

A guide for using interpreters in situations involving domestic and / or sexual abuse issues



Introduction:

People of all cultures and backgrounds are as equally likely (or unlikely) to experience domestic and / or sexual violence and abuse. If a victim / survivor does encounter a service or authority who could offer support, it's important to make every effort to ensure that effective communication takes place.

Those who do not speak English will have several additional barriers preventing them from accessing services – cultural barriers, isolation, a lack of a wider support network and unfamiliarity with UK systems. They could also fear possible consequences regarding their children or immigration status. All these things will have a significant impact on accessing support.

It's therefore vital to use a professional interpreter so that the person can fully express themselves and relay information to the practitioner / professional.

Before the appointment:

- Always employ a professional interpreter. Never use a family member, friend or any children.
- Offer the person a male or female interpreter. The gender of the interpreter could be a key issue depending on the victim/survivors' cultural background or personal circumstances and they need to be able to trust the interpreter with their disclosure.
- If you can, share the name of the booked interpreter with the victim/survivor to confirm whether they are known to them or live in the same community / geographic location. Confidentiality is key.
- Ensure that the interpreter speaks the appropriate dialect of the language. Differences in dialects can have a significant impact on the quality of what is interpreted and understood.
- Try to brief the interpreter prior to the appointment. Check that they are happy to interpret for domestic and / or sexual abuse issues, including explicit terms.
- Remind the interpreter to give a word for word full interpretation (as close as possible) of everything that is said and nothing more. Do not ask the interpreter to comment on the issues and do not say anything that you do not wish the interpreter to say in the language of the client.
- Ask the interpreter that if they are asked not to disclose information, to tell you this.
- Avoid leaving the person and interpreter alone together at any time; before, during or after the session.
- If you can, arrange the seating. You and the person should face each other (maybe on either side of a small table), and the interpreter sits between you. This helps it to feel like a conversation between you and the person, with the interpreter assisting.

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During the appointment:

- Introduce yourself and your role.
- Ask the interpreter to fully explain their role, code of conduct and duties of confidentiality etc. to the person. Then check with the person if they are happy to proceed. Ensure everyone feels safe before you start.
- Address the person directly and look at them whilst you & they are speaking – e.g. who lives with you at home? Rather than - can you ask them who lives in the house?
- Speak slowly and pause after every sentence. The interpreter needs time to translate every word you are saying.
- The words ‘domestic or sexual abuse’ may not translate directly in many languages. You could ask – are there any problems at home? Is anyone hurting you? Are you afraid of anyone? Is anyone making you do anything you don’t want to?
- Remain alert to any difficulties or distress exhibited by the person during the interpreted session.
- Terminate the session immediately if the service user indicates that the interpreter is not suitable.

After the appointment:

- If the person speaks a moderate level of English and if appropriate, you could ask them how the interpreter was – How did that go? How did you find the interpreter?
- Debrief with the interpreter as you would with any other colleague.
- If you can, provide feedback on your experience of using the interpreter on the booking platform.
- If you plan to meet with the person again, aim to use the same interpreter if they were appropriate.



Consider this...

A Sheffield Domestic Homicide Review ([Adult G](#)) found that a victim had been in contact with maternity services, health visitors, the police and GPs, but there appeared to be several barriers to using interpreters. The review found that:

- The gender of the interpreter is a key influence on someone’s ability to respond to questions about domestic abuse. It is unlikely Adult G would have disclosed what she was experiencing to a male interpreter.
- Even though agencies reported that it was difficult to source a female telephone interpreter, they followed good practice by delaying the appointment until a female interpreter was available.
- Interpreters sourced locally may represent the same community as the abused person, again impacting on the ability of a victim to speak freely.

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- The case highlighted a linguistic / cultural issue in that questions used by health staff in routine enquiry to ask about domestic abuse may not be understood by people without English as a first language. It was identified for example that Arabic speakers understand and respond to direct questioning.

Interpreting Services & Service Standards

Interpreters should adhere to the following principles: confidentiality, impartiality, word for word accuracy & non-advocacy. Professional interpreting organisations should have in place systems to ensure good quality services. These should include:

1. A code of conduct/practice/ethics
2. Appropriately qualified staff e.g. Diploma in Public Sector Interpreting or equivalent
3. Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks
4. Training programme which includes safeguarding, domestic and sexual abuse
5. Quality checks on the work of interpreters
6. An escalation or complaints procedure

If you have concerns about an interpreter, raise it with your manager and the interpreting provider.

Useful Resources for interpreters

[A Guide for Spoken Language Interpreters Working with Adult Survivors of Domestic Abuse, Manchester Women's Aid](#)

The Association of Police and Court Interpreters - www.apciinterpreters.org.uk

The National Register of Public Service Interpreters - www.nrpsi.co.uk

The Institute of Translation and Interpreting - www.iti.org.uk