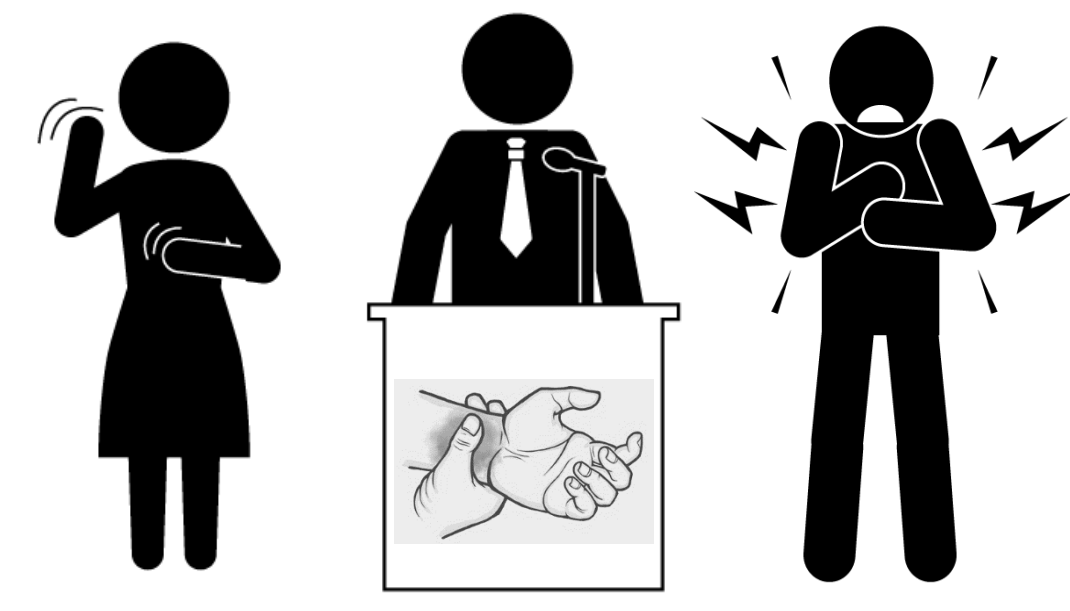
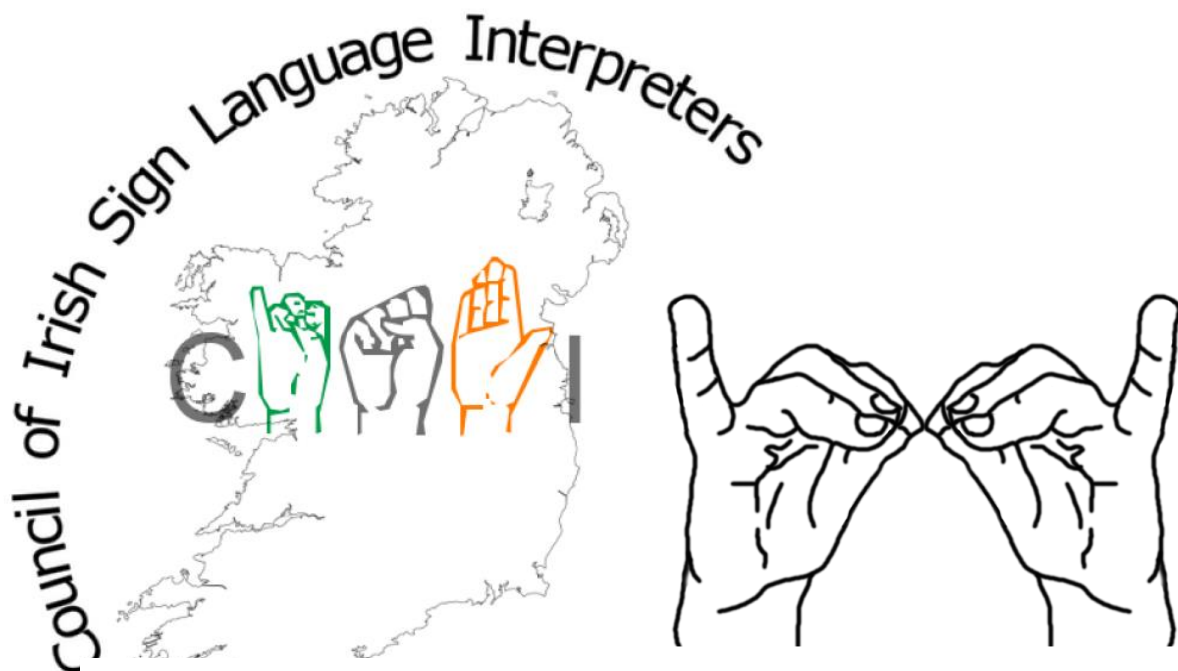


COUNCIL OF IRISH SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

Interpreter Health & Safety Report

September 2017



Researched and Compiled for CISLI by

Cormac Leonard

Editing and Proofreading by

Leanne Saurin

Anthony Claffey

Background

- This is a study undertaken with co-operation from fellow interpreters, carried out on behalf of the Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI), the professional body for Irish Sign Language (ISL) / English interpreters in Ireland.
- Please note that the authors do not have a background in statistics, and this report has been written solely to begin documenting a highly important issue in the profession of interpreting. The authors welcome other interpretations of the data presented and further explorations of the themes and issues covered.
- This survey was undertaken primarily by an interpreter with twelve years' experience of professional ISL / English interpreting, with an interest in health and safety as it relates to that field. At the time of creation of the survey, this author was Chairperson of the Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI).

Rationale

There were a number of reasons for carrying out this research.

- To date, no published research has been done specifically on health and safety concerns for sign language interpreters in Ireland. The authors felt that **there was a need to fill this gap with research from the perspective of practitioners**, for increased status and improved working conditions for interpreters. It is envisaged and hoped that interpreters and interpreting bodies can use this report to work for improved conditions when individually or collectively dealing with agencies and employers.
- The authors have noted there is a **frequent misapprehension about the health and safety needs of working interpreters**. They felt that the collation of data from practitioners was needed to counter the many inaccurate notions about how many interpreters are needed for assignments, breaks, and so forth.

- Data collated within such a report would be a **valuable resource for the Deaf community**. The comparative treatment of interpreters and their conditions may reflect the relative status that Deaf-related professions hold in Ireland, and thus the results of this research could show how much interpreters – and thus the Deaf community – are valued by Irish society.
- It was decided to **focus specifically on assignments lasting between 2 and 3 hours**. It was felt by the authors that full-day assignments, at this stage in the development of the profession, are considered by the vast majority of practitioners and agencies to require two interpreters. However in recent years, there has been much debate and discussion about shorter assignments, and where the boundary (if any) lies between an assignment needing one, or two, interpreters. The issue of breaks is also an important one to look at.

