

# A guide to Chairing Bilingual Meetings



## The aim of this guide...

Is to provide you as the chair of your group or committee:

- with the necessary information to enable you to discuss the advantages of using simultaneous translation facilities in your meetings, in order to allow all members to contribute in their chosen language.
- with the necessary advice on what you should do to encourage and facilitate its use should you decide to take advantage of such a service.

## The Chairman's role

As Chair, the success of your group or committee falls largely on your shoulders!

You are mainly responsible for getting everyone contributing and working together.

Whether your group is informal or formal, your aim as chair is to make everyone feel that his/her contribution counts.

Therefore, it is important from the outset that you are familiar with the group's language capabilities and attitudes. The fact that someone appears to be bilingual does not necessarily mean that he is comfortable speaking both languages in every circle and sphere of life.





## Attitudes towards language

As Chair, it is important for you to understand that people's attitudes towards language can be very complex.

Bear in mind...

There are many fluent Welsh learners who don't feel confident enough to speak in Welsh at public meetings.

Similarly, there are Welsh speakers who don't feel confident enough to participate at meetings where the discussion is mainly in English.

Other secondary factors have a bearing on their perceptions:

They don't feel that their public speaking English is of the same standard as that of their Welsh speaking standard

In fact, there are numerous forms of bilingualism. You may have asked a Welsh speaker to translate an official letter and have been rather surprised to hear him/ her saying that "my Welsh is not good enough."

It might feel very uncomfortable speaking English when Welsh has traditionally been the language of communication at public meetings and community activities within their community.

Changing your language to speak to a lifetime neighbour in English in this context, can be a very strange experience and can leave you feeling bereft and bewildered.

## Linguistic background

“Languages are the dress of thought,” Samuel Johnson once said.

Around 6,000 languages are spoken all over the world. Every year the world loses about 25 mother tongues, that is equivalent to 250 languages over a decade.

By comparison, the prospect for the future of the Welsh language is promising due to the influence of Welsh medium education and other successful language planning initiatives.

But as David Crystal, a local world expert in this field, has pointed out, the future of a language is decided by its use at local level.

“A great deal of language awareness as well as social solidarity results from the various forms of extra curricular activity which a community can arrange.”

“It has been noted that a community has not seen the need for action until it is too late to save the language.”

You as Chair of a community group are in a key position to contribute to the well being of the Welsh language in your community.

In fact as a non Welsh speaking person you may be able to make a unique constructive contribution towards changing attitudes to the language.

In 2001 69% of people in Gwynedd could speak Welsh, but centuries of linguistic oppression, such as the use of the Welsh Not, a sign hung as punishment around the necks of pupils caught speaking Welsh, has meant that many Welsh people still have an inferiority complex when they are in an English/Welsh language groups.

This is particularly true in circles which are outside the traditional domain of the Welsh language – the Chapel and the Eisteddfod.

Encouraging everyone to speak Welsh, although you are not Welsh speaking yourself would be a positive step to promoting the use of Welsh at community level.

## Simultaneous translation

In the case of a non Welsh speaking chairperson it will almost be impossible to hold a meeting in Welsh without the use of a translation service.

Fortunately, here in Gwynedd people have become quite accustomed to using translation facilities and have seen the benefits of doing so, e.g.

- opportunity of taking part in general community activity
- confidence in taking part in public meetings
- a means of getting an initial insight into the workings of their community

The translator is present to allow the use of Welsh during the meeting. Both the Welsh speakers and the non Welsh speakers are as dependent on the translator as each other in terms of their ability to communicate in their chosen language.

In a number of cases, this has been the first step on their journey to learn the language and appreciate the local culture. In time they will not be so dependent on translation facilities.

It may be an additional expense but an investment well made to promote increased community activity and language and social cohesion

# What you as **Chair** should do ...



## Beforehand

### DOCUMENTATION

Either you or the secretary should ensure that all documentation, including the minutes of the previous meeting, the agenda, any reports, powerpoint presentations etc, are sent to the simultaneous translator a few days beforehand.

Ideally, the documentation should be sent to the translator bilingually, after all, if you are going to great lengths to offer simultaneous translation facilities, you should also provide the documentation bilingually.

### LOCATING THE EQUIPMENT

The translator has to place his equipment in the best location to see everyone and for ease of listening, but it is also important that the equipment does not interfere with your meeting.

As Chair, you should arrive early to discuss this with the translator before the meeting.

# As the meeting starts

## ENCOURAGE THE USE OF WELSH

Try to learn a Welsh sentence, such as

“Noswaith dda a chroeso i chi gyd”  
– “Good evening and welcome”

so that you yourself can open the meeting bilingually.

Announce that everyone is able to speak in his chosen language, since a simultaneous translation service is in use so that you and any other non-Welsh speaking members can follow the discussions if anyone wishes to contribute in Welsh.

This would be a good opportunity for you to emphasise your support for the language and encourage speakers of all levels to speak Welsh.

Ask all non-Welsh speaking members to wear their headsets

## ENSURE EVERYONE CAN HEAR

Ensure that the equipment is working properly and that the non-Welsh speaking listener understands and can operate the headset.

Ask the Welsh speakers if the voice level of the translator is quiet enough not to disrupt the meeting.

By doing so you will have made sure that the translator, the Welsh speakers and the non-Welsh speakers can hear.

## ENCOURAGE WELSH LEARNERS

Ask whether anyone at the meeting is learning the language and encourage them to try out their Welsh whenever they feel confident to do so.

At the same time it might also be useful to ask the Welsh speakers to be patient and give the learners this opportunity to practice their Welsh.

# During the meeting

## ONE AT A TIME!

As is the case in all meetings, it might well be useful to explain that everybody should speak in turn.

This is especially true when you have a translation service – a translator may be able to hear two speakers at the same time but he can never translate both of them at the same time!!

## LISTENING AND SPEAKING MODES

In order to follow the translation, you may feel that you would like some time to adjust your headset as you change from a listening mode wearing a headset to your speaking mode, which is usually without the headset.

Ask the members to bear with you as you do this.

## EYE CONTACT

Eye contact between yourself and the translator is vital but at the same time you need to make sure that the Welsh speaker feels that he is communicating with you.

Maybe a sentence reiterating the point just made would confirm that a point has been made successfully through translation.

## INSTIL A SENSE OF CONFIDENCE

The way in which you make effective and positive use of the translation service will instil confidence in others to use the service.

In the case of Welsh speakers and Welsh learners this means that they are encouraged to speak in Welsh.



## Should a translator not turn up

To allow members to contribute in their chosen language, the chair should either be handed over to a Welsh speaker or a Welsh speaker should be asked to translate the proceedings.

This could be done;

either on a one to one basis, with a Welsh speaker sitting next to you and any other non Welsh speakers, with a basic commentary of the proceedings being whispered. This method is also called chuchotage

or as consecutive translation, which would mean waiting until the end of a Welsh contribution and delivering a translated recap of the last contribution.

This method of translation will extend the length of the meeting somewhat and may even place the chair at a disadvantage, since he/she will not have instant translation and therefore instant understanding of what is happening at a meeting.

Remember that neither method will be easy for an untrained Welsh speaker, and that by acting as translator, the Welsh speaker is also giving up their ability to contribute to the meeting.



To find a translator, contact  
[www.welshtranslators.org.uk](http://www.welshtranslators.org.uk)

**01248 371839**