

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: Councillor Clements
LEAD OFFICER: Fergus Mc Morrow
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Summary & Recommendation: The report describes progress on achieving the Audit Commission’s recommendation for reviewing the corporate approach to translation for all service users who have difficulty speaking English.

The Panel are requested to note this report and members’ comments are invited.

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In their housing inspection report published in April 2008 the Audit Commission wrote the following critique:

“The Council’s approach to translation is underdeveloped. It subscribes to an interpretation service and has compiled a register of staff language skills, but these are not advertised and customers who have difficulty speaking English are, in reality, expected to bring a friend with them and to relay what may be very personal issues via a third party. Key information, such as the corporate complaints leaflet, is not available in community languages or alternative formats and front line staff are unable to tell customers whether these can be provided. These weaknesses mean there is a significant risk that potential customers who have communications difficulties are not accessing services.”

- 1.2 The interpretation service is called Language Line.

- 1.3 Members are asked to note that this critique is not directed exclusively at housing services but applies to all Council services.

- 1.4 When the Audit Commission undertook a brief consultancy in January 2009 the inspector’s feedback included:

“Unclear whether Language Line is in place – arrangements that are known require referral to another part of the Council and translation through other agencies takes time to arrange, sometimes several days.”

2 Language Line

- 2.1 This service provides for a translator for virtually any language to be accessed without delays or any specialised technology. The Council has a PIN (unique number) for its Language Line account.
- 2.2 If a customer with limited English arrives in reception the customer services officer can telephone Language Line (quoting the PIN) and pass the receiver to the customer. At the end of the conversation the customer returns the receiver to the officer to enable the translator to explain the customer's needs for any of the Council's services.
- 2.3 If a customer with limited English telephones the Council, the receiving officer can use the conference facility to contact Language Line and involve an interpreter, allowing a two-way conversation to happen.
- 2.4 The process relies upon all customer-serving officers knowing that the Council subscribes to Language Line. They also need to know the PIN in order to access the Council's account.
- 2.5 The current (2007) edition of the Council's Accessible Information Policy instructs officers to call language Line directly without explaining the need for the PIN. This document will be subject to a review.

3 Action Being Taken

- 3.1 It has been agreed that instructions for using Language Line will be displayed on the Council's Intranet, including Copeland's PIN (full instructions are included on Language Line's website and can be adapted).
- 3.2 All staff will be made aware of Language Line and how it can be used to obtain interpretation when contacted by customers with limited English either face to face or by telephone.
- 3.3 All housing leaflets and statutory decision letters will be made available in community languages and alternative formats. This action features in the Strategic Housing Improvement Plan reported elsewhere on the agenda of this meeting.