

Translation of Written Material into Ethnic Minority Languages

RTPI Practice Advice Note

1. Introduction

This guidance note was published in 1993. Whilst some time has elapsed since it was published many of the issues that need to be considered and the principles of good practice remain applicable today. Many local authorities have translation services which should be contacted in the first instance for advice and assistance.

In the 1980s the RTPI, along with others, ran a campaign against gobbledegook – the Plain English Campaign – which has undoubtedly helped in making planning more user-friendly. But for some sections of the community even plain English is gobbledegook. In many areas, large sections of the ethnic minority population have difficulty with English. Even where leaflets and other material have been translated into ethnic minority languages, the quality of both presentation and content is often poor.

This note is about making translations for ethnic minorities.

‘Ethnic minorities’ in this context refers to both individuals and groups/communities. The approach taken to establishing a dialogue will depend on the particular situation; how you approach a group or a whole community. In addition, translations comprise only one way of opening up planning to ethnic minorities. It should not undermine other important areas such as the attitude and approach staff at the reception desk, or the use of videos. These are often far more important than written material.

2. The overall approach

It helps to have a set of key objectives to work to when breaking down communication barriers. These may be as follows:

- (a) To ensure that no section of the population is at a major disadvantage, in terms of receiving our service, because of cultural, language or related issues;

- (b) To clarify and explain planning policies, regulations and procedures, thereby seeking to minimize the need for enforcement action, appeals or abortive planning applications. This will also minimize the risk of inter-racial disputes or tensions occurring in planning matters;
- (c) To establish confidence and trust on the part of ethnic minorities towards planning and towards local planning department staff;
- (d) To give a positive image to the multi-racial/cultural nature of the local population. Ethnic minorities should feel part of the community and the local population should fully recognize the existence and legitimacy of various languages and cultures.

3. Handling language issues

To be effective translations have to be

- (a) of a high standard of presentation;
- (b) in simple language;
- (c) relevant and accessible.

It is not always easy to achieve this because of a number of difficulties.

- (a) The existence of several languages in a locality, making it difficult, because of diseconomies of small scale, to produce high quality material;
- (b) Difficulties of accommodating graphics etc., especially if the language goes from right to left like Urdu and Arabic, or top to bottom like Chinese. It is difficult to standardise the format;
- (c) Problems of translating planning jargon such as 'Unitary Development Plan', 'Green Belt' or 'material change of use';
- (d) The absence of inadequacy of translation facilities and the subsequent checking;
- (e) Difficulties in getting the material into the communities;
- (f) Difficulties in accommodating language needs within computer-generated letters and forms or computer-aided graphics.

4. Suggested approach

Because the composition, history and general characteristics of local ethnic minority populations vary throughout the country, it is neither possible nor desirable to have a standard approach. The approach should be a pragmatic one: one that is aware of local problems and needs and balances these against the resources available. The following covers the main tasks you are likely to have to undertake. They are not necessarily in a sequential order.

Task 1

Be aware of local need. Try to collate information on the main local languages, including approximate numbers in the population and their geographical distribution. 'Main' in this context should be based on need and not necessarily numbers. Often small groups may be in greater need than larger groups, because they have less provision.

This information may be available from surveys undertaken by the local authority or other statutory body. The local 'Racial Equality Council' or local community representatives will also generally be happy to assist you in gaining an understanding.

Task 2

Build translation and related requirements into your public consultation budget (if one exists) at the outset, rather than trying to squeeze them in as an afterthought.

Task 3

Where there are several local languages, it is often the case that one or two are the 'main' ones in terms of need. The only way to assess this is to ask community organisations, individuals and other departments in the authority. But ultimately you will have to make your own, informed decision.

These languages should be identified as the first priority when deciding on translation and publicity. There may be criticism from various quarters but that should be met head on, possibly with support from the in-house race or equality unit or from the local Racial Equality Council. Even there you may not find many allies!

If there are resource problems or other practical difficulties it is better to concentrate your efforts on one language, rather than giving up entirely or trying to do too much and doing it badly. The latter is worse than doing nothing at all.

Task 4

Determine priorities for public information leaflets about development control, if these exist. For example, you may have a general leaflet on procedures for obtaining a planning permission, supplemented by leaflets on specific topics such as hot food takeaways, houses in multiple occupation, meeting places, etc. Decide which are most important. These may then be either phased in or introduced in one go.

The main points to bear in mind are:

- (a) Ensure a high standard and a consistent style, between different leaflets and between different languages, including English. 'Plain English' is vital. If the English version is jargon free there is more chance of getting it properly translated into other languages;

- (b) All translated material should have the name of the language clearly shown in English, to assist quick identification;
- (c) Photographs and drawings of people should reflect the local ethnic minority population in all the leaflets. Never use different illustrations for different languages;
- (d) A general point. The public does not readily distinguish between planning and building control, environmental health, etc. These aspects of development should therefore be covered if at all possible; if not, they should be clearly mentioned, with a clear statement referring people to other information sources;
- (e) Give a contact point, even though a person fluent in the particular language may not be answering the phone or at the reception desk. People's English speaking ability is often better than their reading ability. In any case, once the ice has been broken even those with only a basic grasp of the language can often make themselves understood, given a little patience;

Of course, the employment of more ethnic minority staff would not only help overcome some of these problems but would go a long way to giving a positive image to ethnic minorities.

