

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

CULTURE COMMITTEE'S WELSH LANGUAGE REVIEW – CONSIDERATION OF THE EFFECT OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES WITHIN THE REMIT OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE ON THE WELSH LANGUAGE

Purpose

1. This paper seeks the Committee's views on the effect of housing policies, local government policy and social inclusion policies and programmes on the Welsh language.

Recommendation

2. That the Committee comments on the extent to which the policies impact on the growth of the Welsh language.

Background

3. The Culture Committee is currently conducting a review of the Welsh Language and has asked that the Local Government and Housing Committee examines in an integrated way its area of responsibility to Welsh language issues, and considers the effect of its work on the language. The intention is to focus on the degree to which policies enable or prevent the growth of the Welsh language.

Consideration

Housing

4. In many parts of Wales, the Welsh language is an essential part of community life. This is why the Assembly guides its partners to take account of language issues in developing housing strategies and planning new housing provision and services.
5. The Assembly's detailed guidance on planning and the Welsh language in 'Technical Advice Note (Wales) 20, The Welsh Language – Unitary Development Plans and Planning Control' ("TAN20") recognises that decisions about the location of new housing

between different areas can affect the character of those areas including the linguistic balance. In preparing their Unitary Development Plans, local authorities are guided to take account of the needs and interests of the Welsh language.

6. For housing, the guidance makes clear that policies and proposals to provide adequate homes, including affordable housing, can help support and benefit those areas with high concentrations of Welsh speakers. Unitary Development Plan policies and proposals need to reflect the implications of the distribution of housing development between individual settlements, and also the effect of phasing particular developments in order to meet housing needs, while not eroding the position of the Welsh language. Unitary Development Plan policies should not, however, seek to introduce any element of discrimination between individuals on the basis of their linguistic ability, nor seek to control housing occupancy on linguistic grounds.
7. Alongside land use planning policies, housing management practices influence the mix of people living in communities. The Assembly has recently set up a Lettings Sounding Board to find out views on the future direction of social housing lettings. One of the objectives of this exercise is to find ways to enable landlords to take a more sensitive approach to management of the social housing stock, having flexibility to take account of cultural, language and sustainability issues, as well as housing need. The findings from this exercise will be used to inform policy, Regulatory Requirements and the Code of Guidance on local authority allocations and homelessness.
8. The impact of housing issues on the Welsh language has also been a key influence on the Assembly's broad strategy on rural housing. Action is being taken on a number of fronts. The Assembly:
 - is supporting rural local authorities to undertake local housing assessments to identify the levels of housing need and priorities in their communities;
 - has provided greater flexibility and more resources to support low cost home ownership initiatives in rural areas;
 - has reduced existing barriers to rented housing in rural communities by providing registered social landlords with greater discretion and financial support for the purchase of existing housing for rent;
 - has commissioned research on the distribution and land use implications of second and holiday homes in rural areas; and
 - has sought the views of housing organisations on further restrictions on the Right to Buy and Right to Acquire in rural areas.

2. Given the particularly high proportion of Welsh speakers living in many rural areas, the Assembly's rural housing strategy should make a significant contribution to sustaining Welsh in those areas where it is considered to be under greatest threat as a community language.

Local Government

3. The generic equalities standard for local government specifically includes a requirement to give full regard to Welsh language issues and has the potential to become a model for the wider public sector. An advisory group that includes the Welsh Language Board is overseeing the establishment of the WLGA's Equalities Unit.
4. The guidance on community strategies contains little by way of specific reference to the Welsh language (there are references to "communities of language" and to involving the Welsh Language Board in the development of community strategies). However, the Assembly expects to see sustaining bilingual communities as a central theme in many community strategies, and expects local mentrau iath and other language groups to be fully involved in the development of strategies. This issue will be covered in seminars across Wales to share thinking and good practice on the development of community strategies.
5. There is a specific Best Value indicator on authorities' level of compliance with the Welsh language scheme. Assembly officials are in dialogue with the Welsh Language Board on how to refine the equality-focused indicators.
6. The Assembly is legally required to appoint at least one Welsh speaker to the Local Government Boundary Commission. Following the recent round of appointments, two out of three members of the Commission from January next year, will be Welsh speakers.

Social Inclusion

7. The Assembly has a specific duty to promote social inclusion across all its responsibilities. As part of this duty, it publishes an Annual Report on social inclusion in Wales, which is considered in draft by the Committee. An important element of establishing social justice is safeguarding and promoting people's right to use the Welsh language both to access services and to play a full part in the civic and cultural life of their country. Therefore, this will be an important aspect of the work the Committee will examine in January, to establish Objectives and Targets for tackling social exclusion in Wales.
8. The Communities First guidance considered by the Committee at its last meeting echoes the principles of the Plan for Wales. It states that "the vision is for Wales to be a country with a distinctive and creative culture where diversity is valued; where the Welsh

language is an important component of life throughout Wales; and there are strong links between community arts and sport and our national cultural institutions."

9. Proposals for Communities First funding will have to show that the Assembly's aims have been addressed, and that they can tackle the main causes of deprivation in the community.
10. The guidance also advises Partnerships to make every effort to consider how they reflect the bilingual nature and requirements of the community in the activities they undertake. The guidance states that "the type of provision will differ according to the location and the nature of the activity but may involve:
 - assessing the needs of the bilingual community;
 - using bilingual correspondence;
 - arranging bilingual public meetings and consultation;
 - image presentation, e.g. signage, name, letterhead, logo,
 - website;
 - bilingual training and workshops."

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