



Welsh Language Impact Assessment

POTENTIAL SALE OF PLAS TAN Y BWLCH

The Proposal:

Potential Sale of Plas Tan y Bwlch and Gardens including Llyn Mair and Woodlands.

Background

As an Environmental Study Centre, Plas Tan y Bwlch has from the outset always relied heavily on grant funding to subsidise the professional environmental courses, with the Authority's core funding subsidising residential educational courses for children and young people. In addition, a programme of public recreational courses was run from the Centre, some of which were based around nature and biodiversity and Eryri's special qualities (thus aligning with the Authority's statutory purposes), as well as general interest courses such as drawing, painting, photography, sewing, arts and crafts etc., which were also indirectly subsidised by core funding, and which mainly attracted a core group of older adults who returned annually.

In 2012 the Authority (as with rest of the public sector) commenced a long period of austerity, which has meant that difficult decisions had to be made over financial cuts to services over a number of years.

For Plas Tan y Bwlch Environmental Study Centre, a new business model was established with an emphasis on increasing commercial activities that would subsidise the educational side of the business. Over the years all subsidies and grants available for education and professional courses have ceased. Coupled with this, the Environmental Centre has seen a decline in both demand for professional courses due to the changing market which saw a demand for new more cost efficient training (day courses and online / remote learning), and very little new business for recreational courses.

Efforts by the staff to develop new income streams through being a wedding and party venue, opening the tea room and gardens as a visitor attraction, and conferences and bed and breakfast accommodation had seen various degrees of success. As a Grade II listed building, the Centre's high running and maintenance cost has meant that despite generating a reasonable turnover, its annual target to be cost neutral, has been consistently missed by many thousands of pounds over a number of years.

In 2019, plans were put forward for upgrading some of the bedrooms and relocating the reception and bar area to improve facilities as part of a new revised business plan. However, before such plans were implemented the Centre had to shut its doors in March 2020 as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in the UK.

On the 1st of July 2020, the PTYB Board considered various options for the future, ranging from continuing the current business model, operating at a reduced level, mothballing the site for the duration of the pandemic to a full closure. It was clear to the Board that the current business model was untenable and exposed the Authority to an unacceptable

financial and reputational risk. Consultation began with the affected staff and Unions, and viable business models were considered.

After full consideration was given to consultation responses and all potential business models, on the 23rd of October 2020 the Authority resolved to continue to operate Plas Tan y Bwlch as a B&B type business in the short to medium term and to proceed with staff restructuring whilst navigating UK Covid restrictions.

Since this time, attempts to develop the business have largely been unsuccessful, due to a combination of factors. The recruitment problems which started in 2021, the standard and availability of facilities at Plas Tan y Bwlch for paying guests along with inflationary pressures on costs have all had a detrimental effect. Although the recruitment crisis was a nationwide problem in various sectors, the hospitality industry was particularly effected. The Centre's business depended on staff being flexible with the hours worked to match demand, which saw consistent vacancies and remaining staff working excessive consecutive days without breaks at peak times, to no work at quiet times.

In addition, at quiet times a few rooms booked on a bed and breakfast basis would require all facilities open and staffed and the large public spaces fully heated, which was financially unviable. Not offering meals and bar service etc. to cut costs, was met by complaints from paying guests. Reports to the Plas Tan y Bwlch Board at this time demonstrates despite valiant efforts by staff, the impact that staffing issues, inflationary pressures and facilities offered was having on the sustainability of the business.

In 2022, expert external consultants were commissioned to do a full structural condition survey of the building, which outlined the immediate remedial works required, as well as the investment of an estimated £3 million required over the next decade to repair and maintain the fabric of the Grade II listed building.

By April 2023, Members officially reviewed and considered the position of the Centre and requested the Plas Board to re-evaluate the business model. Additionally, in July 2023 Audit Wales presented its findings on income diversification within the Authority, and made the following specific recommendation on Plas Tan y Bwlch:

"Within 12 months, the Authority review its operating model at Plas Tan y Bwlch and to undertake a cost benefit appraisal of the facility to determine its future strategy for the site. Additionally, Audit Wales commented that Plas should be seen to deliver National Park purposes."

In February 2024, the Chief Executive reported the Plas Tan y Bwlch Management Board findings to the Authority:

- The Board could not develop a vision for Plas that delivered strongly against National Park purposes whilst delivering commercial gain;
- The Board could not support the current business model in terms of delivering against National Park purposes and becoming commercially effective;
- The Board would wish to consider partnership models but accepted that such a window should be time limited;
- If no partnership is to mature then Plas should be offered on the open market, preferably as a going concern but subject to agent advice; and
- Considering the time constraints involved the Board recommends progressing a twin track approach in terms of gaining a partnership arrangement and open market disposal.

Following this, discussions (which had commenced in the later part of 2020) were immediately stepped up with potential partners.

In July 2024, the whole site including Llyn Mair and the Woodlands were put up for sale on the open market.

The Purpose / Aim of the Proposal:

As can be seen from the background information above, Plas Tan y Bwlch represents a huge financial risk to the Authority. The proposal to put the estate on the open market is made as part of wider considerations given to the Authority's general finances.

It was reported to the Performance & Resource Committee in November 2023 that the predicted shortfall for the 2024/25 is in the region of £870K. Welsh Government Officers have confirmed that in relation to future financial predictions, any improvements in finances will not be likely achievable until at least 2027. The decision therefore to sell or keep hold of the asset will directly impact funding and service capabilities (which will include staff numbers) in other areas of the Authority's work.

The purpose of this proposal is therefore to reduce the financial risk to the Authority.

Who will this Proposal Effect?

Currently there are 5 permanent members of staff employed by the Authority at Plas Tan y Bwlch. The contracted hours are the equivalent to 3.4 full-time equivalent posts. In addition, there are an additional 5 individuals who have casual work contracts with the Authority. This proposal has a direct effect on their future employment.

