



Languages and Public Services

In our multilingual communities, public service providers serve speakers of many languages, and they also employ many people who speak more than one language. They have the task of overseeing the provision of public services in the legal sector (including policing), in social services (including housing, welfare and benefits), in the health care sector and in education. In many countries, media, broadcasting and public information services are also part of public sector service provision. The role of public employees, both national and local, is thus of the utmost importance with regard to managing multilingualism in our urban communities.

Challenges

The presence of many languages and cultures in our cities creates opportunities and enriches our communal life. It also creates challenges for national and local authorities. Any situation in which public service providers and public service users cannot communicate can lead to ineffective provision, dissatisfaction and even social division. The increasing diversity of our cities, even those which do not have long traditions of multilingualism, means that solutions need to be found in the provision of public services. This is in addition to educational support and language learning possibilities.

It is important to view such multilingual provision of public services not only as a financial or organisational burden, but as an opportunity to contribute to the social cohesion and effectiveness of our communities and as an example of practical, lived multiculturalism.

Advantages

The formulation of coherent and comprehensive multilingualism policies makes it clear to public service users and public service providers what they can expect and what they should deliver in terms of providing services in more than one language. This has significant advantages in terms of operational effectiveness:

- Public services can be offered safely and efficiently and public policy information and messages can be communicated clearly to more members of the community if delivered in more than one language.

- As well as a practical necessity, the multilingual provision of services can be a legal requirement and a right in cases where providers have a duty of care towards children, vulnerable adults, or users of health services, or in policing and court proceedings.

Acknowledging and celebrating the presence of many languages also fosters social cohesion and a community spirit and prepares residents, newcomers and citizens for meaningful integration:

- Residents, newcomers (and visitors) who do not speak the host language are not excluded from participating in civil society and using and benefiting from public services.
- The use of translators and interpreters helps newcomers integrate and makes all residents feel welcome. The dangers of miscommunications and the costs related to this are minimised.

Translation, interpreting and language learning

The provision of multilingual public services and the promotion of learning the host language are not contradictory, but go hand in hand. Many newcomers to our communities may first rely on translation and interpreting before they have developed sufficient skills in the host language to communicate effectively. A public service encounter facilitated through interpreting is also always a chance to make service users aware of possibilities of learning the host language. The use of

translation and interpreting may be appropriate even in cases where service users have a good command of the host language. This is the case whenever highly technical language (e.g. legal jargon) may be used.

It should also be remembered that employees who speak more than one language have an important role to play. They make it possible for public authorities and public service providers to cooperate internationally. They are able to provide services in more than one language, to welcome visitors in their own languages and they can further the integration of newcomers by acting as multilingual facilitators and mediators.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for public authorities responsible for the formulation and implementation of public service policies and the organisation and supervision of public services. It also provides advice and ideas for a variety of public service providers who might be under a legal obligation to provide their services in more than one language or who want to increase the efficiency and reach of their services to include all members of the community. Another target group are public service users who require provision in a specific language or citizens who are willing to act as lay interpreters or mediators to facilitate multilingual provision. Finally, the information provided here is also of interest to community groups and local NGOs who want to cooperate with public service providers and authorities in the provision of multilingual services or the public acknowledgment and celebration of multilingualism.

Broken links, corrections and updates can be reported and viewed at www.urbanlanguages.eu/toolkits/errata

Ideas for policymakers, public service providers and public authorities



Have you thought about developing and formulating a coherent approach to multilingualism?



A coherent approach will enable public service providers to state clearly what users can expect and it will make providers aware of what they should be able to deliver in terms of multilingual provision. Once a clear multilingualism policy has been developed, it can be shared and used at different levels of local government and at different institutions.



The Canadian city of Toronto has a comprehensive [multilingual services policy](#)¹ which establishes “that all residents shall be entitled to municipal services and programs which are racially sensitive, culturally and linguistically appropriate”. To implement this policy they offer translation and interpreting services in the main community languages of the city.



