

# Working Together:

Recommendations for  
tackling the immediate issues  
facing procurement and provision of  
language services for the public sector

October 2023



Association of  
Translation Companies  
DEFINING STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

with



## Introduction

This paper sets out urgent recommendations for tackling immediate challenges around procurement and provision of language services for the UK's public sector.

Produced by a Public Sector Working Group consisting of leading language services, interpreting and translation associations and organisations, the paper outlines challenges and proposes solutions for resolving pressing issues in a dynamic, continuously changing landscape where public sector commissioning and buying organisations, language service companies, and freelance interpreters and translators, form an interdependent ecosystem where each stakeholder plays a crucial role in the sustainable development of the supply chain.

The paper proposes 10 key, urgent improvements to be implemented at procurement, framework, and contractual levels, and makes the case for building a pathway towards longer-term development.

## About the Working Group

The PI4J ATC Working Group was set up in early 2023 to identify realistic, concrete solutions that contribute to the sustainable development of the language services ecosystem in the immediate and longer terms and safeguard the pipeline of future public service interpreters.

Representing the UK's leading associations and organisations for language service companies, interpreters and translators, the Working Group consists of the following associations and organisations:

### Regulators

- National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD)
- National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI)

### Institutes

- Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL)
- Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI)

### Professional associations

- Association of Interpreters & Translators (AIT)
- Association of Police and Court Interpreters (APCI)
- Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI)
- Association of Translation Companies (ATC)
- Cymdeithas Cyfieithwyr Cymru (CCC)
- Society of Official Metropolitan Interpreters UK (SOMI (UK))

### Trade unions

- National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) (a branch of Unite the Union)
- National Union of Professional Interpreters and Translators (NUPIT) (a branch of Unite the Union)

## Background to the paper

Due to its size, its many stakeholders, and its continuous, organic evolution, the UK's public sector interpreting and translation landscape is fragmented across the four UK nations, Government departments and different public services, which complicates understanding of procurement and fulfilment processes, and consequently creates challenges around implementing and monitoring best practice at all levels.

Procurement at the top level of commissioning organisations is largely transparent, but the levels through which procurement takes place – from public sector organisations and regional authorities of all shapes and sizes through to language service companies and their own sub-contractors, and the individual interpreters and translators carrying out the assignments – can be very opaque.

Changing patterns of demand, unmapped or unforeseen, rapid regional and national changes in the need for different languages and the requirements for rare languages pose challenges both for procurement and provision of services and ultimately equality, fairness, and public safety.

In addition to the inherent fragmentation of the language services ecosystem, the supply chain is extremely vulnerable to economic crises and the competitive environment driven by centralised procurement practices. With public sector contract costs and fees often locked in multi-year contracts, the current cost of living crisis has significantly affected the ability of interpreters and translators to make a reasonable living out of their work, and the ability of language service companies to review and revise remuneration conditions for staff and suppliers.

In our linguistically diverse society, interpreting and translation services underpin the fair and equitable treatment of speakers of more than 300 different languages. This vital work must be safeguarded; positive action is needed to create a pipeline for new entrants into the profession and to support the retention of qualified, competent professionals. Stakeholders across the ecosystem must join forces in a joint effort to ensure that provision of interpreting, translation and other language services continues uninterrupted.

By and large, all Public Service Interpreters and Translators in the UK work as self-employed freelancers – for language service companies contracted by public sector authorities and buying organisations to provide interpreting, translation, and other language services. These freelancer professionals' livelihoods depend on the fees, terms and conditions set through complex commercial procurement practices.

Therefore, the biggest responsibility in driving positive development lies with the commissioning bodies. Ultimately, the challenge around procurement of language services for the public sector is a policy and resource allocation question, which the cost of living crisis is currently significantly exacerbating. Unless decisive action is taken to support the sustainable delivery of language services in support of the police, courts, immigration, health services and local government, the only possible outcomes will be fewer providers, fewer interpreters and fewer translators working in public services, resulting in an increased risk to service quality and safety of some of the most vulnerable in UK society.