Members of the public, community and business groups who currently use Plas Tan y Bwlch services will be directly affected. Current services are bed and breakfast accommodation and meeting / events venue.

For chalets which are privately owned and located within the grounds of Plas Tan y Bwlch, the Authority owns the freehold title of the land, which if sold will be transferred to the new owner. Although historically part of the estate, the other dwellings within the grounds have long since been transferred to private ownership with freehold rights. Therefore, to various extents the chalet and dwelling owners are directly affected by this proposal.

There is a network of paths that runs through the estate which is used primarily by the surrounding local communities as well as visitors to the area. The sale of this land has the potential to directly impact local users as a new landowner can temporarily or permanently close permissive routes at any time, without needing to give the public notice. This is likely to have a direct effect on the local community mostly, as regular users of the paths.

Direct Impacts of this Proposal on the Welsh Language

Direct Impact on Welsh Speakers

Of the individuals currently employed at the Centre, 8 out of 10 are Welsh speakers. As the administrative language of the Authority is Welsh, the Welsh language requirements of posts within the Authority reflect this. This results in the Authority having a higher percentage of Welsh speaking employees compared to the general population, and it is for this reason Welsh speakers are disproportionately affected by this decision.

However, the decision of whether this proposal is to proceed or not is likely to have a direct effect on the remainder of the Authority staff in due course also, which currently number 139, of which 134 are Welsh speakers (96.4%). This is due to this proposal being a primarily financial decision for the Authority. If Plas Tan y Bwlch is not sold, there will be knock on effects on other Authority services as cost cutting measures are required for the Authority to be able to operate with budget over the next few years.

Due to the nature of this proposal, the impact is therefore primarily socio-economic for the staff currently employed at Plas Tan y Bwlch.

Around 2,100 people aged 16 and over in Gwynedd were unemployed in the year ending December 2023. This is a rate of 3.5%. This was an increase compared with the year ending December 2022 when the unemployment rate was 2.5%. However, this is lower than the overall rate in Wales which was 3.7% in December 2023 (and 3% in December 2022).

The hospitality sector is the third biggest sector in the UK and has shown faster economic growth than any other UK sector since the pandemic. Employment in this sector is more fluid but has strong demand, with more part-time, seasonal and casual positions available. Data therefore suggest that it may be easier overall to secure alternative employment in this sector compared to others in Gwynedd, especially for the casual staff.

However, options are also being considered with regard to forming a Partnership Agreement. Potential partners are currently considering options which include assessing financial viability and feasibility of such a partnership, and to date no firm proposals are forthcoming. Should this option come to fruition, there may be opportunities for continued employment for some current staff members.

Direct Impact on the Ability to use the Welsh Language

In terms of an impact on the ability of people to use Welsh, the proposal is currently undergoing a period of public consultation. All written documentation produced by the Authority is done so bilingually in line with the Authority's language policy and requirements of the Welsh Language Standards.

An Open Day was held on the 14th of October 2024, in which all Authority staff and Members present were Welsh speakers, giving members of the public and all interested parties in attendance the opportunity to have discussions in their language of choice. Following this, the Authority is now receiving written responses and comments on the proposal.

The information released under Freedom of Information requests and general FAQs asked by members of the public regarding this proposal, are going to be published imminently on

the Authority's website. All requests submitted and responded to have been translated, ensuring that the information is therefore available in Welsh and English for everyone.

Direct communication with Chalet and Dwelling owners on the estate is carried out in the language of choice of the individuals, and general correspondence sent to all owners is done so bilingually in line with the Authority's Welsh language policy.

To date, no comments have been received which have raised any other direct negative effects on the Welsh language this proposal is likely to cause.

Assessment of Overall Direct Impact: Neutral

Indirect Impacts of this Proposal on the Welsh Language

At the time of writing, the only ongoing business at the Centre are sporadic group residential bookings or group day events/meetings. As these are primarily private events that use the Centre as a venue, data is not available on the language abilities of participants / attendees and / or the language of the event. Anecdotally, it is believed that the majority of events such as courses etc., are primarily ran in English.

There has been very little use of the Centre in the past few years by local community groups to hold meetings and events, despite a promotion and marketing campaign, which included reduced rates. Group lunches for special events such as Christmas have been held by local community groups in the Centre. Again, data is not collected on the language ability of those attending, but anecdotally we are aware there are high numbers of Welsh speakers attending some events.

There are alternative venues and hotels nearby who are able to accommodate these events. It is not anticipated that this will have a major impact on these service users and therefore no corresponding indirect impact on individual's ability to use the Welsh language in their group events.

Should this proposal ultimately be rejected as an option by the Authority and instead a partnership agreement can be entered into with another business or group, it may be possible to increase the indirect positive effects on the Welsh language. This would be dependent on what the primary use of the Centre would be going forward.

This could also be the case should a decision be made to sell or transfer the asset to a community group.

Assessment of Overall Indirect Impact: Neutral

Additional Considerations / Information:

A collection of documents and artifacts are housed at Plas Tan y Bwlch which are of historical and cultural heritage importance to the local area, which would include elements relating to Welsh language and culture.

It will be possible to move the documents and artifacts into storage at HQ temporarily while arrangements are made for the work to be catalogued. In this respect the intention is to ask Bangor University or another body with expertise in the field to assist with cataloguing these papers. Depending on the Authority's decision on transferring the building, this can happen either in the current site or in their temporary home.

The long-term intention is to gift these documents and artifacts to museums and libraries for safekeeping and for ensuring continued public access.

	Date
Assessment completed for first consultation:	23.08.2024
Assessment revised:	24.10.2024
Further revisions:	
Final assessment:	