



ARFOR

Creu Gwaith - Cefnogi'r Iaith

Evaluation of the Arfor Programme

Executive Summary

Key findings

- The Arfor programme has successfully trialled small scale business support schemes and demonstrated that they have the potential to increase the use of Welsh within the workplace, to create favourable conditions for further development of capacity and services, as well as increase the numbers of Welsh speakers within the business community.
- The programme has also trialled less conventional business support interventions such as the mentoring of young people through the Llwyddo'n Lleol scheme, the Ffiws/Gofod Creu scheme which offered workspaces and free access to advanced equipment and technician support, and by supporting social businesses to develop their assets to increase their capacity and impact within their communities through the Cymunedau Mentrus scheme.
- Overall, the programme has created 238 full time equivalent (FTE) and 89 part time jobs, safeguarded a further 226 FTE jobs, supported 154 existing or start-up businesses. Whilst securing this economic impact, the direct grants have also embedded plans to develop language capacity within the businesses' plans for the coming years.
- Moreover, the grants have demonstrated that a focus on developing language capacity need not detract or impact negatively on the capacity for direct capital or revenue assistance to support and act as a catalyst for business development and growth.
- The Arfor programme has also offered insight into the types of interventions that will support the strategic aims of the Welsh Government in relation to the Welsh language. Creating jobs can offer a means by which people may remain and work in the area, though much work and research is needed to determine what types of jobs encourage Welsh speakers to live in the area.
- Overall, the process of delivering the programme has spurred a critical examination of the problems and possible solutions that the Arfor area faces in relation to the economy and the language. In this sense, and in relation to the direct impact that the specific schemes have secured, the programme can be considered a success.
- Importantly however, in only trialling and evaluating interventions, there remains considerable potential to mainstream successful schemes, to share learning, to continue to trial and evaluate and to continue developing the evidence base and understanding of the economy and its impact upon the language.

Summary of key lessons

1. The relationship between the economy and the language – in particular the notion of ‘better jobs’ in the area and the potential to impact upon migration - needs to be better understood. Any future programme should include greater investment in research, monitoring and evaluation over an extended period. Greater understanding of the interplay between economic and other underlying and structural factors should also be developed.
2. Any future programme should be undertaken over a longer period with more time allowed for the design and subsequent delivery of activities and their integration with mainstream business development and language support initiatives.
3. Innovation and trialling ideas have been integral to the programme to date and should continue to be so in any future programme, but with a clearly defined path to upscaling and / or mainstreaming successful activities.
4. The potential benefit of integrating support for business development and the development of language use by businesses has been demonstrated.
5. The potential impact of supporting young people to establish and develop enterprises, thus increasing the probability of retaining them in their local areas and influencing their peers, has been highlighted by the programme and could form a key component in any future programme.
6. Collaboration and the sharing of good practice and learning have been key characteristics of the programme and valued by all partners. Any future programme should ensure sufficient resources to support, facilitate and further embed collaboration between the existing partners with a view to broadening the range of partners involved.

Background and aims

Arfor was a programme that worked across Anglesey, Gwynedd, Ceredigion, and Carmarthenshire. These regions are often referred to as ‘the heartlands’ of the Welsh language; rural, with relatively deprived local authorities and a large percentage of Welsh speakers within their population. The local authorities share common economic, cultural and language characteristics and challenges as well as a desire to work in partnership in response to their challenges.

The aim of the Arfor programme was to develop economic interventions, which would have a positive impact on the number of Welsh speakers and the viability of the Welsh language. Specifically, the programme sought to ‘create more and better jobs’. This reflected the widely held logic underpinning the approach, namely that as (mainly young) people were leaving the area due to a lack of good jobs, creating more and better jobs would stem that outmigration and the associated loss of Welsh speakers to the area.

At its outset, and again through work conducted for the programme's interim report, it was not possible to identify an operational plan of specific interventions with confidence that they would positively impact the economy and language. Practically, therefore, the programme was to pilot and trial interventions and learn lessons rather than affect significant change. This latter point is stressed due to the perception amongst some stakeholders that the programme was a comprehensive effort to affect significant and even structural change. A budget of £2m was earmarked for the period of 2019–2021, again reflecting the relatively small scale and short timeframe for the programme. Each Local Authority would essentially develop their own small-scale trials with small cohorts of beneficiaries.

