

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Welcoming speakers of different languages

Creativity allows people to communicate across cultures – music, shape, pattern and movement exist regardless of language, and offer a fantastic opportunity for people from different backgrounds to come together on all sorts of levels.

Because of this, voluntary arts and crafts can be a perfect way for people with a different first language to feel integrated into the community. This is invaluable, as it allows them to make friends and practice language skills in an informal and non-pressurised environment. It also gives everyone a non-threatening way to learn about and share cultural difference and similarity.

This briefing offers some practical tips on how to welcome speakers of different languages to your voluntary arts group – as potential arts or crafts participants, volunteers or management committee members – and to help ensure that communication difficulties do not become a barrier preventing them from taking an active role in your group.

Bilingualism

This briefing does not deal with the very specific issues surrounding bilingualism in nations and regions of the UK and Republic of Ireland with their own official languages, such as English, Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Scots, Cornish, Irish and Ulster Scots.

Voluntary Arts intends to publish a briefing on working bilingually soon – this will be publicised in the Voluntary Arts e-news:

- www.voluntaryarts.org/news
- www.vaireland.org/news
- www.vaengland.org.uk/news
- www.vascotland.org.uk/news
- www.vaw.org.uk/news

A. Why do we need to act?

Multilingualism is the global norm – with the majority of the world's population speaking more than one language. There are now large numbers of people across the UK and the Republic of Ireland with a first language different from the official language of the nation or region in which they are living, particularly in major cities, but increasingly in rural areas as well.

There is no definitive list of all the languages spoken in the UK/Rol, as populations are ever changing, but common ones include Punjabi, Bengali, Cantonese, Gujarati, Kashmiri and Polish.

Apart from those set up specifically to support or promote a particular language, voluntary arts groups that incorporate cultural (including linguistic) diversity are stronger because they have a wider support base and broader experience upon which to draw.

Working in more than one language can raise the profile of your organisation, increase participation, give speakers of other languages a greater sense of belonging and communal ownership of your group, offer much more in the way of mutual learning... and even strengthen your fundraising potential.

Usually, it's not the art or craft activity itself that causes communication difficulties; it's the logistics of the group – marketing and publicity, membership or subscription schemes, health and safety procedures, etc – that create the problems. But these are rarely insurmountable, and a positive approach, incorporating some of the tips below, will help you overcome them.

B. Easy ways to be more inclusive

Most of the following tips are relatively easy and cheap to implement by small and large groups alike. Even when there are some costs incurred (and these will mostly be small) the gains – i.e. the benefits from



increasing participation and sending out a positive message about your group to your community – will outweigh the cost.

Many of these tips are common sense, and you will find that by doing them you are also inadvertently helping everyone within your group regardless of their first language, including those with learning disabilities, poor literacy skills and people with hearing visual or speech impairments.

- **Create a language policy** – this could include a review of your current situation and a commitment about what you are going to do to improve and monitor things. A formal ‘Language Scheme’ is a requirement for public sector organisations in Wales with regard to the Welsh language, but it is also good practice for voluntary arts groups to create a language policy to assist them with any speakers of other languages who they might encounter on a day-to-day basis. For more details on how to create a language policy, see *Section C below*.
- **Allow people to express their language choice** – when booking onto events, workshops or courses, or applying to join a group as participant, member or volunteer, give people the opportunity to tell you what language they prefer to operate in. Even if you cannot meet this need, it is good practice to establish a database of language needs in your group, as this will inform future changes in your language policy. Make the enquirer aware of your policy, particularly what you currently provide in terms of their preferred language, and what you hope to be able to provide in the future.
- **Case studies** – convincing all your stakeholders (the people with an interest in your group) of the need to develop a multilingual service can be difficult, especially if you are part of a network with headquarters somewhere that has different language needs than yours. Creating case studies based upon individuals’ real experiences can be a good way of personalising the issue and allowing others to understand the need in human terms. Remember to get permission from anyone featured in any of the case studies you use.
- **Treat languages on the basis of equality** – if you are using multiple languages in printed or online material, the languages should be of the same standard and the same font size and prominence. Even if you are having problems with space, try not to put the other language on the back of display materials.
- **Don’t be too wordy** – in workshops, talks, classes and rehearsals this means not talking for too long when working with people who speak other first languages. You cannot rely on long lecture-style lessons. If you do need a lengthy explanation, make sure it is interspersed with plenty of practical activity, and try and make use of visual aids as much as possible. In printed material and signage, try to keep text to a minimum – don’t include anything that isn’t absolutely necessary.
- **Don’t be too formal** – in your manner or your procedures. Try to avoid jargon or organisation-speak (see *VAN Briefing 120 – Voluntary and community sector jargon*, available to download from www.voluntaryarts.org/briefings). Formal application procedures with lots of forms, whether they are for participants, volunteers or paid staff, can put people off at the best of times, but even more so if they speak a different language. On your forms make sure you only request the information that is necessary. You might even decide not to use registration forms and instead note down the important details during an introductory chat.
- **Encourage working in small groups or pairs** – this helps the development of language skills and mutual understanding without the pressure of people having to talk in front of a large group.
- **Consider setting up peer-support groups** – these can be either language-specific or include speakers of many different languages, providing the opportunity for people to come together to share their experiences and help each other solve any difficulties they have. If your group is small or the number of people speaking another language is low, you might consider teaming up with other voluntary arts or community groups in your area to create a shared peer-support group. You may also want to check what existing peer support opportunities are available through your local authority or voluntary sector council.
- **Promote language classes for those who want them** – though voluntary arts groups offer good opportunities to develop and practice language skills, they aren’t expected to be formal language providers. Instead, it may be worth finding out what other learning opportunities are available from colleges, local authority adult education departments or private companies in your area, so you can advise your members on where to go for learning and support if they desire it.



