

Impact of Covid-19 on Working Practices of Signed Language Interpreters in Northern Ireland within the first year of the pandemic

Research report

Sally Gillespie, PhD

Lead Researcher

March 2022

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the **Department for Communities** for fully funding this much needed research.

Thanks to the research team, Lee, Roisin, Sheila and Janet for stepping up and working to very tight deadlines. Your insight and enthusiasm made this research a far more balanced and insightful project than it would otherwise have been.

Thanks to James Bailey for the encouragement to undertake this research.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Table of Figures	5
Background	7
Methodology	7
Results: Working Practices	10
Mode of work	10
Geographical remit	11
Impact of childcare on working conditions	13
Amount of work	14
-Loss/Gain comparison	14
-Enough	15
Recorded assignments	18
-Permission	18
-Renumeration	18
Adaption to remote interpreting	19
Risk of loss in the profession	20
Choice in accepting work	22
Financial support	23
Results: Physical and Mental Wellbeing	25
Physical wellbeing	25
Mental wellbeing	26
Professional support	28
Coworking	30
Results: Continued Professional Development	31

Access to CPD	31
Peer feedback	32
Shadowing	34
Conclusions	36
Working practices	36
Physical and Mental Wellbeing	39
Continued Professional Development	40
References	41
Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire	43

Table of Figures

Fig 1: Proportion of modes of work undertaken pre-pandemic, during the first year of the pandemic, and preference for the future	10
Fig 2: Proportion of work undertaken in different geographical remits, during the first year of the pandemic	11
Fig3: Graphic taken from Gillespie (2018) showing the dispersion of interpreters across NI where more pale colours show a low/no population of interpreters	12
Fig 3: Impact of caring responsibilities on working conditions	13
Fig 4: Change to amount of work undertaken in March 20-21 compared to a previous typical year	14
Fig 5: Loss/Gain range and average, of work secured in the first year of the pandemic	15
Fig 6: Reported levels of satisfaction in the amount of work secured, by mode	16
Fig 7: Required areas of development identified by respondents	19
Fig 8: Reported risk of loss to the profession	21
Fig 9: Reported perceived sufficiency of support funding	23
Fig 10: Experience of increased pain/discomfort March 20-21	25
Fig 11: Experience of increased stress, anxiety or depression March 20-21	26
Fig 12: Reported change in confidence	27
Fig 13: Current sources of professional support	28
Fig 14: Common barriers to further support	29
Fig 15: Reported frequency of provision of co-workers (when required)	30
Fig 16: Proportion of respondents who found CPD easier to access, March 20-21	31

Background

This research is funded by the Department for Communities, Sign Language Partnership Group. It has been led by Dr Sally Gillespie, PhD, as an independent researcher. The study was carried out by a research team, assembled for this study;

Sally Gillespie

Lee Campbell

Roisin McGonegal

Sheila McCormick

Janet Beck

This study seeks to explore how working practices among BSL and ISL interpreters in Northern Ireland has changed since the beginning of the pandemic. The unprecedented disruption that the pandemic has created within the sign language profession in Northern Ireland has been largely undocumented. While the effects of the pandemic are continuing to be felt throughout society, this study focus on the initial impact of COVID-19 on the working practices of interpreters and how this compares to pre pandemic practices. It also questions the working practices professionals would like to see in the future.

Methodology

The primary tool for data collection was an online survey. This survey was designed by the research team to capture the key areas of concern for the group, as practitioners. The identified areas are; *working practices, physical and mental wellbeing, and continued professional development.*

The survey was promoted within the two major professional associations for sign language interpreters (SLIs); Visual Language Professionals (VLP) and Association for Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI), as well as on a WhatsApp

group for SLIs in NI. The same promotion network was used for the recruitment of the research team and all applicants were accepted. By promoting in this way, the survey results can be considered representative of members of both associations and interpreters who are members of neither. The definition criteria for participants was kept intentional wide reaching and participants were invited to participate if they self identified as a 'sign language interpreter working in Northern Ireland'. This was done in order to capture the range of experiences within the profession, which may have been missed if stipulations over membership affiliation or registration status were introduced. Furthermore, due to data sensitivity, names were not collated against data so a stricter criteria could not be verified, had it been adopted.

The survey was built on ArcGIS Survey123. The survey was open for one week, during which multiple requests to participate and reminders were sent out on the promotion networks, as described above.

The format of the presented results within this report do not directly relate to the survey questions. In some instances responses to multiple survey questions have been collated to facilitate comparison and analysis. The full survey is contained in Appendix 1: Survey.

The survey received 19 responses which were submitted between 8th and 15th March 2020.

The National Registers for Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) no longer routinely publish registration statistics however the last published data (March 2019) stated there were 32 RSLI and 4 trainees registered in Northern Ireland. To provide further context from which to derive a response rate, there were 41 participants in the WhatsApp group that formed part of the promotion network for this survey however some members of the group do not currently work in Northern Ireland and therefore would not meet the criteria to participate in this

research. The response rate should therefore be considered as between 53-46%.

Results

Results: Working Practices



Mode of work

The first section of the research asked interpreters about the proportion of the work that was, and is, carried out in person (face to face), remotely as a private booking, and remotely through a specialist remote agency (eg SignVideo, SignLive, InterpreterNow etc.) The responses are shown as percentages in the graphic below.

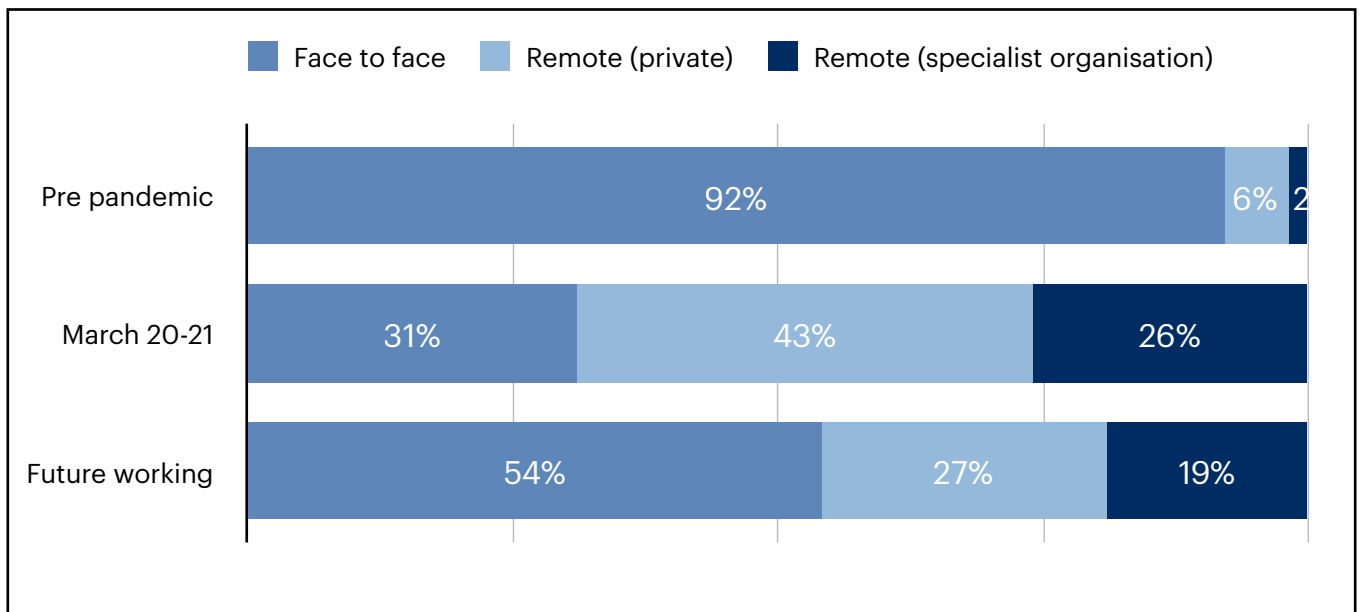


Fig 1: Proportion of modes of work undertaken pre-pandemic, during the first year of the pandemic, and preference for the future

These results show a considerable swing away from face to face work during the pandemic (-61%) and a correspondingly large increase in the amount of remote work being undertaken. Strikingly, when asked about preference for working post pandemic, across all categories the responses

were almost average the previous responses regarding the previous two years. This shows that, despite the changes to the profession necessitated by the pandemic, the change in working habits, in part, became preference.



Geographical remit

Participants were asked about the geographical spread of their work, pre and during the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, the majority (52%) of interpreters in Northern Ireland, worked across Northern Ireland only and two respondents (11%) reported that they did not work in areas of NI, other than their local area. Around 1/5 worked in GB and Ireland, in addition to in NI and one person reported to work globally. Two respondents to the survey did not work in NI prior to the pandemic.

During the first year of the pandemic the majority geographical remit changed to NI, GB and Ireland (42%) and the number of interpreters in Northern Ireland increased.

