

Welsh Language Promotion Strategy

Review 2022

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Introduction

Neath Port Talbot CBC, along with many other public bodies, was required by the Welsh language standards to produce its first five-year Welsh Language Promotion Strategy and Action Plan in 2016. However, as the Council challenged the application of a number of standards including standards 145 and 146, the Strategy was not produced until October 2018, following the conclusion of the challenge.

Since the publication of the Strategy three progress reports have been published all of which can be found on the Council's website. The progress report for 2021-2022 is due to be published before the end of 2022.

Within the lifetime of the Strategy the Council is required to assess to what extent it has 'followed that Strategy and [has] reached the target set it' (standard 146). This assessment, taking place during the final year of the strategy, will help inform a review of the Strategy which is to take place during winter/spring 2022-2023 ready for publication in April 2023.

Policy Context

The Strategy recognises the strategic national and local context in which it has been developed; the legislative foundation of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050, More than Just Words as well as the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan.

The Strategy is further anchored by the promotion and facilitation work undertaken over many years and on which its commitments and principles have been based.

The Strategy has been developed primarily to meet the requirements of the Welsh language standards as applied to the Council and contained in the compliance notice issued by the Welsh Language Commissioner finalised in April 2018.

Aims of the Strategy

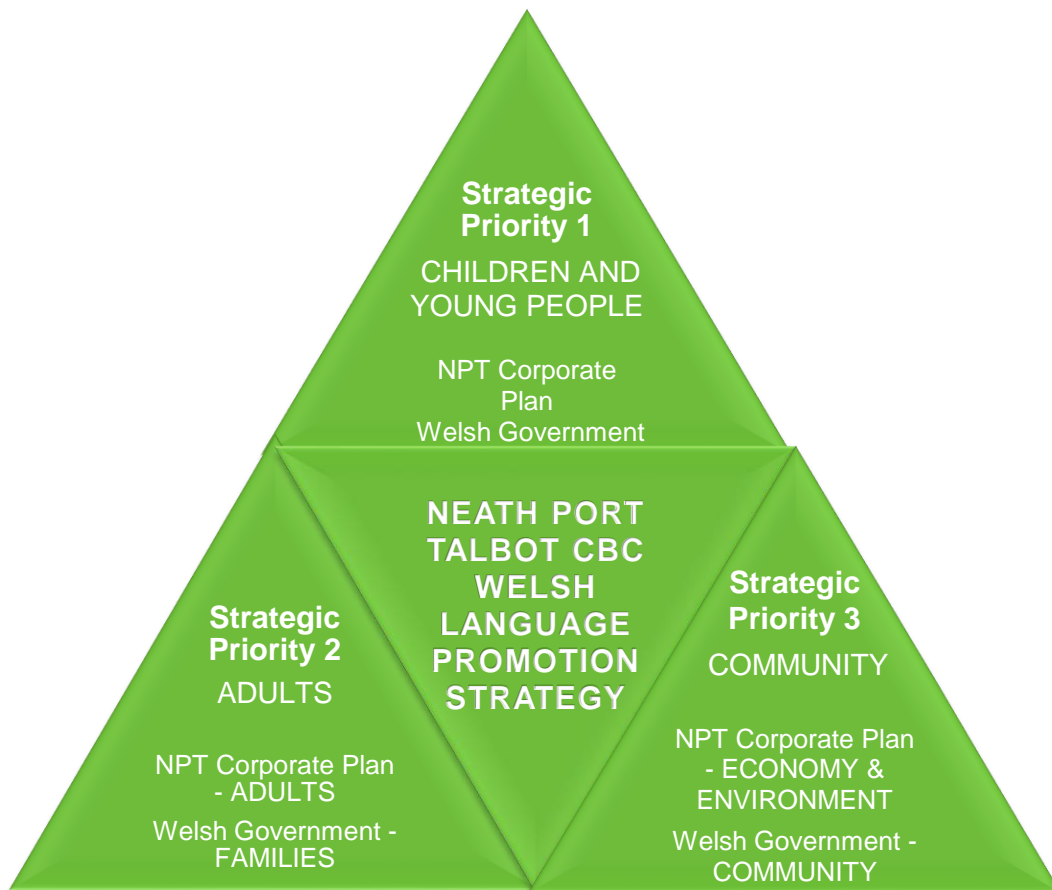
A cross party member Scrutiny Task and Finish Group developed the Strategy, supported by officers of the Council and the local Menter. The Group identified drivers for the development of a strategy; legislative requirements, the contribution to Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 as well as a more instinctive approach to the sensibilities for the language, for example, 'Because it's right to have one...'

