

Tips for Working with Interpreters

Adapted with permission from: The Right to be Understood by Jane Shackman

Who Is Interpreting?

Volunteer Interpreters

As a sponsorship group, you will likely be reliant on volunteer interpreters. It is important to consider some of the potential issues that could arise:

- Do they speak fluently in both languages? Will their translation be accurate?
- Are they appropriate? Do they speak the same dialect? Could their age, gender or nationality be a problem in some circumstances?
- Will they put aside your personal opinions or bias?
- Are they a refugees or asylum seeker themselves? If so, might they be resentful of the support you are providing to the family? Could this impact their relationship or ability to be neutral?
- If they develop friendships with the family, would it be appropriate to translate during sensitive conversations?
- Do they understand the importance of confidentiality? The family may be worried that they will gossip – and so may not be open and honest. How will you reassure them?
- One of the most important tasks of an interpreter is to throw light on cultural differences, values and expectations. If you are relatively new to the UK themselves, will you be sensitive to or understand these differences?

Be open with your volunteers and discuss the potential challenges. What could impact their role as an interpreter? How you could mitigate these issues?

Family Members as Interpreters

Very often, children learn English far faster than parents, and can soon become informal translators. It is important not to over-rely on children, or to allow them to interpret in sensitive situations. For example, they should never be involved in conversations about budgeting, which could expose them to anxiety, or attend confidential, sensitive appointments, such as the doctors.

Working with Interpreters

Before your visit

Time spent with the interpreter before visiting the family will help you to build up a good working relationship.

1. If they are hired as a professional, they may not be familiar with your role and Community Sponsorship – so explain your aims and functions:
 - Basic details
 - What your group can and cannot do
 - The Structure of your group
 - Other people in the group who may be in touch with the family
 - Your own role – what you can and cannot do, your responsibilities and limitations.

2. Decide with the interpreter which style of interpreting to use. Should they interpret every word, or should they summarise your main points? Are they free to ask questions directly to family members, if they think it will clarify an issue? How will they let you know what they are doing?
3. Discuss the reason for your visit, your objectives, and possible outcomes
4. Ask them, if appropriate, to alert you to some of the cultural factors that might arise. Encourage them to tell you about cultural factors where necessary during the visit. The interpreter may be able to tell you how to behave when visiting in the home.

Starting the visit

Seating arrangements

Arrange seats to allow for direct eye contact between you and the interpreter and the family members – so that each of you can relate easily to both the others. This could be a triangle, or circle. Alternatively, you may want the interpreter to sit to the side of the family member. In this way, you and the family member have maximum contact and can develop your relationship. In the end, you will all work out what best position you feel comfortable with.

Introductions

The interpreter will need time to introduce themselves to the family members, and explain their role, and what they can and cannot do. They should explain how the visit will be conducted – i.e. that they will convey as accurately as possible all that is said by both parties, so it's important to pause frequently for them to interpret.

Note that if this is one of the few opportunities the family have to speak in their mother tongue, they may pour out all their anxieties and problems at once to the interpreter, so you will need to allow time for this.

The family may have unrealistic expectations of what you can do. It's worth checking through the interpreter what their expectations are, and trying to modify them, without losing the family's confidence.

During the Visit

- Speak directly to the family member and speak clearly. If possible, use direct speech – some people find this comfortable, others do not.
- Pause frequently, so they can easily remember and translate what you have said
- Use simple English without jargon
- You should speak as though you expect the family members to understand you and encourage them to speak English when they feel confident to do so. The interpreter can help when they have difficulties
- Remember that a lot is said through body language and non-verbal behaviour. Family members will pick up your feelings and attitudes by your non-verbal gestures and expressions.
- You may want to ask the interpreter to interrupt you if:
 - they feel that you are advising something culturally insensitive or inappropriate, that may harm your relationship with the family

- they think that the family member is giving an inaccurate reply- for example, if they say they are happy when they are clearly not; or they understand when they do not.
- Cultural factors or misunderstandings (on either side) are impeding your communication with the family

The interpreter and the family

You may feel insecure if there's a long discussion between the interpreter and the family. You may feel that the interpreter is trying to take over and directing the conversation. Ask the interpreter to tell you what they are doing. Often they are simply repeating or elucidating what you said. Cultural differences may mean that more explanation is required than would be necessary for people of the same culture.

