

Irish Sign Language Interpreter Workplace Wellness during COVID-19: Looking back and moving forward

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Cover Page Footnote

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Irish Sign Language Interpreter Workplace Wellness during COVID-19: Looking Back and Moving Forward

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide insights into the impact of COVID-19 on the Irish Sign Language Interpreting profession in regards workplace wellbeing and occupational health. A two-staged mixed method data collection took place in the form of an anonymous online survey followed by focus groups. This captured work practices throughout the pandemic, the impact it had on Sign Language Interpreters (SLIs), as well as mechanisms employed regarding wellness and self-care. The results reveal many issues impacting SLIs in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic, including drastic decreases in workload, and a forced transition into an online environment. The sudden shift to remote interpreting had many drawbacks, most evidently the initial unpreparedness, i.e., lack of experience to engage in this form of work. Additional difficulties have been noted such as the challenges of providing a complex service on a virtual platform, the lack of opportunity to develop an on-site interpreter-client relationship, and issues surrounding team interpreting in remote contexts. Negative impacts on both physical and psychological health are identified as a result. Conversely, positive opportunities are highlighted, particularly amongst non-Dublin (capital city) based SLIs who found opportunity within remote interpreting to engage in a higher volume of work and to interpret for a new client base. This was accompanied by other positive implications such as an increased flexibility and work/life balance related to hybrid working arrangements. To progress with the ongoing changes seen across the profession, the study concludes with a discussion regarding the future of SL interpreting in Ireland. Concerns have been raised around the lack of SLI autonomy in online spaces and questions have been raised on whether all members of the Deaf community can truly be active citizens in remote spaces. This has identified the need for further research and support in the profession in order to safeguard SLIs and deaf people, and to ensure SLI retention issues are not exacerbated as we move forward.

INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, there are approximately 150 qualified sign language interpreters (SLIs) who hold a degree or recognized accreditation as per the requirements of the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters. However, less than 150 SLIs are actively interpreting. In 1992, official training of Irish SLIs commenced, which led to the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin in 2001 (see Sheridan & Lynch, 2022). While it is difficult to determine the number

of deaf community members in Ireland, Census 2016 informs us that 4,226 persons use Irish Sign Language at home. It is presumed that many of these individuals avail of interpreting services, at least on an occasional basis. Concerns have been raised about capacity, which is insufficient to meet the current demand for interpreting services (Sign Language Interpreting Service, 2017). It is expected that demand will continue to rise due to the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, which formally commenced in December 2020. The Act protects the deaf community, particularly when accessing government funded public services through Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpretation. As demand increases, the discussion of SLI wellness is of paramount importance.

This paper investigates the lived experiences of SLIs working in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first stage of this empirical research involved an anonymous online reflection survey (May 2021). The second phase of this study consisted of two focus groups (September 2021). The aim here is to explore data on a range of psychological and physical demands experienced by SLIs based in Ireland whilst working during COVID-19, following a rapid change to work practices. In the findings we gauge how the exponential demand for remote interpreting has impacted SLIs occupational health, while highlighting some of the drawbacks and benefits of hybrid arrangements¹ or remote working. In doing so, the goal is to highlight the need for wellness interventions in order to prevent ill-health and to ensure SLI career longevity.

INTERPRETER WORKLOAD

PRIOR TO COVID-19

Wescott and Stewart (2017) report that a vast majority of ISL/English interpreters work between 21-40 hours per week. Leonard (2016) found that in the Irish context, out of 52 interpreters surveyed, 44% worked full-time, with 22% working less than one day per week on average. Research undertaken on the capacity of SLIs found that inconsistency, lack of job security and low annual income were the reasons for retention issues. Napier *et al.* (2018) note the lack of government funding and national training programs to develop the profession as factors for reduced desire in pursuing an interpreting career. Consequently, although highlighting a lack of research, Wescott and Stewart (2017) report that the current supply of ISL/English SLIs inadequately meets national demands due to an ISL interpreting agency reporting to have only fulfilled less than half of their requests received in 2016. This raises concerns over demand, which is only expected to rise since the implementation of the Irish Sign Language Act.

¹ In the context of this paper, 'hybrid' arrangements refer to the SLI, i.e., that they have the flexibility to work in-person and also interpret remotely on other occasions. The focus here is not on service users, i.e., some are face-to-face whilst others are accessing remotely.

DURING COVID-19

International research conducted by De Meulder *et al.* (2021) in April 2020, reported that when mass quarantine commenced, 89% of interpreters experienced a decrease in workload, with 33% stating that all work stopped completely. The reasons put forward for this dramatic decline included a lack of available work and an unsuitable home environment for remote interpreting. A small percentage reported pausing their work to become eligible for unemployment benefit.

