

MEETING	<b>Language Committee</b>
DATE	<b>30 January 2023</b>
TITLE	<b>Report of the Housing and Property Department on the Implementation of the Language Policy and Activities to Promote the Welsh Language</b>
PURPOSE	<b>To present information about the Department's contribution to promoting and advancing the Welsh language</b>
AUTHOR	<b>Carys Fôn Williams, Head of Housing and Property</b>

## 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 year.

- 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. The Welsh Language Skills of our workforce**

- 2.1. We place great 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.
- 2.2. According to the latest Language Designations Quarterly Report, **94%** of our staff achieve or surpass the Language Designations of their posts.
- 2.3. Of those 94%, **60%** of them have skills that exceed the language requirements associated with their posts.
- 2.4. Up to 06/01/2023, **96%** of the staff have received some form of assessment (self-assessment or line manager assessment) with only seven remaining unassessed.
- 2.5. Of those, **79%** have completed a self-assessment (i.e. our requirement in order to get the best picture of our staff's language skills). This is an increase of 12% over the past year, following a campaign to encourage more staff to complete it.
- 2.6. Those who have received a line manager assessment only are mostly frontline staff, such as office cleaners, and we recognise that it may take some time for a self-assessment to be completed due to the nature of their work.

## **3. Responding to the matters that members wish to discuss**

- 3.1 The matters are responded to on the following pages

**A matter that the members wish to discuss:** Promoting and advancing

*Question 1: Can you highlight any projects within your department that contribute to one of the Council's language strategy priorities, namely the Welsh Language Promotion Plan for Gwynedd?*

**General**

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.

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 96% of social housing allocations in Gwynedd have gone to a person with a local connection between September 2021 and 2022.

**Homelessness**

When responding to situations where individuals and families are made homeless, the Service does its best to keep that family together when relocating. Apart from the obvious benefits to the well-being of the family by keeping them together, it safeguards the language as the language of the family, and reduces the risk that individuals will lose the language by being separated.

The Homelessness Service does not just work in response to situations of homelessness - a key part of its work focuses on preventing homelessness before it occurs. In some cases such as these, it entails communicating between members of a family in order to keep that family under the same roof, which can lead to the safeguarding of a Welsh-speaking household that would otherwise have been lost.

**Grants to adapt housing for disabled people**

Many people in Gwynedd live in houses that are not suited to their needs. That may mean that a resident is unable to climb the stairs to the first floor, or finds it difficult to wash because the building's existing bathroom is not fit for purpose. The Housing Grants and Projects Unit guides the individuals through the process in conjunction with Occupational Therapists, and ensures that a work programme is in place that corresponds to the individual's needs. Through these modifications, it is possible for the people of Gwynedd to stay in their homes and as a consequence keep Welsh speakers in their communities.

It is pleasing to note that the Unit is operated fully bilingually, with all officers able to offer a service in Welsh. A very high percentage of communication is done through the medium of Welsh (unless there is a need/request for communication in English only) and the Occupational Therapists we work with are Welsh speakers too, and the referral forms are in Welsh.

However, at the moment, our work programmes and technical documents are in English as that is the customary language of building specifications and documents in the construction/architectural field. Nevertheless, we also have the ability to provide these through the medium of Welsh as required.

### Projects within the [Housing Action Plan](#)

The Department's Housing Action Plan, a Plan of 33 projects over a period of six 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:

Scheme	Description	Further information
<b>Develop our own housing in order to increase the opportunities for Gwynedd residents to compete in the housing market.</b>	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.
<b>Purchase private housing</b>	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.
<b>Refuse applications to remove a local person condition on former 'Council houses'.</b>	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.
<b>First Time Buyers' Grants to renovate empty houses</b>	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.	
<b>Council Tax Exemption on empty houses for first time buyers</b>	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.	
<b>Purchase building land for the future</b>	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.	

It was noted in our Equality Impact Assessment for this Scheme that it would have a positive impact on the Welsh language:

*"It is estimated that 60% 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."*

### **Welsh Language Communities Housing Plan and Dwyfor Pilot**

During the first months of 2022, the Department responded on behalf of the Council to the Welsh Language Communities Housing Plan consultation, and now the Welsh Government has published the final Plan. Apart from what is stated in the Plan, it is not yet clear how the Council or the Department will contribute to the Plan moving forward but it is assumed that a number of the interventions will be trialled in the Dwyfor Pilot area.

