

Culture Committee - CC-1-02(p.5)

Date: 9th January 2002

Time: 9.00am-12.30pm

Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly

Culture Committee - Review of the Welsh Language

Evidence of the Arts Council of Wales

The Arts Council is grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the Culture Committee's review of the Welsh Language. The Royal Charter of the Arts Council of Wales sets out its objectives which are:

- to develop the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts;
- to develop and improve the accessibility of the arts to the public;
- to advise and co-operate with other bodies;
- to carry out the objectives through the medium of both Welsh and English languages.

In implementing this latter objective, the Arts Council has sought to be especially mindful of the contribution of the arts to the vitality and vibrancy of the language. The arts in Wales and the language are inextricably linked, and the continued existence and development of a thriving Welsh language culture, a living tradition, is fundamental to the survival, and growth, of the language.

Earlier evidence heard by the Committee has highlighted the links between literature and the language, and the role it has played in sustaining it and contributing to its vitality. Such a role exists also for the arts in a broader sense.

Welsh speaking communities traditionally participate in artistic activity to an extent that is perhaps unusual compared to others. Music, drama, poetry, literature and other art forms, both traditional and contemporary, have been nurtured within this strong ethos of community participation.

The new Arts Council

In its current transformation, the Council has the opportunity to further its contribution to the language. The Committee is aware that the changes being introduced affect every aspect of

the Council's work and include:-

- a new five-year arts development strategy;
- new structures;
- enhanced devolution to local offices;
- new grant schemes, and
- new three-year revenue funding agreements.

The Council has also sought to bring its services closer to local communities in its restructuring, which is due to be complete in February. The enhanced devolution to offices in Carmarthen, serving Mid and West Wales, and Colwyn Bay, serving North Wales are a major step forward in achieving the responsiveness required to local needs in Welsh speaking areas.

They will help in the development of existing local partnerships. Local Cultural strategies will be a particular locus for developing and sustaining the creation of, and access to, the arts in Welsh. The Council believes partnerships with local authorities need to be strengthened, and their closeness to their communities and democratic accountability is fundamental to their role as co-funders of the arts and as providers of many arts facilities. It is also hoped that they can assist local community arts organisations in developing proposals and accessing funding to deliver them.

The Minister has signalled support for the development of these local strategies within the context of community plans, and there is scope for offering specific guidance on how they can be used for developing access to the arts in Welsh and sustaining the language.

The Council has engaged in extensive consultation on its proposals for change, in a series of eighteen meetings across Wales. A number of themes have emerged concerning the language, and these will be reflected in the five-year arts development strategy, in the grant schemes, and in the new arrangements for three-year revenue funding agreements.

Within the new Grant schemes being developed by the Council for project and one-off funding, bilingualism will be a cross-cutting theme. Performance indicators will be included which will enable the Council to monitor the extent of provision through the medium of Welsh, and to set appropriate targets accordingly. The Council recognises that much cultural activity is organised and sustained on a voluntary basis. Consequently it is intended that the new grant schemes will be simple and easy to access to reflect this.

Similarly, revenue clients of the Council will continue to be required to make a commitment to making their work appropriately accessible through the medium of Welsh. Other evidence has noted the fact that the Welsh Language Act does not place requirements on private and voluntary organisations. By introducing grant conditions, such requirements can be put in place, and where appropriate, funded. In practice, most arts organisations have been keen to

support access through the medium of Welsh.

The Council is developing a new research capacity as part of its restructuring. To date, although data has been gathered on the preferred language of correspondence of applicants for grants and revenue clients, data has not formally been maintained on the language in which the artistic product is delivered. The Council will be introducing changes to enable this to be monitored, and to enable targets to be set and action taken in response to evidence where required.

For some media, such as visual arts and crafts, classical music and dance, the availability of appropriate publicity material in both languages and a capacity to respond to requests for information is generally sufficient, as language is not a part of the medium. However, it will be important to ensure that any provision for these art forms as residencies in schools and in the community is available through the medium of Welsh.

