

# Case study

Languages and culture at work



## The customer always comes first in Newham – whatever their language

The London Borough of Newham is one of the most culturally diverse parts of the UK, with more than 30 ethnic communities in a population of approximately 235,000. It is estimated that over half of the population is from Black and Asian communities and large numbers do not have English as their first language. This diversity brings incredible vibrancy and life to the area – but it can present a challenge in delivering services to residents.



### Residents need assistance in accessing a wide range of council services

With 200 staff working across eight local service centres and one telephone contact centre, Newham Borough Council takes customer service seriously. Residents need assistance on a wide range of fronts – from housing and homelessness to healthcare and the environment. The teams aim to deliver an end-to-end service, so that the customer is not simply referred to another department. To do this effectively, communication skills and empathy with the customer and their cultural background are of paramount importance.

Frontline teams are rostered to ensure that as many as possible of the 22 languages they speak are available at a given time. One of the first questions customers are asked is their preferred language: a language card can help to identify this in cases where they don't speak any English at all. Asian communities are well established in the area, and well represented in the teams at Newham's service centres, many of whom speak for example Bengali, Hindi or Urdu. Recent migration has however led to changes in the customer profile. Eastern European residents speaking Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian are increasingly commonplace. Portuguese, Spanish and Somali are spoken by many residents too.

### Written information is translated into key languages

When an adviser isn't available with the right language skills, Newham Language Shop can organise interpreting over the telephone within minutes. Written information, such as leaflets on housing, healthcare and social care, is translated into key languages – and in instances where information is printed only in English, translated versions can be made available on request. The council also takes steps to improve its residents' English language skills by directing customers to funded classes.

Donna Cain, Front Office Manager at East Ham, explained the approach at Newham: "For us it's about equality, making sure every customer has immediate access to all the services that we offer – whatever their faith, cultural background or circumstances. We recently helped a victim of domestic violence who, badly beaten by her husband, turned up at our service centre with her three children. Understanding her cultural perspective and speaking her language ensured that we could respond quickly to her every need."



Links

**Newham Borough Council** [www.newham.gov.uk](http://www.newham.gov.uk)  
**Newham Language Shop** [www.languageshop.org.uk](http://www.languageshop.org.uk)

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