Use of Language Services in Rural and Regional Areas

May 2014

In its role as the national peak body representing and advocating for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA) aims, inter alia, to capitalise on the expertise of its extended network in providing advice to the government and the wider community on the views and needs of its constituency.

FECCA’s Rural and Regional Advisory Committee (the Committee) focuses on issues concerning CALD communities in rural and regional areas. In 2013-14, the Committee worked on developing a position paper addressing multicultural access and equity policies and practices related to language services, including provision and use of translating and interpreting services, as well as language training. The paper draws on the experiences of the Committee members and its extended network, its previous issues papers, and FECCA’s annual consultations with CALD communities on equitable access to government services. It discusses the need for good quality language services in rural and regional areas, reviews policy frameworks for such services in each jurisdiction, and includes practical examples. The paper aims to provide overall guidance for the government and community actions towards increasing responsiveness to linguistic diversity in rural and regional areas.

1. Why the Need for Language Services in Rural and Regional Areas

New immigrants and refugees to Australia have increasingly been settled in rural and regional areas. Over the last several years, around 20 per cent of humanitarian entrants have been directly settled in regional locations. It is argued that regional settlement helps utilise existing capacity in regional areas, recognises the potential of humanitarian entrants, and reduces the load on settlement services in metropolitan areas. The Australian Government’s Strategic Settlement Framework announced in 2009, following two years of national consultations, listed supporting sustainable regional settlement as one of its priorities for reform.

While there are certain incentives for rural and regional settlement, such as economic conditions or existing CALD ties, it is critical that rural and regional communities, structures and services are responsive to, and supporting of, new immigrants. It is important to acknowledge that there are certain challenges faced by all people living in rural and regional locations in Australia, such as limited availability or lower quality of services, poorer infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and social and cultural isolation. For CALD Australians, however, these issues can be exacerbated due to specific circumstances, such
as low English proficiency, limited access to cultural and religious institutions, experience of
torture and/or trauma, labelling and stereotyping. Adequate supports and equitable access
to settlement programs and services are also imperative for maximising the economic and
social value of Australia’s cultural diversity, as well as fostering social cohesion and
harmony.

The principles of Australia’s multicultural policy are based on the fundamental rights of
Australians, regardless of their background, to practise and maintain their culture, traditions
and languages within the law and free from discrimination. The policy commits the
government to a just and inclusive society where Australians from all backgrounds are able
to participate equally in social, economic and cultural life, and to receive equitable access to
government services.

Similarly, the Australian Government’s settlement policy is twofold: it aims to develop the
knowledge and skills of new arrivals to become independent participants in society, while
ensuring that governments and society are responsive to the cultural, linguistic and religious
diversity of immigrants. The policy recognises social participation as the cornerstone of
successful settlement, and English proficiency is one of its key indicators. Participation is
enabled through greater independence, and impacts on new arrivals’ economic and personal
well-being, as well as life satisfaction and a sense of belonging.

For many first generation immigrants and humanitarian entrants, the language barrier
presents a challenge. Indeed, FECCA’s annual consultations on equitable access to
government services reveal that this is one of the most critical issues that face CALD
Australians in accessing programs and services. Well-resourced, flexible and
culturally-appropriate English language learning programs are crucial for ensuring English
proficiency of new immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, while interpreting
and translating services are imperative to assure equitable access to community and
government services.

The Commonwealth Ombudsman’s 2009 report on use of interpreters indicated that the
sourcing of qualified interpreters for new and emerging languages, particularly in rural and
regional areas, was a special challenge facing various government agencies. While it is
important to use professional translating and interpreting services whenever possible, this is
particularly critical in situations which may have potential legal implications and in health-
related procedures where communication is essential for diagnosis.

Indeed, in its Rural and Regional Settlement Issues Paper (2012), FECCA argued the
difficulty in sourcing qualified face-to-face interpreters by health practitioners when
confidentiality considerations prohibit the use of interpreters from within the community. This
further exacerbates the situation of new immigrants and refugees with limited English
language skills in rural and regional areas, such as distinctive health issues and limited
availability of specialist services. Similarly, the paper discussed that often limited access to
qualified interpreters and translations during legal proceedings aggravates the lack of trust
and existing cross-cultural misunderstandings between new immigrants and policing
services.

