Guidelines for Users of Interpreters

Some aspects of working with an interpreter can be difficult and frustrating. The process of communication, never a simple one, becomes more complex because of the third party on which both service provider and community client must depend on for understanding each other. It is time consuming too, but it can also be a rewarding and enriching experience by developing a method of working with the interpreter, many of the difficulties of communicating through a third person can be overcome.

We hope the following information will help you

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE BOOKING AN INTERPRETER

Do I need an interpreter?
Of course, the first and most obvious problem is language, but at an institutional and at an individual level, there is a real lack of reliable information about the needs and general ethnology of minority groups in Britain. If you feel that your knowledge of your client's language and culture/religion is inadequate, you should find it helpful to consider the other questions which follow.

Does my client need an interpreter?
During conversation, be alert for any sign that you are not being understood. For instance, if your client speaks little or no English, you may detect a vacant glazed look; a fixed smile or a repeated 'yes' to everything you say. You can confirm this by double-checking, for example, by asking the question in a way, which would necessitate a ‘no’ answer. Many linguistic minority community members have a superficial knowledge of English. They can respond to greetings, answer familiar questions and discuss familiar topics. However, they might not be sufficiently fluent for an in-depth interview if English is not their first language.

Would my client mind if we communicate through a third person?
Your client's feelings on this matter must always be respected. If possible and if appropriate, check that the client is happy for you to bring a third person, the interpreter to the interview. If you are unable, or virtually unable to communicate with the client, then this will obviously have to wait until the interpreter is present. If you can check beforehand, this should avoid the possibility of a wasted journey for the interpreter.
WORKING WITH AN INTERPRETER
What follows is intended as a practical guide to working with an interpreter. To someone with professional training and experience much of what is said may seem obvious, even just plain sense, but in unfamiliar situations, it is the obvious points which in the heat of the moment, can be overlooked.

MAKING THE BOOKING
Try to arrange the interview in advance and book the interpreter as early as possible. Not only are you more likely to find a suitable interpreter who is available when you need them, but a prior explanation of the case also gives the interpreter an opportunity to think out, before the interview, appropriate translations of any unfamiliar words, concepts or procedures. Clearly, this is more likely to be necessary if the interpreter and the client are unfamiliar with your services.

Remember to allow more time for the fact that an interview through an interpreter will take longer then normal.
This would probably be most convenient immediately before the interview with the client. If you have never met before, it will give you and the interpreter an opportunity to get to know one another. It is important that you and the interpreter develop mutual trust plus understanding and respect for each other’s role. A briefing session will allow you to discuss the case with the interpreter in more detail before meeting the client. You can provide the interpreter with any background information over and above that already discussed when making the booking. You can ask the interpreter any questions relating to cultural/religious factors which you think may be important, e.g. in relation to schooling, child care. There may be cultural conflicts, which are important to anticipate. Any discussion between the service provider and the interpreter should be dealt within this session or after the interview. It should be avoided during the interview itself.

At the briefing session, you should explain to the interpreter, your aims, objectives and the information you hope to obtain from the interview.
Her/his understanding of the purpose and relevance of your question will influence the interpreter translation.

The style of interpreting we are perhaps most aware of thanks to the UN and the EU is simultaneous interpreting, but this is of most use at conferences that entails interpreting of long speeches (sometimes the interpreter with a written text in front of him/her) and is not appropriate for the personal interviews which are the realm of the community interpreter. As far as the latter is concerned, there are two styles of interpreting to be aware of:

a) What is my client’s first language?
Your client’s ethnic origin may be a clue but not if he/she comes from a linguistically diverse background (country). For example, if your client comes from India, you must not assume that he/she speaks Indian, because there is no such language. People from different parts of the indian sub-cultures and religions are also diversely represented. A community worker should be able to pinpoint your client’s mother tongue, if you provide your client’s name, their country of origin and the region within that country. It is also worth double-checking.

b) Liaison Interpreting, commonly known are Verbatim:
Here the interpreter translates a very short unit of speech almost word for word. This method is generally more accurate, distortion is minimised and less is left to the
discretion of the interpreter. It is slower, however, and the interpreter must be skilled in the art of rightly stopping the service provider or the client after every few phrases, in order to interpret.

c) Consecutive interpreting or summary translation:
Here the interpreter summarises longer units of speech and it involves taking notes on the part of the interpreter. While less accurate, this method is quicker. Simple but time-consuming explanations or information with which the interpreter is quite familiar can be presented to the client in this way. The same can be said, as to whether one has to use first person as opposed to third person (direct or indirect speech) when interpreting. Agreement has to be reached between the service provider and the interpreter which style of interpreting to adopt.

DURING THE INTERVIEW
The seating arrangement is important.
You should sit so that you and the client can look at each other directly and that the interpreter can watch you both.

A period for introduction and `small talk' is necessary for a number of reasons.
Introduce yourself and the interpreter to the client. Ask the interpreter to explain why the interview has been arranged, what your function is who he/she is and what he/she will be doing. The amount of explanation required will, of course, depend on the extent of contact you have previously had with the client. Then a short time for the interpreter to chat with the client especially if they have-not met before will help establish some sort of rapport between them and make the client feel more at ease.

Try to build up your own rapport with the client.
This is clearly much more difficult when you are speaking through a third person. Be seen to address yourself to the client directly. Eye contact and facial expressions are important in conveying your meaning and your feeling to the client.

Watch your language.
All institutions have their own jargons and will be used to decoding this for your non-English-speaking client. Even the bicultural interpreter, unless he/she has a great deal of experience in your field, will have difficulty identifying and translating this kind of language and it is therefore your responsibility to avoid using it. Be careful too of idioms. You also need to bear in mind that some words or concepts have no direct equivalent in other languages and/or are culturally biased; e.g. `depression', family etc. You can discuss with the interpreter exactly what meaning you wish to convey.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW
A de-briefing session with the interpreter after you have seen the client is essential. After the interview, you can take the opportunity of seeking the interpreter's own impressions of the client's attitude and state of mind. You can also check with the interpreter any points you think you have missed. This may be especially valuable if the interview had been highly charged and much of necessity has gone un-interpreted. This session would also provide the opportunity for both of you to feed back to each other the actual process of your work together.

Do not expect miracles!
Although every effort has been made to ensure effective interpreting, neither the interpreter nor the service provider can be sure that accurate communication has been achieved. Even when two people speak the same language, misunderstandings do occur. Communication through a
third party compounds problems. However, the introduction and effective use of trained interpreters will dramatically improve access to, and quality of service provided by your department for members of the community whose mother tongue is not English.

THROUGHOUT
The interpreter is a professional and should be treated as such. If the interpreter feels under-valued, he/she will work less effectively. If you talk down to the interpreter, this will inevitably spread through the interpreting and in turn affect the client.
The interpreter deserves your respect!

CONCLUSION
Practical things to do:
• Check that the interpreter and client speak the same language and dialect.
• Allow time for a pre-interview discussion with the interpreter in order to talk about the content of the interview and the way in which you will work together.
• Encourage the interpreter to intervene during the interview when necessary.
• Use straightforward language; avoid using jargons and terminology if possible.
• Actively listen to the interpreter and the client.
• Allow up to twice as much time for the interview when using an interpreter.
• At the end of the interview check whether the client has understood everything and wants to know or ask anything else.
• Have a post-interview discussion with the interpreter.

Points to remember
• When working in difficult situations, please give the interpreters as much support as possible.
• The interpreter should not be asked to take on any other duties other than interpreting.
• You have responsibility for the interview and its outcome, not the interpreter.
• You are working with a professional interpreter without whom you cannot communicate.