The aims of the Strategy reflected these considerations:

- Put steps in place, in the short term, to slow down the percentage decrease in the number of Welsh speakers in the county borough
- Increase the number of Welsh speakers in the county borough
- Increase the usage of the Welsh language in all aspects of life

- Raise awareness of the language as a component of Neath Port Talbot’s heritage, culture, tourism and business sectors
- To drive and support Welsh medium education and the creation of new Welsh medium schools in particular, primary schools through an effective Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP)

Strategic priorities to deliver the aims aligned with the Welsh Government’s Cymraeg 2050 and with the Council’s Corporate Plan 2018-2022 as shown in the diagram below (taken from the strategy)



The aims and priorities reflect and complement the strategic and local context of the language in Neath Port Talbot as well as recognising the Council can only play a part in improving the numbers/percentage of Welsh speakers in the area.

There is, however, a lack of clarity as to the vision for Neath Port Talbot although the aims and strategic priorities for the Strategy are clear; even though ‘tucked’ away towards the end of the Strategy along with the vision.

Recommendation -

- Consider the order of the sections in the revised strategy. Be clear as to the vision for the Welsh language in NPT, its promotion and facilitation. Ensure the aims and priorities of the Strategy are foremost in the Strategy and ensure the vision is prominent!

Leadership

The Strategy was developed by elected members, with support of officers of the Council and the local Menter, with its implementation secured through service areas within the Council and in partnership with the Language Forum.

The Strategy states that:

Although overall responsibility for the Welsh Language Promotion Strategy lies with the Council, in accordance with Standard 145 of the Welsh Language Standards (No1) Regulations 2015, each partner organisation shares responsibility by virtue of the commitments made in the action plan.

While individual service areas are identified as responsible for progressing actions in section one of the action plan there doesn't appear to be a clearly defined 'lead' for its overall implementation. In addition some actions identify more than one service area as the 'lead' which adds at best to the ambiguity or at worst stymies any potential progress.

Recommendations

- To address potential confusion over roles and responsibilities for the implementation of actions in the next iteration of the Strategy it is recommended that these roles and responsibilities are more clearly defined.
- To help ensure the successful implementation of future strategies, partners and service areas need to be fully engaged with the process, from development through to implementation, as well as in ongoing assessment.
- Clarity of ownership / leadership to be more clearly defined where partnerships arrangements are in place.

Partnerships

Working in partnership across the sectors and with a range of organisations has been a key component of the Council's activities over many years; the development and implementation of the Strategy being no exception.

Realising the aims of the Strategy is not in the gift of a single organisation and so contributions made by partner organisations to meet the aims of the Strategy are key. The Strategy states:

'The Council has been conscious of its limitations in influencing the maintenance or increase in the number of Welsh language speakers in the area.'

'Members of the Language Forum have shown their support of the Strategy by agreeing to deliver a range of actions, supported by the Council wherever possible, to help deliver the aims of the Strategy.'

'In implementing the Strategy, the Council, Strategic Forum and individual partners will work together to meet its aims, implement change and work towards the common goal.'

The action plan distinguishes between actions that are primarily the responsibility of the Council (section one of the action plan) as opposed to those actions which fall under the purview of the Language Forum (section two) that comprise of organisations with a remit for Welsh language support and provision.

The Language Forum and its individual members are listed as contributors to 39 of the actions in section one of the action plan as well as being responsible for all 20 actions in section two.

Progress in section two of the action plan is noticeably more limited; in a couple of annual reports there appears to be limited information although contributions from the partner organisations are evident within section 1.

Recommendations

- Continue to build on the progress made by partnership working and continue to work in partnership to deliver the next iteration of the Strategy.
- Although partners were identified to help progress many of the actions there isn't always a clear lead or focus on how the partners would work together. This may have inhibited progress. Clearer lines of responsibility and some detail on how partners will work together to progress actions could be considered.
- The implementation and progress of the Strategy would benefit from the Council being represented on the Forum. This would not only show commitment and leadership in relation to the Strategy but help reinforce the wider partnership approach to promoting the language going forward.