For others, including literature and drama, it is essential that there should be original writing, publishing and productions in both languages, and the Council's policies are being designed to support this. The Action Plans within the five-year strategy will be prepared accordingly.

The Council has participated in the Assembly's task & finish group on publishing and supports the intention to invest in and to strengthen support for Welsh language publishing in partnership with the Assembly and the Welsh Books Council.

A Welsh Language National Theatre Company

Theatre in the Welsh Language has been a key element of artistic expression which in the past, was particularly nurtured by local authorities. A combination of local government re-organisation, "Fair Funding" for schools and the general decline in local authority funding through the eighties and nineties has seen a severe decline in their funding for the arts, which the Arts Council was unable to compensate for, as it also suffered from standstill funding.

Thankfully, this situation has now changed dramatically. Local authority budgets have risen in recent years and the budget for the Arts Council for the next financial year should allow for many of the existing providers to be stabilised, and for modest developments to get underway.

Welsh language theatre will feature in the Council's plans for investment in the coming financial year. It has strongly emerged as a priority in the recent consultation on the Council's five-year arts development strategy. The Council will wish to see further substantial investment in this sector, subject to the future availability of resources, and will seek partners for the future development of main stream, community and theatre in education companies, particularly among local authorities.

Following the loss of a number of Welsh language theatre companies and the reduction in production capacity over recent years, there is a need to restore the former vitality in this sector and redevelop audiences in the Welsh speaking communities. It is intended that funding be made available for the development of new productions to strengthen the output of existing companies, as well as for the initial steps towards establishing the new commissioning agency which will form the core of a new National Company. To fully develop the new company will require additional resources.

Years of under-investment have led to a dearth of quality product, and very limited seasonal productions. The Council's ultimate aspiration is that high quality productions in Welsh should be available across Wales and throughout the year. It recognises though, that the current decline cannot be reversed overnight, and that several years of sustained investment will be required.

Funding for Sgript Cymru is intended to promote the availability of high quality writing for the stage in Welsh. The development of a production capacity to complement it is the next key task.

The work of the Theatre in Education and community companies such as Arad Goch and Bara Caws contributes actively to the development and vitality of the language at community level.

Arts and the economy of Welsh speaking communities

Earlier evidence has also featured the importance of creating and sustaining employment in Welsh speaking and rural communities. The Council is working in partnership with the WDA to foster the creative industries, which can potentially play a major role. The arts can be significant employers in rural communities, and in towns. The scale can range from one person galleries or craft outlets up to medium scale enterprises.

The Council is keen to ensure that their contribution to sustaining local employment is maximised. The characteristics of such enterprises include the fact that they are often local employers, and that they are less subject to the kinds of economic fluctuation which can undermine the manufacturing sector.

The Council is developing its partnership with ELWa to ensure that small businesses in the sector have full access to the range of training they need to be successful. The planned new range of funding schemes being introduced by the Council includes a capacity building scheme which should also assist cultural enterprises to develop the business systems and skills they need in order to thrive.

In a similar vein, the Council is also seeking to work closely with the Welsh Tourist Board in the development of cultural tourism. This also has the scope to create sustainable employment in Welsh speaking communities, and the cultural dimension can help to attract higher value tourism and create more attractive employment opportunities. The language itself, as others have observed in their evidence, can be an integral part of the experience which is offered to tourists.

Welsh learners.

Finally, the development of a bilingual nation will depend to a large extent on the encouragement of non-Welsh speakers to learn and to use the language. The Council is conscious that artistic output specifically geared to the needs of learners, or made accessible to them, is a very helpful adjunct to acquiring fluency and confidence.

Such material is scarce, and the Council will be examining ways in which it might be made more readily available.

Conclusion

The future of the language and the advance of bilingualism both depend on the existence of a vibrant, contemporary culture. It is vital that this culture builds on our heritage, but that it also remains relevant to the needs and preferences of the people of a modern nation.

This requires a full spectrum of artistic output in Welsh, ranging from the cutting edge to the popular. The Council's future programmes are being designed to respond to these requirements.