The Work of Irish Sign Language / English Interpreters in Ireland

It may be helpful to outline some of the factors to bear in mind in relation to the work and income of ISL/English interpreters:

- The majority of professional ISL/English interpreters are **self-employed** and **sole traders**. Interpreters generally register with one or more agencies upon gaining their qualification. Work is offered to interpreters by agencies when it arises. Interpreting work can be assigned by agencies to interpreters on a semi-regular basis (e.g. a series of college lectures for a Deaf student, or series of work meetings for a Deaf employee) or regular once-off assignments (e.g. a conference, event or meeting that may happen only once).¹ Interpreters can take or refuse whichever assignments are offered to them. Interpreters may work with one agency, many agencies, or none at all; in the latter case, interpreters liaise with the Deaf person or client organisation, and paid directly by the client organisation.

¹ Interpreters have been employed on a contract basis in the past, but this represents a very small number of cases. Currently the IRIS video interpreting service, managed by SLIS, contract a small number of interpreters.

- Many **interpreting agencies** have secured major contracts for interpreting services (including ISL / English interpreting), signing agreements with public service providers such as hospitals, courts, the Garda Síochána, third-level colleges and universities. Each of these agencies has its own approach to recruitment, standards, health and safety in regards to their interpreters. Agencies that offer sign language interpreting services include the following²:
 - **SLIS (Sign Language Interpreting Service)** – now (for the most part) a referral service
 - **Bridge Interpreting**
 - **Centre for Sign Language Studies** (now known as **Irish Sign Language Interpreting**)
 - **Word Perfect**
 - **Context**
 - **Translation.ie**
 - **Interling**
 - **Translingual**
- Interpreters have a professional representative organisation, the **Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI)**. Membership in CISLI is currently 41 Active (i.e. professional and trained / accredited) Members.³ At present, CISLI has no published documentation or policies on interpreter health and safety, but is preparing an Occupational Health and Safety Policy at present.⁴
- As with other self-employed workers, interpreters face certain **disadvantages** compared to employed PAYE workers; interpreters are only paid for the work that they do. As self-employed contractors with agencies or direct paying clients, most **interpreters are not ‘employees’ and therefore cannot benefit from workplace health and safety policies**. They do not have a manager, or a supervision or management structure. Employment is not guaranteed, and during quiet periods, interpreters do not receive pay. Anecdotally it seems to be the case that the vast majority of interpreters work in third level education; during the summer when this

² Please note that inclusion of agencies on this list is in no way an endorsement or validation of the practices and / or standards of those agencies. This is simply a list of agencies which state on their websites that they provide sign language interpreting services. The list is not exhaustive, and other agencies may be providing such services at the present time.

³ Figures from <https://cisli.ie/home/members/> as of 23 August 2017.

⁴ See for details: <https://cisli.ie/home/ohs/>

work is not needed, the monthly income of interpreters drops considerably. **They are also not paid for** holiday, maternity or – importantly for the purposes of this report – **periods off sick or due to injury.**

- Interpreters can be subject to **work-related physical and mental stress** due to the complex and highly technical aspects of their work; there are risks in relation to occupational health and safety, for example Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI).⁵

Numbers of interpreters in Ireland

- It is important to begin with an estimated total figure of interpreters in Ireland. Leeson and Venturi arrive at a total of “over 110 interpreters formally trained at a variety of levels”.⁶ If we add a total of 7 Deaf interpreters who have undergone the SLIS / Irish Sign Link examination processes, we arrive at a rough total of around 120.
- It is the case that many qualified and/or accredited interpreters are no longer working as interpreters. Leeson and Venturi recognise this: “We should also point out that many interpreters have left the field and some of those remaining work part time. The consequence of this is that the number of interpreters currently available for work on any given day is significantly less” than the above figure.⁷ Using their contacts in the interpreting community, the authors estimate that **about 70-80 individuals are still involved in ISL/English interpreting.** This includes both Deaf and hearing interpreters.

⁵ For examples and discussion see Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), *Self-Care for Interpreters: Prevention and Care of Repetitive Strain Injuries*, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3DKvZMfFLdaHJNeVdsWDJTUUk/view>

⁶ These figures are taken from Leeson, L and Venturi, V. (2017:25) *A review of literature and international practice on national and voluntary registers for sign language interpreters*. Dublin: Sign Language Interpreting Service. This report can be found at <http://www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/79791>

⁷ *Ibid.*

Health and Safety: Awareness and Agency Guidelines

There has been much work done in recent years on the health and safety issues that concern sign language interpreters.⁸ As a result, there is somewhat of a consensus among practitioners and agencies about the need for more than one interpreter for, for example, a full day assignment. We can see instances of this general consensus within **the terms and conditions of sign language interpreting agencies.**

The following information was found on the websites and / or literature sent to interpreters and clients by the two biggest sign language interpreting agencies:⁹

Bridge Interpreting

Interpreting is a highly skilled process which requires intense concentration. Therefore, the interpreter requires appropriate breaks. Ideally when working in teams, the interpreter will interpret 20 minutes and then the “off-task” interpreter will interpret. However, when working alone, there is additional pressure on the interpreter to perform at his/her maximum. In order to ensure best working practice, **breaks must be given to the interpreter, usually after 45 minutes, a 10-15-minute break is required.** As each assignment differs, you will be advised when booking the interpreter.¹⁰

...Provide **appropriate break every working hour. If two interpreters are booked, this time is essential for debriefing each other on the quality of their work.**¹¹

... In case **the assignment is longer than two hours, two sign language interpreters are recommended** and they should switch every 20/30 minutes.¹²

⁸ See a roundup of same in the upcoming *CISLI Occupational Health and Safety Policy*.

⁹ Other interpreting agency websites contain limited information on these concerns, but the agencies in question may possess internal documents and/or policies on breaks and interpreter configurations; these have not been analysed for this survey report.

¹⁰ Taken from <http://signlanguageinterpreting.ie/booking-terms-conditions/>

¹¹ Taken from <http://signlanguageinterpreting.ie/information-interpreters/>

¹² Taken from <http://signlanguageinterpreting.ie/information-interpreters/>

Sign Language Interpreting Service

Best practice guidelines **promote the use of two interpreters for sessions that are longer than two hours in duration, or in assignments with a lot of information.** They work in tandem with each other to maintain high quality standards and to allow for rest periods.

... For health and safety reasons, **an interpreter is required to have regular breaks throughout a session. At least 5 minutes break every 40 minutes. However, for information 'heavy' assignments more frequent breaks will be required.** Please liaise directly with your interpreter regarding this.