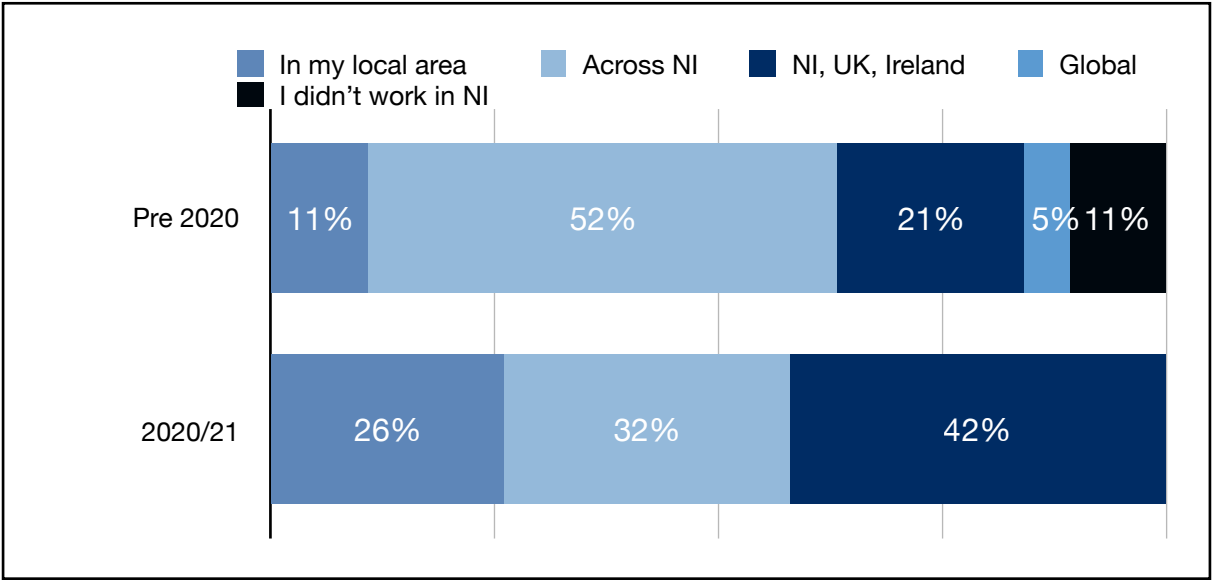


Fig 2: Proportion of work undertaken in different geographical remits, during the first year of the pandemic

The overall number reporting that they only work in NI decreased (from 63% to 58% which is -5%) following the pandemic however within that, more people reported working only in their local area (+15%) meaning the number of interpreters willing to work across NI was even more significantly reduced (-20%). This means that, despite the increase in the number of interpreters in NI, the availability of interpreters in Northern Ireland was potentially negatively impacted for two reasons. Firstly, the increase in geographical remit means that more interpreters time was being spent outside of Northern Ireland. Secondly, the increase in the proportion of interpreters working only within their local area suggests that areas without local interpreter populations would have experienced reduced availability.

This is of particular concern in the context of Gillespie (2018)'s work, which highlighted the concentration of interpreters in the Belfast and L/Derry areas and the large swathes of NI without interpreters which could have been adversely affected by the shift in geographical areas in which interpreters were working.

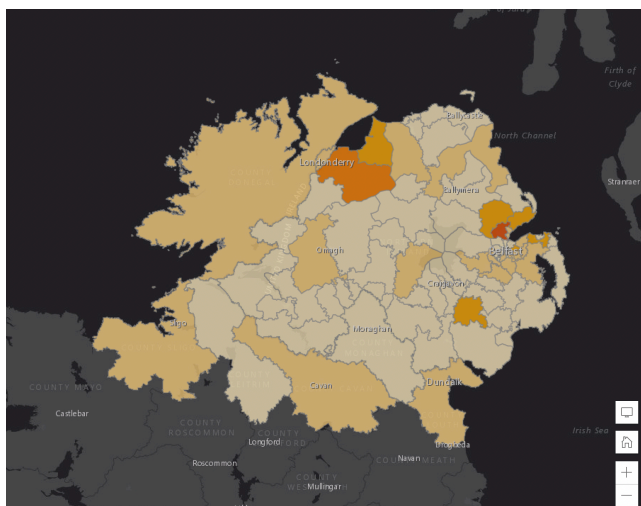


Fig3: Graphic taken from Gillespie (2018) showing the dispersion of interpreters across NI where more pale colours show a low/no population of interpreters



Impact of childcare on working conditions

Participants were asked whether childcare or caring responsibilities had impacted their work during the first year of the pandemic. 37% of respondents reported that they did not have caring responsibilities and a further 21% reported no change to their working hours due as a result of their caring responsibilities. Of the 42% who did report having their work affected by their caring responsibilities, 11% reported more than one of the following impacts.

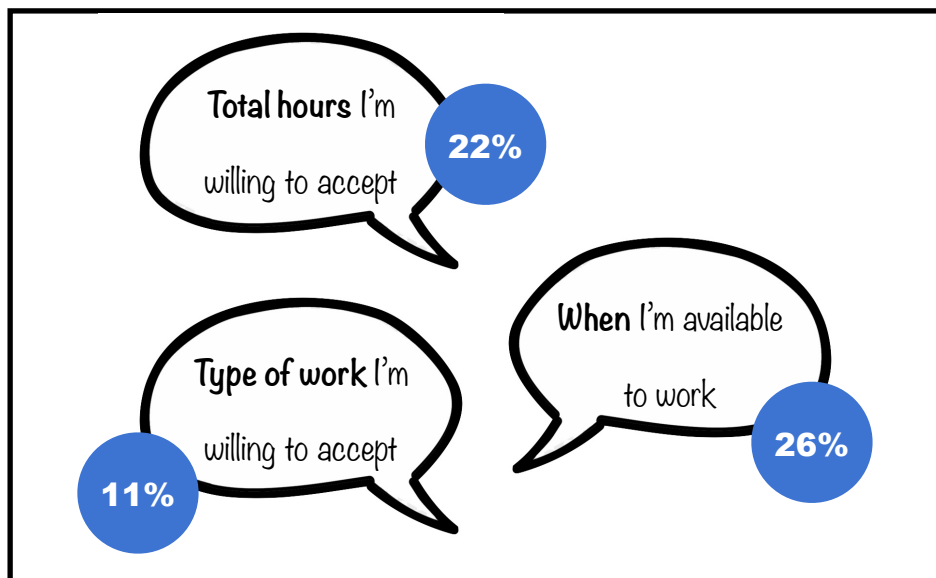


Fig 3: Impact of caring responsibilities on working conditions



Amount of work

Participants were asked a series of questions to gain understanding of the perceived impact of the pandemic on their workload. Participants were asked how they compared the amount of work undertaken against a previous 'typical' year. The term 'typical' was used to account for varied personal circumstances such as career breaks. Participants were then asked to comment on the percentage loss or gain in work. The below graph shows the number of participants reporting a loss in their work, no change or a gain between March 20-21.

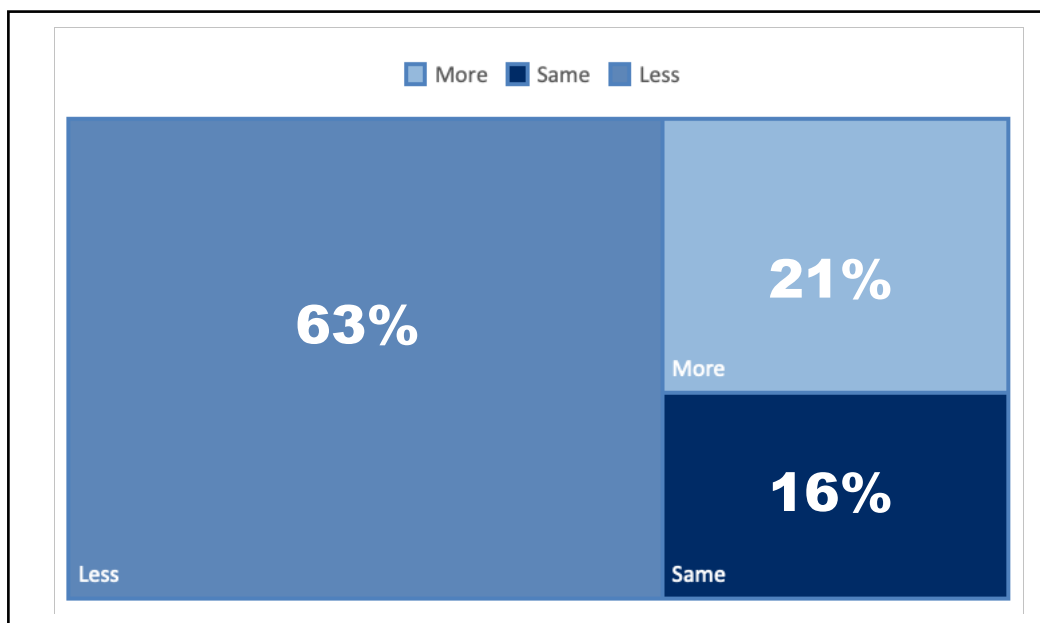


Fig 4: Change to amount of work undertaken in March 20-21 compared to a previous typical year



-Loss/Gain comparison

Participants were then asked the follow-up question of, by how much was the increased or decrease they reported. Responses ranged from 100% increase to 90% decrease and averaged at a 23% loss in work per person, as shown in figure 5 below.