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 and our empty homes schemes) 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 have also developed our own systems for the Maintenance Unit in conjunction with the internal Information Technology Service, and 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. 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.

Although many of the other systems are provided in English (due to the language of the suppliers), we have the ability to 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.

### **Communication**

Recently, the first issue of our department newsletter was published, where matters of interest are shared with staff, as well as giving staff from the Department's various services the opportunity to get to know each other. It also provides a space to draw staff's attention to important corporate announcements such as the recent change in the Council's language policy.

## Housing needs questionnaire

During the second and third quarter of 2022, a housing needs survey was carried out in conjunction with the Ardal Ni survey, where the people of Gwynedd were asked about their housing situation today and to the future, as well as their opinion on what they think is needed in the housing field in Gwynedd. The survey ended in the last quarter of 2022 and the 1500 responses received are currently being analysed.

### A matter that the members wish to discuss:

### Externalisation of work and awarding third party contracts

*Question 2: If the department awards work externally on contract, can you refer to any good practice, either when imposing conditions or when monitoring in order to ensure compliance with the linguistic conditions?*

The Department is involved with a number of contracts and contractors as a result of work carried out on the Council's property as well as in the housing field.

#### **Property Services**

On the whole, work is outsourced on contract by the Property Development, Maintenance and Grants and Housing Projects Unit Services. For example, the Property Development Service will issue tenders for construction work of all kinds, and the Maintenance Service will look for specialist companies in order to issue contracts for work such as the Council's fire alarms. In doing this, we use the extensive experience of our officers together with the expertise of the Corporate Category Team to ensure that we complete the work to the appropriate standard.

We feel that good practice becomes evident when contracts are issued where efforts are made to ensure that the standard of the Welsh medium service is secured and maintained. A copy of the Language Policy is included in the tendering documents, and every applicant is asked to read it to ensure that they understand what is required of them (such as if they need to use signage, they must be bilingual), but also that they understand the importance of the Welsh language to Cyngor Gwynedd.

In addition to that, in high-value tenders, companies are asked to provide a Community Benefits Response encompassing the Well-being Act 2015. This means asking potential contractors to consider how they could contribute to society locally, through steps such as local job creation or offering work experience opportunities. The side effect of that, of course, is to create opportunities for the people of Gwynedd to stay in their area, thereby increasing the opportunities to use Welsh as a working and living language in the County.

### **External property construction/development consultants**

Advertisements for tenders are usually published in English, especially when there is an obligation to advertise nationally and there is a legal requirement to advertise in English. This means that documentation, standard contracts, etc. are mostly published in English and sometimes bilingually. Nevertheless, external consultants are expected to comply with the Council's Language Policy. If it is necessary to provide designs, or short reports on a project for the purpose of public consultation, we will ensure that they are available bilingually. Furthermore, we expect that any consultants who may take part in a consultation with stakeholders or the public can provide Welsh speakers, or provide translation facilities.

### **Housing Services: Housing Grants and Projects**

The Housing Grants and Projects Unit often deals with contractors when commissioning work on behalf of some of the County's most vulnerable individuals.

Local contractors undertake the construction work, with the vast majority of them being Welsh speakers. This is extremely important to us, as the ability to communicate with applicants (especially the elderly) in Welsh can offer comfort and reassurance when they are in difficult and vulnerable situations.

### **A matter that the members wish to discuss:**

### **Operating bilingually**

*Question 3: Are there any obstacles that prevent you as a department from offering a full service in Welsh?*

In general, our ability to offer a full service in Welsh is robust and we do not feel that there are obstacles in this regard. The internal administration of the Department is entirely through the medium of Welsh, and we take pride in our ability to offer support to our service users, many of whom are some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society, through the medium of Welsh. We encourage members of staff who are a slightly less confident in their Welsh skills or who wish/need to improve their language skills to look for opportunities to learn/develop their skills. In fact, over the past 12 months, six members of the Department's staff have followed various courses to learn or develop Welsh. We believe that 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.

**A matter that the members wish to discuss:**

**Developing new opportunities**

*Question 4: 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?*

***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.

***General***

- We feel that the Language Designations Forum is a very 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 over the past two and a half years, 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. Would looking at how these groups could be brought together in an informal way be beneficial perhaps, not only for our staff, but also ultimately for the people of Gwynedd?