... **Conferences require (a minimum of) three interpreters, especially if there are breakout sessions/workshops.** Interpreters work in tandem at all times- this includes breakout sessions & presentations and materials should be forwarded ahead of the event to ensure interpreters are familiar with the topics.¹³

It is instructive to see the treatment of community interpreting (the genre of interpreting that most sign language interpreting would fall under) in the **International Standards Organisation (ISO) 13611 Guidelines for community interpreting.** These guidelines recommend that:

...for long assignments, provide the community interpreter with a break **after a maximum of 60 min if interpreting consecutively or 15 min to 30 min if interpreting simultaneously.** Alternatively, **allow for the commissioning of more than one community interpreter.** Otherwise, fatigue can take a toll on accuracy and jeopardize quality...¹⁴

These very important and influential guidelines envisage an optimum of a break every 15-30 minutes for a solo interpreter working simultaneously, the mode used for the vast majority of sign language interpreting settings; however they do not define 'long assignments'. It will also be clear to most people working in the area that these optimum conditions are not provided to ISL / English interpreters in the vast majority of cases. In the survey that follows, we hope to explore interpreters' own conception of when co-interpretation and breaks are

¹³ Taken from *Guidelines for working with Irish Sign Language / English Interpreters*, Sign Language Interpreting Service, www.slis.ie

¹⁴ International Standards Organisation (ISO) 13611, 'Guidelines for community interpreting' (<https://www.iso.org/standard/54082.html>). Many thanks to Lorraine Leeson for referring us to the latter.

appropriate, when certain arrangements are inappropriate, what interpreters actually *do*, and what are the issues around actual practice.

Methodology

- This survey was carried out in late August / early September 2017 utilising a multiple question online survey. The popular **SurveyMonkey** website was used, which provides a number of tools for creation of detailed and visually clear surveys. The free version of SurveyMonkey allows users to create a maximum of ten questions. The final survey consisted of **ten questions**. These were a mix of single-answer / multiple-answer checkbox-type closed questions, along with qualitative, open-ended questions where user typed input was sought. Users were allowed to skip some questions, if they felt they had nothing to contribute or preferred not to answer.
- Once created, a link to the survey was accompanied by a short explanatory paragraph, and distributed by the following means:
 - **WhatsApp:** A link to the survey was placed on a WhatsApp discussion group used by between 70 and 80 individual interpreters.
 - **Email:** CISLI emailed a link to the survey to the email addresses belonging to members.
 - **Facebook:** A link was placed on the CISLI public Facebook page.
 - **Twitter:** A link was placed on the CISLI public Facebook page.
- The survey was aimed at professional ISL / English interpreters, both Deaf and hearing, CISLI members and non-members.
- There were a total of **38 individual responses**. If 75 is taken as a figure roughly representing the number of working interpreters at the time of the survey, the **response rate is just under 51%**.

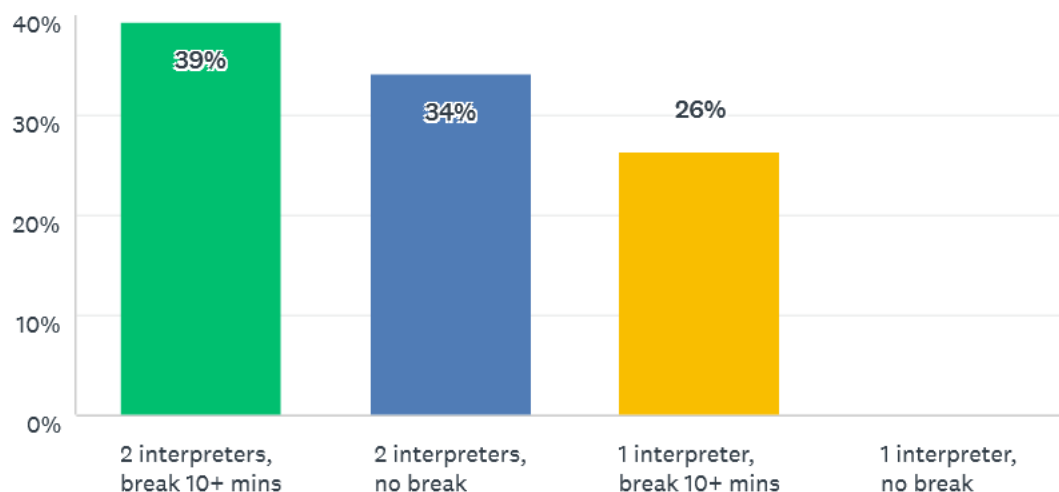
Responses



Q1

For a TWO HOUR long assignment, I believe that the BEST arrangement, ideally, for interpreter health and safety is:

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

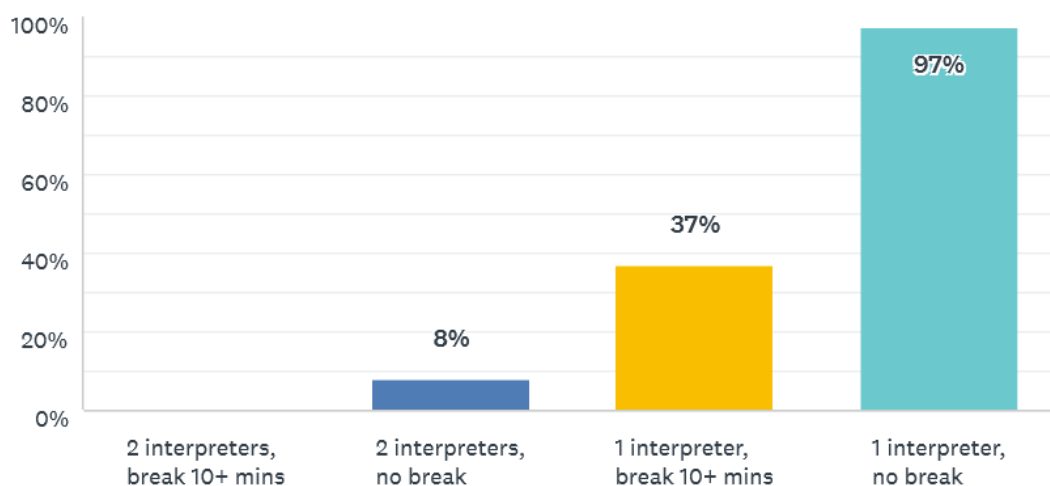


- We see that there is a reasonably well-distributed range of opinions about the best arrangement for interpreter health and safety, with no one particular arrangement being felt to be the optimum.
 - A total of 73% of respondents feel that two interpreters is the optimum configuration for two-hour assignments.
 - Perhaps surprisingly (given well-distributed research about RSI among interpreters), 26% of respondents feel that just one interpreter (with a break) is the optimum for two hours.
- We can see (overleaf) that working alone without a break for two hours is considered harmful by nearly all respondents (97%). It is engaged in by a small, but significant, number of interpreters (11%) in practice.
- However, it is notable that 62% (a good deal more than half) of respondents tend to work alone (with a break of 10 minutes or more) in two-hour assignments. This is an arrangement felt to be harmful to interpreters' health and safety by more than a third of respondents (37%).