More broadly, there was a perception amongst stakeholders interviewed for both the interim and final evaluation reports that government policy had historically approached (rural) economic development and language policy as distinct policy fields, with the latter rarely integrated into the former. Arfor comprises a fundamentally different approach to rural development, where language revitalisation is integrated and a key aim alongside sharing prosperity. Moreover, the approach and ideal of placing language revitalisation and sustainability as an explicit goal of rural and economic development lends itself to the wider rural agenda.

Interim Report

The Interim Report was developed during 2020-2021 and constitutes a key component of the overall programme and the process of learning and engaging with the challenges faced. It concluded that a comprehensive and detailed strategy was not possible, due to the lack of data and supporting evidence to identify and recommend specific activities. However, the report did inform the wider understanding of the field and the challenges which the Arfor programme sought to address.

The report noted that there was very little discussion and data regarding specific economic processes and their actual impact, positive or detrimental, upon the Welsh language. Although there was evidence supporting the hypothesis at the heart of the programme, namely that migration out of the area has a significant and detrimental impact upon the language, the report concluded that there was a lack of evidence supporting the suggestion that creating more and better jobs would alone resolve that issue.

Moreover, the report noted that deeper, structural economic issues, such as the economy being skewed towards sectors that have a lower base value and weaker prospects for growth, lower than average wages and relative inaccessibility of housing for young people, are key drivers in pushing young people out of the area. Meanwhile, issues such as quality of life, access to services and education, the conservative and patriarchal culture of rural areas as well as a desire to expand horizons and access recreational opportunities are further and important factors to consider in relation to the outward migration of young people.

The report concluded with three strategic recommendations, namely:

1. That Arfor continue to trial and evaluate interventions in the economy to support businesses. This learning would likely inform the wider understanding of how the economy interacts with and impacts the language. The Arfor programme would effectively start this process.
2. Secondly, the report proposed that a research group be established to develop and promote an understanding of the link between the economy and the language. Whilst no research group was established, its potential value was recognised within and beyond the programme.
3. Thirdly, the four local authorities should consider continuing to work together formally beyond the lifespan of the programme and should agree to mainstream and promote successful interventions amongst themselves and beyond. This recommendation is still relevant and represents a means by which the impact and legacy of the Arfor programme can be maintained into the future.

Overview of activities

All the local authorities offered direct business grants to support development and innovation. Ceredigion offered two grants, one aimed at supporting new businesses, and another aimed at established businesses looking to develop. Carmarthenshire offered development grants to businesses within the food and drink or creative industry sectors. Ynys Môn (Anglesey) offered business grants and a smaller, language grant to support business development and purely language capacity respectively. Gwynedd offered a direct grant to any businesses. Overall, the direct grants accounted for around two thirds of the operational expenditure.

However, Gwynedd and Ynys Môn also offered mentoring and training schemes for young people through the Llwyddo'n Lleol scheme. The scheme provided business development and mentoring support to young people with business ideas, coupled with a marketing and promotional component whereby the participants would communicate their journeys through social media. Ffiws/Gofod Creu was a further scheme supported by Gwynedd, offering a workspace and free access to specialist equipment and technician support. Cymunedau Mentrus, also trialled by Gwynedd, sought to support social businesses and community enterprises to develop their assets. Finally, Bwrlwm Arfor represented the outsourced marketing and promotional campaign for the programme.

Delivery

The programme was significantly impacted by the coronavirus pandemic in a number of ways. The overall aim of creating jobs was modified to include the safeguarding of jobs. Individual projects and grant holders amended, postponed or, on rare occasions abandoned plans that were proposed in applications. Moreover, fieldwork for the purposes of the evaluation report was restricted to online and remote data capture.

Ultimately, however, the programme delivered all schemes in a manner judged by the majority of staff and beneficiaries to be successful. A brand had been established and somewhat recognised, offering a platform that enables the local authorities to build upon the impact and reputation of the current programme, and respond to the third of the interim report's recommendations. The relatively 'low key' launch, the absence of a significant promotional campaign, and the consistently high levels of interest in the business grants in particular, suggests that any similar successor programme should be expected to attract a similar level of interest. The wider programmes, particularly Llwyddo'n Lleol and Cymunedau Mentrus, were popular, with the criteria for the former even narrowed for the second call in order to focus the support on University students staying home due to lockdown restrictions.