Faced with limited availability of qualified interpreters and translators, particularly for new
and emerging languages, agencies and service providers in rural and regional areas often
resort to the good will of clients’ friends or relatives. When qualified services are available,
their quality may not be adequate, particularly in cases of new and emerging languages, and
for high risk situations which require specific knowledge and expertise.
Flexibility in the provision of English language programs is inherent to making them relevant and accessible to immigrants. With the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) being delivered at over 250 locations in urban, rural and regional areas, feedback from students often indicates that a more flexible approach could be applied to structuring classes that would take into consideration new immigrants’ first languages, levels of literacy, aptitude for learning English, and cultural and religious needs. Other conditions, such as commencing tuition within 12 months and completing it within five years, may prevent some new immigrants from accessing language training due to personal circumstances.

In rural and regional areas, transportation issues may pose additional difficulties. Many new immigrants and humanitarian entrants arrive in Australia without driving skills, which provides a significant barrier when driving is necessary to reach language learning facilities. While various alternatives to classroom-based tuition are offered as part of AMEP, learning outcomes may be different to those of face-to-face training.

1. Language Services Policy Framework: A Snapshot Across Jurisdictions

Queensland

Queensland Multicultural Policy emphasises the growing diversity of regional centres through immigration, including through refugee-settlement and employment-related movement. It also demonstrates the Government’s keen interest in encouraging regional settlement through improved coordination between levels of government and non-government organisations. Informed by state-wide consultations, the policy specifically aims to improve the responsiveness of services in regional areas to CALD Queenslanders, based on the feedback and aspirations from communities in regional centres.

Key actions for 2011-14 under the policy’s Language, Information and Communication objectives include (1) increasing the availability of qualified interpreters through a scholarship program for people from non-English speaking backgrounds; (2) increasing the availability of culturally appropriate information by translating the information and making it available online; and (3) providing more occupation-specific English language training through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

As a part of the Queensland’s Government’s commitment to improving access to services for Queenslanders from CALD backgrounds, outlined in the policy, all government departments are expected to report on the core outcomes which include improved access to interpreters for clients. In relation to health services, the Government aims to improve responsiveness to clients’ language and cultural needs. The policy specifies English as a Second Language programs in schools and TAFE Institutes as one of the key actions towards improving education services for CALD Queenslanders.

Language independence is one of the core outcomes of Queensland Cultural Diversity Policy, which highlights the priority for regionalisation. In addition to adequate access to interpreting and translating services and availability of translated information, key initiatives to achieve language independence include identifying innovative approaches to service delivery and alternative pathways to language learning, *inter alia*, through partnering with the non-government and community sector.

Queensland Language Services Policy commits the Government to addressing language barriers through the engagement of professional interpreters and translators, the provision of multilingual information and the training of staff. The policy provides guidelines and protocols for engaging interpreters and translators, such as identifying the need for
interpreting services, and engaging professionals, rather than using friends and relatives, particularly in obtaining informed consent in legal, police and health contexts. It notes, however, that there must be flexibility in policies to cater for the language service needs of people in rural and remote areas.

To assist hospital and health services in implementing the Multicultural Policy and the Language Services Policy effectively in a health context, Queensland Health, in 2012, published the Guideline for multicultural health policy implementation. While referring to telephone and video interpreting when on-site interpreters are not available, the guide does not address, and makes no specific recommendations for, particular issues related the use of interpreting and translating services in rural and regional areas.

Queensland Health Interpreter Services provides interpreters in Queensland Health public facilities in over 130 languages, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at no cost to clients. Interpreters are available on-site, via videoconference, and over the phone. Training programs addressing specific issues involved in health interpreting are offered to all interpreters working with Queensland Health at no cost on a quarterly basis.