Q2

For a TWO HOUR assignment, I believe these arrangements are HARMFUL to interpreter health and safety:

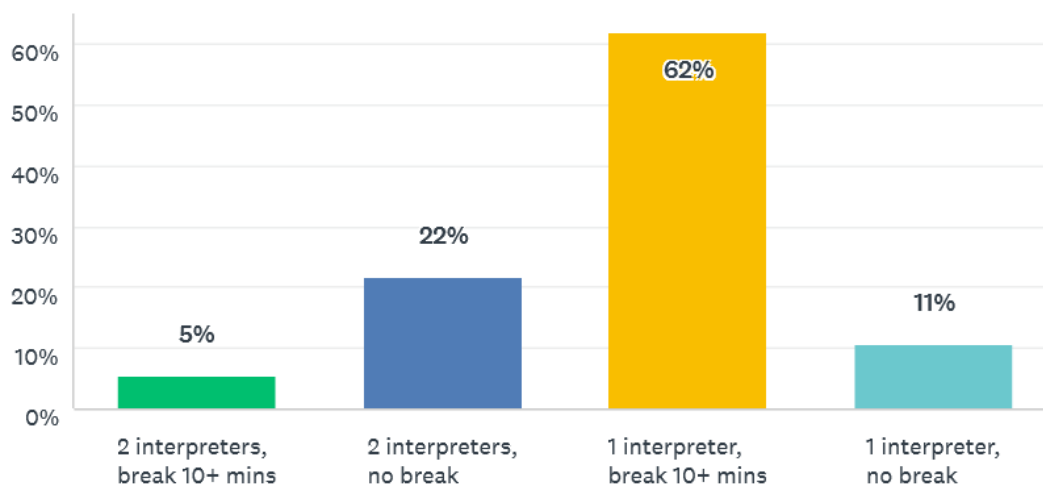
Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



Q3

In actual practice, for a TWO HOUR long assignment, I mostly tend to work using this arrangement:

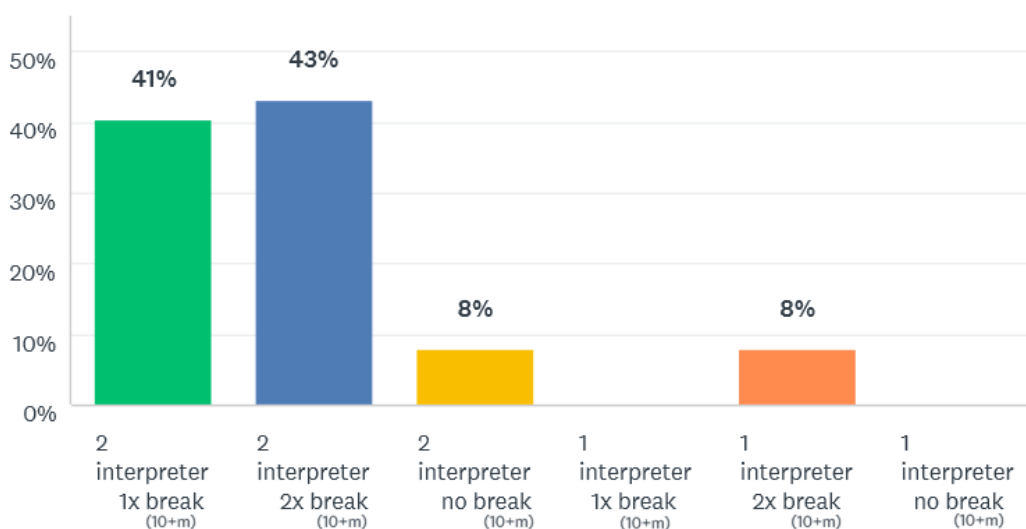
Answered: 37 Skipped: 1



Q4

For a THREE HOUR long assignment, I believe that the BEST arrangement, ideally, for interpreter health and safety is:

Answered: 37 Skipped: 1

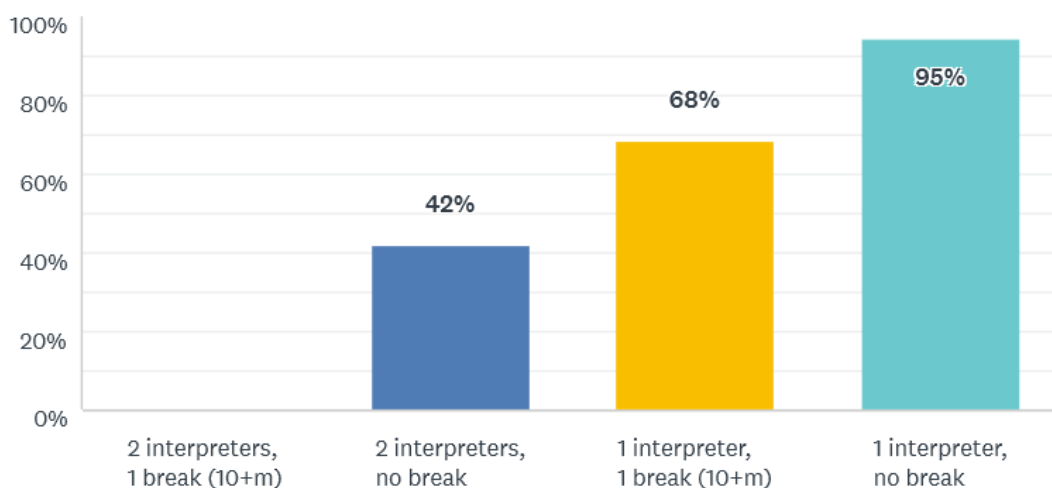


- Again, we see a well-distributed range of opinions about the best arrangement for interpreter health and safety, with no one arrangement being felt to be the optimum.
 - A total of 92% of respondents feel that two interpreters is the optimum configuration for three-hour assignments.
 - Again, surprisingly, three (8%) of respondents feel that one interpreter (with two breaks during the assignment) is the optimum for three hours.
- There is a more nuanced picture when it comes to arrangements considered to be harmful to interpreters, and actual practice, in three-hour assignments.
 - A total of 50% of respondents tend to work with a co-interpreter for three-hour assignments. 26% work in this arrangement with a break, an arrangement seen (from the above results) to be unproblematic from a health and safety perspective.
 - 24% of respondents mostly work with a co-interpreter, but without breaks, in three-hour assignments. This is an arrangement considered harmful to health and safety by as many as 42% of respondents.
 - More concerning is the percentage of interpreters who report that they tend to work alone (with a break) for three-hour assignments. 47% of respondents tend towards this arrangement - considered by a large majority of respondents (68%) to be harmful in regards to health and safety.