Whilst crisis interpreting occurred pre-COVID-19 (see Leeson, 2019), only a small portion of SLIs were involved in the provision of accessible COVID-19 public health information to Deaf communities. Mathews *et al.* (2022) sought to determine the impact of working in such a high-profile context during COVID-19. Their sample involved 16 ISL and British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters and/or science communicators. A specific aim was to uncover the strategies interpreters employed to circumvent or cope in such settings. As well as linguistic, cognitive, and socio-political challenges put forward; affective challenges were also identified. These include perceptions of working in crisis briefings, the level of scrutiny they would be exposed to in such public settings, and feelings of sadness arising from the content they were operating within. Mathews (*ibid.*) then captured the affective measures SLIs used to mitigate the aforementioned challenges, including making time for self-care, debriefing with SLI colleagues, acknowledging the high-pressure environment they were working within and avoiding negative commentary/texts from the Deaf community on their performance.

A blog post produced by Jemina Napier (June 2020) notes the *massive shift in interpreting work practices* and the extra strain of video-mediated interpreting. Concerns were raised about changing working conditions during the pandemic such as lengthy video interpreting assignments with no breaks and where SLIs are working alone. Napier urges working SLIs to make a stand and consider how the quality of such interpretations will suffer and how this will inevitably impact SLI health and quality of access for deaf signers.

Another general concern relates to entrepreneurs and business owners who are more likely to experience burnout and suffer emotional exhaustion (Jamal, 2007). Shepherd *et al.* (2009) explore antecedents which include pressure to perform and financial concerns. This is worrying when we consider the context of SLIs in Ireland as the majority are self-employed. A loss of work for interpreters during COVID-19 has a direct effect on income, thus, potentially causing significant impact to the professional's well-being (Bruhn, 2015). Roman *et al.* (2022) confirms these concerns for self-employed SLIs, who during the pandemic, suffered from the inability to rely on supportive infrastructure regarding remote work, compared to those with an employer.

REMOTE INTERPRETING

PRIOR TO COVID-19

Video remote interpreting (VRI) and video relay service (VRS) interpreting are critical services; however, they do not come without risks. It has been observed that there is added occupational stress compared to community interpreting (Wessling & Shaw, 2014; Napier *et al.*, 2017). According to Leeson (2005), sign language interpreting is a highly complex task in terms of cognitive demands. Therefore, any modifications made to the working environment is likely to

impact on how the information is processed (Napier *et al.* 2017). Although geographical access for all parties may be improved, interpreting remotely creates an extra layer of demands, with some interpreters reporting extreme burnout and stress (Bower, 2015). Napier (2012) suggests that the lack of visible cues, and loss of contextual information in the interaction, are contributing factors here. Dickinson (2014) states that when the interpreter is on-site with both interlocutors, they gain more information about the nature of the interaction and their relationship, assisting with mediating communication. With this lacking, Warnicke and Plejert (2012) claim that it forces the remote interpreter to implement elements of informed guesswork, which exerts more energy in the interpreter's cognitive processing and self-monitoring (Chernov, 2004).

Warnicke and Plejert (2012) consider the consequences of on-demand remote environments, with interpreters having less time to prepare for assignments or engage with the clients and service users compared to that of face-to-face. Palmer *et al.* (2012) discuss the significance of preparation for SL interpreters, explaining its contribution to gaining comfort around dialectical variation and idiosyncrasies in signing styles. Napier *et al.* (2018) suggest that with remote access to a wider client-base, interpreters are now facing assignments from a range of callers, without knowing the nature of such calls or having time to establish comfort around terminology or dialects. These on-demand expectations result in emotional stress for SLIs (Alley, 2014; Brunson, 2011; RISLI, 2021).

Additional demands of remote working are discussed across the literature. Research shows that an ability to solve technical issues is an inevitable part of the remote interpreter's role, with technical glitches emphasized as a threat to delivery of the service (Taylor, 2009; Napier *et al.* 2018). Braun and Taylor (2012) also discuss ethical issues when the interpreter is used as the moderator of the session if the interlocutors are unable to resolve interactional problems. This additional role forces them to step outside of their position to ensure the session goes smoothly, yet it is not within their remit. In their research, Moser-Mercer (2003) highlight the impact of remote interpreting on the well-being of the interpreter. Results showed the interpreter's performance declining at a slightly faster rate, compared to that of on-site – this was explained by the earlier onset of fatigue. However, in another study, Braun and Taylor (2012) present the interpreter's own satisfaction and comfort levels as the most striking comparison. They found that although the judges monitoring the performance found little difference in quality, the interpreters were significantly less satisfied with their performance after the remote assignment. Roziner and Shlesinger (2010) caution that an initial objection surrounding the move towards remote interpreting may account for elements of this finding.

Alternatively, Napier *et al.* (2018) make note of positive implications of remote interpreting, stating that interpreters can now separate themselves from fast-paced and stressful environments, such as hospital settings. Thus, allowing them to better focus on the task. They also highlight another benefit in the ability of the interpreter to break away from exclusively working with their local Deaf community and allowing them the valuable opportunity to meet a range of clients and service users through remote arrangements.

During COVID-19

De Meulder *et al.* (2021) reflect on the shift of the profession from March 2020, when most SLIs were forced to move online at short notice. Although remote interpreting had been expanding over the years, they highlight that most interpreters were doing so by choice and sporadically. This led to an unprepared start for many, as a digital acceleration took place at a faster rate than expected (*ibid.*).

