

Committee	Date	Classification	Report No.	Agenda Item No.
Overview and Scrutiny Committee	10 June 2008	Unrestricted		12.1
Report of:		Title:		
Michael Keating Acting Assistant Chief Executive		Scrutiny Challenge Session – Interpreting and Translation Provision		
Originating Officer(s):		Ward(s) affected: All		
Hannah Bailey Scrutiny & Equalities Support Officer				

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report updates the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the outcome of the Scrutiny Challenge Session on Interpreting and Translation Provision which was held on 22nd April 2008.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the outcome of the Scrutiny Challenge Session on Interpreting and Translation Provision.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT, 2000 (SECTION 97)

LIST OF “BACKGROUND PAPERS” USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT

Background papers

Guidance for Local Authorities on Translation of Publications (Department for Communities and Local Government, December 2007.)
Our Shared Future (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, June 2007.)

Name and telephone number of and address where open to inspection

Hannah Bailey
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3. Introduction

- 3.1 This report provides a summary of the scrutiny challenge session held on interpreting and translation and ESOL provision to provide members with an opportunity to look at current arrangements for providing services in the borough.
- 3.2 Challenge sessions are designed as a quick way for a group of members to get to grips with key policy issues and ensure a robust check on the Council and its partners' policies. The session was attended by a mixed group of seven Members led by the Scrutiny Lead for Excellent Public Services, Councillor A Salique. A number of officers and representatives of partner organisations also attended as witnesses, as outlined below.

4. Purpose

- 4.1 The purpose of the Challenge Session was to:
- To consider the recommendations made in the DCLG paper entitled *Guidance for Local Authorities on Translation of Publications* and any implications they may have for the Council;
 - To ensure that the provision of translation and interpretation is appropriate and effective;
 - To examine the resources allocated to interpreting and translation to ensure the efficient use of resources and value for money;
 - To consider the impact of the current provision of ESOL (English for speakers of another language) courses in the borough;
 - To examine the impact that interpreting and translation has on the wider issues of integration and community cohesion in Tower Hamlets.
- 4.2 The group received five presentations during the course of the session, as outlined below:
- Hafsha Ali and Hannah Bailey, Scrutiny and Equalities, and Emdad Haque, Adults, Health and Wellbeing;
 - Fiona Paterson, Idea Store Learning Development Manager;
 - Vaughan Jones ,Praxis,
 - Tony Collins, Poplar HARCA;
 - Jaimin Patel, Newham Language Shop.

5. Background

- 5.1 In June 2007 the Commission on Integration and Cohesion published a document entitled *Our Shared Future* which set out practical ways in which local authorities could help to build strong communities by promoting cohesion and integration locally. The Commission recommended that local authorities consider:
- Situating translation in the wider context of a communication strategy for all residents;
 - Ensuring that translation of written materials is done in a way that builds integration and cohesion, and maximises efficiency.

- 5.2 In response to the Commission, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) produced a paper entitled *Guidance for Local Authorities on Translation of Publications*. This document advocates that local authorities reject automatic translation in favour of a more selective approach, where translation is targeted to particular needs, and forms part of an overall local strategy to promote English.
- 5.3 Tower Hamlets is an ethnically diverse area, with nearly half of the population from black and ethnic minority (BME) backgrounds. While approximately one third are of Bangladeshi origin, there is also a significant Somali community and an increasing number of arrivals from new communities, most notably from Eastern Europe. Given this level of diversity, the demand for English as a second language courses is high in the borough.
- 5.4 An estimated 3 in 10 Tower Hamlets residents have a disability of some description. This has implications for those who find they have difficulty accessing services through the usual channels of written and spoken word, and presents the need for information to be communicated via other means, such as British Sign Language (BSL) or easy read format.
- 5.5 Interpreting and translation services play a critical role in effectively communicating with residents and improving equal access to services. However the profile and needs of the local community has changed over the years and it is important to ensure that the way in which information is provided through translation and interpretation is both appropriate and effective.