Q5

For a THREE HOUR assignment, I believe these arrangements are HARMFUL to interpreter health and safety:

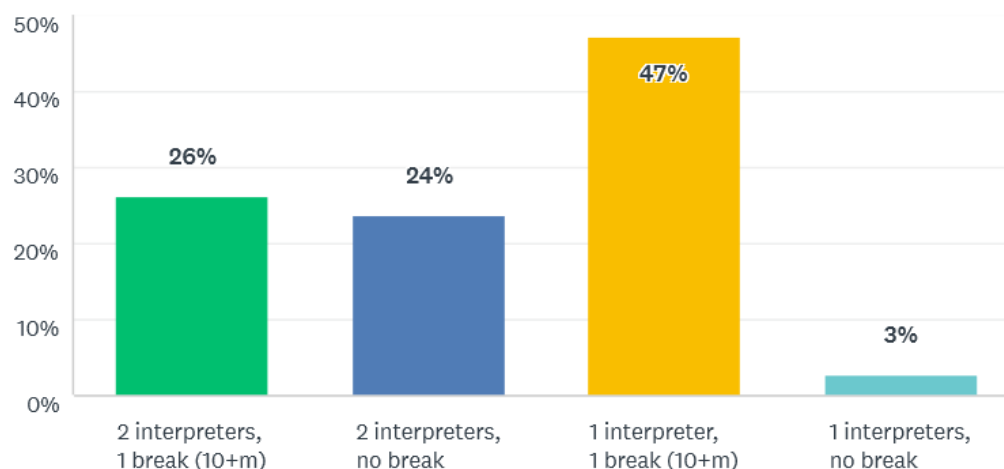
Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



Q6

In actual practice, for a THREE HOUR long assignment, I mostly tend to work using this arrangement:

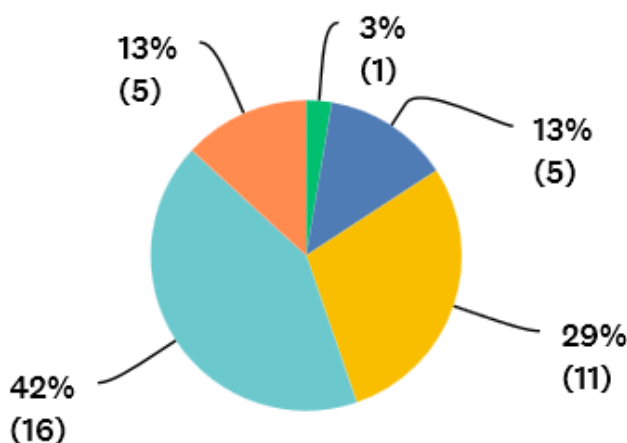
Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



Q7

For any assignment, where I have asked for a second interpreter - but been refused,

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0



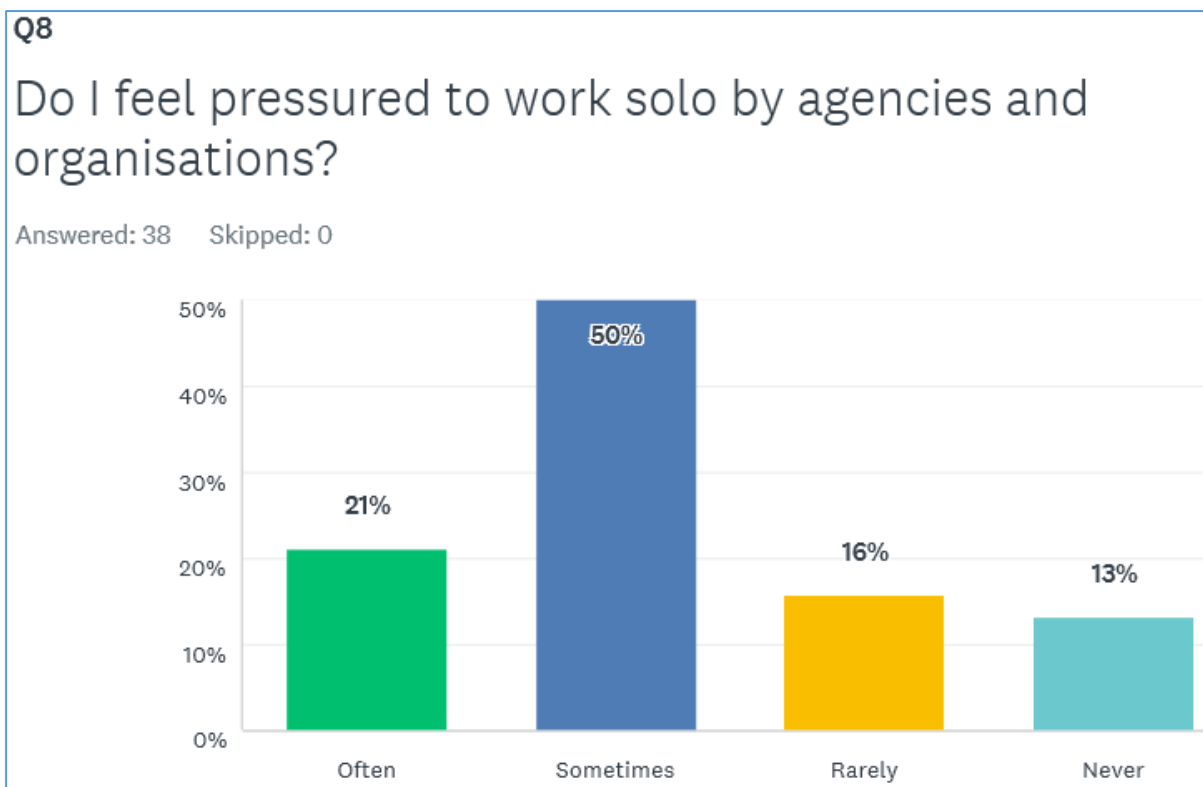
■	I generally do the assignment anyway, on my own, without any alterations (1)	3%
■	I generally do the assignment anyway, on my own, but insisting on the same regular breaks as I would with a co-interpreter (2)	13%
■	I generally do the assignment anyway, on my own, but I ask for more breaks than I would expect when working with a co-interpreter (3)	29%
■	I refuse the assignment (4)	42%
■	Other / Comments (5)	13%

This question reveals the range of responses that interpreters display when their request for a co-interpreter is refused.

