5 years. After doing so, I believe this initiative should be supported, as there is evidence that work has been done to measure the risks, and to consider measures to mitigate them."

Appendices