- **Confront and deal with intolerance and discrimination** – as with any type of discrimination, language-related discrimination should be dealt with by your equal opportunities policies and procedures. You may need to update your existing policy or create a new one specifically for this purpose. Don't stop at just writing the policy though – ensure that everybody knows the kinds of behaviour that are expected and be prepared to enforce the rules.
- **Don't forget other policies** – it is important also to give consideration to other policies when creating multilingual resources, for example your accessibility policy – ensure that the fonts used are large enough, so that those with impaired vision can read in whichever language they choose.
- **Don't promise the world** – it's important that you don't promise things you can't deliver, especially if there's a danger of you giving a misleading impression that you are able to offer on-going support in other languages when in fact you cannot. It's much better to be honest about what is feasible, and use your language policy to spell out your aims and aspirations.

C. Creating a language policy

A language policy is a working document containing details about the services you intend to offer in other languages, and how these will be delivered. A good language policy will also include an assessment of the current language needs of your group, along with details of what you would like to provide in the future and the resources you will need to achieve this.

It is unlikely that your voluntary arts group will be able to achieve everything it wants to straight away, but by creating a language policy you will be demonstrating an active willingness to reach out to people who speak other first languages. An active language policy that everyone 'buys into' ensures commitment from your group as a whole, as opposed to just individuals, therefore ensuring consistency in delivering multilingual services.

Your language policy might include:

- a 'statement of intent' – what you hope to achieve and why;
- a summary of the group's current language needs and assets (information, people, contacts, etc.), and any foreseen changes in the future;
- a description of the things you hope to achieve;

- a timetable and targets for implementation;
- a statement of the group's wholehearted support and commitment;
- a complaints procedure.

Examples of things to take into account in a language policy:

- branding and logos – letterheads, compliments sheets, business cards, envelopes;
- publicity/marketing material – newsletters; leaflets, posters, press releases, adverts;
- signage around your workshop or venue;
- publications – reports, evaluations, annual reports;
- forms – membership, permissions, recruitment;
- online – website, email newsletters, email footers;
- phone contact – greeting callers, offering a call back service;
- responses to letters – responding in the language of the original letter;
- public events and meetings – signage, printed materials, live translation with AV equipment, audio typing with follow-up translation;
- internal documents, policies and procedures;
- recruitment materials – induction materials, employment contracts.

Remember that your language policy is a working document, and should be reviewed and updated regularly in response to successes and failures, new resources becoming available, and any changes in the make-up of your participants and/or membership.

You may want to designate an individual committee member to take an active lead on the creation and implementation of the language policy. You could also consider setting up a working group or sub-committee.

D. Translation

In bilingual nations and regions, translation costs should be built into all plans and funding bids (*this will be dealt with in more detail in a future briefing*). However, with regard to welcoming people in general, rarely is it feasible to translate things into every conceivable language. Many groups will focus on a language, or two or three, based on the largest numbers of speakers in their area.

If the cost of retrospectively translating your existing material is prohibitive, you could offer to translate your material on request, perhaps using the expertise already in your group, amongst its existing participants, members, volunteers and paid staff.

You could also make use of any translation services offered by community networks and services in your area.

Someone within your organisation may be prepared to translate as a favour, but it is unwise to depend on this. It may be appropriate from time to time but bear in mind that a translation company will guarantee the standard of translations and will be insured against any loss to your organisation that may arise from mistranslation.

When you find a translator, talk to them in advance about who your target audience is, and whether you want an informal or formal publication. When you receive the work back from the translator it is a good idea to ask someone you might know who can speak the language fluently to cast an eye over it to ensure quality and consistency.

If your budget won't allow for a professional translation company you could produce the translation 'in-house' and then pay a translation company a smaller fee to check the translation.

If you have made the commitment to translate all or part of your materials, then printing may pose a cost implication. It might be cheaper in this case to provide materials on a need-only basis by reproducing them on a photocopier or to provide them online. Be careful however that the translated material doesn't look inferior to the original – this may be perceived as a value-judgement on speakers of that language.

Further Resources

- **Institute of Translation and Interpreting** – the only independent professional association of practising translators and interpreters in the UK – [www.iti.org.uk](http://www iti org uk)
- **Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association (Cumann Aistitheoirí agus Teangairí na hÉireann)** – the only professional association in Ireland representing practising translators and interpreters – www.translatorsassociation.ie
- **Adviceguide** – an online information service provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau offering up-to-date information in numerous languages – find your nearest CAB office at www.adviceguide.org.uk
- **Volunteer Centre Sheffield** – provides generic letters and information sheets related to volunteering for refugees and asylum seekers on its website in English, Amharic, Arabic, Farsi, French, Kurdish (Sorani), Somali, Tigrinya, and Urdu – www.vas.org.uk/refugee_asylum_project.htm
- **Happy to Translate** – toolkit and logo (available on application) to show that you are a language inclusive organisation – offered by Equality Scotland – www.equalityscotland.com/happytotranslate/happytotranslate.php

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