## Evidence of the growing resource allocation issues

The impact of a tightening economic situation is evident in stakeholder evidence gathered by the Working Group organisations. The following evidence and case study highlight the impact of the growing resource allocation issues in attracting new entrants and retaining qualified and competent professionals, decline in language learning, and the continued pressure on prices.

## New entrants into the professions

Over the last three years, the number of candidates achieving Level 6 Public Service Interpreting (PSI) qualifications has fallen significantly.

In 2021 across all qualification providers, we estimate around 350 candidates were awarded a L6 PSI qualification; in 2022 those numbers halved. On the current trajectory, qualification providers report that the number of people achieving a full L6 PSI qualification in 2023 could fall below 100.

With such a notable drop in numbers of Level 6 qualified PSIs coming through the system, a supply problem seems inevitable. If qualification candidate numbers do not pick up to at least 2021 levels, this could quickly become acute in an increasing number of languages.

A concerted effort with ongoing support from public sector buying organisations will be required to encourage those interpreters already successfully working with a Level 2 or Level 3 qualification to additionally invest in their future careers by achieving a Level 6 professional qualification to support a long-term career as the next generation of Public Service Interpreters.

## Retention of qualified professionals

Data from the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) illustrates the long-term trends in the retention of Public Service Interpreters in the profession. Over the past 12 years, registrations have fallen by 33%, from 2,400 registrants in 2011 to 1,600 registrants in 2023.

A survey conducted by the BBC in 2023 further highlights the on-going issues: 10% of Public Service Interpreters surveyed are unlikely to continue in the profession in the next 12 months due to poor remuneration and current terms and conditions.

Another key measure of the pipeline of interpreters, the NRCPD Register of Trainee Sign Language interpreters, is currently showing a troubling 30% drop in the last five years.

While we've observed a steady 4% annual increase in the numbers of Registered Sign Language Interpreters (RSLIs), it's crucial to recognise that this growth is, in fact, static growth. This is primarily due to Trainee Sign Language Interpreters (TSLIs) progressing to become RSLIs.

There is genuine concern that the current shortage of interpreters is symptomatic of greater challenges ahead, particularly with regard to potential attrition of experienced Registered Sign Language Interpreters reaching retirement age and leaving the profession – a trend that may also reflect on spoken-language interpreter pipelines.

## Decline in language learning

The well-researched and documented decline in language learning is clear from the British Council's [Language Trends 2023 report](#) which charts language teaching trends in primary and secondary schools in England. The report showcases the continued decline in the uptake of language learning, such as the drop in the number of French students from 12,716 in 2015 to 7,347 in 2023, and the number of German students dropping from 5,481 in 2015 to 2,646 in 2023.

These language learning trends are now also felt in higher education. [The British Academy's and the University Council of Modern Languages'](#) analysis of UCAS data on undergraduate courses in 2012-2021 reported a marked decline in acceptances to modern language degree courses, -40% in language courses alone.

## Pressure on prices

An on-going challenge across the whole of the language services ecosystem in the UK is the continued pressure on prices.

[The 2023 ATC UK Language Services Industry Survey and Report](#) reveals that 73% of language service companies in the UK experienced price pressures from clients in 2022. 27% reported that economic challenges and restructuring of the business relating to changing market conditions were the most important changes in the company in 2022. Price pressures remain the highest in the public sector, with only 30% of companies reported being in a position to raise prices for interpreting, compared to 41% for translation – and 10% reported a decrease in prices, with 55% retaining prices at the previous year's level.

