

Culture Committee - CC-18-01(p.2)

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Time: 9.00am - 12.30pm

Venue: Committee Room 1, National Assembly Building

CULTURE COMMITTEE REVIEW OF THE WELSH LANGUAGE

PRESENTATION BY FEDERATION OF SMALL BUSINESSES IN WALES

November 2001

On behalf of the Federation of Small Businesses in Wales, I would like to thank the Culture Committee for inviting us to present our ideas regarding their Review into the Welsh Language. With over 6,500 members in Wales, the FSB represents businesses in every sector and industry imaginable, located in every economic and linguistic region of the Nation. Large proportions of our members are located within the heartlands of the Welsh language and use the language on a daily basis in running their businesses. There are others within and outside these traditional heartlands who are enthusiastic about developing their use of the language. We do not know however, the extent that this enthusiasm is being hampered by the perception, either imagined or real, that the language is irrelevant or inappropriate to their businesses.

From a survey commissioned by the FSB in 1999, only 8% of the respondents in Wales used the Welsh language on a daily basis. Amongst those that used the language, the vast majority said that this was an advantage to their business. From the 92%, which claimed not to use the language, only some 6% believed that this deficiency was a disadvantage.

The low response to this question suggests two conclusions:

1. To compare with other factors that were highlighted by the survey, the majority did not believe that the Welsh Language is of vast importance to their businesses
2. In the opinion of the majority of respondents, their inability to converse in Welsh did not present a major barrier to their business survival and growth

We did not ask the respondent to say where in Wales their businesses were located.

It appears from the response that the majority of businesses are untroubled about the Welsh language, as they do not consider it as a factor that presents major advantages or disadvantages. The most effective way therefore of promoting the language to small businesses would be demonstrate the possible economic, cultural and societal advantages.

The FSB realises and welcomes the increasing economic and cultural emphasis that is being presented by the Welsh language, in particular in relation to cultural tourism and the use of the language in communities. Many small businesses will need to change their attitude towards the language if they are to take full advantage of this trend. But it is also important that Welsh language policies and public projects are adequate and relevant to business needs. The language should be promoted to businesses in a positive and sensitive way, persuading them of the advantages while avoiding implementing any regulations.

To determine how businesses can take advantage of the Welsh language, it is necessary to examine the themes outlined by the Committee more closely.

FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Many small and medium sized businesses are family owned and managed. They often provide essential services to their local communities. As full members of their communities business people and families would benefit directly and indirectly from any bilingual and educational projects and of extending the provision of Welsh to adults. It is important that businesses respond to the conditions and needs of their customers by adopting a positive attitude towards the language, especially in Welsh speaking areas. National Assembly for Wales policies, implemented through its statutory bodies, should assist businesses to develop their capability to offer services through the medium of Welsh.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The view of the FSB in Wales strongly reiterates the assertion of the Committee, that economic activity is essential for the sustainability of communities. Without economic activity in Welsh speaking regions, the language will continue to be under threat. Economic development in these communities will increase the wealth of the local inhabitants and would increase their confidence both in the Welsh language and in enterprise. Economic growth and an improvement in career opportunities would also result in a reduction of out-migration by young dynamic and Welsh speaking members, while at the same time allowing people to re-settle their families and businesses in their original communities.

The FSB in Wales are strongly of the opinion that a major means of promoting the local economy would be to increase the emphasis, opportunity and importance of small businesses. This requires specific policies by the National Assembly through advise, assistance and financial measures. It will also require a revolutionary change in attitudes towards education,

training, business activity and entrepreneurship. This is especially true in Welsh speaking areas where there has been a traditional over-emphasis and tendency on following a career within the public sector. For Welsh communities to become successful it is necessary for its inhabitants to venture in the business world.

Many Welsh speaking communities also reside within the area of Objective 1 European Structural Funds. It is important therefore to target this financial assistance towards projects that would assist the private sector including community ventures. In this regard we welcome the Objective 1 funds that have recently been awarded to Finance Wales in the hope that this will give a boost to business start-ups in North and South West Wales. However, much more recourses are required.

With so much of Welsh speaking areas being rural, there is a pressing need to examine and develop infrastructures, in particular transport and Information Technology structures, which would assist the activities of businesses.

Recourses need to be targeted on creating incentives, that would encourage and assist entrepreneurship initiatives rather than creating barriers, which would impair on businesses. Some of these services should include:

- a. Advisory services to demonstrate how small businesses can use the Welsh language effectively and on a daily basis
- b. Practical assistance including supplying bilingual badges and signs
- c. Financial assistance to fund bilingual training courses for business owners and staff

We would welcome any measures that would support bilingual entrepreneurship with incentives that would offer language-training opportunities amongst owners and staff. In addition to promoting linguistic training, businesses that already have a bilingual staff should be awarded by the offer of alternative training opportunities.

It is not clear why the Committee has decided to offer training opportunities exclusively to businesses in the new economy. While it is important to emphasize the importance of the new economy in general for Wales, it is not appropriate to differentiate while considering means of promoting the Welsh language. Any measures, which aim to promote the use of Welsh, should be available to small businesses in every sector.

We welcome the consideration of placing taxation incentives to small and medium businesses that operates bilingually. Such a measure would certainly be a very persuasive incentive for

businesses when considering adopting a bilingual policy. However, it is not clear who would decide the criteria and standard of bilingualism that would be expected.

By demonstrating clear economic advantages businesses would be encouraged to promote the use of Welsh in more general terms. For example the importance of creating a comfortable environment for customers could be emphasized. The Welsh Language Board should allocate greater resources to assist businesses to become bilingual while also assisting them to advertise the fact that they are competent in Welsh. Extending the Welsh Language Board's small grant system to assist businesses with bilingual signing and offering assistance with information technology is a way of achieving these aims.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

While collecting data on the situation of Welsh, it is essential to include statistics that show the usage of the language among businesses as well as attitudes of non-Welsh language businesses. Data collected should include:

- The economic value for businesses that use Welsh
- The number of small businesses that operates bilingually
- What do these businesses consider as being the major advantages and disadvantage of pursuing bilingualism
- What is the costs to businesses of implementing a bilingual policy
- How many SME's have an interest in developing bilingualism
- What public support mechanisms do small businesses want to assist them in improving their Welsh capability

PROMOTING BILINGUALISM AND MAINTAINING NATIONAL CONSENSUS AND GOOD WILL

Developing consensus and good will among small businesses is essential, especially in areas where Welsh is a minority language. Inspirational incentives and friendly persuasion will be the most effective way of developing good will. Making linguistic policies compulsory may be counter-productive.

It is necessary to realise the different attitudes between businesses of differing resources, as well as businesses that are located in different linguistic regions of Wales. We can imagine businesses within Welsh speaking and semi-Welsh speaking areas

adopting a more positive attitude towards the language. With businesses that have fewer resources to adapt, and which are not located within the Welsh language areas, there will be a need to find more imaginative ways to win their good will and co-operation.

PUBLIC INVESTMENT

Any public investment towards linguistic planning must consider the needs of small businesses that operate within their communities. FSB in Wales are of the opinion that it should be the aim of the Welsh Language Board to give particular focus on assisting businesses to develop and gain confidence in language skills through practical advice and financial assistance.

Once again the FSB in Wales would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to respond to this Review.