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## Guidance for Local Authorities on Translation of Publications



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## Foreword by the Secretary of State

In June 2007, the Commission on Integration and Cohesion published *Our Shared Future*, setting out practical ways in which local authorities could help to build strong communities by promoting cohesion and integration locally.

I have been very encouraged by the way that many authorities have already begun to respond to the recommendations. The government will publish a full response in the new year. But there were a number of areas which needed immediate action. That is why I am publishing this guidance on translation for local authorities.

I agree wholeheartedly with the analysis and recommendations on translation set out by the Commission. Strong communities depend on shared values and experiences. The Commission found that around 60 per cent of people believe that the biggest barrier to “being English” was not speaking the language. Good English skills are vital to finding jobs and participating in society. And, as the Commission says, English **“binds us together as a single group in a way that a multiplicity of community languages cannot.”**

Automatic translation of all documents into different languages in some areas is undermining the importance of English as a way of enabling all citizens to communicate and relate to one another.

While this approach may be well-intentioned, it means that some may come to rely on the service, lacking the incentive to learn English. In the past I think we have – in however well-meaning a way – translated things that need not have been translated. Translation is a stepping stone to speaking English, but it can never be a substitute for it.

As a result, I am very clear that we should reject automatic translation in favour of a more selective approach, where translation is targeted to particular needs, and which is part of an overall local strategy to promote English.

Of course, there will always be some circumstances in which translation is appropriate – for example, to enable particular individuals to access essential services like healthcare or participate in local democracy. That is why local authorities are responsible for making the decisions which reflect the needs of their community.

This guidance will help them make these decisions, with a checklist of questions based on good practice to consider before choosing to translate material. Much of this re-emphasises the Commission's findings, and as a result, is grounded in common sense. The guidance also highlights some of the good practice and innovative approaches which are already working. I hope that authorities will find this useful, and will continue to share the good practice that works for their communities.

**Hazel Blears**  
**Secretary of State**  
**Communities and Local Government**

# Introduction

## Context

1. This document forms part of our response to the Commission on Integration and Cohesion's final report, *Our Shared Future*. It focuses in particular on Annex E of that document. The report, its case studies and supporting research documents can be found at [www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk](http://www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk)
2. The Commission was a fixed-term advisory body, tasked with developing practical recommendations aimed at building cohesion in local communities. Its report set out a new framework for local cohesion work, based on four key principles:
  - a. the sense of **shared futures** – an emphasis on articulating what binds communities together rather than the differences that divide them, and prioritising a shared future over divided legacies
  - b. a new model of **rights and responsibilities** – one that makes clear both a sense of citizenship at national and local level, and the obligations that go along with membership of a community, both for individuals or groups
  - c. an ethics of hospitality – a new emphasis on **mutual respect** and civility that recognises that alongside the need to strengthen the social bonds within groups, the pace of change across the country reconfigures local communities rapidly, meaning that mutual respect is fundamental to issues of integration and cohesion
  - d. a commitment to equality that sits alongside the need to deliver **visible social justice**, to prioritise transparency and fairness, and build trust in the institutions that arbitrate between groups.
3. In responding to the Commission, our objective is to set out clearly how those four principles – and the emphasis on interaction outlined in the rest of the Commission's report – can be made tangible in local practice. And to show clearly how cohesion can be successfully embedded in wider policy areas to ensure a greater impact.

## Who should read this document

4. This guidance is for England only and is aimed at local authorities and their partners (particularly LSPs). The principles it contains, however, can be used by other bodies and organisations.

## What the Commission recommended on translation

5. The Commission concluded that speaking English acts as an important binding ingredient for diverse communities – with 60 per cent of those surveyed in their MORI polling identifying language as the main ingredient of “being English”. It also found that speaking English was a key way of promoting equality, as it led to greater success in the labour market (the research on this is referenced at the end of this document). Their report set out the importance to cohesion of people being able to communicate with one another – with recommendations for both improved English language skills for new migrants, as well as targeted campaigns to help settled communities understand the nature of migration in their area, and to provide the opportunities to meet migrants and to work together.
6. As part of this wider emphasis on communications, the Commission considered the translation of written materials, on a general basis, such as leaflets and official forms.
7. The Commission did not consider changes to the provision of interpreters on a one-to-one basis. Such provision will be necessary, where someone does not have sufficient English language skills and needs to be able to understand their legal rights, medical advice or their financial and other responsibilities. It may be expected, however, that the need for interpretation will eventually reduce as the use of English becomes more universal.
8. Distilled from their consultation, the Commission found five reasons why Local authorities had made a pro-active decision to translate materials into community languages:
  - a. *To ensure that non-English speaking residents are able to access essential services, eg the police, education services, and safety campaigns, such as fire, road safety, etc.*
  - b. *To enable people to take part in the democratic process, for example enabling people to register to vote or take part in local consultations.*
  - c. *To support local community groups or intermediaries working directly with new migrants or non-English speaking communities.*
  - d. *To enable people to function effectively as citizens in society and be able to get along with others, by ensuring that they understand local rules and appreciate local customs eg rubbish disposal, parking restrictions and common courtesies.*

e. *To ensure compliance with the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 and ensure that no one is disadvantaged in accessing services because of their inability to communicate verbally or non-verbally.*

**9.** However, the report also noted that there was evidence of more reactive translations where although local authorities were well-meaning in translating materials into community languages, for example seeing this as a way of promoting equality, they were not always considering whether it was the best use of scarce resource:

- where local authorities and organisations were automatically translating background and reference documents that would not necessarily be in widespread use or general circulation, eg annual reports
- Where overly complex leaflets were being translated, and what was really needed was sign-posting to a service
- Where documents were automatically translated into a set of languages, without consideration being given to the audience for that document

**10.** The report also identified that where areas were facing similar challenges on translation (for example, those in the deprived rural area with high levels of new migration identified by the Commission), they were not sharing resources.