- 42% of respondents report that they refuse to take on assignments where their request for a co-interpreter has been turned down.
- 42% in total take on the assignment, but insist on breaks, with 29% of respondents insisting on more breaks than would normally be given to a two-interpreter team.
- 3% of respondents reported taking on such an assignment without insisting on any special provision to take into account their working alone.

There were five 'Other' responses. Two of these were simply 'N/A', while the others were:

- "I'm a deaf interpreter & have not been part of any assignments requested."
- "Do it with extra breaks if I feel the job is urgent, or will not be filled but insist on a lot more breaks and prep! This would only be for jobs less than 2.5 hours."
- "Never had such a situation."



This question illustrates the level to which interpreters perceive that agencies and organisations apply pressure to interpreters to accept work without co-interpreters.

- A total of 87% of respondents have - at least on rare occasions - felt pressure to work on their own from agencies and organisations.
- A total of 71% respondents report feeling at least sometimes that there is pressure on them to work on their own from agencies and organisations.

Q9

When I find myself working at an assignment on my own, and I feel that I should be working with a co-interpreter, I feel that the possible demands / risks / issues are...

Answered: 36 Skipped: 2

For this question, respondents could enter their own responses into a text comment box. Responses for this question have been thematically analysed in relation to the various points made within each response, with some responses carrying multiple themes.

By far the most common theme in respondents' answers is **quality and accuracy**. Possible issues linked to quality and accuracy were mentioned by 26 (68% of) respondents. Some of the specific issues raised were:

- *"I perform under standard... poor clarity /misinterpretation."*
- *"Increase of information becoming less clear, and quality decreases."*
- *"Inaccuracies [kick in] after 20 mins."*
- *"For service users: poorer quality of interpretation and potential consequences of this."*
- *"Inability to maintain standards throughout the assignment."*
- *"Overworking myself, which would in turn have a detrimental effect on the quality of my interpreting."*
- *"My interpreting skills are compromised and undermined - [there is a] risk of missing information and depletion of the quality of interpretation."*

A very common theme was **physical pain or RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury)**, mentioned by 15 (or 39% of) respondents. Under this theme, some specific issues raised were:

- *"The physical stress and fatigue that come with long periods of intense interpretations."*
- *"Pains in my shoulders and arms."*
- *"Sore joints."*
- *"Affects my physical health - neck and shoulder tension."*
- *"I suffer physically and emotionally from being put in such positions."*

Another popular theme was **fatigue**, mentioned by 14 (or 37% of) respondents:

- *"Quality reduction due to cognitive and physical fatigue."*
- *"Endurance, fatigue ... Cortisol overload due to prolonged work."*
- *"Exhaustion."*

An equal number of respondents (11, or 29% of the total) mentioned issues related to **mental health**, including these specific issues: ¹⁵

- “[There is] both a mental and physical demand from dealing with an intense flow of information / dynamics, which is still felt after the assignment is completed.”
- “Mental health suffers.”
- “Headaches, difficulty thinking afterwards.”
- “Poorer concentration.”
- “Stress...”

Other respondents (6, or 16%) worried that if they accept a booking working alone where it was inappropriate, that this would **set a precedent** that agencies or booking organisations would use in future to justify booking an inappropriate number of interpreters:

- “Organisers assume all is well and think using one interpreter is something that can be repeated ... observers think that this is proper practice.”
- “It gives the organisation a misguided view that it is ok to have 1 interpreter.”
- “I am setting a bad standard for interpreter awareness, and for interpreters who may come after me.”

Another theme was **ability to manage and control the interpreting situation**, and how much more difficult this is when working alone, a theme raised by 7 (13% of) respondents:

- “There is no support so I may need to clarify more often.”
- “[It is] difficult to interpret and intervene when the deaf client wishes to make comments at the same time.”
- “Big meetings [are more] difficult to control.”
- “Managing breaks by interrupting the meeting, and the organisers attitudes towards interpreters’ breaks [are issues].”
- “When asking for more breaks than what clients might be used to in a two-interpreter situation... this [can be] seen as disruptive [and] this could lead to a hesitation in asking for appropriate breaks.”
- “The risk of breaks not being given, so proceedings aren’t disrupted.”

¹⁵ Please note that some comments from respondents had aspects that related to the three themes of fatigue, pain / RSI and mental health equally, or there was considerable overlap. The authors have done their best to appropriately score these three themes within the survey as a result.

Three respondents (8% of the total) raised points around **monitoring of interpreting output**, which is rendered more difficult when working solo:

- *"Accuracy may be affected as there is no one to monitor my interpreting performance."*
- *"No opportunity to catch mistakes that I may make and be unaware of."*
- *"The quality is compromised. It is very stressful. There is no one monitoring me."*

Specific concerns around **the professionalism of the interpreter** and **the workings of professional interpreters** were mentioned in 11 (29% of) respondents' answers. These covered such areas as relations between interpreters and agencies / organisations:

- *"There's only so many times you can say no, then agencies / organisations stop asking for you."*
- *"Agencies / organisations don't care, due to costs."*
- *"[There is also an] issue of our profession not being taken seriously, as we are willing to work in sub-ideal situations."*

The dangers of working at a sub-standard level and this affecting the perception and reputation of interpreters was also mentioned:

- *"The quality of the interpretation can drop, which may cause issues for the interpreter's reputation."*
- *"I lose credibility as a good interpreter with both / all parties."*
- *"I let the profession down by poor standards."*

The ramifications for interpreters' ability to make a living in the long term was mentioned – as was interpreters' own culpability on occasion for accepting such conditions:

- *"Potential loss of future earnings, as [you need] time off due to [physical] recovery."*
- *"All of us interpreters are guilty of working solo all day, every day, on our own."*