However, it was widely felt that the tight timescales for designing and delivering the programme and schemes limited the extent to which innovative approaches and interventions could be offered. Consequently, direct grants to businesses represented the most efficient and likely surest means by which the budget could be spent.

Impact

The programme has had the most visible and direct impact through direct business grants to small and micro firms in the area. These businesses frequently noted how difficult it was to access alternative sources of finance, investment and capital. In this sense, the grants have proved particularly valuable for these businesses and have enabled expansion and diversification. In turn, these businesses have created 238 full-time and 89 part time jobs and safeguarded 226 FTE jobs, increased revenue, and with these being in local firms, are more likely to recycle the revenue locally.

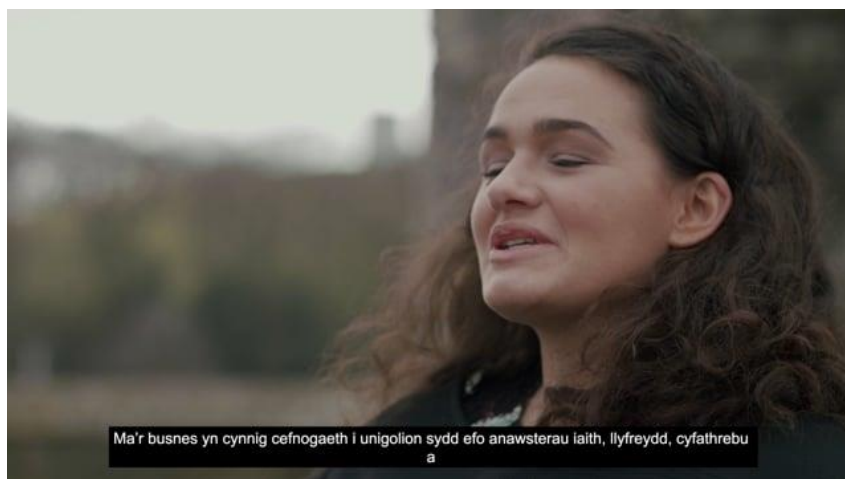
Specifically, the support has enabled the development of new services and products or new ways of working by providing capital or revenue finance to match and multiply the impact of business investment. Businesses consistently noted that such developments would have been particularly difficult to secure without the Arfor grant due to the challenges they faced accessing finance and investment in order to fund key developments. This was widely felt to be particularly relevant to younger (potential) business owners who were thought to face additional challenges in accessing finance and investment for their businesses due to a lack of credit history or capital. These grants consequently filled a particular void and, arguably, avoided a market failure.



By embedding the development of language services and capacity within businesses, largely through generous scoring for language development plans within application forms, the direct grants have revealed ways to support the language through economic interventions. By embedding language development within business planning, the grants have ensured more substantive engagement with the agenda, as well as with wider government support services such as Helo Blod. Ultimately, this leads to more accessible Welsh language services and products as well as the language becoming more visible amongst businesses. This does not necessarily increase the numbers of Welsh speakers in an area, but it does support communities and individuals to live their lives through the medium of Welsh.



Schemes such as Llwyddo'n Lleol meanwhile, alongside supporting nascent businesses run by young people, have demonstrated a means by which a narrative around starting businesses and living within the area can be created and promoted. The longer-term impact of this narrative, one that counters the established story of there not being opportunities or jobs for young people in rural Wales, remains to be gauged.



Finally, the Cymunedau Mentrus scheme differed from the other direct-to-business support on offer. The scheme sought instead to support and help expand the capacity of key “allies” in pursuit of similar aims. Specifically, the scheme supported social businesses that seek to create employment for local people through the medium of Welsh. This approach differs from the other schemes in that the impact is entirely secondary and draws upon the capacity and role and impact of the businesses within communities.



More generally, the data suggests that it is possible to support business development and innovation alongside supporting the development of Welsh language capacity. The latter does not limit the former from creating and supporting jobs and innovation within companies across a range of sectors. Moreover, the former does not limit the latter, and businesses can be supported and encouraged to develop their Welsh language capacity alongside wider business development, and that language development can be mainstreamed and embedded within business development.