The East London NHS Foundation Trust, which is responsible for organising and providing mental health and community health care services, has a detailed translation and interpreting services policy. It has been published [here](#)².



Do you acknowledge and celebrate the linguistic diversity of your community or locality?



Acknowledging and recognising the variety of languages spoken by citizens will increase their sense of belonging to a multicultural community that welcomes diversity. It raises awareness and acceptance of language diversity.



The London borough of Harrow asked its citizens to help translate the borough’s motto into as many of Harrow’s languages as possible. It also published the names and number of languages spoken in the borough.



The city of Hamburg has adopted the Charta der Vielfalt ([Charter of Diversity](#)³), which includes supportive measures for linguistic diversity.



The Dutch city of Utrecht maintains a [multilingualism blog](#)⁴ (“a multilinguistic laboratory”) about multilingualism in the city and beyond. It gives information about the languages spoken in the city and how multilingualism can be useful in the daily life of citizens.

1 <http://www.toronto.ca/311/knowledgebase/86/101000047886.html>

2 <http://www.eastlondon.nhs.uk/About-Us/Freedom-of-Information/Trust-Policies-and-Procedure/Clinical-Policies/Interpreting-and-Translation-Policy-and-Procedures---Version-3-1.pdf>

3 <http://www.charta-der-vielfalt.de/service/presse/pressemitteilungen/detail/article/hamburg-und-40-unternehmen-der-region-unterzeichnen-charta-der-vielfalt.html>

4 <http://multilengua.blogspot.co.uk/>



Do you know which languages are spoken and by how many speakers in your local government areas?



Data on host language competence and on languages spoken at home will give public authorities and public service providers a better idea with regard to deciding into which languages information material should be translated and for which languages there will be the greatest demand for interpreting services.



If data on languages spoken is not available through nation-wide censuses or surveys, have you thought about carrying out your own user surveys? You could include a simple question on languages, like: *“Which language(s) do you speak at home?”* Web-based surveys are less expensive and relatively easy to carry out.



Data on languages spoken might also be available from educational institutions or from related data sets available in the public domain (e.g. data with regard to visitors from other countries, or data on ethnicity and countries of origin).



In London, local boroughs have stated to make use of the results of the 2011 national census which included a question on the main language used at home as well as a question on host language proficiency.



Do you know which of your information material needs to be published in more than one language?



It is good practice to identify a set of key documents, which contain the most important information about how to access a public service as well as key public policy messages. If you have reliable language data you can also decide into which languages these vital documents should be translated.



If you maintain a central database about information material available in other languages, different local service providers can share this material. You can save time and money by sharing and pooling resources with other local service providers.



The Dublin City Centre Citizens Information Service produced [Find Your Way: A Guide to Key Services in Dublin City](http://www.dublin.ie/arts-culture/find-your-way.htm)⁵ Centre. This directory of key services in Dublin is available in English, Polish, Russian, French and Mandarin.



The [official website of the city of Strasbourg](http://www.strasbourg.eu/)⁶ provides essential information about city life in three languages: English, French and German.

5 <http://www.dublin.ie/arts-culture/find-your-way.htm>

6 <http://www.strasbourg.eu/>



[Immiweb](http://www.immiweb.org)⁷ is a multilingual website with information on immigration and integration for Rome and its province. It contains a “survival kit” document published in eight community languages.



Tower Hamlets Homes is a not-for-profit company which delivers housing services for residents living in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Their award-winning project “[We Speak Your Language](#)”⁸ has made their services more accessible to residents who can’t speak or read English. The project report is available for download [here](#)⁹ (PDF, 290KB).



Could you use language competence in relevant languages as a selection criterion for employing new staff?



You could employ staff with competence in the languages spoken by your service users. Find out which languages are required in which departments by surveying the needs of your users. Deploy staff with language skills in areas where they are needed.



The municipality of Hamburg has been running a [campaign](#)¹⁰ to increase the number of trainees with a migrant and multilingual background working in public authorities. The target of 20% was reached in 2011 and the campaign is ongoing.