Governance

Progress on the actions in the Strategy is reported annually to Cabinet Board and is scrutinised by the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee. There is an additional element of scrutiny by the internal Welsh Language Officer Group (WLOG) and the Equality and Community Cohesion Group, whose members include representatives from local equality/community groups.

Monitoring arrangements, as identified in the Strategy, fall to Members of relevant Scrutiny Committees for actions in section one and to the chair of the Language Forum for actions in section two with progress to be reported annually to Cabinet Scrutiny Committee.

However, the reality is somewhat different; the assessment has identified that monitoring of progress has been confined to an annual report to Cabinet and scrutinised by Cabinet Scrutiny Committee (as is the case with other strategic plans).

Information on progress from partners in the Language Forum in relation to section two of the action plan has been limited over the period - the pandemic being a significant factor in this. However, information as to the contribution of partners to actions in section one is more evident; potentially due to services driving monitoring arrangements.

Although arrangements are not as originally envisaged there is a degree of monitoring and reporting of progress in line with other corporate strategies and plans. However, there are significant gaps in monitoring such the lack of quantitative/qualitative measures to indicate direction of travel. With such arrangements any concerns or good practice could be identified/addressed in a more timely manner.

Recommendation

- Consideration to be given to more effective arrangements to ensure responsibilities and accountability is clear both internally and amongst partner organisations.
- Consider the role of WLOG and the Equality and Community Cohesion Group in scrutinising progress, for example receiving quarterly reports on progress.
- So that the implementation of the Strategy can be effectively monitored while at the same time not being too onerous on partner organisations/Language Forum it is recommended that current practices for partner organisations are accommodated as far as possible. This will help streamline and encourage monitoring of progress. It is suggested that progress against any future actions is reported regularly for example via the chair of the Forum to ensure actions are progressing and to help enable any issues that may arise to be addressed in a timely manner.
- To help ensure progress is monitored throughout the year performance management arrangements to be put in place to enable any issues that may arise to be addressed in a timely manner.

Costs and resources

The Strategy was developed against a backdrop of austerity and actions were developed in light of resources available at the time. The action plan includes actions that had already been identified or had little or no cost attached to them as well as more aspirational actions to be progressed should circumstances allow.

At the outset staffing capacity was considered sufficient to progress the commitments of the strategy. However, the pandemic and the resulting changes to staffing arrangements, working practices as well as restrictions to service provision, has had a limiting effect over the last two years of the strategy.

The need to refocus and reprioritise services, along with their methods of delivery, and resources (budget and staff) has been a major factor in the implementation of the Strategy during the height of the pandemic. Consequently, progress was paused or limited in some areas, for example, encouraging businesses to promote Welsh as well as education related actions, albeit work to progress actions have since recommenced.

Recommendations

- Consideration to be given to identify external funding for projects/specific events or activities to enable promotion of the language more widely.

- In light of the new WESP and Corporate Plan, consideration to be given to sharing resources across service areas to achieve a better take up/promotion/publicity of the language.

Progress assessment

Each annual report provides an insight into not only the progress made in meeting the aims of the Strategy but also records the journey of a strategy, and all involved, from taking a tentative dip and trying to stay afloat to striking out for distant shores.

2018-2019

The rate of progress has been mixed in respect of the short term actions due to a number of reasons including, potentially over ambitious target dates, increased officer workloads, sickness/maternity leave, the underestimation of the level of complexity in the implementation of some actions.

In some areas, including early years' provision, significant progress has been made in promoting the Welsh language to parents and childcare providers. This activity is borne out with the rise in the number of children accessing Welsh Flying Start child care during 2018-2019, 135 compared to 104 in 2017-2018.

2020-2022

Progress during this period was hit significantly by the outbreak of the pandemic and its resulting ongoing impacts. The unprecedented situation brought with it challenges and impacts for communities, partner organisations and the Council which had never been experienced before. With the resulting necessary changes in service delivery, working practices as well as a refocusing of priorities, activity on the Strategy was suspended. Maintaining services, in what was a very different environment, took precedence and any progress against actions was limited.

