

BRUXSEL BABEL
MULTILINGUALISM IN BRUSSELS : ASSET AND CHALLENGE
Memorandum of the Brussels Council for Multilingualism

RECOMMANDATIONS TO THE CANDIDATES
TO THE FEDERAL, REGIONAL AND COMMUNITY ELECTIONS OF 9 JUNE 2024



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Executive summary

This memorandum is intended to guide reflection and action, by both political representatives and citizens, in order to help turn a formidable linguistic challenge into a fantastic asset.

From Bruxsel to Babel

From The linguistic configuration of the Brussels-Capital Region has undergone dramatic changes since the language rules currently in force were conceived in the 1960s. From a “Bruxsel” consisting of two linguistic communities, a majority of French speakers and a minority of Dutch speakers, it has evolved into a linguistically superdiverse “Babel”.

In this memorandum, the Brussels Council for Multilingualism provides a brief overview of these changes and their causes. It is aware of the scale of the resulting challenge, but it is convinced that it is possible to make Brussels a model for the successful management of linguistic diversity and the promotion of multilingualism. Against this backdrop, it makes a number of recommendations.

Multilingual public services

Without calling into question the privilege granted to Brussels' two official languages, the Council recommends authorising everywhere, and encouraging whenever useful, the provision of public services in other languages. The extent of these multilingual services is to be determined pragmatically according to the nature of the services and their target public, that is not limited to permanent residents of the region. To make this financially realistic, good use must be made of new technological tools.

Priority to the home language

The objective, however, must not only be to better serve a linguistically diverse population thanks to multilingual services. It must also be to render this population more multilingual. To this end, the Council recommends encouraging the anchoring of the parental language, whatever that may be, in order to facilitate the acquisition of the school language and all other learning. This recommendation implies adopting a ‘family language policy’ different from that which is often advocated for families whose language(s) are not that of the school, as well as welcoming all parental languages at school.

This applies to both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking schools, whose pupil populations differ less and less linguistically from one another. But this policy must necessarily vary according to the language of instruction in the school, to take account of the very unequal presence of French and Dutch in the Brussels linguistic environment.

Bilingual schools ?

To promote the learning of Brussels' two official languages, the vast majority of Brussels residents say they would like to see the creation of bilingual schools. Within the current institutional framework, this wish can be partially met by developing immersion teaching in both Dutch-speaking and French-speaking schools. It is particularly appropriate on the French-speaking side, but comes up against various obstacles.

Currently, the most important obstacle is the difficulty of recruiting native teachers of Dutch, which is made even more problematic by the recent divergence between school calendars. The more modest formula of an exchange of teachers between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking schools comes up against partially similar obstacles. The Council makes various proposals to remove these obstacles. It also recommends the creation of a bi-community network of teachers wishing to exchange experience and good practice.

Knowledge of the linguistic performance of Brussels schools, which is essential to inform parents' choice between French- and Dutch-language education, is currently very superficial. It needs to be improved by access to the Brussels results of the PIRLS and PISA surveys, which is currently impossible, and by further research.

Learning languages at all ages

There are a multitude of public and private initiatives to promote multilingualism among the adult population of Brussels. However, they are not sufficiently well known to their potential beneficiaries, and some are largely underused, in particular the Brulingua e-learning platform. The Council therefore recommends the creation and regular updating of a website to guide all those wishing to enhance or maintain their language skills.

The cultural sector and the media have a crucial role to play in promoting multilingualism. The Council recommends encouraging all cultural initiatives involving both language communities and eliminating any obstacles that render them more difficult. It also recommends promoting all cultural and media initiatives that help motivate people to learn other people's languages and thus get to better know and appreciate their cultures.

An annual Multilingualism Week

To highlight initiatives that usefully promote multilingualism and to encourage their multiplication, the Council recommends the introduction of an annual "Multilingualism Week" along the lines of the Mobility Week, bringing together schools and companies, public institutions and associations, experts and influencers. One or more annual prizes could be awarded for exemplary initiatives.

To coordinate the Multilingualism Week, manage the website effectively and support the creation of a network of teachers from both communities, the Council recommends the creation of one or more dedicated small units within the Brussels administration. It also recommends that the Brussels ministry for the promotion of multilingualism be made permanent.

Brussels as model ?

The Council is convinced that with few resources, provided better use is made of the skills available both in families and in schools and administrations, it is possible to serve the population of Brussels far better and to make it much more multilingual, thus making Brussels a model for the successful management of linguistic diversity and the promotion of multilingualism.