

Elin Jones AM  
Llywydd

6 December 2018

Dear Elin

**Additional information following the debate on the Commission's annual report on its Official Languages Scheme**

I am writing to you in my capacity as an Assembly Commissioner with responsibility for official languages. During the debate, Adam Price AM, my predecessor, indicated that he would be writing to Members to expand on some points and to answer questions that could not be reached at that point because of a lack of time. It is therefore good to be in a position to write to you with the relevant information.

**The timing of the publication of the annual report and the debate**

Following the comments by the Chair of the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee during the debate, I have had an opportunity to consider the timing of the publication of the annual report and holding a debate on its content in terms of the opportunities for scrutiny.

I sympathise with the Committee's view that it is eager to consider the annual report well in advance of holding a debate on the Senedd floor, so that it can decide whether it wishes to closely scrutinise any aspect of the report in detail



and feed the result of any scrutiny into the Plenary debate. I would like to emphasise that I welcome any scrutiny from the Committee and that I am eager to do what I can to facilitate such scrutiny.

Due to our work arrangements, I think that this would have too much of a disruptive effect on the organisation of our work at the moment for us to vary from the pattern of publishing the report and holding a debate *before* the summer recess in every parliamentary year. As has already been noted during the debate, it would be difficult to publish the report much sooner than it was this year. I understand that the arrangement regarding the Commission's annual report and accounts is for them to be published before the summer recess, and that the Public Accounts Committee scrutinises after the autumn recess as a matter of routine. I would hope that this model would be something that the Culture Committee could also consider adopting and that a scrutiny session could similarly be held in the autumn on the Official Languages Scheme as a matter of routine, with the Committee's agreement.

Having said that, in order to try to be as responsive and flexible as possible for the Committee, I have asked officials to keep in mind the Committee's comments when planning their work schedules for the 2018/19 reporting period, and to regularly update Committee officials as to the timetable for publishing and holding a debate. Having also reflected on the arrangements for this year, I believe that we could consider sharing a rough copy of the annual report with the committee some weeks earlier as an alternative if the Committee so wishes.

### **Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA)**

The assessment is a live document, and we will update it after the new recruitment system is implemented.

### **Committee documents and laid documents**

Reference was made during the debate to the number of documents submitted to Assembly committees and the documents laid in English only, and the steps that the Commission is taking to address that.



In line with the service standards for Assembly Members and their support staff in the Scheme, we are committed to enabling them to engage with Assembly business in their preferred official language. The Plan itself clearly states that committees, when commissioning documents (reports, responses to consultations, etc.) from third parties for proceedings, will request bilingual versions. The Scheme also states that we expect bodies subject to any statutory requirements in terms of bilingual provision, whether in the form of Welsh Language Standards or a language scheme, to comply with those requirements.

It is therefore a matter of concern that the number of documents submitted to committees and the documents laid in the Table Office by the Welsh Government are nowhere near the aim for all documents to be available in Welsh as well as in English. I believe that the Welsh Government has particular responsibility in terms of the ability of Assembly Members and the people of Wales to engage with the proceedings of their legislature in their preferred language due to the unique relationship the work of the Senedd and the Government.

Therefore, following the publication of the report, and the findings that are specifically related to the Welsh Government, officials have raised the issue with Welsh Government officials and the matter was raised at a meeting convened with the Welsh Language Commissioner's officials following the report's publication. I have also written to the Business Committee to formally draw its attention to this issue and to ask the Business Committee to consider how this problem may be addressed. Specifically, I hope that the Committee will be able to address the adequacy and clarity of (i) the requirements of the relevant Standing Orders and (ii) the procedures that are in place to ensure compliance with those requirements and duties. Hopefully, by doing so, a constructive discussion may be started with the Business Committee and the Government so that we can try to find ways of improving the provision for Members and the people of Wales during the coming year. We will also continue to consider what further steps may be taken to confirm the expectations and to strengthen processes by working with the Welsh Language Commissioner, amongst others.

### **Number of complaints**



I support in principle the Commission reporting the exact number and nature of complaints received in relation to official languages in the annual report in future years. That is already done in the case of the Annual Report on Diversity and Inclusion, for example. I believe that doing so in the case of the Annual Report on the Official Languages Scheme would be a natural evolution of our commitment to include more quantitative data on performance in the future. Officials will look at the possibility of adding this information when preparing the annual report for 2018/19 as part of collecting and general reporting on quantitative data.

### **Broadcasting of proceedings and subtitling**

It is vitally important that the people of Wales can follow the proceedings of their legislature in their preferred language. In the case of the comments about both languages being broadcasted simultaneously as the verbatim audio feed and its English translation that we provide is used by broadcasters, I can confirm that I have corresponded with the Director of BBC Cymru, asking him to consider that issue together with any consideration that the BBC has given to the possibility of subtitling contributions from floor of the Senedd as part of their programmes.

Suzy Davies also asked about the internal arrangements when broadcasting contributions from the floor of the Senedd on the TV screens on the Assembly estate that are within the Assembly Commission's control. I am grateful for that feedback and I have asked officials to ensure that the feed that the Commission broadcasts on the television screens across the estate reflects the principle of equality between our official languages, including considering the possibility of using subtitles.

### **Written Questions**

It is not possible for the Assembly Commission to monitor the Welsh Government's responses to written questions. In accordance with convention, the Welsh Government will respond to written questions in the language in which they were submitted. Assembly Members that submit a written question in Welsh receive a bilingual response. However, I have asked officers to bear this issue in mind as part of their regular involvement with Government officials. In collecting the statistics for the annual report, it became apparent that not much official



business is currently submitted either in Welsh or bilingually. From our perspective as the Assembly Commission, in order to ensure that Assembly Members and their support staff are confident in submitting business in Welsh or bilingually, a training session was created that included an introduction to the new Table Office system and elements of language refresher training. The sessions are provided as required, and those that have received the training have praised it.

### **Assembly Members and the Official Languages Scheme.**

The Official Languages Scheme does not encompass Members' interaction with their constituents at one-to-one level. However, any materials funded by the Commission or the Remuneration Board must be produced bilingually. The Members' Business Support Team and the Official Languages Team have jointly developed new pages on the Members' Intranet entitled Working Bilingually. The purpose of the work was to create a central hub for information about our official languages, and the support that is available. The section on advice and support specifically includes details on how to arrange text translation or interpretation, vocabulary and advice on preparing bilingual material, and frequently asked questions. We will review the pages from time to time and ensure that we update the relevant sections with examples of best practice and any new resources that are available, and the number of visitors to those pages will be considered as part of that review work

### **Language Skills**

As part of our work on Theme 3 in the Official Languages Scheme on language planning, the Official Languages Team will work with individual services to review and improve language schemes. As part of the work, the team will assist with determining the language skills for all posts within services. Following this, services will require all staff to make a self-assessment of their language skills in accordance with the skills matrix introduced as part of our work on recruitment over the summer. We are still looking for ways to retaining the information in a reportable format. Our ultimate hope is that individuals will be able to update the information when their language skills level changes.



I hope this further information is useful.

Yours sincerely,

Siân Gwenllian AM

Commissioner with responsibility for official languages, and delivery and transformation of services to Members

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English / Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg

