

Asiantaeth y Swyddfa Brisio

# The Valuation Office Agency Welsh Language Scheme Annual Monitoring Report

25 February 2022

(November 2020 to October 2021)

### Introduction

The Welsh Language Commissioner requires the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) to produce an annual monitoring report to assess the progress we're making in delivering the commitments in our Welsh Language Scheme. Our revised Welsh Language Scheme was agreed with the Welsh Language Commissioner - it went live in April 2021 and can be accessed via the following link: <a href="VOA Welsh Language Scheme April 2021">VOA Welsh Language Scheme April 2021</a>. This Monitoring Report covers the period from November 2020 to the end of October 2021.

#### Summary of achievements

#### Achievements for 2020-21 include:

- •Review and publication of the VOA's Welsh Language Scheme.
- •Appointment of a dedicated Welsh Language Officer and Translator.
- •Welsh Language Customer Service Centre (WLCSC) continue to provide a bilingual service for customers, as well as handling VOA translation requests whilst working from home and/or in our Cardiff office.
- •Continued working partnership with HMRC's Welsh Language Unit to deal with lengthy and complex translation requests.
- •WLCSC members securing internal VOA promotions and providing Welsh language representation in other parts of the business.
- •Opening of the new office in the heart of Cardiff city centre Tŷ William Morgan.
- •District Valuer Service successfully tendered work including evidence on how they support and encourage Welsh language provisions.
- •Continued support of the Work Welsh programme funded by Welsh Government which offers Welsh language online learning courses for staff.
- •Including the Welsh language as part of planning discussions for the Agency wide transformation programme Business Systems Transformation.
- •Regular monitoring of the VOA's bilingual online Rent and Lease Details service.
- •The availability of a bilingual template used by the VOA to collate occupier details for Welsh billing authorities to complete as they wish in Welsh or English.

# Compliance with the Welsh Language Scheme

#### Welsh Language Commissioner reporting requirements:

- We ask you to report information about implementation of the scheme's timetable.
- We ask you to confirm what actions were completed during the year and what further steps are required to complete other actions.

The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) would firstly like to thank the Welsh Language Commissioner for offering an extension to the submission deadline for the 2020-21 Annual Monitoring Report in light of recent staffing changes concerned with monitoring the Welsh Language Scheme. The 2021-22 Annual Monitoring Report will be delivered as per the usual timeframe i.e., November 2022.

#### The VOA's Welsh Language Working Group

The Working Group consisted of VOA Welsh speaking staff, as well as members concerned with the VOA's operation in Wales. During this reporting period (i.e., November 2020 to October 2021) the Working Group:

- 1. Reviewed and published the Welsh Language Scheme (April 2021). It was last updated in 2006.
- 2. Played an integral role in reviewing and implementing the Scheme.
- 3. Proposed appointing a dedicated Welsh Language Officer and Translator to carry out their work as a formal solution moving forward.

Since the appointment of a dedicated Welsh Language Officer and Translator the Working Group has been disbanded. The VOA would like to thank members for their time and dedication, and for creating a strong platform for Welsh Language development in the future.

#### Updated VOA Welsh Language Scheme

One of the VOA's most prominent successes since the 2019-20 Monitoring Report in terms of its Welsh Language commitments has been the review and publication of its Welsh Language Scheme. This updated Scheme was approved by the Commissioner's Standards Team and received internal approval before it came into effect on 1 April 2021. The Agency will update the Scheme every two years to make sure it remains current and central to how we deliver our Welsh language services. The next review is due by April 2023.

Our Welsh Language Scheme includes a foreword by our Chief Executive which outlines that the Scheme aims to refresh the VOA's entire approach to the Welsh Language and '... not only to fulfil our legal requirements, but to ensure a parity of quality between our Welsh and English services – this means setting the same exacting expectations of our services in

both languages and clearly demonstrating how we aim to deliver our legal responsibilities in Wales'.

