

Enw'r corff: Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Torfaen

Before we respond, as a Council we support the Welsh Government aims of promoting and increasing the use of the Welsh language. We have recently opened a new Welsh language primary school in Sebastopol to add to existing primary provision and the borough hosts a Welsh language medium secondary school to which learners from across wider Gwent authorities attend. These educational establishments will support learners through the medium of Welsh and longer term contribute to the aim of achieving 1M Welsh speakers across Wales by 2050.

In addition the Council supports its staff to learn Welsh; we have introduced guidance to staff and Members on compliance to the Standards when conducting business and has significantly increased its Welsh language translation to support bilingual provision. The Council is in discussion with the Welsh Language Commissioner's Office to those Standards we are appealing and recent progress has been encouraging. As stated earlier, the Council does support promoting and increasing the use of Welsh in the county in a reasonable and proportionate manner and will continue to do so. Below are our responses to your specific questions -:

What is your experience or opinion of the standards regime? I would like to hear in particular about the processes of setting and enforcing standards, and your experience of implementing or preparing to implement the standards within your organisation

The process of preparing and implementing the Standards has been ongoing for over 6 years, both laborious and uncertain at times. The process has meant credibility in the democratic system and the language itself has suffered as a result. During the initial consultation on the setting of the Standards, ourselves and other Local Authorities were clear from the outset that due to the demographics of the borough, we as an authority would find it very difficult to provide face to face services through the medium of Welsh.

The Standard, in their naming were seen as a way of building on the Council's Welsh Language Schemes and moving towards a common standard of Welsh language services delivered throughout Wales, albeit taking some authorities more time to reach the desired level, again due to demographics and workforce skills. We are now at a stage where, in South East Wales, each Council's Compliance Notice varies greatly due to individual challenges put forward. Making it difficult to merge services, as outlined in the Local Government Reform White Paper. We challenged 32 of the Standards, and despite numerous requests to meet and discuss the difficulties with the Commissioner's office, we have now managed to have a constructive meeting at this late stage, but this has been helpful.

The ethos of the Standards has meant promoting the language within the organisation has been positive, this is down to individual officers and not the assistance of the Commissioner. We believe, that from a service user's perspective, the introduction of the Standards have meant uncertainty with who, what, where and when they can expect a Welsh language service. A simplified and clearer set of Standards would have meant more organisations implementing the Standards sooner and with clearer guidance to what each Standard actually means such as a

'code of practice' would have given greater consistency and understanding to Authorities interpretation of the law.

The Welsh Language Commissioner's role includes regulatory functions and responsibilities for promoting and facilitating use of the language. Is the balance right?

The reluctance of the Commissioner to issue Codes of Practice, statutory under the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 has meant the interpretation of the requirements varies from Council to Council, and more so down to officer level. Although the Commissioner has offered general guides on specific service delivery aspects, the interpretation of each standard is what all authorities have been seeking. The fact that the regulations were written and agreed by Welsh Ministers and regulated by the Commissioner has added to the frustration experienced by Councils.

What is your experience or opinion on the current arrangements for promoting and facilitating the use of the Welsh language?

It is encouraging to see that current and future legislation incorporates Welsh language requirement, strengthening the Measure, although we feel that the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 will have a significant impact on policy decisions.

The current campaign, encouraging individuals to complain to the commissioner in the first instance, does not promote and facilitate Welsh speakers to use and expect their service in Welsh. A more positive campaign would be to encourage users to use their Welsh when visiting Councils.

The investigation into complaints is both unnecessary and lengthy, and could easily be rectified by treating Welsh language complaints in the same manner as any other complaint, through the Corporate Complaints procedure where the intervention of the Commissioner as the Ombudsman would better deliver the positive and often instant results for customers.

Who should be responsible for promoting the use of the Welsh language?

Under the Standards, each Council has a responsibility to increase the number of Welsh speakers by promoting the use of Welsh (Standard 145), this is only achievable with clear direction from Welsh Government on Welsh Education Policy, training and appropriate funding of organisations, such as the Urdd and Menterau Iaith if it is to realise the target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050.