**Northern Territory**

Guidelines for implementing the Northern Territory Multicultural Policy serve as a reference for government agencies. While the guidelines do not specifically refer to the use of language services, the recommended key strategies include effective use of workforce diversity, *inter alia*, to provide language services in-house and for direct service delivery to CALD clients.

The Northern Territory Language Services Policy provides an overarching acknowledgement of the use of language services in the delivery of all services for people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and aims to encourage government agencies to develop their relevant guidelines and procedures.

The Interpreting and Translating Service NT (ITSNT) of the Department of Community Services works with non-government and government agencies, and currently provides only on-site (face-to-face) interpreting services. The service offers training in cross-cultural awareness and working with interpreters. For after-hours bookings and telephone interpreting, agencies are advised to contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National under the auspices of the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Border Protection, with ITSNT reimbursing bookings made for clients who are citizens or residents of Australia.

ITSNT face-to-face interpreting services are not available in regional or remote areas outside of Darwin and Palmerston. In those areas, there is a reliance on telephone interpreting through TIS National.

**Western Australia**

The Western Australian Languages Services Policy outlines principles that underpin the use of interpreting and translating services, such as the need to engage professional services in
circumstances where the rights, health or safety of an individual are concerned, noting, however, that in some exceptional situations, it may be justifiable to engage non-professionals. The policy provides certain guidelines for understanding the demand for language services, as well as identifying an appropriate type of interpreting services. The policy acknowledges that the availability of on-site interpreters may be limited in some rural and regional areas, where telephone interpreting is more widely used. Videoconference interpreting is referred to as an ideal alternative where on-site interpreting is not available, on-site interpreting cannot be accessed or associated travel costs are too expensive. Some agencies may not, however, offer the necessary infrastructure or afford telecommunication costs.

The Language Services Policy principles and guidelines are also reflected in the Western Australian Health Language Services Policy that applies to all service providers within the State’s public health system. When referring to types of interpreting services, the policy is geared towards consultation, whereby health service providers must consult with consumers and carers to identify the most appropriate interpreting type in any given situation. The decision, however, should be made taking into consideration a number of factors, including rural and regional location of health services.

WA Government does not engage a dedicated service provider, yet maintains a directory of recommended providers that can be contracted to deliver translating and interpreting services to various government agencies.

**New South Wales**

Consistent with NSW policy on multiculturalism, government agencies and their contractors are expected to ensure that language services are provided to clients when needed. Provision of multicultural programs and services, including language services, is one of the areas of the *NSW Multicultural Planning Framework*. The framework identifies interpreter service use as one of the preconditions for achieving access and equity. It also emphasises the need for strategies to improve outcomes for people in regional and rural areas, including through targeted and responsive services. In addition, the framework addresses the need for enhanced agency cultural and linguistic competence through delivering training to staff, supporting and developing their multilingual and intercultural skills.

On engaging interpreters, NSW Health policy sets out the obligation of the public health system to engage professional interpreters. It outlines the responsibilities of health care providers when engaging interpreters, as well as in situations when on-site interpreters are not available.

The NSW lead government agency for interpreting and translating services is the Community Relations Commission, which also offers interpreting via videoconferencing. The services are provided for 106 languages and available to government agencies, private sector, community organisations and individuals.

The Health Care Interpreter Service is the major provider of interpreting and translating services for health care professionals.
**Victoria**

The Victorian Government’s guidelines on using interpreting services provides practical advice to government agencies on planning for and using interpreting services as part of the obligations to ensure that all Victorians have proper access to services. Addressing often limited availability of on-site interpreters in rural and regional areas, the guide refers to telephone and videoconference interpreting, as a cheaper and more available option. Separate guidelines provide advice on using translating services which are particularly relevant for community information or personal documents.