Lessons from the model and delivery

The experience and model of delivery also generated valuable learning and key lessons. The interim report and related discussions and workshops with stakeholders and management staff played a valuable role in stimulating discussions and developing this knowledge and understanding. Crucially, the programme and its staff refined their understanding of how the issue of language decline and outmigration of Welsh speakers could be tackled. Whilst creating jobs was important and valuable, the core challenge is likely related not to the number of jobs but to the type of jobs available to young people. In this sense, more could be done to understand the relationship between creating jobs and the ‘right’ people taking the posts, or in understanding which were “the right jobs” to attract young, local and Welsh speaking people to live and work in the area. Moreover, simply creating job opportunities may not, alone, be enough. It may even be counterproductive when accounting for the wider analyses undertaken for the interim report.

The challenge is also likely related to wider issues concerning the quality of life and ambitions of young people. Ideally, economy>language approaches should be a part of a wider strategy to address the negative narrative around living and working locally and the structural factors threatening the sustainability of the language.

The programme has also uncovered a coalition of “allies” who have or could have been drawn and enticed through direct funding. This suggests that there may be a network of organisations and individuals interested in pursuing the common purpose of developing economic interventions that benefit the language. Importantly, future and broader efforts to engage with language sustainability could make more use of these wider “allies” and the social capital that is to be found within networks of such allies.

Close

The programme, in spite of the delays and difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has therefore been successful in supporting pilot schemes to promote economic development and generate a benefit to the Welsh language. It has succeeded in identifying ways in which economic interventions can support the sustainability of the Welsh language in rural areas. The immediate challenge of ensuring that the learning and good practice is shared, learned and adopted remains for the participating LAs.

Ultimately however, the Arfor programme was a pilot or demonstrator fund. Therefore, given its scale, the direct impact is unlikely to be significant beyond the individual businesses or communities supported. For the programme to have a significant impact and a constructive legacy, the learning must be shared and schemes must be mainstreamed. The Arfor structure, involving cooperation between the staff of the four local authorities, nonetheless represents an effective means by which these two tasks can be accomplished. The local authorities should therefore seek opportunities to continue to cooperate, to share good practice internally and promote it externally, to mainstream effective schemes and to identify opportunities to fund and evaluate further pilots.

Summary of Report Lessons

LESSON 1: The management staff and stakeholders have developed their thinking in relation to a key Arfor concept, namely the notion of a “better job” within the area, post-pandemic. The staff and stakeholders should aim to continue to develop their understanding of what constitutes a “better job”; this will inform any future efforts to develop job creation programmes or economic interventions that have a beneficial impact upon the language. A “good job” should also concern the social and language impact of the job being created.

LESSON 2: Strategically, expectations of what impact a job creation programme can have upon migration (in and out), and consequently the language, should be limited. Ideally, economy>language approaches should be a part of a wider strategy to tackle the underlying and structural factors threatening the sustainability of the language.

LESSON 3: It is recommended that the age profile of individuals benefiting where jobs are created is captured in future monitoring data. This would enable the management to gain insight into the types of interventions and jobs that encourage young people to remain in the area

LESSON 4: The management staff should seek to engage with Business Wales's Helo Blod and the Welsh Language Commissioner’s business support services with the aim of sharing their experiences and good practise developed while delivering this programme.

LESSON 5: If an extension or continuation is considered, the role of social capital and the added value of a wider coalition of delivery partners and allies should be considered when developing the design and delivery model. The design should look to capitalise and maximise the impact that the social capital may achieve.

LESSON 6: More resource was required to manage and delivery the programme than had been anticipated. If extended or continued, the programme should account for the administrative burden of administering the grants.

LESSON 7: If an extension or continuation is considered, including institutions that are hubs within sectors such as Yr Egin or the Food Centre Wales as well as the numerous Universities in the area should be considered as potential delivery partners.

LESSON 8: If an extension or continuation is considered, the management and funders should consider allowing more time to design and develop schemes. This should enable staff to approach key stakeholders and possible delivery partners to add value to the support as well as draw a wider network of actors into the field of developing economic interventions that benefit the language.

LESSON 9: The programme management and the four Local Authorities should seek to remain in contact with the businesses and beneficiaries of the programme. The management should aim to continue to monitor the impact that the support has had into the next few years.

LESSON 10: In looking to share good practice and learning, and to promote the mainstreaming of successful activities, the four LAs should continue to cooperate into the future regardless of whether a formal Arfor programme exists. The Arfor structure presents opportunities to maintain cooperation; for sharing good practice and learning internally; identifying opportunities for mainstreaming; identifying funding opportunities for further trialling; and for promoting learning and knowledge externally to influence wider economic governance structures.

The evaluation has been undertaken by [Wavehill: social and economic research](#)

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