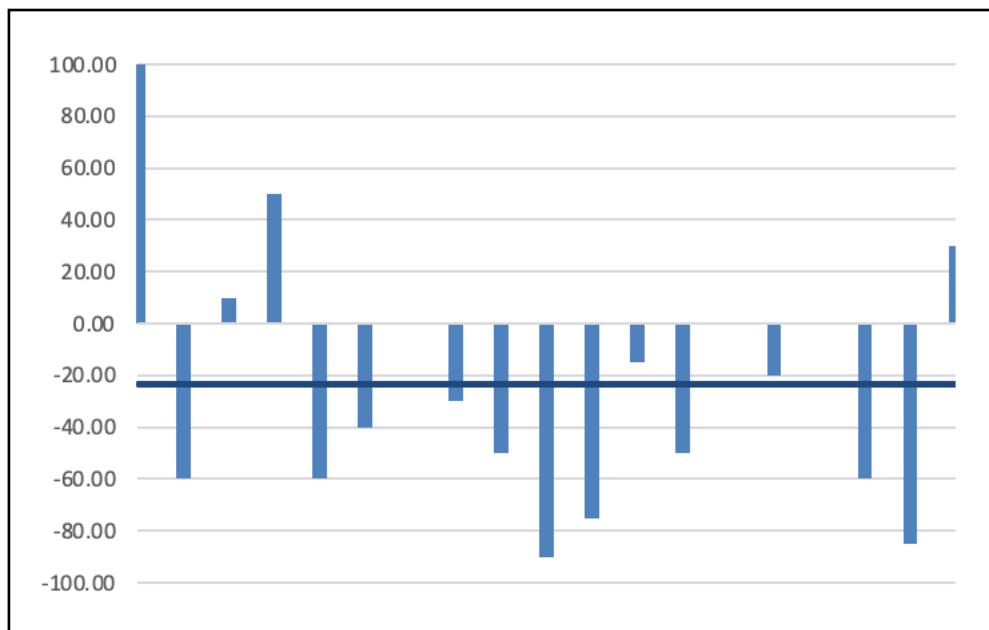


Fig 5: Loss/Gain range and average, of work secured in the first year of the pandemic

These findings show that the experience of interpreters in the pandemic is not uniform. There were significant gains (one participant experiencing a 100% uplift in work) and there were significant losses (one participant experienced a 90% loss of work). However it should be remembered that the majority of interpreters (63%) experienced a loss in work which contributing to the average loss of 23%.



-Enough

The following section begins to consider sustainability of the profession and market saturation vs demand. Face to face work and remote work were considered separately in this section of the questionnaire. For each type of work, participants were asked if the amount of work they got was; enough (as much as they wanted), enough (but would have preferred more), or not enough work. The results are displayed below in both percentage and total number of respondents, and in simplified categories of enough, not enough, and not applicable.

	Face to Face		Remote	
Yes- as much work as wanted	26% (5)	53% (10)	63% (12)	74% (14)
Yes but more preferred	26% (5)		11% (2)	
Not enough work	42% (8)	42% (8)	21% (4)	21% (4)
N/A	5% (1)	5% (1)	5%. (1)	5%. (1)

Fig 6: Reported levels of satisfaction in the amount of work secured, by mode

There was a higher overall satisfaction rate in the amount of work secured remotely (74%) than face to face (53%). This research did not explore the reasons why this was the case and may have been due to many variables, such as geographical limits (as documented earlier in this research), limited opportunities to work face to face, or differing exceptions of the definition of 'enough' for each mode of working.

The vast majority of respondents were willing to accept both face to face, and remote work. This demonstrates a high degree of flexibility within the interpreting profession and willingness to adapt to the needs of their customers.

Points of interest: the participant who reported a 90% drop in work was only willing to accept f2f work. Only one other participant reported to only have accepted one mode of interpreting work- in their case, only accepting remote work. Their reported loss of work was much less at 40%. The overall trend from the previous question was that more people were satisfied with the amount of remote work that they got, than the amount of face to face work. This helps to explain why the experiences of two interpreters who each only accepted one mode of work, were so different and suggests that there

were more opportunities to work remotely during the first year of the pandemic than opportunities to work face to face.



Recorded assignments

-Permission

Participants were asked whether they had been recorded while working in the past year and whether permission was asked before being recorded.

12 of the 19 respondents (63%) reported to have been recorded in the past year, while working however of those recorded only 20% said they were always asked permission to be recorded.

Although it is not possible to ascertain whether recording of interpreters increased in the first year of the pandemic, as baseline data is not available, the prevalence of interpreters being recorded without giving permission is concerning. The National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) state, on their website, “If you are planning on recording or live streaming the event you must inform the interpreters in advance and agree consent.” 58% of respondents who had been recorded stated that they were not always asked permission.



-Remuneration

Participants were then asked, if they had been recorded, did they believe they had been fairly remunerated. Further to the above guidance, NUBSLI also states the following on their website.

“BSL/English interpreters reserve the right to decline to be filmed or otherwise recorded whilst working (except when such recording is inherent within legal proceedings). Consent to recordings intended for broadcast or publication should be sought from the interpreter(s) in advance. *Such recordings are likely to incur an additional fee.*” NUBSLI, 2022. (emphasis added)

This research revealed 62%, of those who had been recorded, felt they had not been fairly remunerated. Of those who felt they had been fairly remunerated, only 1 person reported that they had charged an increased fee.

Others were satisfied with charging their usual fee. This highlights a disconnect between NUBSLI’s statement that recording an interpreter is ‘likely to incur an additional fee’ and what some interpreters in Northern Ireland believe to be fair. The more pressing concern with these figures is that, routinely the majority of interpreters who are being recorded are discontented with the remuneration they receive but have not taken action to increase the fee they charge.



Adaption to remote interpreting

Survey participants were asked what skills or knowledge they felt they still needed to develop to be able to effectively work remotely. 47% (9) identified development areas, 5% (1) stated they completed significant training prior to the pandemic and 5% (1) stated they weren’t sure about their development needs. The main topics mentioned by the 47% of respondents are shown below.

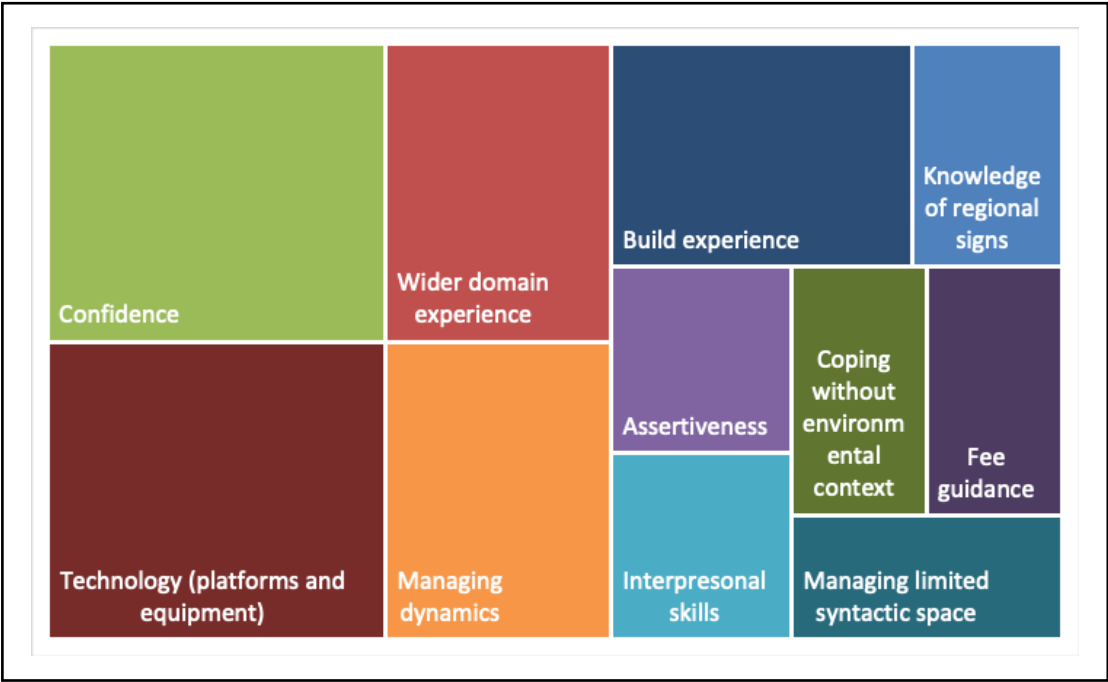
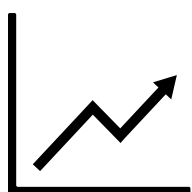


Fig 7: Required areas of development identified by respondents

The most frequently mentioned areas of development were confidence and technology. Mentions of technology included the need for better equipment, and training on relevant software and hardware.

