

Press Release

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Council workers started using a new visual interpretation app and locals are delighted

Social workers in North Yorkshire now feel incredibly more comfortable working with households with a language barrier with the addition of a new visual interpretation application. Many migrants can have flowing conversations with the use of real-time, visual translation. The North Yorkshire Council are urging locals to contact the council if they are suffering from any issues including harassment and domestic violence. The council ensures that the confidentiality and comfort of locals is their utmost priority and that with the new visual interpretation application, non-English-speaking locals can also benefit from uninterrupted conversation and discussion.

The North Yorkshire council was struggling with issues concerning interpretation when it came to face-to-face conversations/meetings with non-English-speaking residents. According to the 2021 census in England and Wales, 1,040,000 adults, or 20% of adults whose main language is not English, reported that they could not speak English well or at all. One problem is the availability of interpreters and the safeguarding issues that arise are many: from delayed support to interpretation being done by fellow household members and potentially the 'abuser'. According to the Office of National Statistics, approximately one in five people aged 16 years and over (9.9 million) had experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16 years. The issue of interpretation being done by the abuser, not only leads to a lack of integrity of the information but also there is a high concern for the well-being of household members that may have been mistreated. This leaves the victim potentially hurt and without support which is extremely worrying for the council and their workers. This also leaves elements of frustration among the workers as they feel unable to help, especially when being misled.

Andrei Cazacu (a non-English-speaking Romanian resident in North Yorkshire) has said this about the old process of communication with the council (translated from Romanian): 'There is a lot of Romanians here (North Yorkshire) that cannot speak English, so it is very annoying to try and speak with the social workers without an interpreter being present.' 'I also often forget what I was about to say when they are

trying to translate my previous sentence.’ Residents are clearly upset about the previous methods. Andrei also pointed out an ineffective feature of the process where the interpreter is translating aloud and the council worker is writing down notes and while all this is happening, the resident is waiting to speak - jeopardizing the flow of the conversation and potentially leaving out important details if they are forgotten.

The solution to this problem appeared to be an accessible and user-friendly virtual interpreter that social workers can use to help translate the conversation into English in real time regardless of the language being spoken, so that all residents are accounted for. The app also produces a transcript allowing the workers to take notes after the meeting instead of interrupting the flow of the conversation and this transcript can be sent via email from the app. Security measures such as encrypted data and a login system are put into place as the confidentiality of residents’ information is key and is a major priority to the developers and the council; according to research at IBM, a data breach has an average cost of 4.88 million USD. At almost no extra cost to the council and much cheaper than renting qualified interpreters, the developers tried to keep the transition as smooth and cost-efficient as possible, to not pressure the council into funding the application over something that might need urgent attention.

Thuraya Kanabawi (A Sudanese resident) talked to us about the new visual interpreter being used at one of her meetings with a social worker; (translated from Arabic) ‘The difference is huge; the process is much smoother, and the meeting was much shorter and so it meant I can continue working on my business much quicker. I am very happy the council is starting to make changes for us even though we are not English’. The visual interpreter brought more understanding on the severity of the problem as it seems residents of the community were starting to feel neglected. One of the lead members of the North Yorkshire council, Jane Madison, says ‘This was a great allocation of our resources, and we hope the residents feel the same relief as we do.’

Social workers will be able to load the application on any device they bring and log in using their government email and credentials. They may then start a meeting to which the app will start listening whenever the social worker indicates in the app that they have started. They may then face the device towards the resident, so as they ask the questions the app will output on the screen the translation in whatever language the resident speaks, and the resident may read what they are asking. There is also a text-to-speech function for people who require it (this is recognised by the developers that it may hinder the flow of the meeting). Then the social worker may face it towards

themselves to read/hear what the resident is saying in real-time. A transcript of the entire meeting is available throughout and at the end of the meeting.

‘We had 3 things to focus on when coming up with a solution to the issue: Confidentiality, User-friendliness and Efficiency.’ ‘We are proud of our solution and remain confident that it will bring about positive change in the community and decrease the friction and perhaps resentment that the residents of North Yorkshire could be feeling towards their council’ said Abdulrahman Gallul - one of the lead developers on the project. In further conversations with Abdulrahman, he expressed hope that other councils around England and the UK will decide to incorporate the visual interpreter. ‘We are also focused on keeping the solution tailored towards the residents as we believe if residents are comfortable talking to their council, more issues and feedback can be brought up, ultimately leading to changes that will, hopefully, impact the community positively’.