#### Appointment of a dedicated VOA Welsh Language Officer and Translator

In the 2019-20 Annual Monitoring Report the Welsh Language Working Group proposed the appointment of a 'Welsh Language Officer and Translator'. This was because the VOA did not have a dedicated, central role to coordinate activities and guidance in support of the Welsh Language, or to review, monitor and report the VOA's progress against commitments in its Welsh Language Scheme. These duties had previously been covered by a Welsh Language Coordinator and various members of staff, in addition to their main duties.

The creation of a dedicated full time Welsh Language Officer and Translator role would not only demonstrate the VOA's commitment to the importance of its Welsh Language provisions and its commitment to the Scheme, but it would also provide a single point of contact for Welsh Language guidance. The appointment would also mirror the approach taken by other public bodies for example, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Food Standards Agency. This request was successful and agreed by the VOA's Chief Strategy and Transformation Officer. The VOA recruited a Welsh Language Officer and Translator who assumed their role in November 2021.

As well as implementing the Scheme, the expectation is that this dedicated officer will create new partnerships and working relationships with other external organisations, with the aim to share good practice ideas and develop our Welsh Language services in the future.

#### Welsh Contact Team - Calls and translations

The permanent Welsh Language Customer Service Centre (WLCSC) team are based in our Cardiff office at, Tŷ William Morgan. They provide a bilingual service handling the VOA's Wales-specific calls and translation requests in both Welsh and English.

On average the WLCSC team requires four staff members on the telephone lines at any given time. As of November 2021, the team had six members of staff thus allowing flexibility to move some resource to translation tasks when required.

Between November 2020 and the end of October 2021 three permanent team members left on internal promotions. These internal promotions provide an opportunity to develop and support more bilingual colleagues and mean the Agency has more bilingual staff working across its business areas.

One member of the team secured a line manager role within the WLCSC. Another applied for, and was accepted onto, a six-month operational delivery leadership programme. Having a bilingual colleague on this development programme supports the provision of future Welsh Language leadership roles.

The WLCSC has faced challenges recruiting permanent replacements for these team members, however, has temporarily filled these positions until March 2022. Ahead of this,

the Agency will review the situation and consider if and how these positions can be filled permanently.

#### Calls

When customers dial our Wales line, they are given the option to continue either in Welsh or English. Between November 2020 and October 2021, 960 customers opted to select the Welsh line. Following Welsh line selection 211 of these calls proceeded to put through to speak with a Welsh speaking advisor. Our current systems do not gather information related to why customers decide to end their call following Welsh or English line selection. Customers are however presented with an automated message before reaching an advisor both for Welsh and English lines. These automated messages include information about our online services and website. These may lead to some customers electing to drop out of the call at that point, as we have either answered their enquiry with the automated message or have signposted them to another way to obtain the information that they need.

This is a very small telephony line and we continue to review how we best route customers to Welsh speaking operatives, in order to maximise the service.

#### Translation

Between November 2020 and October 2021, the WLCSC team received 426 translation requests. They translate shorter documents for internal and/or external use themselves.

The WLCSC have a working partnership with HMRC's Welsh Language Unit to deal with lengthy and complex translation requests. Longer documents are handled by the HMRC Welsh Language Unit and aim for a 10-day turnaround time. The timescale for longer documents can present some challenges, for example, if external messages need to be issued rapidly with limited notice. The new Welsh Language Officer and Translator will be able to aid with future time-sensitive translation requests.

#### COVID-19 and our offices

For the VOA, as for many other organisations, COVID-19 created significant challenges balancing delivering our services, at a critical time for many customers, while keeping our employees safe. Throughout, we have followed government guidelines respectively in Wales, England, and Scotland. Welsh Government guidance has meant most employees based in Wales have continued to work from home throughout the reporting period. Colleagues who were unable to work from home because of their personal circumstances, or because of the nature of their work, were able to work from our offices, which were risk assessed, made COVID-19 secure and met all health and safety requirements. Longer term, the Agency plans to offer all colleagues a balance of working from home and the office.

In our 2019-20 Monitoring Report we stated that the decision had been taken to pause the progression of the VOA's Estates Strategy in Wales, England, and Scotland until after January 2021, which is still the case. We also reported that we had remained on track to close our office in Bangor, in January 2021, which has been the case. Of the 13 employees based in our Bangor office, ten have been redeployed and are now attached to our

Wrexham office, two of these colleagues are Welsh speakers. Three people left the Agency.