As part of their “[We Speak Your Language](#)”¹¹ initiative, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets is committed to the recruitment of more public service employees who speak community languages.



Do you know under what circumstances it may be appropriate to use lay interpreters to provide a public service to someone?



Whenever a situation is formal or confidential and technical language is likely to be used (e.g. in all legal encounters and in policing, and in nearly all medical encounters), only professionally trained interpreters should be employed. However, there might be less formal situations where the use of lay interpreters (volunteers, grown up family members of the public service user or your own members of staff) may be appropriate. It is important that public service employees know about this and can rely on clear written guidance and policies.



The city of Toronto runs a scheme allowing citizens and residents to [volunteer as a translator or interpreter](#)¹² for the city.

7 <http://www.immiweb.org>

8 http://www.towerhamletshomes.org.uk/top_level/about_us/diversity/we_speak_your_language.aspx

9 <http://www.towerhamletshomes.org.uk/idoc.ashx?docid=52ef3604-23e2-42e9-9cb2-b993cf31c673&version=-1>

10 <http://www.hamburg.de/bist-du-dabei/2385460/kampagne/>

11 http://www.towerhamletshomes.org.uk/top_level/about_us/diversity/we_speak_your_language.aspx

12 <http://www.toronto.ca/311/knowledgebase/81/101000047881.html>



Do you work together with local NGOs and self-help organisations?



In many cities, local NGOs, self-help organisations and networks of newcomers and migrants are in the best position to let public authorities know about access problems to public services caused by a lack of knowledge of the host language. They are usually also willing to cooperate when it comes to providing lay interpreters or mediators.



The [Community Directory](#)¹³, provided by the Victorian Multicultural Commission in Australia, is an online guide to local community organisations and associations and gives an overview of their activities and services, many of which are multilingual.



A number of local London councils maintain an [online directory of “useful organisations”](#)¹⁴ which lists charitable and other community organisations that provide support and advice services for members of the public.



The Social Services Department of Aghii-Anargyroi Kamatero in Athens cooperates with NGOs to support the social integration of immigrants. One programme focusing on health care delivery for immigrants was initiated in collaboration with the NGO [Greek Caravan of Solidarity](#)¹⁵.



Do you know what languages are spoken by your members of staff and do you know how competent they are in these languages?



Finding out about existing linguistic skills amongst your members of staff will help you provide services in more than one language. Depending on the type of public service encounter, the use of lay interpreters or mediators may be appropriate.



Setting up and maintaining a database of linguistically competent members of staff and of volunteers, who are willing and able to provide linguistic assistance in situations, will aid you in overcoming communication barriers.



In the German city of Hamburg, many municipal authorities maintain databases of the language competences of employees who could potentially act as multilingual facilitators. Employees are also encouraged to take up language courses.



The London borough of Tower Hamlets pays a [community language honorarium](#)¹⁶ of £50 a month to members of staff who regularly use a language other than English to communicate with public service users, or who help with interpreting or translating.

13 <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/resources/community-directory>

14 <http://www.peoplefirstinfo.org.uk/>

15 <http://www.karavani.gr/en/index.html>

16 http://www.towerhamletshomes.org.uk/top_level/about_us/diversity/we_speak_your_language.aspx



Are your members of staff trained in the delivery of services across cultural and linguistic barriers?



While all frontline staff engaged in the delivery of public services should possess good communication skills, communication across linguistic and cultural barriers requires an extra set of specific knowledge and skills. You might be able to organise in-house training or make use of offers provided by educational institutions.



For the use of professional interpreters in the delivery of public services to be efficient and successful, interpreters and public service employees need to cooperate closely and have to be aware of each other's needs and rules of conduct. Joint training of public service employees and interpreters is the best way of achieving this.



Building Mutual Trust¹⁷ is a project for Implementing EU Common Standards in Legal Interpreting and Translation. It offers audio-visual training scenarios that demonstrate best practices when working with suspects, defendants and witnesses through a spoken language interpreter.



