

Bilingual staff

The term 'bilingual' refers to people who speak two (or more) languages fluently. Many staff members have the ability to speak other languages and, in some cases, an ability to speak a language other than English is a requirement of their job role.

Knowing a language other than English well for everyday communication is not the same as having the ability to effectively manage dialogue between two people and accurately convey complicated information from one language to another, which is what credentialed interpreters are qualified to do.

As a general rule, bilingual workers may assist in simple communication, but should not be relied on to interpret complex, technical or sensitive information.

The role of bilingual staff in simple communication

Bilingual staff may be called on to meet 'simple communication' needs between a government agency and a client who has limited English language proficiency. Simple communication must be viewed as communication where the outcome has limited risk of adverse effects for both the person with limited English language proficiency and the agency.

Examples of simple communication include directing a client to a meeting room, promoting a resource or showing a client a form they need to complete.

Bilingual staff can also help to improve front-line services through increased cultural responsiveness, and can increase confidence and skill level among other staff in communicating with clients with low English language proficiency.

Providing interpreters for complex, technical or sensitive information

Credentialed interpreters, rather than bilingual workers, are required to interpret:

- Complex, technical or sensitive information
- Discussion that informs or includes decision-making or signing of agreements/forms
- Discussion where there is a high risk of miscommunication
- In situations where there is a (real or perceived) conflict of roles
- Information that may place the person with limited English proficiency or the Government agency at risk
- Any discussion or information that is legally binding

Issues to consider

There are a number of issues to consider to help decide whether the assistance of a bilingual worker or interpreter may be most appropriate:

- are they accredited or recognised by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI)?

- are there ethical implications? Bilingual workers are not bound by The Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) Code of Ethics, but are bound by the Code of Ethics for the South Australian Public Sector.
- is there a real or perceived conflict of interest in performing the role? (e.g. when the person providing the interpreting is also a decision-maker)
- is there potential for misunderstandings to occur? See [Using interpreting services: conflict of interest](#).

Language allowance for bilingual staff

Staff who are required to use their language skills in their employment may seek reimbursement in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment's [Determination 3.2 Employment Conditions: Remuneration - Allowances and Reimbursements](#).