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Towards a language strategy for cities

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Preamble

Why should we support and celebrate multilingualism?

We believe it is important to recognise, promote and celebrate the different languages and heritages in our society. We believe that when people speak different languages, it can make our communities stronger and more interesting. We also believe that people should be able to use their language skills without fear or discrimination. We believe that by celebrating language and cultural diversity we can raise awareness and in that way help ensure equality.

Sometimes, different languages are not valued as much as they should be. We want to change that by working with schools and other educational bodies, government, both locally and nationally, and community groups to promote the benefits of multilingualism. We want to show people how speaking more than one language can be good for individuals and for society as a whole.

We also believe that it is important for people who work in different fields, like education and healthcare, to learn about and respect different languages. We want to bring people from these fields together with academics to share ideas and make sure we are doing the best we can to promote multilingualism.

Overall, we want to create a world where people can speak the languages and language varieties they choose to and be proud of their language skills and cultural heritages.

The purpose of this document

This document is intended to inspire cities in the UK and beyond to embrace, promote and harness their multilingual reality. We call for a strategic approach to multilingualism that is responsive to needs and that embeds urban multilingual reality firmly into local policy.

The document has been composed in conversation among activists, teachers, academics and other professionals working in a variety of sectors who represent initiatives to promote multilingualism and language learning in various cities in the UK and several European countries.

We hope that the document will trigger discussion at the level of local civil society initiatives, cultural institutions, public service providers and local authorities about ways and means to embrace and respond to the multilingualism that is now a permanent feature of our contemporary cities.

We welcome comments and contributions that can help extend and enrich the document, as well as feedback and reports on aspects considered in this document that have been adopted in local policy documents.

Background

Our cities, our communities are multilingual:

The 2021 census for England and Wales reported that 5.1 million people or 8.9 per cent of the population stated a language other than English or Welsh as their 'main language'. The wording in the census is a rather vague declaration that obscures the reality of people using languages in addition to English in their homes, work or personal life. And so it does not give us the full picture. Yet it shows just how widespread multilingualism is and how integral it is to our society.

Unsurprisingly, the multilingualism recorded in the census showed considerable concentrations in cities, with places like Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Leicester, Reading, Boston, Southampton and individual London boroughs showing anywhere between 15 and 37 percent non-English 'main language'. Between 12 and 20 percent of households in cities with high multilingualism reported more than one language in addition to English within their household.

School census figures show that among young people the numbers are considerably higher, with more than 40 percent coming from households in which a language other than English is spoken. Those figures too are believed to be lower estimates, as many parents do not always report another home language or languages, and school staff can be unaware of these additional language skills, especially when children appear to be completely fluent in English when they enter school. Researchers put the realistic figure of young people from multilingual households in cities at over 50 percent.

Clearly, the future of our cities is multilingual.

Why take action?

Currently there are two aspects of the discussion on multilingualism that require urgent consideration. Firstly, there is the assumption that being multilingual necessarily entails having difficulties with English proficiency, which, consequently, can impact negatively on educational attainment, career opportunities and social integration. In fact, the figure of those with a declared ‘main language’ other than English and who do not speak or understand English has remained steady since figures were first collected in 2011, at a mere 0.3 percent of the population (currently around 160,000 people; and we can compare that with over 500,000 international students who come to the UK every year to study or improve their English). Of that figure of 160,000 many go on to develop English language skills. Nevertheless, language policy should address the issues of accessibility of services to those with no, or poor, levels of proficiency in English.

Secondly, the efforts of educators, professional bodies and policy makers have tended towards encouraging the uptake of language qualifications by persons of, overwhelmingly, monolingual backgrounds. We do consider the offer of language qualifications to be an important aspect of a comprehensive language policy but we should also have a strategy which caters to the needs and aspirations of the many, particularly young, people in our cities, who have acquired skills in, potentially, a variety of languages, even before entering the school system.

Why do cities need a language strategy?

Cities are usually places where languages meet, and linguistic plurality and difference are treated as normal – expected, addressed, accepted and enjoyed. Across a range of media, at work, at home and in community life, people switch, mix and blend languages, in both routine and creative ways. But some regard linguistic diversity with hostility and fear. This suspicion inhibits the development of individuals and undermines community.

Depending on how we approach it, linguistic diversity can be a source of connection and enrichment, or insecurity, division and conflict. Our uses of language, our linguistic repertoires and our communicative relationships are complicated. They are closely tied to the different situations where we find ourselves, as well as to who we are, what we do, and what we want to be.

Language policies and explicit beliefs about language play a very important part in society, but they sometimes take only a narrow view of what communication involves, speak of ‘deficit’, and emphasise formal standards more than creativity, fluidity and the need to build confidence by recognising and strengthening people’s self-declared identities.

A city language strategy must acknowledge the changed cultural and social fabric of UK cities and recognise that multilingualism is a key aspect of civic identity, one that gives rise to multilingual spaces and new forms of transactions and cultural and identity routines, opens up new opportunities for skills and worldwide connections while also giving rise to needs that require assessment and effective responses

Cities should draft comprehensive strategies that will rest on and enshrine the following observations and principles:

- Speaking multiple languages is good for individuals and society as a whole, as it offers opportunities to develop skills and experience of navigating a variety of settings, of critical thinking, empathy and flexibility. Linguistic diversity makes communities stronger and more interesting. It is therefore important that society includes and promotes different languages.
- Sometimes different languages are not valued as much as they should be. People should be able to use their language skills without fear or discrimination. We want to create a world where people can speak the languages they want and be proud of their language skills.
- It is important for people in different fields like education and healthcare to learn about and respect different languages. We want to promote the benefits of multilingualism with schools, government, and community groups. We want to bring people from these fields together to share ideas and promote multilingualism.