Task 5

Work out a system for dealing with material relating to development control procedures such as consultation letters, decision notices, publicity material on major applications, etc.

In the case of major or controversial developments which are likely to have implications for local residents, targeted publicity ought to be undertaken: e.g. translations of publicity material or neighbour notification letters in the relevant language(s) for that locality.

In certain instances (such as a decision notice with specific and detailed conditions, or certain refusal notices) you should send accompanying letters in English and in the relevant minority language. This is so that the applicant is in no doubt where he or she stands. This applies also to enforcement notices, tree preservation orders, etc.

The key, especially in important or controversial cases, is for case officers to use their discretion to ensure that applicants are not left in uncertainty because of language problems and that they are given the opportunity to have their say.

Where authorities have introduced computers to facilitate development control procedures, these practices should be built in, enabling case officers, for example, to identify applications which need special publicity, or providing standard pre-printed letters in the appropriate languages to be enclosed with the

English letter. Details could be filled in if it is not possible to have them translated. ***Don't sacrifice second best because you can't get the best.***

Avoid translations for the sake of it – translating planning application forms for example. Concentrate on explaining what information is required, and why. Allow or encourage representations in other languages, but make sure you have sorted out the procedures for having them translated into English beforehand. Make use of local ethnic minority press and radio to give publicity in appropriate cases.

5. Translations and development plans

It is usually neither practical nor necessary to translate a Local Plan or a Unitary Development Plan into various languages. Your efforts should be directed instead at getting an input from the communities at the draft stage, through information sheets or newsletters.

These would spell out the main policies, particularly highlighting the ones which are most likely to have implications for ethnic minorities.

Establishing a dialogue with ethnic minority communities is a gradual process; don't expect an exhibition to result in any meaningful involvement. A better way may be to set up an advisory group by inviting a representative sample of people to come together at three or four meetings to go through the draft plan and make a response.

Be prepared to meet at times and in venues that the community requests and to meet travelling and related costs. These items cost relatively little in comparison with the production costs of a plan.

Always follow up. Let the community know how you have used their comments, including comments which may only be of peripheral concern to you as planners.

This brief section gives only the bare outline and is in no way comprehensive on methods used to involve people in the preparation of District Plans. The key point is that extra effort will often be needed in terms of staff input to involve those sections of the community who do not normally get involved in consultations.

6. Overcoming problems

Accommodating graphic problems in languages where the format is not left to right

Where mock-ups and type setting etc. are done in-house, some training is necessary. In time, this becomes less and less of a problem. If the job is done outside then this is provided as part of the service. The latter is on balance more expensive, and clear and detailed instructions have to be given to avoid abortive work.

Translating planning jargon

Translations should normally contain transliteration of technical words with a specific meaning to avoid any ambiguities. (Transliteration means to write a word in the letters of another alphabet.) Translators should be asked to adopt a consistent approach; perhaps other leaflets available in the department could be sent to help the translator avoid inconsistency.

Absence of, or inadequate, translation facilities

Some authorities have an in-house service. Where none exist you must be prepared to ask around and go to firms outside your local area. The quality of work can vary considerably. You should ask for examples of their work and have this checked by an independent party. For some languages, like Urdu, typesetting is not always available, so it is advisable to have the quality of calligraphy assessed as well. Equally important is to have the leaflet translated back by an independent translator to see whether the meaning has been lost or transformed.

You could also request feedback from the community on the quality of the translation in certain cases. This could avoid major gaffes and help you to slowly develop your own expertise.

Cost

This depends on the quality required, whether the work is full of technical or uncommon words, how long it is, etc. As a rule you should be looking to pay around 50-60 per 1000 English words of translation and around 120 for typesetting (prices at December 1992. These prices are for Asian languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi or Gujarati and you should expect a good quality job. There is often a minimum charge of anything from 15 to 30, or possibly even less for very small jobs.

It is not easy to produce a reliable list of firms or individuals who do translations

Getting material into the communities

It is easy to overload ethnic minority communities with translated information on all kinds of services and facilities, usually made available at local neighbourhood or community centres. Whilst one-off targeting of such places, e.g. for a major development proposal, is fine, generally speaking you should avoid leaving hundreds of leaflets for people to pick up. They often serve a limited purpose and may just be a waste of effort. Instead a small number should be sent to the major community centres and meeting places so that at least the secretary or the community representative is aware.

Equally important is to publicise the availability of such leaflets of the English leaflets, which are usually more widely distributed. This would ideally be done both in English and the relevant ethnic minority languages. Once word gets around that translations are available, they will begin to be used more effectively.

The above has focused on written material. Where possible, and when dealing with major or controversial issues, opportunities should be offered for meeting the individual or community. This is usually best achieved by contacting a few key individuals or organisations in person or over the phone, as well as formally by letter. They will assist in ensuring that the information is dispersed. Word of mouth is often far more effective than formal letters or notices, although of course there is the danger of meanings getting changed as they pass from one person to the next! – even more reason for accurate, good quality written material.

7. Summary

- Be clear about your overall approach.
- Identify potential problems - e.g. difficulty with graphics, availability of contacts/translators, etc.
- Follow a step by step procedure bearing in mind your own circumstances: e.g. numbers of languages, resources available, when and which material to translate, etc.
- Work out a system for getting information into the communities or to concerned individuals.

The principles contained in this note are relevant to town planners working in all parts of the UK.

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