



**To/
Councillor Robert Smith
Cabinet Member for Education &
Learning**

**Councillor Elliott King
Cabinet Member for Culture, Human
Rights & Equalities**

BY EMAIL

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SPC/2023-24/15

10 April 2024

cc: Cabinet Members

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Committee on 19 March 2024. It is about the Council's Welsh Language Standards Annual Report 2022/23. A formal written response is required by 1 May.

Dear Councillor,

Scrutiny of Welsh Language Standards Annual Report 2022/23

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session with you on the Welsh Language Standards Annual Report covering the period April 2022 – March 2023. The session enabled the Committee to understand how well the Council is doing regarding compliance with Standards, and ask questions to provide challenge to progress, performance, and improvement.

Scrutiny has been discussing the Welsh Language Standards Annual Report since 2017, though previously it was reported to the Service Improvement & Finance Performance Panel. Following a tweak to Scrutiny arrangements the Committee has added this item to its work plan. So, this was the first time the Committee had considered this item.

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The Council has a legislative duty to comply with nationally defined Welsh Language Standards, introduced in 2016, including producing an annual report which details how it has complied with those Standards. We noted that there are 163 Standards in total, including 86 Service Delivery standards, 16 Policy Making standards, 51 Operational standards, 2 Promotional standards, and 8 Record Keeping standards. As well as data demonstrating our compliance, the Annual Report highlighted actions taken over the year across these 5 standards categories as well as work planned. For example in relation to Service Delivery Standards, the Council has delivered a series of digital projects, including automated processes, improving the ways residents and businesses can access services online bilingually.

Overall, the Committee noted from the report that complying with Welsh Language Standards continues to be challenging for the Council, impacted by the level of Welsh Language skills within the workforce. Though it was pleasing to see that there has been an increase on the previous year in the number of employees reported to have some level of Welsh language skills; willing to use Welsh in the course of their work; and the numbers who participated in formal Welsh language training courses. We also noted a greater percentage of new of vacant posts (excluding schools) which specified that Welsh language skills were desirable or essential.

It was a very helpful and useful session, and this letter reflects on what we learnt from the information presented, questions, and discussion. It shares the views of the Committee and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - key issues are summarised below.

Annual Reporting

The Standards require the Council to publish the annual report no later than 30 June following the financial year to which the report relates. It was noted there has been a significant delay in bringing the 2022-23 report to Scrutiny due to staffing issues, however we understand that the 2023-24 report, bringing the Committee up to date, will be prepared without delay – and is currently listed for the 14 May Committee meeting.

The Standards also require the Council to publicise the fact that it has published an annual report and ensure that a current copy of the annual report is available on the Council website, and in each of our offices that are open to the public. **The Committee asked about the visibility of the Annual Report and would be grateful if you could confirm whether hard copies of the Annual Report are deposited as required. In particular, we queried whether the report would be available in our libraries, which we felt would be a good thing.**

Welsh Language Complaints

The Annual Report shows that there were 6 Welsh language complaints in 2022-23 compared with seven the previous year, and provided a summary of the complaint and the Council response. **The Committee expressed some concern about the Council response to some of the complaints received, as described in the report, e.g. stating no action was taken. You undertook to look into this after the meeting and respond, in order to provide assurance that the Council has managed these complaints effectively where there has been a failing on the Council's part, and there has been learning and development as a result.** For example, a customer had been advised a letter in Welsh was not sent to them to save money, which is of course contrary to legislative requirements and policy.

Welsh Translation Service

The Welsh Translation Unit is a joint service with Neath Port Talbot Council. We understand that a formal contractual arrangement is in place, with a recharge costed on the use of service by Neath Port Talbot. We took the opportunity to follow up on an issue raised when the 2021-22 Annual Report was discussed by the then Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel in May 2023. There was discussion around the in-house Welsh Translation service, and cost comparison with external translation services. Your response back then stated that the use of external translators - or an external translation service - is significantly more cost effective per annum, and that further detail will be provided at a later date.

You told the Committee that the unit cost of providing the Welsh Translation Unit during 2022-23 was £90 per 1000 words. Whilst the procurement of external translation was more cost effective per annum, you stated that there were reasons for that and why an internal translation service was still preferable. **Although you mentioned an estimate of around £50 to £60 per 1000 words, can you confirm the actual cost of external translation?** We can see from the Annual Report that in 2022-23 the Welsh Translation Unit translated 3.17 million words, similar to the number translated in 2021-22. Around 400,000 words were translated by third party provider, compared to 750,000 in the previous year. It will be interesting to see figures for 2023-24.

You referred to improvements being made / explored to improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the service, which would bring the current unit cost down. We had a discussion about automatic translation systems, which could potentially save time and money. You told us that MS Translator software was already being used within the Unit, with officers then proof reading the translations to ensure error free, but opportunities to expand its use would be explored such as for large documents that could result in greater efficiency savings.

We queried the reference in the report to Zoom licences having also been procured for facilitators to enable simultaneous translation for meetings. As the Council was corporately using MS Teams, which has functionality for translation, we asked why this was necessary. You undertook to provide a written response on this.

Signage

We asked about Welsh language requirements in relation to signage, for example whether it should be the case that all the Parks in Swansea have bilingual signage notices in place. You stated that the Welsh Language requirements were that when we erect a new sign or renew a sign (including temporary signs), any text displayed on the sign must also be displayed in Welsh. We understood, therefore, that it is possible that some older signs still in place around Swansea, whether in Parks or not, are not bilingual, but would need to be when they are replaced in the future. A specific issue was raised about signage, specifically in Plasmarl, which you undertook to follow up with the individual Committee Member.

Welsh Medium Education

There are 10 Welsh-medium primary schools feeding into the two Welsh-medium secondary schools. The Committee asked what arrangements should be in place for translation provision for School Governor Meetings within Welsh-medium schools, and whether individual schools were responsible for the cost, or whether this was covered centrally. The example given was of one primary school where no translation facility was in place, so governing body meetings were being conducted in English, not Welsh. This could be down to costs and issues around organisation. You indicated that standard practice in Welsh-medium schools would be to have interpretation in place and would look into this issue. **You stated that a response would be provided to the Committee regarding expectations and arrangements regarding translation, including funding.**

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within, Specifically, we would be grateful for your response to the following:

- **Annual Reporting – are we complying with the requirement to ensure that a current copy of the annual report is available in each of our offices that are open to the public? Does this include libraries?**
- **Welsh Language Complaints – please provide assurance that the Council has managed the complaints effectively where there has been a failing on the Council's part and there has been learning and development as a result.**

- **Welsh Translation Service – can you confirm the actual cost of external translation; and can you clarify the Council’s need for Zoom licenses for interpretation in meetings, given the corporate tool remains MS Teams.**
- **Welsh Medium Education - what arrangements should be in place for translation provision for School Governor Meetings within Welsh-medium Schools, and whether individual schools were responsible for the cost.**

Please provide response to these, and any other comments about our letter by 1 May 2024. We will then publish both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

We look forward to seeing the Welsh Language Standards Annual Report for 2023/24, which is scheduled for our Committee meeting on 14 May, which will bring us up to date.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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