

Why language is critical to effective engagement with tenants

Building trust while meeting the Consumer Standards

Summary

KEY TAKEAWAY

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) has produced a set of Consumer Standards that outlines how social housing providers, both Local Authorities and Housing Associations, should communicate and engage with their tenants.

The essence of the Standards is that communications should be clear, understandable and accessible.

Translation and interpreting services provide an important way to engage with tenants who may not be proficient in English and help providers deliver an effective and compliant housing service.

Under the Regulator of Social Housing's (RSH) [Consumer Standards Code of Practice](#) and the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard, landlords are required to take action to understand the needs of their tenants and offer accessible services.

Language is one of those needs.

Most providers will have a significant number of tenants who are not proficient in English and can thus only engage properly if information is available to them - and conversations are supported - in a language they understand. Translation and interpreting services help them understand information about their homes, report repairs easily, and hold their landlord accountable.

Likewise, providers and landlords also want to understand the needs of their tenants, so as to prevent issues, misunderstanding and problems further down the line. Not to mention compliance with the Consumer Standards.

It's a two-way street where language support enables the flow of effective, understandable communications, in both directions. Which in turn allows for actions to be planned, prioritised and managed in a timely manner, saving costs and building trust.

The more commonly used form of language support in these situations is on-demand telephone interpreting, where an independent, qualified, professional interpreter is brought in to support a conversation. But despite the apparent simplicity of the task, it's not always easy. Not least, because effective interpreting requires more than linguistic skills. Interpreters also need practical knowledge of UK social housing and the judgement to handle sensitive conversations about things like rent arrears or a tenant's expectations of their landlord. To keep tenants safe and meet regulatory standards, housing providers should look for partners that vet their interpreters for qualifications, Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, and UK public sector experience.

Working with a language provider like Clear Voice gives housing teams fast access to qualified interpreters in over 260 languages, including rare ones. Integrating interpreting services into daily operations provides a practical way to fix repairs faster, reduce staff workload, and prevent rent arrears.



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Every interaction between a landlord and a tenant depends on clear communication. If a tenant can't understand what their landlord is saying or the landlord doesn't understand what the tenant needs, communication breaks down, issues such as repairs and complaints go unresolved, and trust breaks down.

The Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) recognises this. The [Consumer Standards](#) require landlords to understand the diverse needs of their tenants, including language barriers, and to assess whether their services are delivering fair and equitable outcomes for those tenants.

If you're a housing professional overseeing your organisation's performance and regulatory grading, or an operational manager handling service delivery, providing English-only services introduces a real compliance risk.

What do the Consumer Standards expect from housing providers?

The [Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard](#) requires that landlords are open with tenants and treat them with fairness and respect, as set out in the Code of Practice. Tenants must be able to:

- Access services and rely on effective landlord operations
- Raise complaints effectively and promptly

- Influence decision-making and participate in local scrutiny panels
- Hold their landlord to account by reviewing clear performance information

To understand tenants' needs, including those arising from language barriers, the Standard requires landlords to collect relevant data and use it to assess whether their services are delivering fair and equitable outcomes for tenants.

The scale of the language gap in social housing

Language barriers are a reality across UK social housing. According to the [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\)](#) Census, 5.1 million residents in England and Wales do not speak English as their main language. Of this group, over 1 million people have limited English proficiency. Of those, 880,000 cannot speak English well, while 161,000 cannot speak it at all.

Official data shows that certain ethnic groups are more likely to rent social housing than others. As a percentage of rented social housing versus other housing types, Black Afro-Caribbean (48%), Bangladeshi households (40%) and Arab households (36%) are more likely to live in rented social housing. By comparison, 16% of White British households live in rented social housing.

In London, [more than 1 in 8 households](#) have no one who uses English as their first or preferred language. This number peaks in the borough of Brent, where one in five households have no English language speakers.

That same report shows that after English, the most commonly spoken languages in England and Wales are Polish, Romanian, Punjabi, and Urdu.

For landlords, these statistics demonstrate that language services are vital to reach residents who would otherwise be cut off from basic housing support.

How do communication failures impact housing teams?

While the regulatory expectations in the Consumer Standards are clear, housing teams in both Local Authorities and Housing Associations can experience a number of challenges meeting them.