“More knowledge around technology. I’m a qualified interpreter but that training did not cover technology and the various platforms and equipment that is used remotely ” (Participant response)



Risk of loss in the profession

The chronic limited pool of sign language interpreters in Northern is widely documented and accepted. Following huge changes to society and the profession during the pandemic, the research team felt it was extremely important to consider the risk of loss to the profession. The research question posed to participants was not time specific and did not mention ‘since the pandemic’ as it was decided to be more valuable to use the opportunity of this survey to assess the general risk of loss to the profession in order to gain wider insight. The participants were asked whether they had considered applying for, or retraining for, non-interpreting work. The results of this question can be considered alongside the responses to the question of ‘enough’ work, earlier in the research. The only time bound element of the question was in the final of the multiple choice answers which stated ‘in the last year’ in order to capture actual loss to the profession, in the past year.

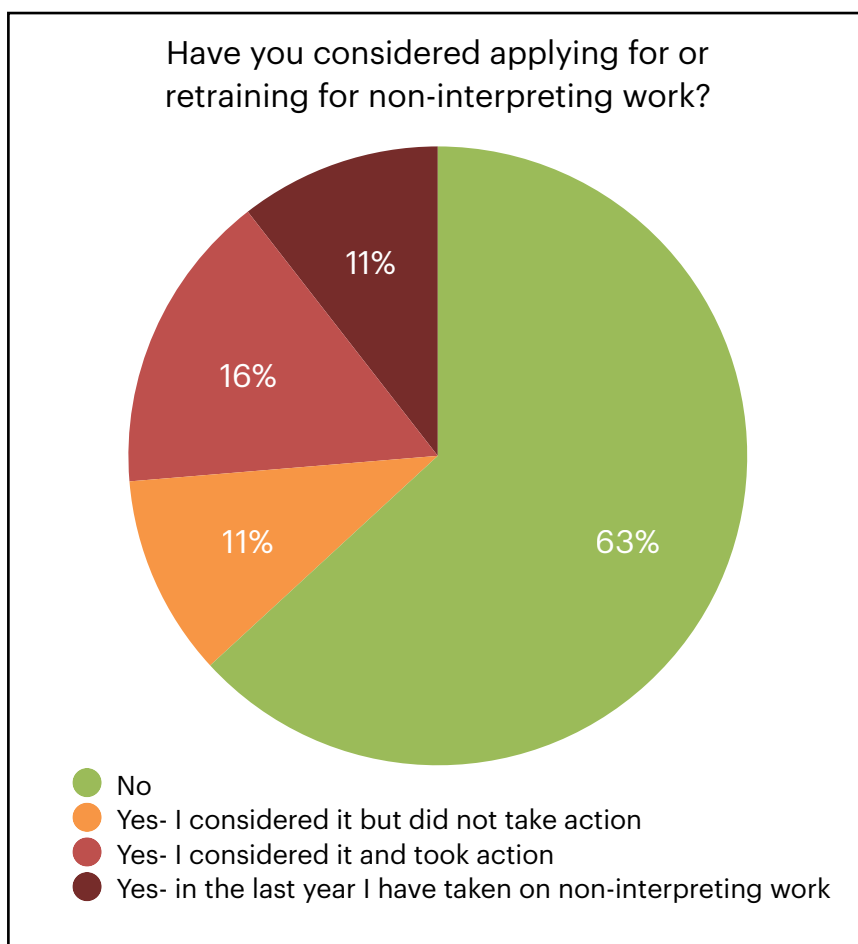


Fig 8: Reported risk of loss to the profession

Approximately 2/3 of respondents had not considered alternative work however, the 38% who had at least considered work outside the profession should be noted. Of the 38%, 27% had taken action and 11% (2 participants) had taken alternative work. This represents actual loss to the profession. Regardless of whether the loss is temporary, permanent, full time or part time, it is significant. The small sample size within this research should not distract from this finding, particularly in the context of the existing limited availability of interpreters. Any loss to the profession is likely to cause significant impacts for service users. This demonstrated loss is of concern.



Choice in accepting work

Participants were asked whether they had felt pressured to accept work that they weren't comfortable with. Reassuringly, 79% reported that they hadn't felt pressure to accept work they were uncomfortable with, however the 21% who had felt pressured had had their choice in accepting work compromised. The cause of feeling pressured to accept this work were cited as, financial pressure, concern that alternative cover wouldn't be found, time pressure, and fear of de-skilling.

"I have been stretched out of my 'comfort zone' in the past year grappling with Covid related vocabulary and the high pressure situations of relaying critical - life and death - information about the pandemic. Words and contexts were new and shifting and therefore I was stretched. I found support with colleagues and the Deaf community in terms of understanding and translating this new information. Being taken out of your comfort zone is not a negative thing, how ever it is very stressful."

Research participant



Financial support

Participants were asked whether they applied for support funding and whether or not they considered the amount they received was sufficient. Example of support schemes were mentioned in the question, specifically the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, and the Department for Communities Sign Language Partnership Group funding.

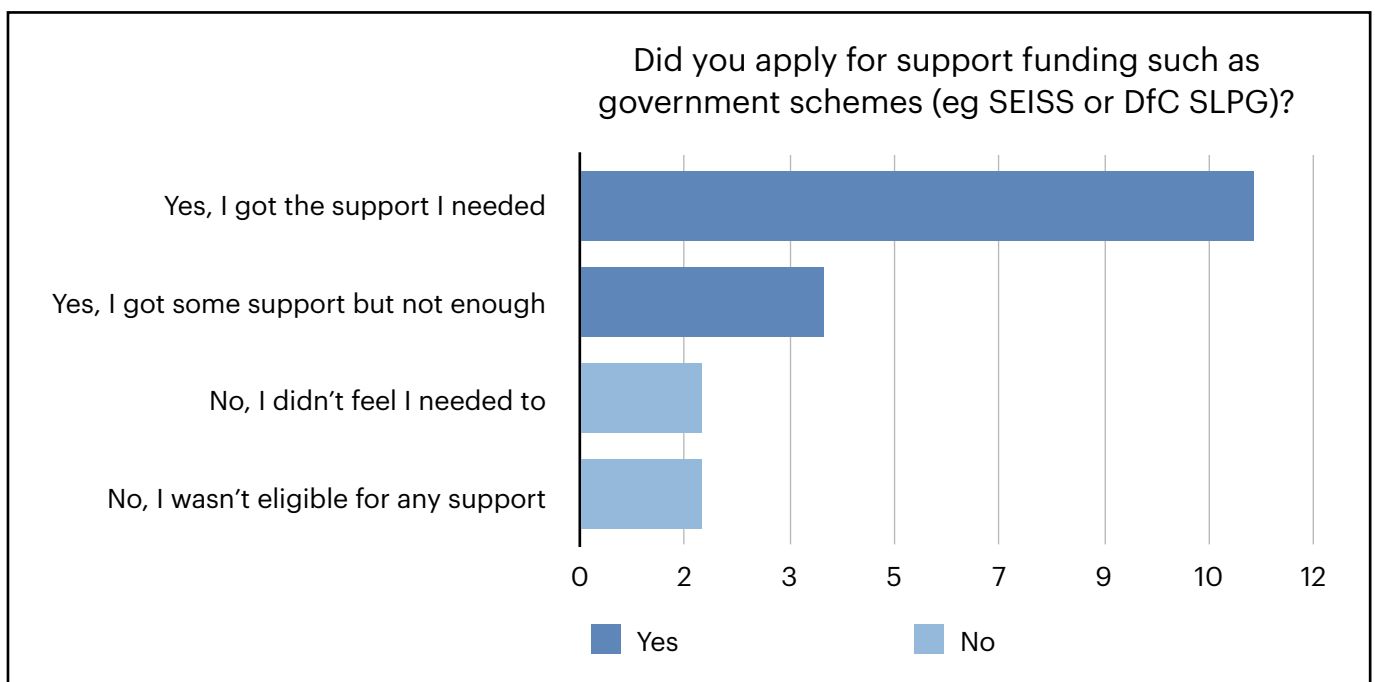


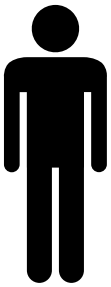
Fig 9: Reported perceived sufficiency of support funding

11% (2) reported that they had no need for support funding.

Of those who did require funding, 88% reported receiving all or some of the support they needed, 73% of whom reported receiving the support they needed. The remaining 12% reported being ineligible for support.

This identifies a high degree of support available to sign language interpreters during the pandemic and high demand for that support (89% reporting need for financial support).

While it is impossible to comment on individual circumstances, the two responses stating they were ineligible for support is surprising as the SLPG support scheme offered by DfC to interpreters was extremely broad in its offering.



Results: Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Physical wellbeing

63% of participants reported that they had experienced increased pain or discomfort in the last year while working remotely, mentioning trapped tension, RSI, migraines, eye conditions and back pain.

