Western Australian Language Services Policy 2020

When to engage an interpreter

The decision whether or not to engage an interpreter is based on an assessment of the needs of the client and the level of risk to the client of not doing so.

Bilingual/multilingual staff (who speak English and one or more languages other than English) can be useful in front-line services to provide simple information or gather sufficient information to deal with immediate situations. However, unless they have tertiary qualifications and/or a NAATI credential as an interpreter they should not be requested to interpret.

When in doubt, it is wise to err on the side of caution and to engage an interpreter. It is important to engage a tertiary qualified and/or NAATI credentialed practitioner who meets current industry standards and adheres to the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) or Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA).

In any situation, do not ask people under the age of 18 to act as interpreters.

How to assess the need for an interpreter

If a client requests an interpreter or shows a Government of Western Australia, Aboriginal Interpreting WA or Department of Home Affairs I need an interpreter card, they should be provided with one.

An I need an interpreter card aims to help clients request an interpreter and makes it easier for agency staff to arrange for an interpreter in the appropriate language.

Hard copies of the Western Australian version of the card are available from the Office of Multicultural Interests.
If a client presents an I need an interpreter card:

- check the language/s on the front of the card
- inform the client that you will arrange for an interpreter
- arrange for an interpreter in accordance with agency policies or guidelines.

If a client does not have an I need an interpreter card, here are some ways to determine if they need an interpreter:

- ask a question that requires your client to answer in a sentence, for example ‘How may I help you?’
- ask ‘In which language would you prefer to speak?’
- explain information to the client and ask them to repeat what you have said.

Before booking an interpreter, consider the needs of the client and the level of risk to the client of not doing so.

Be aware of the risks of gratuitous concurrence, which occurs when a person appears to agree with every proposition put to them when, in fact, they do not. The person may nod their head, or use sounds like ‘aha’, ‘hmm’ or ‘uh-huh’, or say ‘yes’. These gestures do not necessarily mean he or she agrees with or understands what is said. If there is any doubt about a person’s ability to communicate or understand Standard Australian English, an interpreter should be engaged.

To assist Western Australian public sector agencies in the decision-making process, consult the When to engage an interpreter: Decision-making guide. This guide can be downloaded from the Office of Multicultural Interests’ website at www.omi.wa.gov.au. For clients refusing the services of an interpreter, refer to information in the next section.
**Refusal of an interpreter**

A client may refuse the services of an interpreter before or during a session. This could be because they:

- are confident in their own ability to communicate in Standard English
- prefer a family member or friend to act as an interpreter
- do not understand the reasons why the interpreter has been engaged
- do not realise that the agency staff member who speaks Standard English needs the services of an interpreter to provide an effective and appropriate service
- think they must pay for interpreting services
- know the interpreter personally and feel uncomfortable talking in their presence
- are worried about gossip in their community
- feel uncomfortable with the gender of the interpreter
- have experienced unprofessional behaviour by an interpreter.

A client cannot be compelled to work with an interpreter. If possible, try to identify the reason for their refusal and address the issue.

If the client still refuses an interpreter:

- explain that you/the Standard English speaker needs to be able to understand the client well and that there are risks (such as misunderstanding) if you do not
- offer them access to telephone interpreting instead
- decide whether or not to proceed with the client interaction.

If the session proceeds without an interpreter, it is essential you document the reason for refusal and any associated concerns.

**Further reading**

- Western Australian Language Services Policy 2020 and Guidelines
- How to work with an interpreter (PDF)
- Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT)—[Best Practices and Guidelines](#)
- What not to do, common mistakes—[YouTube example](#)
- Australian Government, Department of Communications and the Arts Accesshub—including access to the National Relay Service (NRS)

**I need an interpreter card**

- Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) national promotional materials catalogue
- The Australian Government through the Department of Social Services (DSS) offers a [Free Interpreting Service](#) for eligible groups. Delivered by Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National, it aims to provide equitable access to key services that are non-government funded for people with limited or no English proficiency.
- Aboriginal Language Services—information kit
- Blurred Borders—[Ask for an Interpreter](#) poster