

Key Components of Good Communication Practice for All Public Authorities

1. Procurement of Communication Services and Health and Safety Issues

As procurers of communication services, public authorities should ensure that the terms and conditions offered to qualified interpreters and translators are comparable to those offered to other professionals. These include training in, and awareness of, health and safety requirements. Public authorities should ensure that the appropriate number of interpreters be commissioned, bearing in mind the physically strenuous nature of BSL/English interpreting and the dangers of repetitive strain injury.

2. Professionalism of Interpreters

Public authorities should make a commitment to using professional interpreters. This is a means of promoting trust and confidence among communities that they are receiving the highest standard of service.

The authorities should also be setting targets for the employment of a greater number of disabled people and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. The same people should not, however, be used as unqualified interpreters.

3. Quality of Preparation

It is the responsibility of public authorities to engage the interpreter - it is not the responsibility of the service user. Staff need to prepare themselves properly for any meetings and to assume full responsibility for the procedure.

4. Briefing Interpreters

Public authorities should respect the role of the interpreter. Pre-meetings could be used to clarify respective roles, to provide briefing about the background and practical purpose of the interview or assignment and to deal with issues such as confidentiality and positioning. The authorities should also ensure that the interpreter is clear about the use of technical terms or specialist vocabulary.

5. Needs of the Service Users

When accessing communication support the needs of the individual client are paramount. Staff should take steps to ensure matches for language and dialect and that gender issues are addressed. This is of particular, but not singular, importance to Muslim women. Constant evaluation of interpreting assignments is important to gauge that the individual needs are being met.

6. Use of Alternative Formats

It is good practice to state on all information leaflets and public documents that alternative formats are available on request including in appropriate community languages. Such wording should eventually be replaced by a logo, recognisable by the community, defining an organisation with accessible communications.

7. Funding

Public authorities should make arrangements to ensure that sufficient funding is available for the engagement of professional interpreters, all forms of communication support and the translation of information as appropriate. Under no circumstances should public authorities rely upon family members or friends to provide an informal interpreting service. When applying for external funding for specific projects, the issue of communication support should be resourced along with other access criteria.

8. Payment of Interpreters

On completion of the assignment public authorities should ensure that the interpreter is aware of the procedure for payment of fees and other appropriate expenses.

9. Accredited Interpreters and Assessing Their Work

Qualified interpreters and translators in minority community languages are in short supply in Scotland. Language, interpreting and translation skills should always be checked before employment is offered. This can be done by bringing in an expert (for example the Institute of Linguists) or by involving an existing member of staff, known to be fluent in the required language. The checking should involve oral and written tests and possibly some role playing.

Local Authorities and public bodies procuring interpreting and translation services should ensure that appropriate quality assurance processes exist. These should include a sample proof reading of translated material and the occasional recording and checking of interpreting work.

10. Approved Qualifications

Bilingualism is an essential element of proficiency in interpreting. An interpreter however, also has to have knowledge of the organisation's environment and operating processes, the ability to cope with specialist vocabulary and an understanding of the rights and responsibilities of the public service interpreter. The best way to acquire such proficiency is through high quality training.

Successful completion of the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) provides interpreters and translators with the only professional certificate of competence currently available in this field. Those who have gained a DPSI can ensure service users that they are working with qualified staff trained to nationally recognised and assessed standards.

The Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) is available in three different options. Further information can be obtained from the Institute of Linguists, in London.

A degree level qualification in Conference Interpreting from any university or equivalent qualification from abroad will also be a good indicator of the level of competency.

SASLI hold the register of BSL/English interpreters in Scotland and these interpreters are recognised by Scottish Executive and the Crown Office.

11. Training

Training providers are as follows:

- Stevenson College, Edinburgh
- Cardonald College, Glasgow
- Bell College, Hamilton
- Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh - Certificate course in Sign Language Interpreting Studies.

An example of good practice is Fife Community Interpreting Services' scheme for Diploma Standard interpreter training in Glenrothes.

There is also a need to train those that use interpreting and translating services and special training is available through Forum members. Training lasts between half a day and one day.

12. Disclosure

The National Register of Public Service Interpreters' Code of Conduct and Guide to Good Practice states under 'Ethical and Professional Issues', that interpreters disclose any information, including any criminal record, which may make them unsuitable in any particular case.

Interpreters may find themselves working in positions of trust, such as assignments involving children or vulnerable adults. In the interests of public safety interpreters should be prepared to agree to a disclosure check from Disclosure Scotland. For more information, contact their helpline on 0870 609 6006