Managing language support in-house places a real burden on housing teams. Staff are left to manually manage bookings, check credentials, process individual invoices, and coordinate availability. Such a process also introduces quality risks, as they make it difficult to verify whether every language speaker is indeed able to act as an interpreter, has the right linguistic skills, is appropriately qualified, with up-to-date background checks, safeguarding training, and experience in UK social housing. Using in-house staff or family members, may seem like a quick and easy fix, but is fraught with risk and complication, to the extent that it's rarely a satisfactory solution.

Staff may also struggle with language vendors who fail to meet required service levels. Long connection times when phoning an interpreter leave staff and tenants waiting on hold, while limited coverage for rare or hard-to-find languages creates gaps in everyday communication.

Language barriers limit a tenant's ability to navigate housing systems or understand their tenancy rights, while the resulting communication issues can leave rent arrears unresolved and repairs unreported for far longer than they should be.

Language services to support effective communication and active engagement

To meet RSH expectations and ensure fair outcomes, social housing providers should address both the written word (translation) and the spoken word (interpreting) across the tenancy lifecycle.

Document translation

Social housing involves complex, legally binding agreements that can be difficult for anyone to understand. A language barrier makes them doubly so. Translating key documents ensures there is no misunderstanding and ensures that housing providers can be confident that a tenant is fully aware of their obligations. It also helps to build trust, and underpins the delivery of an effective housing service:

- **Tenancy Agreements & Legal Addendums:** Setting out statutory rights, implied common law, and tenant obligations
- **Safety Compliance Notices:** Confirming compliance through documents such as Annual Gas Safety Records (CP12), Electrical Installation Condition Reports (EICR), and fire safety instructions required under the RSH Safety and Quality Standard
- **Financial & Rent Communications:** Explaining rent restructuring, cost-of-living adjustments, or arrears management so residents understand their financial obligations under the Rent Standard
- **Formal Complaints Procedures:** Publicising a simple, accessible process for residents to voice grievances, in alignment with the mandatory [Housing Ombudsman's Complaint Handling Code](#)

Interpreting

Real-time interactions require fast, reliable access to professional linguists. The quicker a tenant and their landlord can understand each other, the quicker an issue gets resolved. Slow or unreliable interpreting not only frustrates tenants, but it can mean that housing teams need to allocate extra time and resources to managing interactions with tenants that don't have proficiency in English.

Interpreting takes different forms depending on the situation:

- **On-Demand Telephone Interpreting:** Giving staff a quick connection to an interpreter for urgent problems or immediate tenant needs, not a long hold time. Clear Voice connects clients to an interpreter in under 40 seconds on average.
- **Video Interpreting:** Supporting planned, visually sensitive interactions, such as complex welfare checks, tenancy sign-ups, or anti-social behaviour (ASB) interviews, allowing for facial expressions, body language, and deeper engagement.
- **Accessibility Services:** Providing access to [British Sign Language \(BSL\)](#) interpreters via video or in person is a core requirement for supporting Deaf and hard of hearing residents. Braille, Text to Audio, Large Print and Easy Read services ensure that those with visual impairments are also provided for.

Language support built for social housing

Partnering with a professional language services provider such as Clear Voice eliminates the administrative burden and compliance risks of managing language support in-house.

The provision of language services, such as interpretation, to support the housing sector requires empathy, cultural awareness, and a good understanding of the relationship between social housing providers and their tenants.

Clear Voice provides access to professional, qualified, and DBS-vetted interpreters who understand the sensitivities of housing, welfare, and community support.

With a pay-per-use model, Clear Voice allows social housing providers to pay only for the support they use while gaining access to over 260 languages, including rare and hard-to-find languages.

Clear Voice works with councils, including Worcestershire County Council

and Westminster City Council, and major Housing Associations such as Clearsprings, Clarion and Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing.

A quick, reliable telephone and video interpreting platform provides fast connection times and automates many processes, so staff can meet RSH Standards with confidence, whilst supporting effective engagement and resolving issues with tenants and residents in a timely manner.

Whether you'd like to review your current language strategy or learn more about breaking down language barriers, Clear Voice is here to help.

Whether you're ready to act or just want more information about breaking down language barriers, [let's talk](#).



We make services accessible in **every language**

Everyone should be able to access the services they need, in the language they require. We are here to help you make this a reality.

Talk to us about your language requirements

findoutmore@clearvoice.org.uk · 0800 817 4777