

Statement by the Presiding Officer on the bi-lingual services provided by the National Assembly for Wales Commission

As Wales's principal democratic institution, the Assembly has a duty to enable all citizens and Assembly Members to be informed about, and contribute fully to, the democratic process in their chosen language – through Welsh or through English. The Government of Wales Act 2006 stipulates that “In the exercise of the functions of the Assembly Commission effect must be given, so far as is both appropriate in the circumstances and reasonably practicable, to the principle that the English and Welsh languages should be treated on the basis of equality.” (Schedule 2 Section 8(3)). Since 2007, the Assembly Commission has significantly developed and extended the bilingual services provided by the Assembly.

The Commission's broader duty under the Act is to provide the “property, staff and services required for the Assembly's purposes” (Section 27(5)). The Commissioners (the Presiding Officer and four others chosen by the Assembly) are corporately responsible for the exercise of the functions conferred on the Commission and for the governance of the organisation, and must act in the interests of the Assembly as a whole. The Assembly's role in relation to the Commission is to consider and authorise the use of resources requested by the Commission and to hold the Commission to account for the exercise of its functions.

In June and July this year the Commission considered its strategic priorities in relation to the draft budget which will be laid tomorrow. Our aim was to limit the budget increase for 2010-11 as far as possible, so as to make as much of the Welsh block as possible available to support public services, while still delivering effective services for the Assembly. One of the options that was considered related to the translation of the Record of Proceedings. At the Commission meeting today we took account of the representations

that have been made to us by Assembly Members and others. We concluded that we should take four main steps:

Firstly, we will continue to translate the Record of Plenary Proceedings from English into Welsh so that a fully bi-lingual written record is produced, but to do so within 3 to 10 days of each plenary meeting.

Secondly, we will introduce the facility for all proceedings related to legislation to be translated.

The Record of committee proceedings has only ever been produced with translation of spoken Welsh to English and not vice versa. As the Assembly's constitutional status evolves and our legislative role increases, the Commission believes it is appropriate to review this approach in the light of those developments. As a bilingual legislature, we make Measures that carry equal legal weight in both Welsh and English. As a point of principle, we should ensure that later consideration of the effect of the legislation we make can be carried out with equal facility in either language. Henceforth, therefore, we will produce a record of both plenary and committee proceedings on Measures in both languages. Specifically, a full record in both languages will be produced of all proceedings at Stages 2, 3 and 4 as well as committee scrutiny of the Member in charge of a Measure at Stage 1. The first Measure to which this will apply in full will be the Commission's own Measure to establish the National Assembly for Wales Remuneration Board, the new independent body that will set the level of Members' salary, allowances and pensions.

Thirdly, we will establish an independent review to examine our delivery of bilingual services prior to the formal review of the Assembly's Welsh Language Scheme in 2010.

Fourthly, we will take steps to bring forward legislation to put the status of the two languages used in the business of the Assembly on a sound statutory footing.

The Welsh Language Act 1993 was never intended to provide a framework within which a national legislature operates. It would be constitutionally inappropriate for the Assembly and the Commission to be accountable to a body appointed by Ministers and, under certain circumstances to Ministers themselves, when the Ministers in question are themselves accountable to the Assembly. In other bilingual jurisdictions there is detailed legislation, independently enforceable, which deals specifically with language rights in relation to the legislative body. Up until now it has not been open to us as an Assembly to enact such legislation. But the Legislative Competence Order (LCO) on the Welsh language, when made, will provide us with the power to do so. The Commission intends to consider the options which will be open to the Assembly when the LCO in question becomes law, and to produce a set of specific legislative proposals relating to the use of the two official languages in the work of the Assembly and of the Commission. These proposals will be developed in consultation with Assembly Members, the public and interested bodies.

The Assembly Commission is already an exemplar organisation in its delivery of bilingual services to the public. Taken together we believe these proposals demonstrate our commitment to remaining so by strengthening the position of Welsh in the work of the Commission and the Assembly, in a way that is effective, practical and relevant.