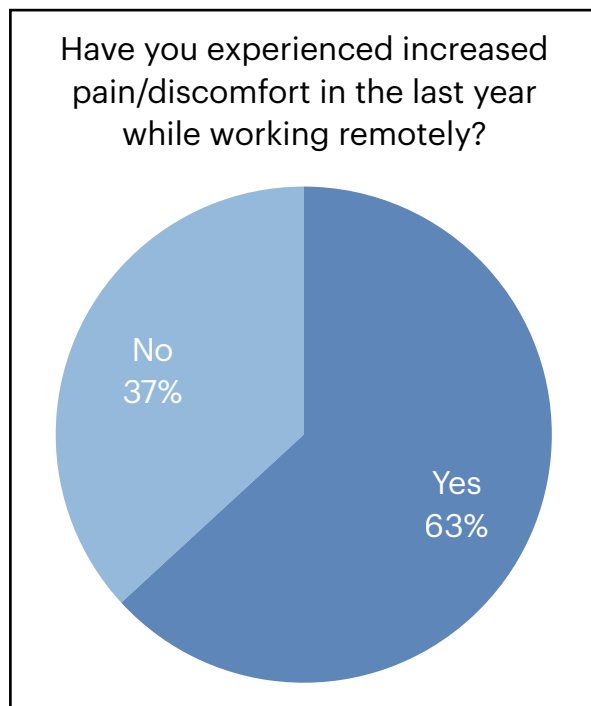


Fig 10: Experience of increased pain/discomfort March 20-21

In addition to the reported pain and discomfort, 2 respondents mentioned that they were proactively taking steps to manage the risk of physical injury as a result of working, citing proactively stretching and exercising to avoid injury, and reducing working hours (see full comment below). The participant comments on the tension between outlaying costs to buying equipment, alongside the need to limit the amount of work undertaken for self care.

“Got an additional 'blue' screen for the computer, bought a new chair, but decided to work less hours to reduce the amount of screen time I had”

Research participant



Mental wellbeing

Further to physical wellbeing, participants were asked to comment on their mental wellbeing during the first year of the pandemic. Specifically whether, compared to a previous typical year, had they felt increased stress, anxiety or depression since March 2020 while working as an interpreter. 74% reported that they had.

Compared to a previous typical year working, have you felt increased stress, anxiety or depression since March 2020 while working as an interpreter?

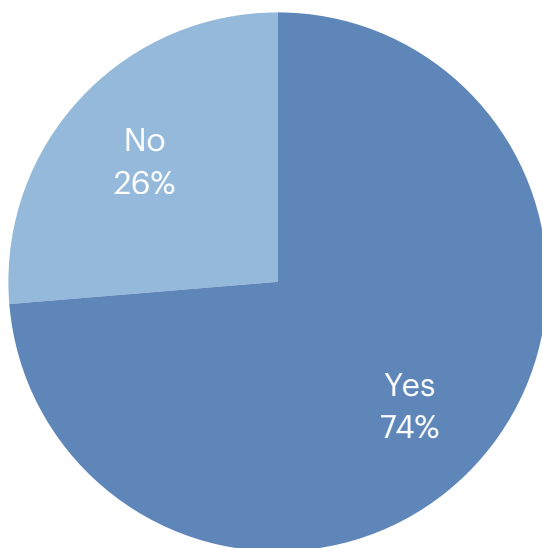


Fig 11: Experience of increased stress, anxiety or depression March 20-21

Participants were given the opportunity to comment on their answer to the above question. Comments mentioned stress due to lack of work and deskilling as contributing factors.

The high prevalence of increased stress, anxiety or depression identified in this report correlates with increased anxiety in the general population during this time. NISRA (2020) (page 26) reports, “The average (mean) wellbeing rating for ‘anxiety’ (3.33) was significantly higher than that reported by NISRA for the 2018/19 year (2.83) (Table 1).”

Participants in this research were asked whether their confidence had increased, decreased or remained the same over the first year of the pandemic. A response option was also provided for participants to state that they didn’t work prior to March 2020 however this was not selected by any participants and therefore has been omitted from the graphic below.

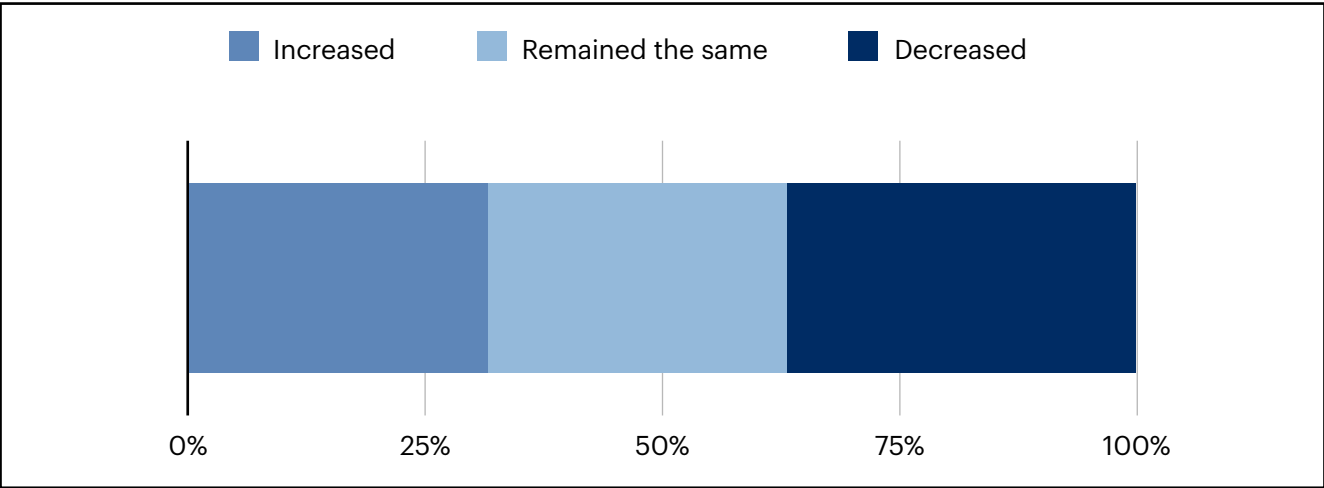


Fig 12: Reported change in confidence

The results of this question were striking since the number of responses were consistent in each category (32%) with the exception of a slightly higher number reporting a decrease in confidence (37%). This shows the experience

of interpreters during the first year of the pandemic was not consistent throughout the profession.

Professional support

Participants were asked 3 questions in relation to professional support; What sources they currently have, what additional support they would like to see and what is stopping that support being put in place. Of these, a response was only required for the first question, and the other two were optional.

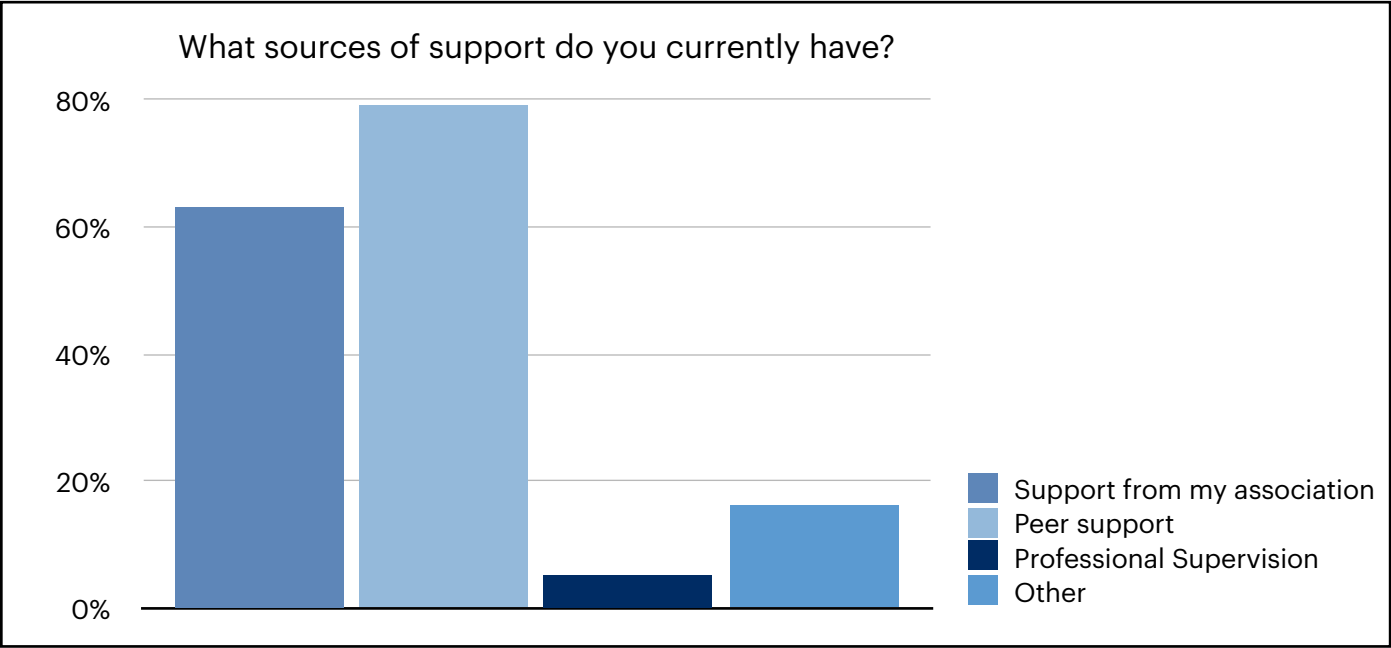


Fig 13: Current sources of professional support

Crucially, for the first of these questions, participants could select all answers that apply. This reveals that, while the most common support, peer support, is utilised by 79%, 21% of the profession report feeling unsupported by their peers. One of the participants who selected ‘other’ commented, “I don’t really have any peer support really”. Another notable result in this category is the extremely low uptake of professional supervision; only one participant listing it as a current source of support.