6. Current interpreting and translation provision

- 6.1 Members received information on the Council's current interpreting and translation provision from Hafsha Ali and Hannah Bailey from the Scrutiny and Equalities Team. It was explained that interpreting and translation services were currently sourced from an external provider, Newham Language Shop. Following a short analysis of the national background to the ongoing debate on interpreting and translation provision, the session heard evidence about the language demand in Tower Hamlets.
- 6.2 Bengali and Somali made up the two largest groups for translation in both 2006/07 and 2007/08, with Vietnamese as the third most requested language. In terms of interpreting, again Bengali and Somali were the two main languages. In 2006/07 Turkish was the third language, however in 2007/08 this position had been equally shared between Turkish, Kurdish and Polish at 3% each. This year a total of 38 other languages make up the remaining 22% of interpreting provision. These include a range of languages, such as Russian, Romanian and Albanian.
- 6.3 Members heard that another useful means of measuring potential need is to examine the schools language census. This looks at which languages pupils speak in their home environment and shows trends amongst families with school age children. An example is that the number of children speaking Polish at home has almost doubled in a year, rising from 63 pupils in 2006 to 120 in 2007.
- 6.4 The majority of provision made by the Council is for interpreting services, the figure for 2006/07 was 87% of all services which rose to 95% in 2007/08. For both 2006/07 and 2007/08 the main use has been for telephone interpreting. When broken down into individual service areas for 2006/07 Housing used 66% of provision (on homelessness and housing advice, tenancy support, housing benefits and local housing offices)

Social Services used 21% (on youth offending, sensory impairments team and child protection / welfare) and Chief Executive's used 13% (One Stop Shops and customer access on a range of queries across the authority.)

- 6.5 Members were then presented with information about consideration of visual and sensory impairments. Around 5% of all interpreting provision in 2006/07 was for Braille and BSL. However it was felt that other options needed to be more routinely considered such as the use of large print for documents for those who are visually impaired but still have some vision and the use of easy read, which is a system of simplifying documents for those with learning difficulties.
- 6.6 From 2005/06, annual expenditure on interpreting and translation had been reduced from £178,310.01 to £127,152.34 in 2007/08. To summarise the information given Members heard that the Council does not automatically translate all documents, but offers a service on request, and uses interpreting for vital services. Whilst the Council does understand demand, this could be improved particularly for newer communities, along with a revision of the guidance on interpreting and translation. At present the issue is not linked to a wider Communications Strategy or ESOL, as recommended by the government and this is an area for improvement.
- 6.7 Emdad Haque from Adults Health and Well Being then presented information to the meeting on the internal arrangements for interpreting and translation which complemented the main service from Newham Language Shop This consists of a core specialist service with staff employed within the directorate able to provide services in Bengali, Sylheti, Somali and Arabic. The service aims to ensure equal access to services within Adults Health and Well Being whilst improving efficiency.

7. ESOL provision

- 7.1 Fiona Paterson addressed Members in her capacity as Idea Store Learning Development Manager on the issue of ESOL provision in the borough. Recent research, including the Adult Learning Strategy had highlighted significant demand in Tower Hamlets for ESOL classes. However the available funding did not meet this level of demand.
- 7.2 Members heard that the majority of funding for ESOL in London came from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) whose emphasis was on the skills agenda. This meant that the bulk of the already limited funding went on preparing people for the labour market, with less emphasis on those wishing to begin at basic entry level English.
- 7.3 It was explained that LBTH (nor generally do other providers in the borough) did not currently advertise ESOL services due to lack of resources and that the high level of demand was created entirely by word-of-mouth. Aligned with this, it was also felt that not enough work was currently undertaken to reach out to vulnerable groups who may benefit from ESOL provision.
- 7.4 Whilst ESOL has a role in preparing people for the labour market, it was also felt that it could have a positive impact on community cohesion, for example through enabling parents to become more actively involved in their child's education, and this role should be more strongly emphasised.
- 7.5 In conclusion Members heard that it was necessary to view ESOL services within the constraints of the available funding. Although there was planned investment of £5m

for ESOL through the City Strategy Partnership (CSP) in East London over the next two years, when broken down over the five eligible boroughs this figure was lessened considerably. In this case, the target group will be mainly parents to engage them to move into employment.