The Department of Human Services has developed a policy setting out minimum standards that need to be applied by the Department and its contractors to remove language barriers for people with low English proficiency. In view of limited availability of on-site interpreters in rural and regional areas, the policy makes a number of specific recommendations if an on-site interpreter cannot be found on a particular occasion, such as using telephone interpreting or rescheduling the appointment. If there is a difficulty in finding suitably qualified interpreters – a situation which may also be experienced in rural and regional areas – the policy recommends engaging paraprofessionals, but only for assistance to the level of their competence and ensuring that the reasons for such a choice are clearly recorded.

The Department of Health provides languages services, through the Language Services Credit Line, which include on-site interpreting, telephone interpreting, and translation, for funded health care providers.

**South Australia**

Language services provision with the South Australian health system is guided by a 2001 protocol that makes no reference to use of interpreting and translation services in rural and regional areas.

The Interpreting and Translating Centre of the SA Government delivers face-to-face or telephone interpreting in about 140 languages and dialects.

**Tasmania**

Tasmanian language services policy provides guidelines for government agencies to address language barriers faced by people from CALD backgrounds. The policy discusses protocols for situations when NAATI credentialed interpreters are not available, such as in rural and remote locations where interpreters are often only available by telephone. For situations when neither credentialed interpreters nor telephone interpreting are available, the guide advises agencies to develop alternative business rules in relation to engaging interpreters.

The Tasmanian Government funds interpreting services to assist non-English speaking clients when accessing a State health service.
2. Barriers to the Engagement of Qualified Interpreters in Rural and Regional areas: Experiences from the Field

Costs

Engaging qualified on-site interpreters in rural and regional areas may entail additional expenses associated with travel, accommodation and other allowances, depending on the location and duration of an assignment. The costs may be prohibitive to agencies or service providers, yet not sufficient for professional interpreters, and result in engaging volunteers, including clients’ family members or friends, without relevant qualifications.

Major expenses can be associated with transportation costs for interpreters who travel for appointments from urban centres to rural and regional areas. In order to maximise the benefits of the interpreter’s travel to a particular location, several appointments may be made around the visit, which sometimes results in interpreters having to leave the sessions strictly after the designated duration due to other commitments.

Awareness of services

Community members may not be sufficiently aware of available interpreting services for specific languages. Similarly, they may not be aware of available types of services (telephone, on-site, etc.) and particular ways of requesting the services, such as booking in advance.

Understanding how to work with interpreters

Staff at agencies and service providers engaging interpreters for their CALD clients may not be aware of, or may not have experience in working with interpreters. They may not be well organised to ensure that the interpreter is utilised fully for the duration of the job. As a result, the interpreting session would need to be extended, yet the interpreter may not be able to remain due to other commitments or the agency may not wish to pay the extra cost.

Confidentiality and conflict of interest

Community members may feel discouraged from discussing their confidential issues through interpreters who belong to the same community, which may often be the case for new and emerging languages. The risk is lesser in urban areas where communities are larger and the chances of interpreting for a friend or relative are not as high.

CALD clients often feel uncomfortable in sharing personal or sensitive information – such as about domestic violence, addictive behaviours, family dysfunction or financial hardship – with interpreters within tight networks of friends or family for fear of generating rumours and gossip, to the extent of possibly being driven out of town through shame or embarrassment. They may also feel that certain interpreters, out of conflicted interests, may deliberately distort or misinterpret information to service providers or professionals.

Factors affecting interpreters

As professional interpreters predominantly live and work in, or close to, urban centres, working in rural and regional areas may pose a number of issues. Engagement for
assignments that require interpreters to work excessive hours or for extended periods of
time away from home may cause stress and fatigue, and result in interpreters declining
bookings.

Interpreters are often concerned about not being able to quote for a job, with language
services agencies setting payment terms, which often discourages interpreters from working
in rural and regional areas.

3. Enhancing Accessibility and Quality of Language Services: Possible Solutions

Bi-lingual Staff

Feedback from FECCA’s annual consultations on equitable access to government services
suggests that addressing the language barriers facing many CALD Australians through
employing staff who speak several languages is highly important in helping CALD clients to
access services effectively.