Of the two remaining participants who listed 'other' only one commented to say that they selected 'other' to represent support they receive from their remote team.

When asked what support provision interpreters would like to implement in the future, 60% mentioned professional supervision. This was the only comment mentioned by more than one participant. Other comments mentioned a desire for support regarding technology, wellbeing, interpreter rights, language development and engagement with professional body members. One respondent stated that they already felt well supported.

In response to what is stopping the support being put in place, the most popular responses are displayed in the word cloud image below.



Fig 14: Common barriers to further support

In addition to the themes highlighted in the word cloud above, the following comment was offered, *"Money and relationships with in the interpreting community. Hard to ask for peer support if you don't feel the relationships are developed enough, or there are all."*

On a more positive note, another participant commented, *"I am in the process of asking for such"*.

Coworking

Participants were asked about the provision of a coworker when one was required.

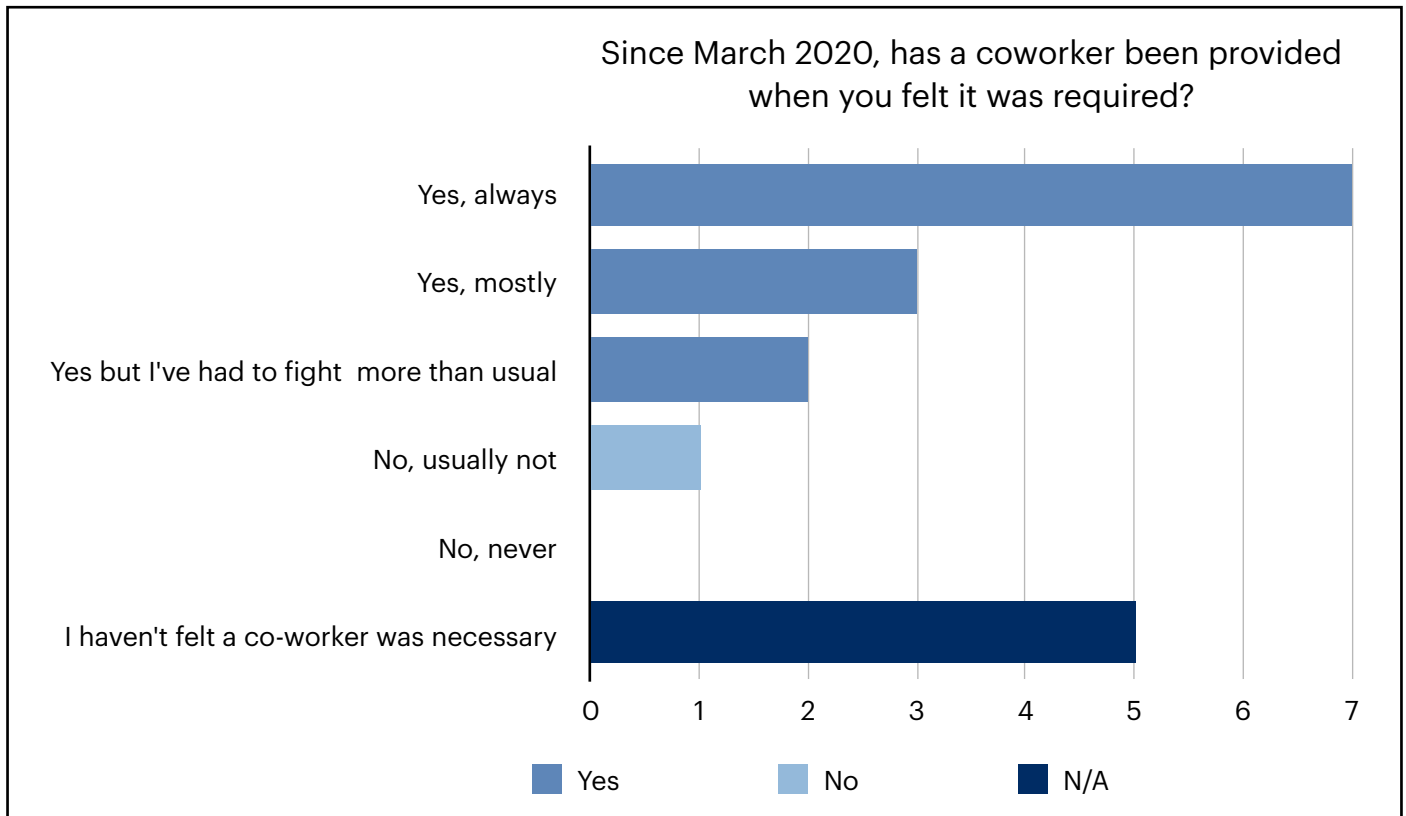


Fig 15: Reported frequency of provision of co-workers (when required)

The results suggest that, for the majority of instances when a co-worker was required, one was provided. 5 respondents (26%) said they hadn't felt a coworker was necessary since March 2020. Of the 74% who had felt an interpreter was required, 54% had always had a coworker provided when it was felt to be necessary and 92% reported they'd had a coworker at least most of time, when one was required.

Results: Continued Professional Development

Access to CPD

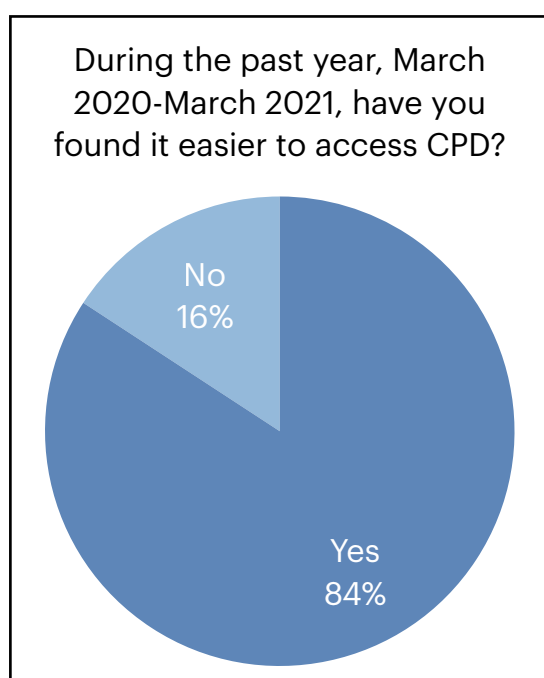


Fig 16: Proportion of respondents who found CPD easier to access, March 20-21

Participants were asked whether they had found it easier to access CPD in the first year of the pandemic. There was a free text box for participants to comment on their answer.

The majority highlighted the decreased cost and increased opportunity and variety of CPD available in the year 20/21. One participant mentioned that increased opportunities had been provided by their membership organisation as well as from peer initiatives. Other comments included,

"Why wasn't this support available pre covid? Development is a necessity pandemic or no pandemic."

"There's an abundance of CPD on offer. However due to childcare constraints or timings of the training ie late evenings I can't attend."

“... screen time can be tiring for training over 2.5hours with little breaks”

“I have taken no formal CPD’s this year - I have been too busy.”

Separate to this research, Department for Communities provided a budget for interpreters in NI to arrange CPD training for the profession. Subjects and timings for these sessions were agreed by peer discussion in order to accommodate the development needs and availability of those interested in attending. It is therefore unsurprising that 84% reported that accessing CPD was easier to access.

Peer feedback

With the increase of remote working, and the generally lower levels of interactions with individuals outside your household, the research team felt it was important to explore the prevalence of peer feedback in the profession.

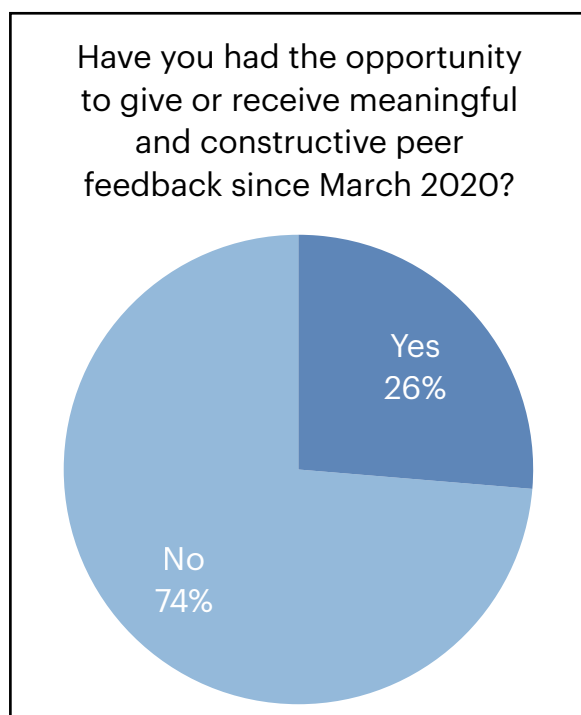


Fig 17: Prevalence of peer feedback in March 20-21

The results of this question highlighted a low prevalence of peer feedback being exchanged. Only 26% had engaged in peer feedback in the year March 2020-March 2021. This is surprising in the context of other findings in this report. Since 92% of interpreters reported having a co-worker at least most of the time one was required, the low prevalence of feedback being exchanged is not likely due to lack of opportunity. This conclusion is further supported by the high number of people who stated that peers were a current source of professional support which suggests that the low prevalence of feedback is not due to a lack of support or trust between peers. It cannot be concluded from this research as to why peer feedback is so low however, it is worth noting that, of the aforementioned CPD sessions that were funded by the Department for Communities, one session was agreed to focus on skills for providing feedback. The session, delivered by Brett Best and Rachel Wilkins, 'Fostering a Supportive Industry: Peer Feedback' was well attended. Both the high attendance at the session, and by the very nature that it had been agreed as a worthwhile topic to include in the CPD programme, suggest there was an area in need of development within the profession. With this knowledge, it is proposed that the low prevalence of feedback was due to a lack of experience and knowledge of how to undertake peer feedback.