The purpose of a Language Strategy is to set out guiding principles through which to approach language diversity as a cultural asset and a strategic resource that can play a key role in the city's sustainable development, and to outline a cost-effective mechanism for delivery that is based primarily on harnessing existing resources and partnerships and does not require substantial investment in new infrastructure.

Strategic priorities

1) Access and equality

We must ensure that language barriers are not a hindrance to access essential services, and that effective strategies are in place to overcome language barriers both in the short term (through interpreting and translation) and in the long term (through adequate provision of English courses). We require effective procedures to establish and monitor the numbers of people who don't know English, and to review the current state of provisions for interpreting and English language learning; need for more data. For interpreting and translation, particularly in health and social care as well as emergency services, we need clearly formulated quality assurance principles and processes to share good practice (not least in light of the fact that many of these provisions are usually outsourced to private contractors). We also need comprehensive provisions for sign language including both easy access to interpreting and careful consideration of the merits of inclusive education, protection in the work place and risk assessment and risk mitigating procedures.

Suggested measures and Objectives:

- Quality assurance standards for translation and interpreting in public services
- Programme of training on language diversity for front line key public services guidelines for accessibility of key public services
- Speech and language therapy provisions for multilinguals, and setting up training curricula and recruitment processes for speech and language therapists to equip them with the skills to diagnose and treat multilingual referrals
- Provision of training for education, social care and health professionals, emergency services and local authority staff about the merits of bilingualism as well as the multilingual profile of their cities

- Create and maintain tools for data collection and data assessment, and data sharing protocols, to improve data collection on languages, for example by co-referencing census and school census data with statistics on requests for interpreting and translation in various sectors, uptake of language qualifications in educational bodies, uptake of and requests for city library resources in other languages, reported language skills among staff in key service providing institutions, and more.
- Work towards creating quality assurance oversight, at national level, of procedures for language assessment for the determination of origin in asylum and immigration.

2) Heritage and Skills

By strengthening confidence in languages and multilingualism we aim to ensure confidence in heritage, support intergenerational communication and family well-being. We can strengthen the educational, cultural and career development of individuals and their job market flexibility, enrich professional expertise in dealing with international partners in a variety of areas and strengthen the pool of country-based and regional expertise.

Suggested measures and Objectives:

- Set targets for GCSE and A-level enrolment in languages, and work towards meeting those targets by informing students and parents on options and supporting educational facilities to reach target audiences
- Work towards diversification of GCSE and A-level language offers at primary and secondary schools
- Create local frameworks for support and accreditation of supplementary schools that teach heritage languages, and offer networking and training opportunities for supplementary school staff on both pedagogical and administrative matters as well as on less-discussed but crucial issues such as regional and social variation in language and considering such variation in the curriculum
- Work towards the inclusion of heritage languages in the mainstream curriculum and dismantling language hierarchies in education
- Support library holdings in heritage languages and create effective needs assessment procedures
- Develop language learning programmes for older citizens, as a way of preventing or mitigating some of the mental effects of ageing, and as a way of building bridges among people of different backgrounds.

3) Celebration and Citizenship

We should make multilingualism part of civic identity, by recognising cities' multilingual character and flagging how belonging to the civic community with its diverse backgrounds and traditions can be expressed by embracing the city's multilingual spaces.

Suggested measures and Objectives:

- We need programmes and activity portfolios to raise awareness of multilingualism through events in educational facilities, cultural institutions, community centres, and public spaces.
- Cities should include public celebration of multilingualism in their civic calendar, while ensuring that strategies are in place to ensure that celebration means informing, awareness-raising and the building of confidence, allowing people and communities to showcase their heritage in the public space with a view towards tackling inequalities, building confidence, bridging gaps and opening opportunities, beyond just the festive or ‘marketing’ nature that are often associated with celebrations.
- Cities should set up permanent advisory groups on multilingualism and language diversity to help local authorities draft detailed action plans in all of the above areas, and to network with other cities, and the UK and abroad, who are working towards similar goals.

Appendix: Some relevant documents and publications

Call for a Multilingual Cities Movement, 2019:

<https://mrcityoflanguages.org/call-for-a-multilingual-cities-movement/>

Draft City Language Strategy for Manchester, 2018:

<https://mrcityoflanguages.org/developing-a-city-language-strategy-for-manchester/>

British Academy Report on ‘Languages: the state of the nation’, 2013:

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2601/Languages-state-of-the-nation-demand-supply-language-skills-UK-2013.pdf>

Faye Taylor British Academy and Cumberland Lodge Report on Multilingual Britain, 2013:

https://www.academia.edu/3538682/Multilingual_Britain

Coalition for Language Education Founding Statement, 2023:

<https://coalitionforlanguageducationuk.com/founding-statement/>

Yaron Matras: Speech and the City. Multilingualism, Decoloniality and the Civic University, Cambridge University Press, 2024:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/speech-and-the-city/5554A2626BF69CA029F361FA9BEB91F6>

Yaron Matras, Can Global Cities Have a Language Policy? 2017:

<https://www.meits.org/policy-papers/paper/can-global-cities-have-a-language-policy>