Bi-lingual workers should not be precluded from assisting their clients, acknowledging a
distinction between advocacy and provision of language assistance. Acquiring and
maintaining bi-lingual skills should be encouraged and rewarded. Supporting bi-lingual
professionals to develop their skills and, if necessary, obtain appropriate accreditation, may
require provision of funding and should be factored into budget allocations.

| Community Language Allowance Scheme  
| (New South Wales) |
| Administered by the NSW Government, CLAS is an allowance paid to selected NSW public sector employees who have a basic level of competency in a language other than English and who work in locations where their language skills could be used to assist CALD clients. |
| Public sector employees, nominated by government agencies, are required to undergo the CLAS examination, accreditation at professional interpreter level by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), or NAATI recognition if accreditation testing is not available. |
| CLAS aims to utilise languages skills of employees, and support people from non-English speaking backgrounds in accessing government programs and services. |
| CLAS examination is conducted by the NSW Community Relations Commission. Fees are paid by agencies nominating their employees, and the languages are determined based on demand. |

Victorian Public Service Language Allowance

VPS allowance is available to public service employees who work with, and can similarly
converse with, speakers of languages other than English, and are willing to utilise their
skills to assist their clients.

It aims to utilise staff resources while meeting the needs of CALD clients, through
employing a cost-effective way of providing language services.
Allowance recipients are accredited by NAATI at various levels, including language aide, paraprofessional, and professional levels.

**Enhanced Professional Capabilities**

CALD communities in rural and regional areas often express concerns about the quality of available translating and interpreting services, in particular for new and emerging languages.

NAATI does not provide accreditation testing for languages of low community demand, and new and emerging languages often fall within that category. Instead, recognition is granted as an acknowledgement of an interpreter’s or translator’s experience, without specifying the level of proficiency. NAATI recognition, however, may not be adequate for situations that involve the use of specialised terminology. While acknowledging the significance of higher demand for establishing NAATI accreditation testing, it is important to note that low demand does not necessarily imply low need, and may be due to other factors, such as lack of awareness of services.

People from CALD backgrounds should be supported to undertake professional development training and obtain NAATI accreditation or recognition, as the costs may be prohibitive for many. In doing so, it is important to remember that members of smaller, tight-knit CALD communities may be unwilling to access an interpreter from the same community because of fears that their private matters may become known. They may be unaware of or not have faith in the confidentiality provisions of the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) *Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct.* In highly sensitive situations that require strict confidentiality, a possible solution could be to use telephone interpreting (for example, through TIS National). Another disadvantage in rural and regional areas may be limited workload, due to small size of communities, to sustain full-time employment for new interpreters.

### Interpreter Sponsorship Programs

**NAATI New Interpreters Project (Australia-wide)**

The project provides funding to undertake a preparatory workshop and the English language proficiency test, if applicable, and to apply for recognition as an interpreter or accreditation as a paraprofessional interpreter.

The projects targets new and emerging languages identified through consultations with government agencies.

The project aims to:

1. Increase the pool of credentialed interpreters in new and emerging languages;
2. Increase community awareness of the need for credentialed interpreters; and
3. Facilitate existing community interpreters to gain credentials.

**TIS National Interpreter Sponsorship and Scholarship Program (Australia-wide)**

A program offered through the TIS National provides dedicated funding for professional development of interpreters and NAATI accreditation.
The program aims to enhance the skills and expertise of TIS National’s interpreters, predominantly in regional areas and for new and emerging languages, by developing skills in specialised areas, such as mental health, torture and trauma, and domestic violence.

**OMAC Interpreter Scholarship Program (Victoria)**

The Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC) provides scholarships to students enrolled in the RMIT University Diploma of Interpreting. The program also covers the costs of obtaining NAATI accreditation.

The program aims to enhance training and accreditation opportunities for specific languages identified in consultation with government service providers and language service providers.

**OMAC/Department of Health Professional Development Short Course Program (Victoria)**

The program, delivered by Monash University, provides professional development opportunities to interpreters and translators in health, legal and community domains, with a limited number of bursaries available for each course. In addition to Melbourne, courses are delivered in the regional centres of Shepparton and Mildura.

