

Bilingual volunteers

We consider a bilingual volunteer to be someone that speaks English and the same language as the people they are supporting, and provides advice and support to them, as well as interpreting.

They can be a useful addition to the support you are offering refugees, it can be a challenging role for them to manage. They may be providing advice one moment, translating the next, and then back to providing advice, all within the same appointment, or even within the same conversation.

Performing this role well requires a degree of self-discipline, so they can understand which role they are performing at which time, and to stop themselves from speaking on behalf of the refugee. For example, if they are translating something the refugee has said, it could also be tempting to correct them if they feel they have said something wrong, or that may not be helpful for them. The volunteer may do this for perfectly good reasons, and in some situations, it may be the right thing to. However, it also demonstrates the level of influence that they have over that individual. The refugee could feel obliged to take the volunteer's advice, even if they disagree with it. They may also become reluctant to make their own decisions if they know they can get advice from a bilingual volunteer.

The volunteer will need to ensure that the wishes of the refugee they are supporting are their primary concern. The volunteer's role is to ensure that the refugee understands their options, and the consequences of any action or decision that they take. The refugee should feel the volunteer respects their right to choose and will convey their choice to the relevant parties as accurately as they can.

The bilingual volunteer will want to avoid the refugees becoming dependent on them, as this will slow their integration and mean they rely on the sponsor's support for longer.

As a group, you may want to ensure that appointments are spread evenly between bilingual volunteers and other group members to prevent them being overworked, or the refugees becoming over reliant on them.

You might want to allocate more time to support these volunteers because of the increased demands placed on them.

Providing advice and support

When providing support, a bilingual volunteer should work in the same way as any other volunteer or group member, the only difference being that they do not require an interpreter.

This process should not present any direct problems, but bilingual volunteers may face greater demands than other members of the group. The refugees might prefer to work with them rather than speak through an interpreter, or refugees might make additional requests of them because they are from the same culture. You should have a discussion in advance with the volunteer to see how they would manage these situations and agree how you can support them to handle them. For example, you could encounter a difficult situation if the group feels that an elderly member of the family can start to book their own GP appointments, but a volunteer finds it difficult to refuse them if they share a culture of deference to their elders.

If you prepare for these situations in advance, then you can think about how you explain the service to the refugees you are supporting. You should explain that the bilingual volunteer will work in the same way as other members of the group, and you can keep this under review to see if both the refugees and the volunteer are comfortable with this.

Interpreting

When they are interpreting, bilingual volunteers should try to work in the same way as any other interpreter and translate everything that is said to them as accurately as possible.

The additional challenge for them is that, while they are interpreting, they might also be asked to, or need to, add information themselves. This can become confusing for them and the refugees, and can make it difficult to know what information is coming from them, and what information is from the other parties.

When a bilingual volunteer attends an appointment where they will be expected to interpret, they should explain their role clearly to both the refugee and the other party. If they are asked to provide information themselves during the appointment, they will need to pause the interpreting and make it clear they are doing so, while ensuring the refugee understands what they are doing.

At times, the volunteer may need to be robust when attending appointments with some service providers. If it is a busy service, some service providers may put pressure on the volunteer to do most of the talking on behalf of the refugee as this will be quicker, but this would not empower the refugee and would prevent them from engaging in the discussion. The volunteer may need to firmly explain that they will translate the information to the refugee so that they understand and can make their own decisions.

The volunteer may also need to be firm with refugees at times, who may also ask the volunteer to speak on their behalf (e.g. “you know what happened last week, can’t you just tell them”). Again, this could prevent the refugee from taking ownership of the situation and could slow their progress towards integration.

Never feel shy or nervous about discussing issues or areas of concern directly with your volunteers, they are doing a brilliant thing in supporting refugees, but it's important that they are not overworked, feel like they must take ownership and feel supported throughout the sponsorship agreement.