8. Evidence from partner agencies

- 8.1 Members heard evidence from three further speakers who each gave their views on current interpreting and translation provision, the circumstances local to Tower Hamlets and best practice.
- 8.2 Vaughan Jones from Praxis addressed the meeting beginning with an analysis of his experience in working with new communities in the borough. Alongside the significant long-established communities in Tower Hamlets, there had been a recent considerable increase in the numbers of new arrivals from Brazil, Columbia, Poland, Lithuania and China, amongst others. Research completed in 2003 around communication was still vital and the evidence showed that the ability to communicate effectively impacts upon an individual's sense of belonging, their participation and citizenship.
- 8.3 Whilst English was not the only language of the British Isles, its economic importance could not be underestimated. In line with this, Praxis currently offer ESOL classes aimed at new arrivals wishing to utilise their skills in the field of health and social care. However, Praxis saw English as an important skill not only in the workplace but in the home and within the community to allow people to communicate on a number of levels.
- 8.4 In the workplace it was essential that both employers and trade unions were aware of their employee / member needs as the workplace was often an appropriate forum for delivering ESOL courses. The key to being able to plan these services was knowing what / where the demand was. Wherever provision was made, it was essential to ensure that it fit with people's lifestyles in order to maximise take-up.
- 8.5 Tony Collins presented Members with information on the provision made by one of the borough's largest registered social landlords. He began by stating that the languages provided by Poplar HARCA corresponded with the profile presented by LBTH. All publications produced included a strap-line which offered translation of the document upon request in order to reduce unnecessary waste, as had been the case in the past. The organisation also operated a customer tracking system which recorded customers preferred method of communication on a central system to highlight any requirements to all staff.
- 8.6 Poplar HARCA currently provided ESOL classes in their community centres and these were not solely for their residents but open to all. These currently had a mixed take-up including Bengali women and those wishing to enter employment. In terms of interpreting, the organisation offer financial incentives for bilingual staff to utilise their language skills in the workplace to assist with service delivery. Alongside this, all staff were also trained in BSL. The Poplar HARCA website was also speech enabled to assist those with visual impairments.
- 8.7 In conclusion, Members heard that the Audit Commission's inspection of Poplar HARCA had recommended that more be done in the area of interpreting and translation. Therefore the organisation was keen to embark on any partnership

working with the Council and other agencies in order to expand and improve their provision.

- 8.8 For the final presentation, the meeting heard from Jaimin Patel of Newham Language Shop (NLS). He explained that NLS had provided interpreting and translation services to LBTH for the past eight years and also worked with a number of other London Boroughs. The role of NLS was to provide services that could not be sourced locally in Tower Hamlets in order to empower local people by allowing equal access to services.
- 8.9 The ethos of NLS revolved around effective communication for all customers, particularly vulnerable residents. The growth of new communities in Tower Hamlets has increased the breadth of languages NLS are required to cover, with around eighty different languages requested across East London. The national debate on interpreting and translation was seen as somewhat simplistic by NLS as it was felt that facilitating effective interventions at an early stage often served to save money in the long term.
- 8.10 Members were presented with examples of best practice from other boroughs, such as the routine translation of a document listing the seven documents needed to complete a Housing Benefit application and the use of multi-lingual 'talking heads' online and at customer service kiosks in Newham. There were many challenges around interpreting and translation, particularly in terms of a lack of data, differing levels of need and the transient nature of London's population. In conclusion it was felt that quality data identifying demand was essential to keep pace with changes in local circumstances.

9. Discussions and recommendations

- 9.1 The Challenge Session provided an opportunity for Members to raise a number of issues and there was a wide ranging discussion throughout the meeting. During the discussions Members proposed a number of recommendations.
- 9.2 The quality of data was recognised by Members as key to providing quality services and enabling the local authority to be more proactive in their approach to how interpreting and translation, and also ESOL, is provided. It was felt that work needed to be undertaken to ensure that the data used is adequately highlighting areas of demand. Members also felt that there was merit in examining the possible implementation of a customer tracking system in order to record customers preferred method of communication across directorates.

Recommendation 1 – That work is undertaken to review the collection and quality of data around interpreting and translation, and an examination of the practicalities and merits of implementing a customer tracking system across the authority is made.

- 9.3 Concerns were expressed around the current arrangements for ESOL provision, particularly in terms of both the funding available and the level at which courses are offered. Whilst the importance of preparing individuals for the labour market was recognised, it was felt equally important that those with very limited English be given the opportunity to access entry-level classes.

Recommendation 2 – That the Lifelong Learning Service examine ways in which new arrivals and those with limited English be targeted and offered the opportunity to take an entry-level ESOL course.

- 9.4 Given the huge local demand for ESOL courses Members enquired as to whether any alternative funding streams had been identified in order to increase provision.

Recommendation 3 – That work be undertaken to examine alternative sources of funding for ESOL through a number of channels including the Local Strategic Partnership, Section 106 agreements and opportunities created by the 2012 Olympics.

- 9.5 In response to the information supplied by Poplar HARCA regarding the provision of ESOL in community centres, Members felt that there was merit in holding classes close to the community. It was suggested that GP surgeries would be another good location as they would be accessible to a broad range of people. Discussions also took place around the need to offer more flexible methods of learning English, such as open source learning via computer packages.

Recommendation 4 – That an examination be made of the feasibility of holding ESOL classes in conjunction with partner organisations, such as Poplar HARCA, and the voluntary sector at a range of accessible community locations, such as GP surgeries. Also to examine alternative methods of delivering English language courses.

- 9.6 Despite the evidence that demand for ESOL was high through word-of-mouth advertising alone, Members were concerned that newer or more vulnerable communities may not be aware of the existence of such support.

Recommendation 5 - That work be undertaken to examine advertising and signposting of ESOL services.

- 9.7 Discussions took place during the session between Members and the representatives of partner organisations in attendance around the benefits of partnership working. It was felt that the Council, PCT and other service providers would benefit from adhering to a common strategy around interpreting and provision and also examining who provides what service and where to reduce any duplication.

Recommendation 6 – That an examination of the opportunities for partnership working on the issue of interpreting and translation be made.

- 9.8 Members raised the issue of the creation of the new housing ALMO (Arms Length Management Organisation) given the high levels of housing-related requests for interpreting and translation made within the Council.

Recommendation 7 – That the arrangements for the provision of interpreting and translation services within the new ALMO be examined.

10. Conclusions

- 10.1 The Challenge Session was an opportunity for Members to examine the current arrangements for providing interpreting and translation in the borough in the light of national debate on the issue. It was recognised that LBTH was not wasteful in its current provision and that services were targeted at areas of need. However it was also felt that local circumstances in the borough did not always reflect the national picture due to the diversity of the population and high levels of new migrants. Particularly, it was acknowledged that current ESOL provision is not meeting the huge demand amongst residents and a number of recommendations were made by

Members to try and address this shortfall. Finally, the challenge session highlighted the opportunities for partnership working both across the borough and beyond, as it was recognised that the issues discussed affected neighbouring boroughs, particularly around the high demand for ESOL. It was recommended that these opportunities be further explored and taken forward in the new municipal year, particularly given the ongoing discussions with Hackney around these issues.

11. Concurrent Report of the Assistant Chief Executive (Legal)

- 11.1 Under Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000, the Council has a duty to deliver an effective and robust Overview and Scrutiny function. Monitoring the interpreting and translation service provided by both the Council and through the contract with NLS by Members and partner organisations is an example of effective scrutiny and ensures that this duty is discharged effectively.

12. Comments of the Chief Financial Officer

- 12.1 Any financial implications arising from this report will be met from within existing resources.

13. Equal Opportunity Implications

- 13.1 Ensuring fair and equal access to services in the borough is an important step towards challenging inequalities. During the session Members considered the impact of providing good quality interpreting and translation services to allow those who do not have English as a first language or those with sensory impairments to access key services.

14. Anti-Poverty Implications

- 14.1 New migrant communities are often among the poorer members of the community. Access to high-quality interpreting and translation provision is therefore vital to ensure that they are able to access key services such as GPs or housing. In the longer term, the provision of ESOL at both entry-level and with an employment and skills emphasis will ensure that new migrants are more able to access the labour market, and often at a higher level.

15. Sustainable Action for a Greener Environment

- 15.1 There are no direct sustainable actions for a greener environment arising from this report.

16. Risk Management

- 16.1 There are no direct risk management actions arising from this report.