The goal is to provide opportunities for practicing interpreters and translators to enhance their skills and expertise to effectively deliver language services in the community.

**Telephone and Video Interpreting**

When on-site qualified interpreters are not readily available, it is generally recommended to use telephone interpreting as an alternative. Telephone interpreting is particularly useful in emergency situations when pre-booking is not feasible. In case of urgent bookings, however, it may be difficult to meet specific clients’ requirements, such as a particular language or specialist knowledge. Despite obvious convenience of telephone interpreting, video interpreting, providing a face-to-face opportunity, appears to be more appropriate in various situations, such as medical appointments (telehealth) and legal proceedings.

With both telephone and video interpreting being cheaper options, in particular due to no travel costs involved, it is important to ensure the quality of technology. Feasibility of utilising telephone or video interpreting in particular situations should be determined in consultation with qualified interpreters, as only on-site professionals may be required to interpret for such clients as mental health patients or people with dementia.

**Role of Local Councils**

Local councils can play a crucial role in achieving successful and sustainable regional settlement, including through provision of language programs and services.

A multicultural planning guide for local councils in New South Wales places a strong emphasis on the need for better collaboration between local councils and government agencies in rural and regional areas, which may help to avoid duplication of resources. Local councils are instrumental in ensuring that targeted services, including language
services, are provided based on specific community needs. Local councils are also well positioned to develop partnerships with local community organisations and regional service providers.

Aiming to assist Western Australian local governments to integrate multicultural principles into their processes, the Government of Western Australia has produced a guide that acknowledges the role of local governments in understanding, and responding to, the needs of local residents. With regard to language services, the guide provides local governments with a range of options that could be implemented to lift language barriers. With interpreting services being the most obvious option, the guide emphasises that qualified, trained, and, whenever possible, on-site interpreters must be used for complex and sensitive situations, in particular those involving legal or health issues. The guide also refers to a block booking system that local governments may use when accessing interpreting services to ensure that interpreters are available at regular times at certain locations based on a roster system. Alternative options include bilingual officers assisting in non-sensitive situations, as well as translated materials which may not be appropriate for certain languages lacking written tradition. It is worth noting that the guide calls for a holistic communication strategy that would address the needs of people with low English proficiency by providing both oral and written information.

### Local Councils' Initiatives towards Enhanced Language Services

**Toowoomba Regional Council, QLD**

In addition to AMEP classes, Toowoomba Library runs English language conversational classes on an informal basis. A local interpreter working group engages and supports local community members towards NAATI accreditation.

**City of Whittlesea, VIC**

A free interpreter service and language aides assist people from CALD communities in accessing the services provided by the Council.

### Translated Materials

Feedback from community organisations indicates that availability of translated information resources is often limited, activity-specific and sporadic. Effective communication of written information is particularly important for improving legal and health literacy of CALD communities. Adequate translated information may also address some initial queries of CALD clients and possibly the need to provide interpretation for them. When producing translations, it is important to identify the audience, as well as its language and information needs.

### Health Translations Online Directory

The Directory is part of the Victorian Government's broader Language Services Strategy, which aims to make strategic improvements to language services across Victoria. The directory enables health practitioners and those working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities to easily find translated health information.
It also provides direct links to translated health resources in other states and Federal Government resources. The information includes resources that have been translated into other languages with state-wide applicability by an accredited translator, have an English language version available, and have been published or reviewed within the past 5 years.

The directory currently links up to over 10,000 resources in 90 languages and is searchable by language and topic.

**Engagement with language services providers**

Building strong trusting relationships between community organisations and providers of services for CALD communities and language services providers should be considered an important principle. However, in rural and regional context, it is vital for achieving positive outcomes for people from CALD backgrounds.

The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory works closely with the Interpreting and Translating Service NT to deliver community information sessions and consultations. The two organisations have developed good relationships based on cooperation and trust, and work together to meet the needs of CALD communities in Darwin.

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See also:


