Is anybody listening?  
the user perspective on interpretation and translation services for minority ethnic communities

Summary of findings
May 2005

This paper summarises the findings of a study into the provision of translation and interpretation services in the public sector for minority ethnic communities. While much research exists on interpretation and translation services in general, little focuses specifically on the views of users.

Since the implementation of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, public authorities have had a duty to promote race equality in Scotland. Despite this duty, concerns regarding translation and interpretation services have emerged repeatedly in research involving members of minority ethnic communities. In Scotland, calls have been made by a variety of bodies for a greater co-ordination in the provision of such services, underpinned by national standards and recognised training for the professional staff involved. To date, however, no such framework has been produced and members of minority ethnic communities continue to report difficulties created by language barriers in accessing public services.

Overview of findings
Overall, many participants felt that they may not have received fair treatment by public services due to language barriers. Only a minority of participants had experience of using a professional interpreter. A key problem was lack of understanding of how to go about accessing this help. A commonly held view was that using an interpreting service would be very expensive; participants were also unsure about who would be responsible for paying for interpreting services. Experience of delays in accessing professional interpreters was found to be common and proved to be a particular problem in more rural locations. Many participants had experienced what they considered to be poor quality of interpreters, although none had complained about this to the service provider concerned.

The use of informal interpreters such as family members and friends was common amongst participants, although given the choice, participants tended to favour the use of a professional interpreter over a friend, family member or other acquaintance.

Box 1: Definitions

Translation - The conversion of written text from one language to another.

Interpretation - The conversion of speech from one language to another.
Recommendation 1

The Scottish Executive should develop and implement a national strategy for interpretation and translation services in the public sector.

Key Findings

Literature Review

A small-scale review of literature was carried out, focusing on UK material in order to ensure the relevance of the findings. An effort was made to locate Scottish-based material where possible. In general we found that material focusing specifically on translation and interpretation services was limited with previous research focusing on the user-perspective even thinner on the ground. Much of the information selected for the review was extracted from research on broader issues relating to public services, during which issues of translation and interpretation had emerged as significant. Key themes identified in the literature included:

- Difficulties in communicating in English emerged repeatedly as playing a significant role in curtailing access to public services for many members of minority ethnic communities.
- The use of informal interpreters was widespread amongst minority ethnic communities although they raised potential problems surrounding the accuracy of interpretation of formal details such as medical diagnosis and the possibilities of misinformation resulting from this practice.
- There was little in the way of evidence of user-views on the use of professional interpretation services.
- An apparent lack of demand for professional services appeared to result in part from a general lack of awareness amongst minority ethnic communities of the existence of such help and how to access this and concerns over the financial cost to the user of demanding interpretation and translation services.

Framework and Quality Standards

Focus group participants had different opinions on the level of training which “professional” translators and interpreters had undergone. These ranged from believing that at least some exams were taken to suspicions that some “so-called” professionals had little to no formal training in translating or interpreting. There was also concern that private firms were offering their services in translating and interpreting without the need to adhere to any formally agreed set of standards. Several participants recommended that there needed to be clear standards set for training and quality of translation and interpretation services to address such issues. A call was made for a central database of accredited professionals in the field, perhaps held at council area level. Participants stressed that ideally, translators and interpreters should specialise in different public policy contexts such as court work or health.

Using existing voluntary organisation expertise

Some focus group participants reported previous experience of voluntary or faith organisations assisting public services on an ad hoc basis with translating and interpreting. They acknowledged that the expertise which those organisations could offer in terms of their cumulative expertise in a variety of minority ethnic languages and understanding of cultural issues was very helpful. However, the ad hoc nature of the requests for assistance and inadequate financial recompense for this help led to a recommendation for more formal...
Recommendation 2
- Public authorities should explore links with local voluntary organisations to develop interpretation and translation schemes, providing sufficient funding to voluntary organisations to cover training and expenses.

Improving publicity and raising awareness
Participants felt that a lack of publicity by public sector organisations on the availability of translation and interpretation services contributed to confusion over how to access such help and who would pay for it. One comment was that there appeared to be much publicity regarding assistance for people who were hard-of-hearing, yet people who had other communication difficulties seemed to be overlooked. It was acknowledged that information was routinely provided to refugees concerning their rights and the various assistance they could access in the UK. Several refugees however, described how their experiences of trying to access interpretation help had left them unsure as to whether this was within their rights and whether they could be required to pay for it.

Recommendation 3
- Public authorities should develop pro-active publicity strategies to raise awareness of services. To do this they should make use of links with community and voluntary organisations and make sure that publicity information itself is available in all community languages.

Recommendation 4
- Public authorities should ensure that all publicity material outlines service users rights to interpreting and translation services and clearly states that services will be provided free of charge. Service users should not be expected to pay for interpreting or translation support to access public services and this must be made clear.

Accessibility of service
One barrier to accessing interpretation and translation services experienced by focus group participants was the attitude and awareness of public authority staff themselves, with some of our participants describing negative experiences when trying to access services.

Some of those who had tried to access services experienced difficulties in the availability of suitable interpreters or long delays in arranging interpreters. Examples were found of new technology assisting in the development of interpretation services. For example, one project provided access to their bilingual staff via mobile phones taken by service users to their local authority housing department.

Recommendation 5
- Public authorities should ensure that all front-line staff are trained in equality issues and are aware of the interpretation and translation policy of the authority.

Recommendation 6
- Public authorities should consider the use of new technologies such as video conferencing or the use of mobile video phones to provide quick access to interpreters, ensuring access to all community languages is available.

Complaints mechanism
Despite experiences of poor quality interpreters, none of the focus group participants had complained to public authorities about the service received. Some service users may not be willing to complain, however, complaints mechanisms are a useful tool for public authorities to monitor the quality of the services that they provide.

Recommendation 7
- Public authorities should develop strong complaints mechanisms for interpretation and translation services and ensure that these are clearly outlined on all publicity material.
Community Involvement

Many of the problems identified during the focus groups, for example when clients were offered interpreters from regions or even countries other than their native region/country, could be avoided by closer consultation and involvement with the communities that public authorities are serving. Community planning mechanisms could help develop awareness of the language needs of local areas.

Recommendation 8

- Public authorities should incorporate their interpreting and translation services into community planning mechanisms and consult widely to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the communities that they serve.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that, with few exceptions, there is little evidence of change in the provision of translation and interpretation services over the last 10 years despite the criticisms that have emerged from reviews, inspection or research. Various guidelines and standards have been devised in an attempt to improve quality and consistency of provision, but their effectiveness has been curtailed by the lack of a strategy for implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Guidelines and policy statements alone do not appear to have improved service delivery. We therefore recommend that the Scottish Executive develop and implement a national strategy on interpreting and translation to encourage change in the sector.

More Information

Is anybody listening? the user perspective on interpretation and translation services for minority ethnic communities (ISBN 0-9549004-4-9) is available from the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC), price £12.

The research was conducted by Linda Nicholson, The Research Shop. The full report was written by Linda Nicholson, The Research Shop and Jennifer Wallace, Scottish Consumer Council.

All SCC reports are also published on our website www.scotconsumer.org.uk

The Scottish Consumer Council

The purpose of the Scottish Consumer Council is to make all consumers matter. For more information on what we are doing visit our website at www.scotconsumer.org.uk. The website gives free access to all our reports, campaigns and policy work in progress. SCC reports in printed formats are available from our office at the address below. We are often able to make our publications available in alternative formats.

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