While the closure of leisure facilities for a significant period hampered actions to promote the language in these areas, there was some progress in relation to Welsh medium education for example provision of new/additional childcare spaces and additional Foundation Phase classrooms at five Welsh-medium schools. This has been due to the increase in the numbers of children accessing Welsh language flying start childcare places and reception age Welsh language education.

The Strategy anticipates that by 2023 'the Council will have contributed to a minimum increase of 1% in the number of Welsh speakers in the county borough within the current financial plan, and current levels of funding and resources'. It is difficult to confidently assess progress made against this figure as the data currently available is extrapolated from information gathered as part of the annual population survey. This has been made more difficult with a recent revision of the 2020-and 2021 data. 'This planned reweight (using updated Pay As You Earn (PAYE) Real Time Information (RTI) data) as well as to correct an error affecting grossing factors for some age groups for the annual periods between April 2019 to March 2020 and July 2020 to June 2021' (source Stats Wales).

| | 31 March 2018 | 31 March 2019 | 31 March 2020 | 31 March 2021 | 31 March 2022 |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| % of persons (aged 3 and over) who say they can speak Welsh | 22.4% | 25.3% | 20.5%* | 23%* | 22.8% |
| % of persons (aged 3 and over) who say they speak Welsh daily | 9.3% | 12.5% | 10%* | 10.6%* | 10.1% |
| % of adults who say they speak Welsh daily and can speak more than just a few words (FG36) | 11% | 10% | 10% | 12% | N/A |
| % of adults who say they speak Welsh daily and can speak more than just a few words (FG37) | 18% | 16% | - | 19% | N/A |

* Revised data

Based on the above data the Council would have made significant progress in increasing the number of people who can speak Welsh (an increase of 2.3%, based on the revised 2020 figure) however this is not seem to be translated into the frequency of use.

However, a clearer and more reliable indicator will be the Census 2021 which is due for release in December 2022.

Conclusions

Overall the development and implementation of the Strategy has been positive.

The strategic priorities identified correspond with the national vision and take into the local policy and language context with the resulting target mindful of current provision and financial constraints.

While there is an element of strong leadership this is tempered with ambiguity in certain areas of the action plan and in aspects of governance.

Summary of Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been identified to address some of the issues highlighted as well as strengthening areas of good practice.

- Consider the order of the sections in the revised strategy. Be clear as to the vision for the Welsh language in NPT, its promotion and facilitation. Ensure the aims and priorities of the Strategy are foremost in the Strategy and ensure the vision is prominent!
- To address potential confusion over roles and responsibilities for the implementation of actions in the next iteration of the Strategy it is recommended that these roles and responsibilities are more clearly defined.

- To help ensure the implementation of future strategies, partners and service areas need to be fully engaged with the process, from development through to implementation, as well as in ongoing assessment.
- Clarity of ownership/leadership to be defined where partnership arrangements are in place.
- Continue to build on the progress made by partnership working and continue to work in partnership to deliver the next iteration of the Strategy.
- Although partners were identified to help progress many of the actions there isn't always a clear lead or focus on how the partners would work together. This may have inhibited progress. Clearer lines of responsibility and some detail on how partners will work together to progress actions could be considered.
- The implementation and progress of the Strategy would benefit from the Council being represented on the Language Forum. This would not only show commitment and leadership in relation to the Strategy but help reinforce the wider partnership approach to the promoting the language going forward
- Consideration to be given to more effective arrangements to ensure responsibilities and accountability is clear both internally and amongst partner organisations.
- WLOG and the Equality and Community Cohesion Group to play a greater role in scrutinising progress, for example receiving quarterly reports on progress.
- So that the implementation of the Strategy can be effectively monitored while at the same time not being too onerous on partner organisations/Language Forum it is recommended that current practices for partner organisations are accommodated as far as possible. This will help streamline and encourage monitoring of progress. It is suggested that progress against any future actions is reported regularly via the chair of the Forum to ensure actions are progressing and to help enable any issues that may arise to be addressed in a timely manner.
- To help ensure progress is monitored throughout the year performance management arrangements to be put in place to enable any issues that may arise to be addressed in a timely manner.
- Consideration to be given to identify external funding for projects/specific events or activities to enable promotion of the language more widely.
- In light of the new Welsh Education Strategic Plan and corporate plan consideration to be given to sharing resources across service areas to achieve a better take up/promotion/publicity of the language.