Our current office portfolio in Wales now consists of four offices as follows:

- Cardiff Tŷ William Morgan.
- Carmarthen St David's Park.
- Swansea Civic Centre.
- Wrexham Regents House.

Our new Cardiff office, Tŷ William Morgan House, opened in August 2021. Over the past year, the WLCSC team has effectively continued to handle calls and bilingual contact both from home and the office in the same manner as their Customer Service Centre (CSC) counterparts in England.

As mentioned in our 2019-20 Monitoring Report, our CSC team in Cardiff were the first to be provided with kit to handle calls from home thus providing means for a bilingual service to be resumed from the moment the Agency was able to reopen the customer phone lines.

To maintain a high level of service throughout the pandemic the WLCSC team have a Coronavirus Welsh Line Operational Contingency plan. The plan was created by the Cardiff, Plymouth, Gloucester, and Birmingham CSC site lead (responsible for leading on the day to day running of the CSC in these locations) and agreed with the CSC Unit Head. This contingency plan highlights the different scenarios and service level that should be followed to deal with customer contact through the medium of Welsh if an issue arises with staffing due to the virus.

#### District Valuer Service

District Valuer Services (DVS) is the specialist property arm of the VOA. They provide independent, impartial, valuation and professional property advice across the entire public sector where public money or public functions are involved. DVS ensures that all relevant correspondence and regulatory documents, such as valuation reports completed in accordance with the RICS Red Book, are kept up to date and translated into Welsh, in line with the English publications. In accordance with the VOA's Welsh Language Scheme, all translations during this reporting year are up to date and in line with the English publications.

Over the past reporting year DVS updated their letterheads and templates, including bilingual templates for use in Wales. DVS have continued to ensure that delegates can correspond and communicate in Welsh when they have hosted learning events for clients.

In the work that DVS undertakes, including invitations to tender, if it is requested that the case is conducted in Welsh, DVS will consider the availability of suitable Welsh-speaking employees. If requested, arrangements are made for the valuation to be conducted by a Welsh speaker and the valuation report to be completed in Welsh where appropriate. Over the last reporting period 2020-21 no Welsh language reports have been requested.

In the case of one particular tender, which was successful, DVS had to evidence how it supports and encourages Welsh speaking within their offices, as well as provision of Welsh language speakers and bilingual materials. DVS have also successfully tendered for another two large schemes with information regarding Welsh speakers included within both bids.

# Mainstreaming the Welsh Language

#### Welsh Language Commissioner reporting requirements

The Welsh Government's definition of mainstreaming the Welsh language is "to consider the Welsh language in all aspects of your work and in everything that you do, with the aim of ensuring that every opportunity is taken to:

- i. promote and support the Welsh language
- ii. contribute to the Welsh Government's vision of a truly bilingual Wales
- iii. plan, provide and evaluate services in Welsh and English."

#### Revised Welsh Language Scheme and Welsh Language Officer and Translator

Following the agreement of our new Welsh Language Scheme the VOA is in a stronger position in terms of its commitments to mainstreaming the Welsh Language and its consideration in all aspects of our work. As mentioned earlier in this Report, the appointment of a full-time Welsh Language Officer and Translator demonstrates the VOA's long-term commitment to mainstreaming the Welsh Language.

#### Learning and development

In the 2019-20 reporting period, we reported that we had worked with Learn Welsh from The National Centre for Learning Welsh (funded by the Welsh Government) to offer the "Work Welsh" e-learning package to colleagues that expressed a desire to learn Welsh. Of those that expressed an interest 34 employees, including five from the Cardiff Customer Service Team (mentioned below), formally registered.

