

The Importance of a Good Interpreter

Written by Mo Issa

Mo Issa is a Syrian refugee who lives with his wife and two young children in High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. He comes from a small town near Aleppo and in Syria worked as an English teacher and tutor. In 2011, he started a BA in Translation and he was awarded an MA degree in Translation by SOAS in the UK in 2018. He has worked as a paid interpreter for three Community Sponsorship Groups.

Some Community Sponsorship Groups rely on British volunteers who are proficient at Arabic for translation and interpretation – and this can work. But there are definite advantages in hiring a professional interpreter. I would summarise them as:

- Effective communication in both English and Arabic
- Expertise not just in both languages, but also in the technical aspects of translation and interpretation
- Familiarity with Syrian/Arabic culture and ability to act as a facilitator between the family and the Community Sponsorship volunteers
- Awareness of the need for confidentiality and appropriate boundaries

An interpreter's work only really starts once the refugee family arrives, but it is helpful to participate in a couple of the Community Sponsorship Group's regular meetings beforehand. This is a good way for the interpreter to get to know the members of the Group and for them to get to know him or her. It also allows the Group to plan when they will need the services of a professional interpreter and when they can manage without.

The Home Office requires that two Arabic speakers are part of the small group that welcomes the sponsored refugee family at the airport. It makes sense for one of those to be the paid interpreter so that the family members become familiar with the interpreter right from the start of their life in the UK.

Even if a Group does hire a professional interpreter, it is important that they have some other volunteers who speak at least a bit of Arabic. When I was working with the Peckham Community Sponsorship Group in South London, it was a great help that one of their key British volunteers spoke decent Arabic – and there were also another couple of people attached to the group who they could call on.

That said, it is important for the paid interpreter to be available full-time for at least the first couple of weeks. It is also crucial in those first weeks that the family have the interpreter's mobile number in case of emergencies and that the family feel free to get in touch with the interpreter when anything comes up. It can be helpful for the interpreter to be living close by during this period. With Peckham, I was put up by one of the local volunteers to save me travelling some distance home every night.

Thereafter, it is useful to be able to call on the interpreter to come in for days or half days for particularly important appointments or discussions. It is also a good idea to have an on-call arrangement which stipulates that the interpreter answer calls from the family when necessary and in return the interpreter gets paid for the number of hours he or she did during that certain time.

How much does all this cost? A professional interpreter will usually charge around £25 an hour, and perhaps £200 for a full day. On top of this, the interpreter will ask for reasonable expenses to be covered. So, the total cost of hiring an interpreter could be as much as £4,000 or £5,000. I know this is a significant proportion of Group funds. But is probably going to be the single biggest thing the funds are used for.

From my experience, it is most important that an experienced interpreter is present for the following:

- Initial discussions on the first couple of days with the family about the Community Sponsorship arrangement, what they can expect from the volunteers in the group, plans for settling into the UK etc
- Registration at the job centre for welfare benefits
- Registration at doctors' surgery and enrolment in schools for the children
- Discussions about the family budget – income and expenditure

As an interpreter, you never know what you might come up during discussions between the refugee family and the Community Sponsor volunteers, so you have to be prepared and ready for any challenge you might face. Also, it is important to take the cultural aspect into your consideration. Without an interpreter there, the Group volunteers might take things for granted when dealing with a new family. However, an interpreter, particularly one from the same country as the family, narrow the distances and brings different outlooks and cultures closer together.

As an interpreter, you need to express what the two sides want to get across in the right way. Clarification is a key factor as things can get complicated and difficult to grasp – especially for the refugee family members who are having to absorb a lot of information in a short time. Your role is to mediate between both parties. The interpreter never gives any personal answers without the permission from the member of the Community Sponsorship group in charge and always adheres to standards of confidentiality.

Finding a good translator is not that easy. I have heard stories of interpreters who have found themselves in difficult situations especially in hospitals, because they couldn't cope with high level of terminology and technical terms used by specialists and doctors there. As I have already stressed, getting an interpreter with a good academic background brings peace of mind to the Community Sponsorship, so I highly recommended finding someone who has a professional qualification and is recommended by others. Get in touch with Sponsor Refugees or with other local groups as they will help you and will recommend someone whom they have worked with or someone who has previous good experience.

Finally, it is important to remember that the quicker you can dispense with the services of an interpreter, and indeed stop relying on Arabic speakers in the group or using Google Translate, the better. From the start, you want to be signalling to the refugee family that within weeks, certainly months, the medium of communication will be English. This is a tough message, but important, as the refugee family must prioritise learning English, fluency in which is key to their future in the UK.