

Culture Committee - CC-17-01(p.3)

Date: 15th November 2001
Time: 2.00pm-4.30pm
Venue: Newport Centre, Newport

CBI WALES SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

CULTURE COMMITTEE'S REVIEW OF THE WELSH LANGUAGE

1. Summary

1. CBI Wales supports multilingualism and recognises the role that the Welsh language plays in this
2. We support the use of the Welsh language amongst the workforce on a demand-led basis
3. Companies in customer-facing industries are in most cases already using the language meaningfully on a voluntary basis. They must not be punished by any attempt to legislate and increase the compliance burden.
4. Business can do most to assist the survival and development of the language by providing employment in Welsh speaking areas.
5. But business cannot create more jobs unless the Assembly creates the right business environment. This means
 - a. addressing deficiencies in transport and planning policies
 - b. incentivising language use, not penalising non-use. This will assist in making the language heartlands more competitive.

1.6 We must recognise that economic prosperity depends on people. If the Welsh economy grows we will need to attract skills into Wales – this summer's debate about the Welsh language has been extremely unhelpful in this respect.

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2 CBI Wales

2.1 The CBI is the UK's foremost employers' organisation. Membership consists

of companies of all sizes and all sectors. CBI Wales has in membership businesses from all parts of the country, and approximately 50% of the private sector workforce in Wales is employed by a CBI member business. Members include the Wales-based divisions of UK companies, local operations of multinational corporations, as well as Welsh owned companies, both large and SME. Sectors represented include manufacturing, financial and other services, retail, tourism and higher education.

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3 Evidence to the Culture Committee

3.1 This evidence was compiled from the submissions of individual member companies, discussions at member meetings, and has been agreed by the CBI Wales Council. The CBI Wales Council is the elected group of members which decides the strategic direction of CBI activities in Wales. Its members share six different mother tongues, and represent businesses from Gwynedd to Flint, Powys, and Pembrokeshire to Monmouthshire.

3.2 This evidence primarily relates to the economic development theme of the Review, and is mainly concerned with the normalisation cross cutting theme.

4 Language in business

4.1 English is indisputably the main language of business worldwide, and many multinational operations, even if headquartered in a non-English speaking country, adopt English as the corporate language because of its universal acceptance.

4.2 However, CBI Wales members strongly support multilingualism. Wales is too small a market to allow the development of purely local businesses and it is essential that Welsh companies tackle markets outside Wales, either in the UK or abroad. A multilingual workforce is a great asset in achieving this.

4.3 CBI Wales therefore wishes to see a flourishing Welsh language. We believe that individuals comfortable in English and Welsh will have a strong foundation from which to develop the language skills which will both assist the individual in developing a career, and contribute to the skilled workforce which business

values.

4.4 Business also believes in the need to reflect and respond to the values of the communities in which it operates. This takes many forms, but responding to demand for Welsh language usage is one manifestation of this.

5 Current use of Welsh language by business

5.1 The current use of Welsh by business is varied, and is largely determined by the level of consumer contact which a business has, and the parts of Wales in which it operates.

5.2 Within a business-to-business context there is little demand for use of Welsh in a formal way – documentation, literature etc., - though of course more evidence of Welsh language use by individuals within organisations. There is, however, significant evidence of use of the Welsh language by companies who are strongly consumer facing. This is particularly so for the large banks, retailers and utilities. Many of these businesses adopt a universal approach to the Welsh language across the whole of Wales, not only in the traditional language heartlands.

3. Most businesses in these categories produce bilingual literature, signage, and where practical are able to answer queries in Welsh. Examples of best practice in this area include:

Manweb - serves 300,000 customers in North Wales, and has a Welsh language customer call centre .

HSBC – who not only provide bilingual signage and literature, but now offer Welsh language bank statements

BT – whose customers enjoy bilingual billing and can transact with Welsh language call centres

4. These companies, and others, undertake this level of language provision for several reasons. They wish to reflect the culture of Wales, they feel they can add value to their customer relationships, and so increase customer retention and satisfaction, and they feel that they and their staff can better become part of the communities in which the business operates.