Shadowing

Considering the same context as the previous question- the increase of remote working, and the generally lower levels of interactions with individuals outside your household, the research team felt it was also important to explore the prevalence of shadowing opportunities in the profession. Participants were asked whether, in the first year of the pandemic, they had the opportunity to shadow peers.

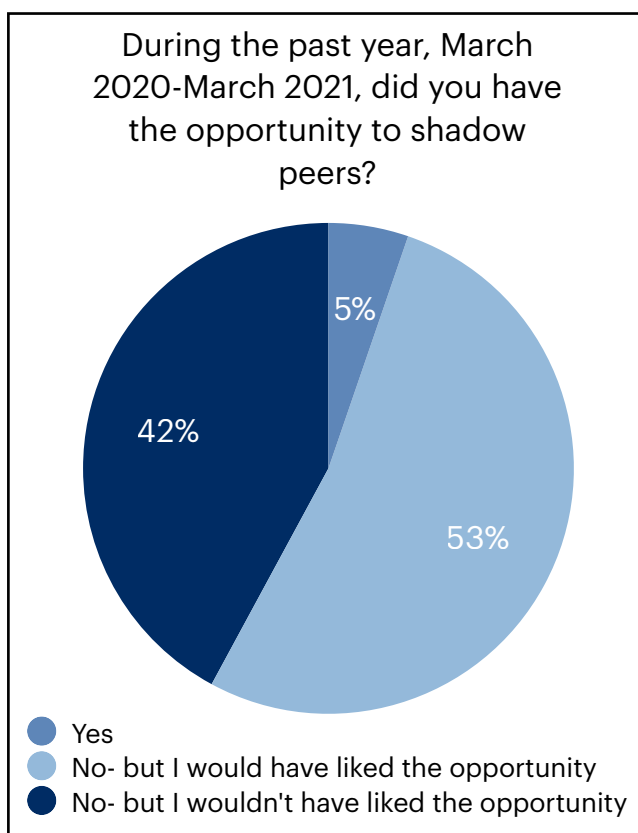


Fig 18: Shadowing opportunities in March 20-21

42% reported that they would not have wanted the opportunity to shadow. Of the remaining 58%, only 9% (5% of all respondents) secured a shadowing opportunity/opportunities. 91% of interpreters, who would have liked to, did not have an opportunity to shadow within the year March 20-21. This is a serious gap in interpreter support and development.

Shadowing can be a valuable learning and reflective experience to an interpreter at any stage of their career however it is of particular value to early career professionals. In the context of the risk of loss to the profession discussed previously in this report, the low prevalence of shadowing (experienced by only 5% of respondents) in combination with the high prevalence of interpreters wanting such opportunities (53%), highlights a potential risk to the future of the profession.

Conclusions

The experience of interpreters has not been homogenous. Repeatedly throughout the survey, responses showed opposing experiences such as the reported change in confidence, where participants were evenly spread between the three possible question responses, (see fig 12).

This should in some ways be unsurprising as the range of work that interpreters carry out is extremely varied. Some interpreters who work in the community or performance will have seen their face to face work disappear almost instantly with the introduction of the regional remote interpreting provision, contracted to Interpreter Now, and arts and culture events being cancelled. Others who either already worked remotely or adapted quickly to this way of working will have seen their work continue unaffected or indeed demand increase as their specialised skillset became more valuable. This variation in experience can be seen in the results of the following sections; Amount of Work, Loss/Gain comparison, and Enough. This research demonstrates that it is not possible, nor is it wise, to try to identify a universal experience of interpreters in Northern Ireland during the pandemic and rather, we should consider the impact to the profession in each of the areas explored.

Working practices

The change of working practices in terms of the proportion of work undertaken face to face, remotely, or remotely for a specialist VRS/VRI¹ company showed significant changes between pre-pandemic and the first year of the pandemic, followed by a prediction of further changes post-pandemic. This predicted change in preference resulting from the experience of forced changes due to the pandemic. This research suggests

¹ Video Relay Service/Video Remote Interpreter company who typically provide an on-demand interpreting service to customers.

that in the future, there will be a greater range of common working practices, compared with the high prevalence of face to face work prior to the pandemic. The geographic remit of the area in which interpreters are willing to work has changed since the beginning of the pandemic and there has been a decrease in the proportion of interpreters willing to work across Northern Ireland only. If this trend remains, it could make it more difficult to source interpreters in areas of Northern Ireland where interpreters are not resident, as a greater proportion of interpreters, in the first year of the pandemic, were unwilling to work beyond their local area. It could also be made more difficult to source an interpreter in Northern Ireland since a greater proportion of interpreters, during the first year of the pandemic, were also working in the rest of the UK and/or Ireland, which proportionally reduces the amount of work these interpreters are available to accept in Northern Ireland. The impact of childcare did not affect all interpreters however, for those it did, the consequences were wide reaching, affecting the amount of work interpreters were willing to undertake, the times they were available to work and the type of work they were willing to undertake. These impacts reduced the availability of interpreters and therefore presented challenges to those wishing to utilise interpreting services.

The factors discussed so far identify a reduction in supply as a result of the pandemic.

The majority of interpreters experienced a downturn in the amount of work they were receiving however this was not a universal experience throughout the profession. From analysis of the data shown in figures 4 and 5, it can be concluded that work was not evenly distributed throughout the profession with a clear divide between two groups of interpreters- those who lost work and interpreters who gained additional work during the pandemic, as compared to a previous typical year. The data shows an overall loss of

23%, suggesting that, in addition to the reduction in supply, there was also a reduction in demand for interpreting services.

The conclusion that there was a reduction in demand for interpreting services is can be further broken down by method of working- face to face, remote, or remote for a specialist VRS/VRI company. The data in figure 6 suggests that there was a less demand for interpreting services than supply.

During the first year of the pandemic, there was a high prevalence of interpreters being recorded while working but who had not given permission for this to be done. Separate to the question of consent, the majority of interpreters who had been recorded did not feel that they had been fairly remunerated for their work. These findings indicate development need within the profession in order to better protect interpreters.

Areas of personal development, arising from the shift to increased prevalence of remote working as a result of the pandemic, were identified by participant self reflection. The training needs were wide reaching and included practical skills development (training on technology), intrapersonal skills (confidence) and interpersonal skills. These results showed that there is not a predominant area of development that the profession, as a whole, identified as needed.

The research identified a risk of loss to the profession which, in the context of existing perceived shortages of interpreters, is acutely concerning. The reduction of supply has already been discussed however the results reported in figure 8 show a risk of a reduction in supply becoming a long term impact of the pandemic. Stakeholders should take note of this risk and act in order to reduce the loss of interpreters from the profession, and seek to increase the pool of professionals in order to lessen or avoid long term negative impacts to the Deaf community and others seeking to utilise interpreting services.

In general, interpreters appear to have been, at least in some way, supported financially during the first year of the pandemic. This decreases further risk of loss to the profession by supporting interpreters to remain in their current employment.

Physical and Mental Wellbeing

The findings displayed in figures 10 and 11 show that the majority of interpreters experienced negative physical and mental effects on their wellbeing during the first year of the pandemic. Stakeholders, including individual interpreters, interpreter peer support groups and interpreter associations should take immediate action to tackle these emerging trends and ensure the wellbeing of interpreters, and safeguard their continuation of their contribution to the profession.

Current sources of support utilised by interpreters was limited, for most, to peer support and support from an association. This highlights an opportunity for diversification within the profession to engage with alternative sources of support. The main limiting factors to this diversification were time, money and knowledge. Further funding for professional support could facilitate interpreters to engage with a wider range of sources of support which is important given the aforementioned increase in negative effects on physical and mental wellbeing. The identified lack of knowledge shows an important role for interpreting associations in providing members increased information about sources of support for interpreters. Without this intervention and increased support, the profession is at greater risk of loss which further threatens the stability of the profession. Coworking was reported to have been provided in the majority of instances when required. This is an important support for working interpreters and should continue to be provided to protect interpreters well being.

Continued Professional Development

A very positive finding in exploring the continued professional development of interpreter was that, during the pandemic, the majority of interpreters who responded to the research found it easier to access CPD than they did prior to the pandemic. While this research cannot prove this response was related to the investment by the Department for Communities, to fund CPD training for sign language interpreters in Northern Ireland, it is highly likely.