Sometimes the family will feel very strongly about something, and express their situation in a torrent of words. Sometimes you will need to remind the interpreter to stop them, and tell you what they are saying. Sometimes, the interpreter may need to let the family member talk on if they are upset or emotional. In such cases, frequent interruptions may inhibit them and stop them from revealing their feelings – you need to trust the interpreter's judgement and allow them to stop the family member when they feel it's appropriate.

What to do when things go wrong

Sometimes an interpreter may put in their own opinion, give advice, side with the family member, or the CS group, or 'interpret' what they think you want to hear. They may make up the family member's answer because they think they are making an unjustified complaint or demand, and don't think you should be bothered with it.

Example

You: *Are you happy living in your new home?*

Interpreter: *Are you happy living in your new home?*

Family Member: *The rent is too high, and we need another bedroom. I prefer my friend's house*

Interpreter: *The rent is a bit high, but he lives living in this house*

Or they may give their own advice to the client.

Example

Family member: *I'm not happy in my house, I would like to move*

Interpreter: *He's not happy in his house, he would like to move*

You: *Why are you unhappy? It can be difficult to find a new house, but we could try.*

Interpreter: *You haven't been there long enough to know if you are happy. You should wait another year before deciding to move. You should make more effort to make friends and feel settled. You should realise how lucky you are to have a house. It is very difficult to get another house.*

Other problems may arise. For example, the interpreter may become angry or impatient with the family member and tell them off. They may refuse to interpret something you say because they don't believe what you're saying.

All these examples are things that could go wrong without you knowing it.

If you and the interpreter have built up a good understanding and a good working relationship, such things will probably be avoided. But, if you do have the feeling that something's going wrong, or getting distorted, for example, if the family's reply doesn't seem to fit your question, then take action.

You can always stop and have a short discussion with the interpreter. Or, it may be more appropriate to have an evaluation after the visit, when you are no longer with the family.

Find out what the problem is. If the interpreter is angry or impatient, ask them why. Can you help resolve it? Check whether the pressure, or their personal feelings are getting in the way of their ability to continue the role.

If you are still concerned, you may wish to invite an objective interpreter to speak with the family, to ensure that they are happy with how the interpreter is working with them.

After the visit

Discuss with the interpreter. You may find that:

- They want to tell you things they couldn't say during the visit
- You want to know more about their impressions of the family (how they are feeling, etc.), or clarify certain points
- There are cultural questions to be considered
- You need to discuss any problems or misunderstandings between you
- You wish to discuss how the interview went. Did you feel excluded? Did anything go wrong? Do they have any suggestions on how to work better together next time?

Evaluating after each visit will enable you to work more effectively together and to improve.

It is also important to support the interpreter. You can

- Discuss sympathetically problems that arise during the visit
- Offer help and advice in confidence when appropriate
- Acknowledge the pressure the interpreters are under
- Ask the interpreter to tell you if they're having problems with a family member
- Ensure that they get breaks
- Confront racial prejudice of any group or family member
- Express your appreciation for the work they do
- Treat them as equals

Points to Check

- ✓ Do the interpreter and family speak the same dialect?
- ✓ Is the interpreter acceptable to the family (consider their age, gender)?
- ✓ Allow time for pre-meeting discussion with the interpreter, in order to talk about the context and content of the visit, and the way you'll work together
- ✓ Allow enough time for the visit
- ✓ Use straightforward language
- ✓ Is the family prevented from telling you things because of their relationship with the interpreter?
- ✓ Is the interpreter translating exactly what you and the family are saying, or are they putting forward their own views and opinions?
- ✓ Does the interpreter feel free to interrupt you when necessary to point out problems or ask for clarifications?
- ✓ Is the interpreter embarrassed by or ashamed of the family member?
- ✓ Are you asking too much of the interpreter?
- ✓ Are you maintaining as good a relationship with the interpreter and family as you can?
- ✓ At the end of the visit, check whether the family have understood everything and want to know anything else
- ✓ Have a post-interview discussion with the interpreter
- ✓ Remember the pressures on the interpreter. Be patient and show compassion in a demanding situation