**11.** The Commission therefore recommended that a checklist be prepared for local authorities considering whether or not to translate materials – which is set out in further detail later in this document. They also commissioned a research from the Central Office of Information, which also informs the rest of this guidance, and can be found at the Commission’s website – [www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk](http://www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk).

### **Our response to these recommendations**

**12.** We agree with the Commission’s emphasis on the need to speak English and that promoting English is essential for both longstanding migrants (for example, spouses who did not speak English upon arrival) and new migrants who do not speak English.

**13.** While there is an argument that fewer translations will reduce costs, in supporting this recommendation, our key concern is that local authorities should provide services in a way that meets the needs of communities – whilst avoiding divisively positioning one particular community against another, and ensuring that people are encouraged to learn English as soon as possible, given the importance of language skills to integrating and accessing the labour market.

14. In the widest sense, this might mean that local authorities want to consider how all of the support they provide to citizens and service users can be delivered in a way that supports vulnerable communities, but does not appear to do so at the expense of others.
15. With regard to the development of a new approach and specifically on the translation of written materials:
  - We therefore agree that local authorities, and other government bodies and organisations should think twice before continuing with, or providing new, written translation materials – considering the impact on both those who actually use them, and also thinking through how English speakers will perceive the special provision of written materials that do not feature any English.
  - Where local authorities do choose to translate – because the information is needed for safety or health reasons, for example, we agree with the Commission’s suggestion that this is used as an opportunity to teach English, perhaps by using pictures instead of translation in a document in English, or bilingual translation.
  - We agree that all bodies should be considering whether there are groups which do not speak English in their communities, and have low literacy standards in their own language
  - We also agree that the local approach should be part of a wider communications strategy that seeks both to manage the impact on settled communities of demographic change, and to ensure that all documents – whether translated or not – meet plain English standards.
16. In short, we would encourage local authorities to consider whether translation is necessary, for which documents it is appropriate, whether it should be available on demand, and whether it can be done in a way that helps people learn English.
17. Finally, following the Commission’s lead, we have specifically focused in this guidance on the translation of general written materials. But we are aware that many local authorities and bodies make use of interpreters and interpretation services to assist non-English speaking people to access essential services. We therefore expect that some of the principles outlined below will also be useful to local authorities when making decisions on when to provide interpreters.

## Putting this Guidance into Practice

- 18.** We strongly agree with the Commission’s position the evidence for translation acting as a crutch for people who don’t speak English is patchy. But we strongly agree with the Commission’s position on the need for English to be used as a binding agent in communities and to promote equality of opportunity. This section reinforces the guiding principles they developed, as well as restating the checklist developed.

### Context

The Commission suggested four contextual points, which helpfully set the background for any decisions on translation of written materials:

- a. **There is no legal reason for all materials to be translated.** The Race Relations Act simply says that all parts of the community should have access to services, and although that might involve translation, it does not always have to. The Human Rights Act only requires translation if someone is arrested or charged with a criminal offence.
- b. **Translation can never be a substitute for learning English.** Whatever the considerations *when* translated printing materials, the whole issue needs to be seen in the context of a wider drive to improve English skills in all communities. And that means a greater focus on ESOL and English language provision.
- c. **Translation should be reduced except where it builds integration and cohesion.** Opinion is *divided* as to whether translation is a barrier to integration, or whether it is a stepping stone to better language skills. Our position is that it depends on the individual: where migrants from the past are still relying on community languages, then translations from English are likely to extend their reliance on their mother tongue; where new migrants do not speak English then clearly they need initial information in appropriate languages. Local authorities will judge what is best – but our working assumption is that heading for the translators should not be an automatic first step in all cases.
- d. **Translation should be considered in the context of communications to all communities.** Materials that are not in English can be alienating to existing communities. It is important to keep communications channels open between community groups living in the same area. Local partners should therefore consider ways to use translated materials to underline their even-handed approach to all communities.

## Translation Checklist

The Commission suggested a checklist for local authorities, which we agree provides a clear picture of both the intent of this recommendation, and the ways in which it might be implemented (we have revised this slightly):

### **Is it essential that this material be translated?**

What is your evidence of a need or demand for this translation?

What is your evidence that people will be disadvantaged without this translation?

Who is the target audience? – for example is it young mothers, pensioners, workers etc and do those target audiences include people who don't speak English?

Are speakers of particular languages being targeted?

Are you using the right data to select the languages to translate this material into?

Have you got information about who cannot speak English locally, and is it being updated as intelligence comes in about local changes?

### **Does the document need to be translated in full?**

Are you confident that people across all communities will have the literacy skills to understand this document?

Should it first be simplified into a plain English version?

Would a short summary do with signposting to further information? – or could it be translated on request rather than proactively?

Could this message be better delivered by engaging with community groups directly or through credible partners, or by using alternative media?

Have you considered the cost/benefit analysis for this translation?

Will these materials be used in full, or is it likely that this form of communication will sit on the shelf?

What would be the cost of not translating these materials – would there be an additional burden on public services?

Have you explored whether other local agencies might already have these materials available in translated form?

Have you networked with other authorities to share leaflets?

Might the police or other partners already be translating similar things?

Is there any national best practice?