Peer feedback, and to an even greater extent shadowing, were shown to be uncommon common practice within the interpreting profession in Northern Ireland. These are two areas of potential development to further increase support for interpreters and safeguard the future, stability and growth of the profession.

This research highlights the diverse experience of sign language interpreters in Northern Ireland during the first year of the pandemic. The research team hope that the findings of this report will highlight areas for development within the profession, safeguard interpreters welfare and safeguard the provision of interpreting services.

References

Bailey, J. (2018) Sign Language Interpreter Survey Report. Private correspondence.

Gillespie, S. (2018) Linguistic Demographics, Resources and Deficit of Opportunity: Deaf Signed Language Users in Northern Ireland

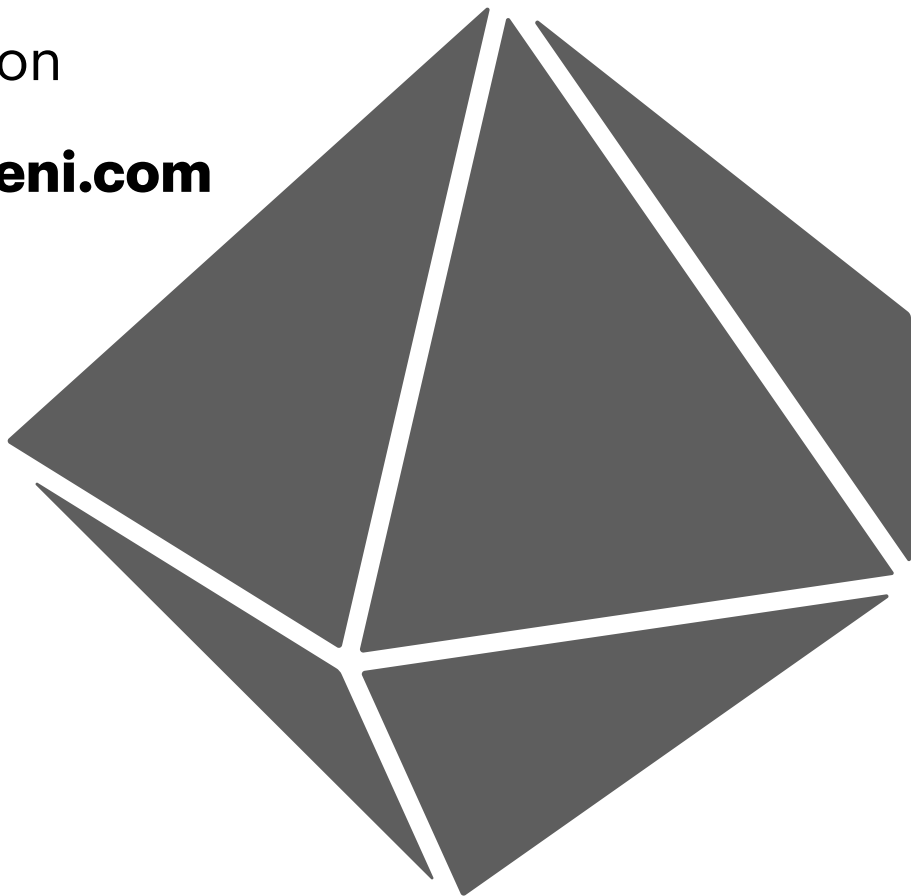
NISRA (2020) NISRA Coronavirus (Covid-19) Opinion Survey Key Findings from Phases 1 and 2

NRCPD (2019) Newsletter April 2019. Private correspondence.

NUBSLI (2022) Website [<https://www.nubsli.com/guidance/interpreter-fees/>]

For further information

hello@signlanguageni.com



Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire

Survey: Working practices of SLIs in Northern Ireland

This survey is for sign language interpreters working in Northern Ireland

This research is funded by Department for Communities

The first three questions are the hardest- get past the percentages and it's plain sailing...

This is the longest section and contains 11 questions



Prior to March 2020, what percentage of your work as an interpreter was...

Face to face*

Remote (private bookings)*

Remote for a specialist remote interpreting organisation?*

I.e, SignVideo, SignLive, InterpreterNow etc

Between March 2020 and March 2021, what percentage of your work as an interpreter was...

Face to face*

Remote (private bookings)*

Remote for a specialist remote interpreting organisation?*

I.e, SignVideo, SignLive, InterpreterNow etc

In an ideal world, 'post pandemic' what percentage of your work as an interpreter would be...

Face to face*

Remote (private bookings)*

Remote for a specialist remote interpreting organisation?*

I.e, SignVideo, SignLive, InterpreterNow etc

Across what geographical area did you typically work?

	My local area in NI	Across NI	NI and the rest of the UK and/or Ireland	NI and beyond UK and Ireland	I didn't work in NI
Prior to March 2020*	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Since March 2020*	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Have your working hours changed in the past year due to childcare or other caring responsibilities?*

☐ Yes- the total hours I'm willing to work has changed

☐ Yes- when I'm available to work has changed

☐ Yes- the type of work I'm willing to do has changed

☐ No change

☐ N/A- I don't have caring responsibilities

Consider the amount of work you undertook March 2020- March 2021

Was the amount of work you undertook in 20/21 greater or less than a previous typical year?*

☐ I worked more than usual in 20/21

☐ I worked about the same amount

☐ I worked less than usual in 20/21

☐ N/A- I didn't work as an interpreter prior to March 2020

By approximately how much? (%)

If you were willing to accept f2f work in the past year, do you feel you got 'enough' f2f work?*

Yes- as such as I needed/wanted to take on Yes but I'd have preferred more No N/A- I wasn't accepting f2f work

If you were willing to accept remote work in the past year, do you feel you got 'enough' remote work?*

Yes- as such as I needed/wanted to take on Yes but I'd have preferred more No N/A- I wasn't accepting remote work

Have you been recorded while working remotely in the past year?*

If yes, were you always given notice that it would be recorded?

☐ No- I haven't been recorded

☐ Yes- I've been recorded and always made aware, in advance, that it would be

☐ Yes- but I haven't always been aware that it was going to happen

Do you feel that we are fairly remunerated for recorded/live streamed/on demand recorded content?*

☐ Yes- I charged an increased fee

☐ Yes- I charged my usual fee

☐ No

☐ N/A- I haven't been recorded

CPD

During the past year, March 2020-March 2021, have you found it easier to access CPD?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

Any comments?

(optional)

Have you had the opportunity to give or receive meaningful and constructive peer feedback since March 2020?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

During the past year, March 2020-March 2021, did you have the opportunity to shadow peers?*

☐ Yes- plenty
☐ Yes- but I would have preferred more
☐ No- but I would have liked the opportunity
☐ No- but I wouldn't have wanted the opportunity

Congratulations- you're done! Now just hit submit to make it count

(If you've skipped over any questions, it will ask you to answer them before you can submit)

Submit

Did you apply for support funding such as government schemes (eg SEISS or DfC SLPG)?

☐ Yes- I got the support I needed

☐ Yes- I got some support but not enough

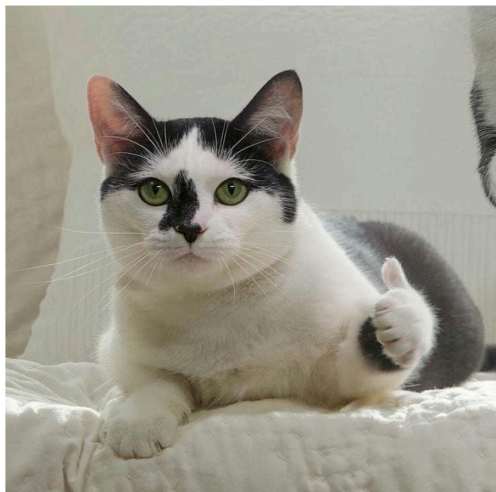
☐ No- I didn't feel I needed to

☐ No- I wasn't eligible for any support

Phew, time for a breather!

Well done, you're half way through! Now we want to know **how you are** and how the profession is doing. The last two sections are about your health and well being and the development of the profession.

You've answered the most tricky parts so please keep going!



Physical wellbeing

Have you experienced increased pain/discomfort in the last year while working remotely?*

Headaches, back, joint etc

☐ Yes

☐ No

Any additional comments?

Mental wellbeing

Compared to a previous typical year working, have you felt increased stress, anxiety or depression since March 2020 while working as an interpreter?*

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ N/A- I didn't work prior to March 2020

Any additional comments?

Has your confidence as an interpreter changed in the past year?*

☐ Increased
☐ Remained the same
☐ Decreased
☐ n/a- I didn't work prior to March 2020

What sources of professional support do you currently have?*

☐ Peer support

☐ Professional supervision

☐ Support from my association

☐ Other

What additional support would you like to have in place in the future?

What is stopping you setting up that support?

Since March 2020, has a coworker been provided when you felt it was required?*

Remember, this is only related to jobs that you feel **needed** a coworker

☐ Yes, always
☐ Yes, mostly
☐ Yes but I've had to fight for it more than usual
☐ No, usually not
☐ No, I've never been provided a co-worker
☐ I haven't feel a coworker was necessary for any of my jobs in the past year

Nearly there!

Just one more section to go! (And it only has 3 questions)