5.5 It should be noted however, that in the great majority of cases these Welsh language services are commercially unproven. There is a belief that this reinforces a company's position in its community, or that it cements relationships

with customers, but little evidence of a financial gain.

5.6 Further evidence of business increasing engagement with the language is provided by S4C which has quadrupled the number of companies advertising in the Welsh language over the past three years.

5.7 There are therefore, many examples of business using the Welsh language to communicate with the public in Wales.

6 Business contribution to the promotion of Welsh

6.1 The Culture Committee's review document states that economic development is the lifeblood of language maintenance. Perhaps the biggest single contribution that business can make is to be active in Wales, especially in the heartland communities, creating wealth, employing people. This activity will assist in underpinning the population irrespective of which language is used by an individual business.

6.2 Increased economic activity is necessary across the whole of Wales, and by providing increased employment opportunities at all levels, business can assist in tackling depopulation, and provide opportunities for expatriate Welsh to return to Wales.

6.3 The current debate over the future of agriculture in Wales, which is often centred in Welsh-speaking communities, is highlighting the need to both diversify the agricultural industry, but also to provide alternative employment opportunities. Business must therefore be encouraged in these areas.

7 What the Assembly can do

7.1 The Assembly must make Wales, and especially the Welsh language heartlands, an attractive place for people to set up and grow businesses. This will require action across several Assembly policy areas, and may require current thinking to be challenged.

7.2 Improving the business environment of the rural heartlands will require the transport infrastructure to be improved. And this will mean recognising the reliance on car transport, and road movement of people and freight. Public transport and modal shift to rail will not provide the answer for these areas.

7.3 Planning guidance which emphasises brownfield development, or places onerous requirements on developing in rural Wales will make it harder and less

attractive for business to invest in these areas, and so to create employment.

7.4 The Assembly should focus on promoting businesses, whichever is their language of operation. Policies aimed at Welsh language businesses or entrepreneurs alone, are unlikely to achieve the improvement in economic performance necessary to sustain populations in Welsh-speaking areas.

7.5 The Assembly can seek to promote the best practice in Welsh language usage shown by some companies, and to demonstrate the benefits of such practice. This should seek to demonstrate the commercial advantage to business.

8 What the Assembly should not do

8.1 The Assembly should not place any requirements on private companies in respect of the Welsh language. CBI members who have contributed to our response to this review are unanimous in believing that any attempt to compel business to use the language will be counter productive. This view is equally held by those companies who use the language extensively on a voluntary basis.

8.2 Compulsion would remove the good will that exists towards the language amongst business. It would increase the costs to of operating in Wales, and reduce the attraction of Wales as a business location, at a time when we desperately need to improve the competitiveness of our businesses.

8.3 Compulsion would also be impractical in many of the sectors that are often discussed with regard to extending the scope of the Welsh Language Act. Financial services, retail, and telecommunications are sectors which increasingly do not require a physical presence to serve consumers. Thus requiring all banks, for example, to use the Welsh language would only increase the costs of those businesses that are already, on a voluntary basis, adopting the language, while not impacting on the telephone or internet based providers who already enjoy a cost advantage. It would also provide a significant disincentive to companies considering Wales as a headquarters location from which to service the UK.

9 The tone of the debate

9.1 The tone of the Welsh language debate, particularly when it is joined with issues of rural depopulation, or housing, can at times have a damaging impact. This summer has seen inflammatory language used visibly in the media, which has at times portrayed Wales and the Welsh as intolerant and unwelcoming. Some of the ramifications of this are felt by business when it attempts to recruit key workers from outside Wales, by universities when trying to attract students

from outside Wales, and in all probability by Wales inward investment efforts.

9.2 As the economy of Wales grows, and especially if we are to address the challenging economic targets set by the Assembly, so we will need to attract people in to Wales. In some areas, such as Newtown, there are simply insufficient people to enable companies to grow. In other areas, the emphasis is more on attracting specialist skills.

9.3 The Welsh language can be, and must be , presented as a cultural positive, not as a barrier.

9.4 All participants in this debate should be aware of the potential they have to damage the country and cause they support.

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