



AGENDA ITEM: 10

NORTH WALES FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

22nd September 2008

Welsh Language Scheme and Linguistic Skills Strategy

**Report by Colin Hanks
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Purpose of Report

- 1.** To inform members of new developments and progress on promoting the use of the Welsh language within North Wales Fire & Rescue Service

Introduction

- 2.** North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority's Welsh Language Scheme 2006-2009 sets out how the Authority will abide by the principle that, in the conduct of public business in Wales, it will treat the English and Welsh languages on the basis of equality and as such aim to deliver a service that is of the same high standard and quality in both languages.

It serves to:

- Offer the public a real language choice
- Recognise that service users are able to express their views and needs better in their preferred language
- Recognise that offering a language choice is a matter of good practice not a concession.



The Scheme is approved by the Welsh Language Board under section 16 of the Welsh Language Act 1993 and is reviewed regularly.

The Linguistic Skills Strategy is a statutory requirement to provide a means of responding appropriately to the Service's commitments contained in the Welsh Language Scheme. The Strategy helps to take the Welsh Language Scheme further by providing a planned and strategic infrastructure for implementing it into the future.

Crucially, this means staffing the Service in accordance with the Welsh Language Scheme in order to enable the provision of services of equal quality, facility and breadth in both English and Welsh. It means satisfying service needs where there is a shortage of Welsh speakers within the workforce by adopting and implementing this Strategy.

Background

- 3.** The benefits to North Wales Fire and Rescue Service of adopting a Linguistic Skills Strategy are that it will:
 - Satisfy the Fire and Rescue Service National Framework for Wales 2008-2011 which states that Welsh fire and rescue services should provide a bilingual service that recognises and reflects the diversity in their communities.
 - Provide a method of forward planning to acquire, deploy and develop the statutory Welsh Language Scheme
 - Be impartial, objective and effective
 - Help to reduce risks such as failure to achieve equality and customer care standards, failure to empathise and



identify with customer needs, complaints and dissatisfaction.

4. In preparing the Linguistic Skills Strategy, North Wales Fire & Rescue Service is adopting the objectives recommended by the Welsh Language Board which involve continually auditing the bilingual requirements of workplaces and posts, comparing skill needs with existing skill resources and being able to close the gap between the two, as well as appropriate arrangements for monitoring and reporting the strategy's implementation.
5. An audit of the bilingual requirements of workplaces and posts within the Service has been carried out by Cwmni Iaith and identified which roles within the Service should be designated Welsh essential. The Service has since assigned Level 1-5 competences to each type of role, providing a greater understanding of the standard of Welsh required.
6. An audit of the bilingual skills of existing staff has been carried out and around 80% of Service staff have indicated the level of Welsh which they believe they possess. In future, this information will be a requirement of the Individual Development Review process for all staff.

Information

7. The Service is currently comparing the skill needs of posts with existing skill resources to ascertain what work is required to bridge the gap.

The aim is to close this gap gradually, taking a long term perspective through establishing well defined practices in staff training and support, recruitment, reorganisation and redeployment of staff. The work will involve:

- Increasing the number of staff who can confidently speak



or write Welsh and encourage them to use their skills more often. A member of staff has been seconded to HQ to deliver Welsh Language awareness training.

- From January 2009, all new members of staff will be required to have the ability to show basic (Level 1) Welsh language courtesy skills before joining the Service.
 - From January 2010, all new staff will be allowed a specified period of time after formal appointment to achieve Level 2 (involving 5 days of training and a second training CD).
 - Existing staff will be encouraged to achieve Level 1 on a voluntary basis as part of the awareness course. Existing staff who have direct contact with the public will be encouraged to achieve Level 4/5 through intensive training.
 - From January 2010, staff seeking promotion within the Service will be required to pass Level 2 to be successful.
 - Training courses will enable staff to learn or improve their Welsh. Coleg Llysfasi will provide Level 1 and 2 training courses to staff which are supplemented by Welsh Language CDs (tests will be assessed independently by Coleg Llysfasi). The tests are linked to a nationally recognised accreditation.
 - The Linguistic Skills Strategy will be incorporated into the Service's policy on Equality and Diversity – with reference to the Seven Strands of Diversity in Wales which include the Welsh language.
- 8.** The Service will review the Welsh Language Strategy on a regular basis, working according to the Welsh Language Board's



indicators. This work will involve having an accurate record of the number and percentage of staff who have direct contact with the public and the level of Welsh required in these posts, the proportion of staff who have received language training, as well as being able to accurately identify staff who can speak Welsh – by department, job grade and workplace.

9. The Linguistic Skills Strategy will be linked to the following;

- Recruitment and appointment procedures
- 'Investors in People' and Staff Development Plans
- Training Strategy
- The Service's corporate plan
- The Equalities and Diversity programme
- The Customer Care regime

Internal consultation will explain that the Strategy is being adopted to ensure the Service complies with the Welsh Language Act and that ability in Welsh is recognised as a skill.

10. It is hoped that the Linguistic Skills Strategy will benefit staff by:

- Treating language skills in exactly the same way as any other skills which may be necessary, desirable or advantageous for the post
- Providing a means of ensuring consistency of approach in determining the language requirements of posts
- Placing an emphasis on staff training, development and support to enhance staff skills and competitiveness in the wider labour market.

11. Conclusion

This Strategy requires Service-wide commitment and has far reaching implications. The emphasis is on forward planning and



for the acquisition of the necessary skills over a period of time – not sweeping change. The intention would be to gradually improve both the service to the public and staff skill levels, over a period of three to five years.

Recommendation

That members note and support this strategy.