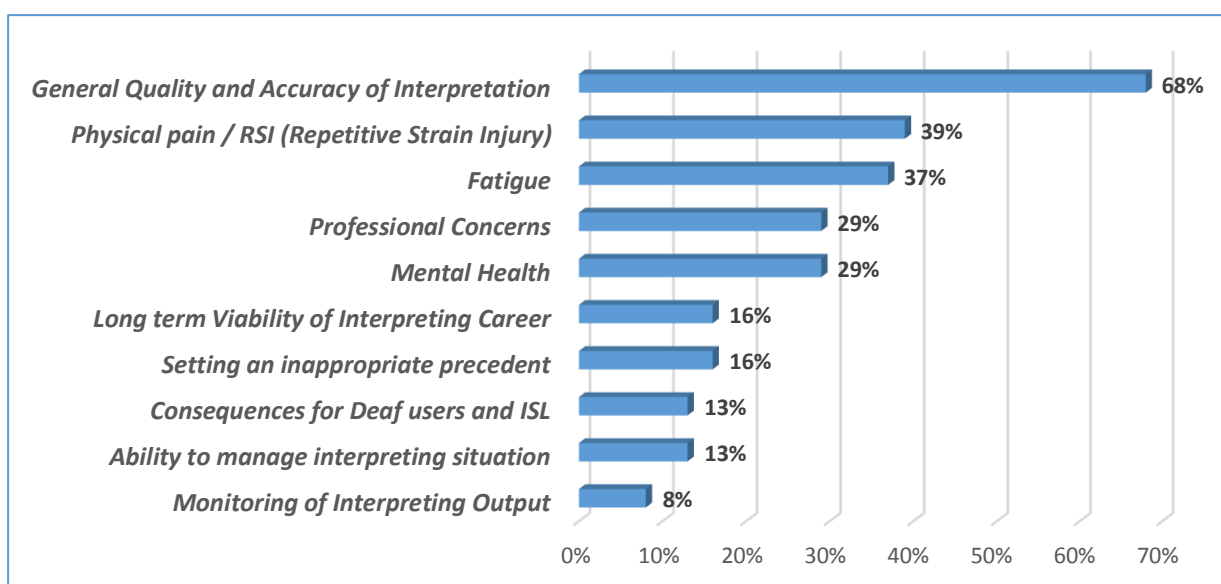
Specific **consequences for Deaf users of interpreting services**, and indeed **consequences for ISL**, were raised by 5 (13% of) respondents:

- *"Deaf participants usually suffer most in terms of missing information due to my tiredness."*
- *"Deaf / hearing clients are not accurately portrayed in my work due to [mental] saturation."*
- *"Deaf service users may be made to feel like an economic burden [if more than one interpreter is asked for], and feel pressurised to accept poor quality standards."*
- *"Allowing such sessions to occur continues to keep ISL as a lower status language – [this] would not be asked of spoken language interpreters of high status languages, such as French and German."*

And the prospect of **interpreters being unable to continue in the job** due to the above factors is raised by 6 (16%) of respondents:

- *"Long-term burn out."*
- *"Demoralisation."*
- *"I begin to dislike the job, and may not stay in the profession as long as I would if it was well resourced."*

The following graph shows the themes raised in the answers to this question by frequency by which they arise:



Q10

What steps can I take to ensure that future assignments from this agency / organisation will have the appropriate number of interpreters?

Answered: 36 Skipped: 2

Again for this question, respondents could enter their own responses into a text comment box. Responses for this question have been thematically analysed for the various points made within each response, with some responses carrying multiple themes. We have arranged these steps into different categories of actions interpreters can take.

The first step is to **insist on as detailed information as possible about the assignment beforehand from agencies / client organisations**, in order that the correct number of interpreters can be gauged (mentioned by 7 respondents, or 19%):

- *“Ensure that I know fully what the assignment involves. Not just sketchy information.”*
- *“Request as full information as possible in order for me to make an informed decision regarding accepting the assignment.”*
- *“Be more assertive and request more information prior to accepting the assignment.”*
- *“Clearer information and contact numbers in advance.”*

Next, when it appears that an assignment requires more than one interpreter, **firmly and clearly request a co-interpreter (or other configuration of interpreters)** (mentioned by 8 respondents, or 22%):

- *“Make sure there is a co-interpreter before taking on the assignment.”*
- *“Demand them to provide a 2nd interpreter, but this is rarely an option especially outside of Dublin. “*
- *“Have to keep asking and pushing for it.”*
- *“Insist on the right numbers before accepting any assignment if more than one interpreter is appropriate.”*
- *“Keep asking for what is needed. I recently did a job that required a Deaf Interpreter. I asked for a Deaf Interpreter, confidently explained why it was necessary and then they agreed to it. It made all the difference!”*

It is considered important to also **educate the client organisation or agency about the need for more than one interpreter** (mentioned by 14 respondents, or 39%):

- *"Finding out the nature of interpretation and the information content as much as possible, discussing previous assignments and their impact on both interpreter and client, and providing recommendations for future assignments."*
- *"Offer advice to agency/organisation regarding the appropriate number of interpreters required."*
- *"Continue to provide materials in advance of each job clarifying the need for two interpreters."*
- *"Cite the ISO Standards on Interpreting."*
- *"Health & safety information must be [distributed] to all agencies."*
- *"Continue to educate/ inform the agency as to the benefits of 2+ interpreters. YES, it is a cost, however, it's an investment on a long-term basis for everyone concerned."*
- *"Set out a policy document, stating working policies, to send out with a quote when dealing with direct organisations."*
- *"Make sure that the agency/organisation get some feedback from deaf attendees about the number of interpreters."*

Six respondents (17%) mentioned the importance of giving **immediate feedback to organisations and clients** when they found that a situation was inappropriate for one interpreter working alone:

- *"When I have found myself in an inappropriate meeting I would state the need for two interpreters going forward, and if not implemented, I withdraw service."*
- *"Make sure to mention it at any breaks that you are doing your best, but that you really should have 2 interpreters."*
- *"I always contact them and express my concerns about the number of interpreters at the break of the assignment."*

However, when such steps fail to produce results, it is considered important by 7 respondents (or 19%) to simply **refuse to take on an assignment where working alone is inappropriate**:

- *"Say NO on every occasion..."*
- *"Refuse assignments when 2 interpreters are not provided through an agency but are needed."*
- *"[Stop taking on jobs in a particular setting] until a 2nd interpreter is provided, when it becomes apparent onsite that incorrect job information was provided (I know I don't practice this but think it's best option)."*

The importance of **collective action by interpreters, and standing together on issues of health and safety**, was highlighted by 5 respondents (or 14%):

- *“Interpreters should stick together and demand better conditions.”*
- *“Stand with colleagues to ensure that such assignments are not taken on by interpreters.”*
- *“Create an awareness within the interpreting community of the importance of providing the appropriate number of interpreters for an assignment and not to accept work without the adequate number of interpreters.”*
- *“Give fore warning and voice my concerns if issue persists with an agency such as CISLI.”*

In summary, the answers given by respondents to this question can be separated into categories of actions, and we can thus assemble a sequence of responses that practitioners can use:

Ensuring Health and Safety for Interpreting Practitioners

- 1) Insist on as **detailed information** as possible about the assignment beforehand from agencies or client organisations
- 2) Firmly and clearly **request a co-interpreter** (or other configuration of interpreters)
- 3) **Educate the client organisation or agency** about the need for more than one interpreter
- 4) **Give immediate feedback to client organisations and agencies** when finding yourself in a situation with inappropriate health and safety arrangements
- 5) **Refuse to take on an assignment** where working alone is inappropriate
- 6) **Seek collective action by interpreters**, standing together on issues of health and safety

Other Issues

Among the responses to the survey questions were comments and points that indicate more specific, issues within the professional interpreting scene which make safe working conditions difficult to implement:

"More often than it's the organisation that says that only one interpreter is required. This can be for many reasons - cost, seeing it as unnecessary, as advised by the Deaf person, as advised by previous interpreter. I would try and advise the organisation as to best practice. This can involve some tricky diplomacy as it may not be the advice that organisations want to hear, and sometimes there are protocols and nuances around status within organisations."

"Some colleges have 3-hour slots for some classes, and the lecturer would prefer to teach through in order to finish early, rather than give a break to the interpreter; the option of a second interpreter in education is disregarded."

"Unfortunately, I have found that the agency/organisation will often find someone who is willing to work solo, which can weaken the conviction of my case, and leads to little change in booking processes."

"Refuse to do the job? But then cowboys get the work..."

"At the end of the day we are the only ones who KNOW our job!"

These comments point to a number of issues:

- The **professional expertise of the interpreter** in deciding the most appropriate configuration **is being challenged or disregarded**.
- The **continual use of a single interpreter in educational interpreting settings** can lead to extreme challenges in regards to health and safety.
- **Agencies and organisations are disregarding health and safety concerns** by finding an interpreter willing to work solo.
- Related to the above, **interpreters are taking on such assignments solo, displaying ignorance of best practice, or inability for other reasons** (such as fear that agencies will utilise unqualified individuals instead) **to turn down such work**.

Conclusions

- We believe that the response rate was sufficient for us to stand over the validity of the survey results. The authors believe this survey to be a useful tool in looking at the area of health and safety and working conditions for sign language interpreters.
- The survey shows that **many interpreters are working regularly under conditions which respondents feel are harmful to health and safety:**
 - For two-hour assignments, 62% of respondents tend to work alone (with a break) - an arrangement felt to be harmful to health and safety by over a third of respondents (37%).
 - For three-hour assignments, 24% of respondents tend to work with a co-interpreter, but without breaks - an arrangement considered harmful to health and safety by 42% (nearly half) of respondents.
 - For three-hour assignments, 47% of respondents – almost half - mostly work on their own, with a break. This is an arrangement considered by a large majority, 68%, of respondents to be harmful to health and safety.
- The survey also shows that **there is a range of interpreting configurations and arrangements considered by interpreters to be best practice** in regards to health and safety:
 - There are encouraging signs that a greater awareness of health and safety (in terms of having a co-interpreter) is widely distributed about the profession. A total of 73% of respondents feel that two interpreters is the optimum configuration for two-hour assignments; a massive 92% of respondents feel that two interpreters is the optimum configuration for three-hour assignments.
 - It is however concerning that some interpreters continue to believe that one interpreter, rather than two, is the optimum solution for two- and three-hour

assignments. The point has been made by respondents that interpreters can set a precedent for an organisation to continue to demand that interpreters work alone. Ignorance about health and safety research for practitioners can contribute to this.

- An analysis of responses has identified that **in situations where health and safety requirements are not met, the chief concern of respondents was quality and accuracy of interpretation.** This reflects well on the practitioners who responded to the survey in terms of their commitment to providing a high quality, professional service.
- However, there is also **a large number of respondents who show great concern about physical pain / RSI, mental health, and fatigue.** These worries – combined with comments related to the viability of interpreting as a career, given these risks – show that there is a perception among many practitioners that these are serious issues, that can have a significant impact on retention of professional interpreters.
- It is clear that **agencies and client organisations are putting pressure on interpreters to work in unsuitable conditions.** 71% of respondents report feeling, at least sometimes, that there is pressure on them to work on their own from agencies and organisations. While certain agencies clearly state their health and safety conditions, it may be that when pressured, these rules can go by the wayside.
- In many discussions on sign language interpreting in Ireland in the last few years, the point has been strenuously made by many that there are **‘not enough interpreters’** for the amount of interpreting work that is being requested, and assignments go unfilled. While we would not at all dispute there are issues around supply, we also know – and can confirm from the results of this survey – that **many assignments that arise and are offered by agencies and organisations come with sub-standard conditions in relation to health and safety. Interpreters are becoming more confident in refusing such work.** Ensuring that assignments conform to health and safety standards will significantly increase the takeup for assignment that currently

may go unfilled. CISLI cannot endorse interpreters working in unsafe conditions, regardless of other external factors.

- Although there seems to be a significant number of respondents working in situations they admit are not ideal, there is a refreshing amount of determination (reflected in responses) to insist upon co-interpreters, to refuse assignments when none is provided, and it has been possible to construct **a series of steps – from the strategies used by practitioners – that may be of use to existing and future interpreters when insisting on health and safety and proper working conditions.**
- There has been **an identified need for collective action by interpreters** in this area. As a result, **CISLI** can learn from these responses and **prepare materials (including its upcoming Occupational Health and Safety Policy)** that will enable practitioners to insist on proper working configurations, especially in educating agencies and organisations.
- It has been shown that agencies and organisations do put pressure on interpreters to accept work where conditions are unsuitable for health and safety. **CISLI** can use the present Report to **work together with agencies and organisations to demonstrate practitioner concerns** and **push for acceptance of best practice standards** for its members and the wider community of practitioners.

Suggested Future Directions

- This Report should be read in conjunction with the upcoming CISLI Occupational Health and Safety Policy. More practical research on health effects on interpreters in Ireland should also be carried out to cover new areas, for example, health and safety concerns for interpreters working within IRIS (video relay interpreting services).
- One area not covered within this survey is differences (if any) in conditions and practices of Deaf interpreters relating to health and safety. This would form an illuminating contrast for this rapidly evolving field of interpreting practice.

- There was no attempt to gather information on the level of interpreting qualification, years of experience, preferred genre of interpreting etc. from respondents. This may have added interesting insights to see if various sectors of the profession had different views on, or differing experiences of, health and safety issues.
- Similarly, there was no geographical basis for the questions in the survey. Research done on comparative conditions in different parts of the country would be illuminating.

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Cormac Leonard, September 2017