Do you know how to contact and make use of professionally trained public service interpreters and do you engage with their professional associations?



Close cooperation between public service providers and public service interpreters and their professional associations can guarantee that professionally trained interpreters are available whenever they are needed and it will increase understanding of the interpreting process and how it can be used effectively.



Have you thought about using modern communication technology (e.g. video-conferencing or web-based services) to facilitate interpreting or mediation?



The Multilingual Information lines in Melbourne are a telephone service to meet the needs of residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They provide recorded information in a variety of languages about public policies and practices.



Could you use a public library or another suitable public place to set up a multilingual and multicultural community centre?



Community centres can be locations where newcomers and more established members of the community can come together to get to know each other and to learn from each other. They could be places where host or other language courses can be offered.



Tandem language exchanges are schemes where people who want to learn each others' languages are brought together, so they communicate together and profit from each other's linguistic skills.



Libraries are obvious places where material in many different languages can be displayed and made available to citizens.



Westminster Local Government in London provides specific information for users who want to read a book in another language: <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/language-resources>



The [Open Learning Centre at Dublin's Central Library](#)¹⁸ offers a wide range of computer and language self-learning courses.



[Biblioteche in lingua](#)¹⁹ [libraries in foreign languages], an initiative organised by the Multicultural Department of the Libraries of the City Council of Rome, is a project that aims at promoting multilingualism. New sections of books in the languages of the largest foreign communities in Rome have been added in 18 libraries.



Have you considered organising or hosting multicultural festivals?



Help to organise or host multicultural neighbourhood festivals. Next to music, food and clothing, the promotion of other languages can play a role at such an event. Funding might be available from private sponsors and you can cooperate with local NGOs and self-help organisations.



The city of Ottawa runs an annual [Welcoming Ottawa Week \(WOW\)](#)²⁰: "WOW is an annual, week-long series of dialogues, cultural and celebratory events, sports activities, documentary screenings, and other fun events designed to convey the genuine welcome and hospitality of Ottawans to newcomers, while providing opportunities for quality interactions between residents, old and new."

Ideas for public service users & community groups



Have you thought about letting the public service providers know about your language needs?

18 <http://www.dublincity.ie/main-menu-services-recreation-culture-dublin-city-public-libraries-and-archive-locations-hours/open>

19 <http://www.romamultietnica.it/biblioteche-in-lingua.html>

20 <http://olip-plio.ca/welcoming-ottawa-week-2014/>



When you are planning to use a public service and know that you are going to need an interpreter or some other form of linguistic assistance, you should let the relevant providers know in advance.



Do you know that you might have a right to the use of an interpreter?



Before you use a public service, you should find out whether you have the right to an interpreter. Depending on the kind of service you are going to use you might also consider using a lay interpreter. This could be a friend, member of your family or a volunteer from a local NGO.



An EU directive from 2010 establishes a right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings and specifies minimum requirements for the provision of such services. Interpretation and translation must be provided to persons who do not speak or understand the language of the procedure.



Do you cooperate with local public authorities and service providers?



Public service providers or authorities might be interested in working together with you to make it easier for people who don't speak the host language to access public services.



Public service providers or authorities might be willing to sponsor you or might be able to help you find sponsors to carry out your work. It is usually easier to find funding for specific projects.

Conclusion

We hope that this toolkit on languages and public services has provided you with some useful information that will have a positive impact on your institutional or personal life and activities. Multilingualism in the provision of public services is an important topic and practice which will continue to grow as our societies are becoming more and more linguistically diverse. As a first step to becoming savvier in this respect, you could conduct a linguistic skills audit in your organisation, try to find out more about the linguistic needs of your clients and customers or familiarise yourselves with multilingual service policies. Whatever you do, we wish you every success in increasing your multilingual capabilities, and please do get in touch with us to share your experiences of and tips for using more than one language in public life and the provision of public services!

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