

Eric Pickles: councils must cut back on foreign language materials

Communities secretary tells MPs that translating information wastes money and reduces incentive to learn English

- [Alan Travis](#), home affairs editor
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Eric Pickles has told MPs that councils don't have a legal duty to translate documents into a foreign language. Photograph: Steve Parsons/Press Association

The [communities](#) secretary, [Eric Pickles](#), has ordered councils to stop automatically translating their information leaflets, posters and other material into foreign languages.

In a written ministerial statement to MPs published on Tuesday, Pickles says that councils spend as much as £20m a year for translation services that actually reduce the incentive for some migrant communities to learn English.

He says that councils have a legal duty under equalities legislation not to discriminate but that doesn't include a legal duty to translate documents into a foreign language.

"Even if publishing only in English could put some people at a particular disadvantage, such a policy may be justified if local authorities can demonstrate that the integration and cost concerns pursue a legitimate aim and outweigh any disadvantage," said Pickles.

He claimed that the policy of Southwark council in south London of providing a full and free translation of its services into 70 languages harms integration by reducing the incentive for some to learn English.

He also singled out Crawley council in Sussex for spending £600 on translating its glossy 12-page in-house magazine into Urdu after a single resident complained they couldn't read English.

In January the communities secretary complained that the £140m a year spent by all public sector bodies on translation costs had led to an "incomprehensible situation where no one can speak English as their main language in 5% of households".

The most recent census figures published last week show that while 4.2 million people or just under 8% of the population in Britain do not have English as their first language, only 138,000 or 0.3% said they could not speak English at all. The Office of National Statistics said however that 726,000 or 1.3% reported they couldn't speak English well. Polish is the second most popular "first language" listed in the census returns.

Pickles has said that he doesn't expect everyone to adopt the lyrical dexterity of Samuel Johnson or even Boris Johnson but he does want people to talk to their neighbours, read a bus timetable or experience the "enormous joy of [reality TV show] The Only Way is Essex".

The communities secretary concedes in his statement to MPs that local councils need to communicate with groups that have poor levels of literacy or learning difficulties. But he says this can be addressed by using plain English, easy read versions of documents and using pictures instead of translation.

"Stopping the automatic use of translation and interpretation services into foreign languages will provide further incentive for all migrant communities to learn English, which is the basis for an individual's ability to progress in British society," Pickles told MPs.

"It will promote cohesion and better community relations. And it will help councils make sensible savings, at a time when every bit of the public sector needs to do its bit to pay off the deficit."