## Case study from an interpreter having left the profession

The below case study from former public sector interpreter belonging to AIT, one of the associations in the Working Group, highlights the everyday challenges of the profession:

*Interpreter 'E' cited various grounds contributing to their decision to leave the profession. Financial hardship played a primary role: where cases were cancelled, finished early, or curtailed, 'E' found they were unable to plan in general for their life, pay bills and forward plan (e.g., for holidays), as last-minute changes in bookings frequently meant receiving remuneration for half the booked time or far less. Remuneration for travel and waiting time were further practical challenges that 'E' found difficult to manage, with remuneration an issue for assignments both close to home (with very limited travel remuneration) and assignments further away (with travel and ad hoc waiting time not adequately compensated).*

*With frequent last-minute changes, and with the nature of the work being constantly on-call to catch other last minute jobs, 'E' found that there was less time to feel rested, which led to a state of burn-out.*

*Following Brexit, 'E' recognised that various sectors cut down on spending, and interpreting assignments were harder to come by. When an opportunity arose to retrain in another profession, 'E' was hopeful that they could practise both jobs alongside each other. As an interpreter, 'E' had always loved the diversity of being self-employed, feeling passionate about each day and each assignment being different. However, 'E' quickly found that their new profession provided a much higher degree of security and stability, and interpreting became too difficult a profession to remain in. Ultimately, 'E' made the decision to leave the interpreting profession.*

## Ten key recommendations

The foundations of sustainability across public sector procurement are laid by the Government at policy, framework and contract levels. We believe that implementing best practice and unambiguous requirements at Framework specification level will result in a more uniform service delivery across the supply chain, enable good governance and oversight practices, and, importantly, create an equitable and sustainable working environment for freelance interpreters and translators.

These are our ten recommendations for public sector commissioning and buying organisations to tackle the immediate challenges of the cost of living crisis, and to ensure the continued safe provision of multilingual services for the public sector.

### **1. Continue to work together**

The last three years have seen enormous progress made in the quality of dialogue between key Government departments, UK public services, and language stakeholders. Together we can improve the ecosystem; this is not a zero-sum game. All the actors benefit from working together and understanding each other's pressures.

### **2. Index cost of contracts and link to inflation**

Indexing the cost of contracts and linking fees to inflation enables public sector buyer organisations and language service companies to react to challenges in the economic climate and mitigate the risks of economic crises to the language services supply chain.

### **3. Build in fair and equitable interpreter and translator fees at framework level**

Defining and building in interpreter and translator fees at framework levels ensures fair and equitable remuneration for interpreters and translators, and creates a level playing field for language services companies tendering for the frameworks, as early indications from the National Police Dynamic Procurement System shows.

### **4. Increase contractual transparency on rates to interpreters and translators**

Increasing transparency on 'pass-through' rates to interpreters and translators is the first step towards identifying and defining best practices, and setting adequate and acceptable rates of pay for interpreters and translators at framework and contract levels – essentially linked to protecting the careers and meeting the cost of living for interpreters and translators working for the UK's public sector.

### **5. Review practices and current fees around travel time and travel cost compensation**

Reviewing practices and current fees around travel time and travel cost, subsistence, and accommodation, where necessary, ensures that interpreter and translator remuneration does not get eroded by rising travel costs, and that compensation for travel time is commensurate with the type and duration of the assignment.

### **6. Implement minimum assignment duration/charges to match resource allocation**

Implementing minimum assignment duration and charge mechanisms at a level matching the required allocation of time and linguist resources ensures that the overall take-home compensation for in-person assignments is at an adequate level.

### **7. Ensure cancellation policies are fair and transparent across the supply chain**

Reviewing current cancellation policies contributes to transparent practices across the supply chain, and ensures that in the event of assignment cancellations, compensation is fair, adequate, and commensurate to the cancellation notice and length of assignment.

### **8. Promote and prioritise the use of qualified professionals**

Defining and implementing appropriate qualification requirements for the level and difficulty of diverse assignments ensures that qualified professionals are prioritised and promotes a sustainable supply chain of skilled professionals.

### **9. Build pathways and support career progressions in interpreter and translator professions**

Collaboration between language services stakeholders in building transparent pathways into interpreter and translator professions promotes entry of new professionals into the interpreting and translation professions and supports career progression within the professions.

### **10. Support small businesses' access to public sector work**

Supporting small businesses' access to public sector work through dedicated, tiered routes ensures a diversified, local and regional service provision, which in turn fosters a more diverse local base of professional interpreters and translators.