Over the reporting period the VOA's CSCs based in Cardiff, as well as CSC teams with Welsh line support in Durham and Plymouth, have been informed of the "Work Welsh" opportunities by the CSC Learning and Development Team (CSC L&D Team). The CSC L&D Team provide the official training for CSC and the wider VOA. 63 CSC members expressed interest in this e-learning package (12 in Cardiff, 24 in Plymouth, 26 in Durham, and one additional staff member in Halifax). The CSC L&D Team piloted the learning package with six volunteers from the Cardiff CSC (one of whom subsequently left the Agency), with the aim to organise regular updates to track their progress and evaluate the learning by seeking their feedback. Once the pilot volunteers have completed the relevant learning units, the CSC L&D Team will explore the possibility of further Welsh learning opportunities should the participants wish to do so. The CSC L&D Team are also looking

into the possibility of working on a second "Work Welsh" pilot cohort with another six of the Cardiff CSC members.

The pandemic and the Welsh Government's guidelines to 'work from home if you can' has limited the informal opportunities usually available for VOA staff to practice and converse in Welsh. The VOA's Welsh Language Network remains paused for the time being. Our newly opened Cardiff office will provide a good future opportunity for those who wish to learn, practice or converse in Welsh to link and meet up with others working for the other 12 government departments based in the building.

If colleagues in Wales are required to continue to work from home due to Government guidelines, we will investigate different opportunities for colleagues to practice and converse in Welsh virtually.

#### Staffing and recruitment

In our 2019-20 Monitoring Report we noted that we were running two separate recruitment trawls for SEOs, i.e., one national trawl, and one pertinent to Wales that stated the ability to speak Welsh was mandatory. We found it difficult to recruit via this route and were unable to fill our vacancies, but we will look to explore specific Welsh language advertising routes next time to increase applicant numbers. We have also had success recruiting via a contingent labour supplier and may look to utilise this again in the future.

The VOA recruited one Welsh speaking graduate via its annual HEO graduate trawl in September 2021. It became apparent that the graduate could speak Welsh once they had joined the VOA. We currently have four Welsh speaking graduate surveyors in total.

As mentioned earlier, three of the original WLCSC have left having secured internal VOA promotions however, these positions have been temporarily backfilled.

During the 2020-21 reporting period the VOA identified a bilingual colleague who is receiving training in Council Tax and Valuation Tribunal Service presentation. The VOA has also promoted a Welsh speaking colleague to a Technical Lead role in Wales and are making the best use of their skills to also train colleagues. Our focus on supporting and developing our Welsh speaking employees is part of our commitment to provide Welsh speaking representation at all levels and areas of our business.

As at the end of September 2021, we have a total of 20 people in Operations who state that they use or can use their Welsh language skills at work.

All Civil Service vacancies including the VOA are advertised and managed through the Civil Service Jobs portal. The VOA also has scope to explore other means of advertising more widely via Welsh language platforms. By using other recruitment platforms, this will hopefully encourage more Welsh speakers to apply for the roles where Welsh language skills are beneficial.

Over the past year we have continued as an Agency to prepare for the far-reaching and ongoing Agency wide transformation programme – Business Systems Transformation (BST). The multi-year programme will re-design and simplify our core business processes, and

introduce new, more flexible data structures and technology systems to support them. It will reduce the need for administrative processing and information-entry, freeing colleagues to focus their time and skills where they can add most value. The Welsh Language has been part of the BST planning discussions to provide and evaluate Welsh Language provisions. Some areas in scope include the following:

- Ensuring our systems ask for and record customer/stakeholder language preferences (Welsh, English, or both).
- Ensuring our new systems can handle Welsh addresses.
- Continuing to allow customers/stakeholders that wish to transact their business with the VOA in Welsh to do so, which will be handled by our Welsh language staff.
- It is also important to note that bought-in data sets that only cater for English language (e.g., some Geospatial datasets) will not include Welsh language translations. Additionally, our internal case management systems will be written in English.

Due to the specific requirements in web monitoring tools, we are currently only able to provide the metrics on one of our externally Welsh facing web services – Council Tax on the Internet (CTi). We are gradually migrating users across from CTi to the new Check and Challenge Your Council Tax Band (CCYCTB) service. The CCYCTB service is also available bilingually. During the reporting period, we recorded 3,369 CTi page views where the language was in Welsh compared to a total of 43.4 million page views (both in English and Welsh). This equates to 0.008% of page views being in Welsh. Those 3,369 CTi page views in Welsh can be attributed to 1,492 individual users, which out of a total of 7.7 million individual users, accounts for 0.019%.

Last year we reported that the Welsh version of our online Rent and Lease Details (RALD) service had been delivered. The RALD forms are monitored regularly for ease-of-use amendments. The RALD team also discuss any issues that have been raised by customers with the VOA's Market Information Team. Any changes will be mirrored in both Welsh and English forms to maintain parity and quality. Unfortunately, the current digital system is unable to calculate the number of Welsh Language users however, this has been raised with the BST team to see if this can be addressed.

The VOA's Local Authority Engagement Team (LAET) are proactive in ensuring Welsh language provisions are in place when engaging with Welsh billing authorities (BAs). The LAET endeavour to ensure the communications they issue to Welsh BAs are available in both Welsh and English. Both Welsh and English versions of an email/document are sent together. One key update involves the template used by the VOA to collate occupier details from Welsh and English BAs. Since the 2019-20 Monitoring Report, this template has been translated into Welsh and is available for Welsh BAs to complete as they wish in Welsh or English.

#### Welsh Language Commissioner reporting requirements

We ask you to report the following information about your arrangements to mainstream the Welsh language

- a) a copy of the generic tool(s) used by your organisation to assess the impact of new policies, initiatives and legislation (if relevant) on the Welsh language (please note that you will be expected to provide a copy of the generic tool(s) only once) and;
- b) examples of policy documents, legislation or new initiatives planned or produced by your organisation which ensure the Welsh language is a mainstream consideration

The VOA does not currently use any generic tools to assess the impact of new policies, initiatives, and legislation on the Welsh language.

## Performance Indicators

#### Frontline services

Performance Indicator 1: the percentage and number of bilingual staff who are working, in your contact centres, in your public reception areas or on your main telephone helplines.

The number of employees in our dedicated Wales contact centre has fluctuated over the reporting period due to changes in staffing (as outlined in this Report under the 'Welsh Contact Team & translation' section). By November 2021, the team was back to full capacity.

As indicated in the 2019-20 Monitoring Report, under normal circumstances, our offices are not open to the public and we only accept customer visits by exception and appointment. Ratepayers and their representatives are encouraged to use our online contact service (available in Welsh and English) as their first point of contact with the VOA. This ensures that if a customer wishes to correspond in Welsh, we can reply appropriately the first time around. Customers can also contact central telephone numbers and email addresses with the option of conducting their enquiry through the medium of Welsh.

#### Services delivered through third parties

Performance Indicator 2: the percentage of the 3rd party contractors assessed which provide services in accordance with relevant measures within your Welsh language scheme.

In 2020-21, no VOA services were provided through third parties.

#### Language training and awareness

Performance Indicator 3a: the number and percentage of staff who have received Welsh language training to a certified level of qualification.

Since the introduction of the Learn Welsh e-learning programme, 34 members of staff (according to the provider 'Learn Welsh') had enrolled.

The VOA doesn't offer any other Welsh language training to a certified level of qualification at present.

Performance Indicator 3b: the number and percentage of staff who have received Welsh language awareness training.

The VOA does not have specific Welsh language awareness training. Awareness is encouraged by talking to colleagues about the importance and need to consider Welsh language requirements. The VOA's new Welsh Language Officer and Translator will advocate the importance of the Welsh Language through their involvement and input on various cross-VOA project delivery and working groups.

#### Information Technology

Performance Indicator 4a: the number of IT systems assessed using the Commissioner's bilingual software accreditation scheme.

None.

Performance Indicator 4b: the number of improvement plans prepared following assessments using the Commissioner's bilingual software accreditation scheme.

None.

#### Administering the Scheme

Performance Indicator 5: the number of complaints received about a lack of Welsh language service provision and steps taken to resolve complaints.

The VOA received two complaints relating to the Welsh Language during the reporting period.

#### Reviewed and approved by:

#### **Douglas Stoneham**

Director of Policy and Strategic Engagement | Strategy and Transformation Group

#### 15 February 2022