Kelly (2008) highlights the importance of the interpreter's working environment and its suitability, noting the necessity of an appropriate room layout with no audio or visual disturbances. For those working from home, De Meulder *et al.* (2021) reported that many felt restricted by their environment which impacted what jobs they could accept. This was due to factors such as having children at home, pets and a noisy environment. In addition to this, in the early stages of the pandemic, interpreters stated their technical set up and inability to buy the right equipment as a reason for not working remotely. According to Bruhn (2015), the scale of investment in remote interpreting set-up should depend on the purpose and intention of use. De Meulder *et al.* (2021) point out that during the pandemic, 68% of their participants invested in setting up workstations at home with the intention of undertaking remote work.

Alsadoon and Turkestani (2020) discuss access to education for deaf children during the pandemic. They emphasize the ability to learn remotely as an essential option for students when considering the risk of transmission in busy classroom environments. Thus, resulting in the use of remote interpreting to assist a deaf child learning under these conditions. In their study, they recall barriers facing the interaction such as technical issues which inhibited the student's view of the interpreter and prevented simultaneous interpreting. They also noted the difficulties with interpreter's schedules when classes had to be rescheduled due to failures in bandwidth. Despite these issues, they confirmed this mode as a necessity to keep all participants safe throughout the crisis. Kwok *et al.* (2021) explore this advantage further when referring to healthcare settings. They discuss remote interpreting and how its capacity to enable the provision of essential services to those in hospitals. This was achieved by maintaining infection control and meeting the demands associated with social distancing and isolation. Thus, contributing to the safety and well-being of both the patient and interpreter in high-risk situations.

In terms of additional benefits of remote interpreting during COVID-19, De Meulder *et al.* (2021) highlight many advantages mentioned by the participants in their research. This included increased flexibility, less travel expenses, the ability to cover more assignments in a day, more opportunities for interpreters working rurally, and increased chances of working in teams that were not possible before due to geographic logistics. They also refer to smaller benefits such as less expenses on appearance, and an increased amount of downtime at home as opposed to on-site.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

PRIOR TO COVID-19

According to Knodel (2018), interpreting is frequently perceived as a linguistic or technical profession. However, this is often rejected due to the interpreter's presence and influence on the interaction. Therefore, they may be considered an active participant (Young *et al.*, 2019; Roy, 2000; Hoyt, *et al.*, 1981). Dean and Pollard (2001) discuss the psychological impact on the SLI as a participant, with outcomes dictated by a Demand and Control Schema. For example, neutrality is explored within this schema, where historically, interpreters have been trained to exclude their own feelings or thoughts in the assignment. This expectation from participants can create an interpersonal demand for the interpreter. Hetherington (2012) states that acting impartial is different to feeling impartial, and this concept leaves interpreters unsure of how to process their emotional reactions (Knodel, 2018).

Harvey (2003) states that this lack of acknowledgement of one's own feelings, leads to an increase in SLIs' susceptibility to occupational stress. Brunson and Lawrence (2002) posit that interpreters working in emotionally charged environments are at risk of developing Vicarious Trauma because of this unprocessed material. However, unlike many other professions where this risk is significantly highlighted, SLI as a profession lacks awareness and training around this concept, leaving individuals more vulnerable to the impact (Harvey, 2001). In addition to this, an SLI may be further at risk due to their use of the first-person form (Bontempo and Malcom, 2012), engagement with information on a visceral level (Anderson, 2011), and re-creation of emotional affect with their own voice and expression. According to Dean *et al.* (2010), these additional demands result in an increased presence of depression and psychological stress amongst SLIs, in comparison to that of spoken language interpreters.

In terms of the physical impact, Rochester Institute of Technology (2008) discuss sign language interpreting as a profession at high risk of ergonomic injury. Schoenberg (1999) reports that many interpreters have had to leave the profession after suffering instances of repetitive motion injuries. This is caused by factors such as repetition, variables of force, inadequate breaks, and unhealthy posture (Feuerstein *et al.*, 1997). Woodcock *et al.* (2008) states that in order to lessen this risk, warm-ups and hand breaks are essential during assignments. However, despite awareness around the increased risk, physical injuries amongst SL interpreters remains prevalent in the community (Donner *et al.*, 2016).

The International Standards Organization (2014) states that community interpreters should be provided with a break after 15-30 minutes of interpreting simultaneously or should be allocated a co-interpreter in order to prevent fatigue. However, CISLI (2017) states that these provisions are not upheld for Irish SLIs in the majority of cases. Their survey showed that although being aware of the optimum conditions, 71% of Irish SLIs reported feeling pressured by organizations or agencies to work on their own. This report led to the development of a health and safety policy for Irish SLIs which states that assignments longer than one hour in duration require the employment of two interpreters (CISLI 2017/18).

DURING COVID-19

According to De Meulder *et al.* (2021) the move to remote interpreting as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a psychological impact on interpreters for a variety of reasons similar to those mentioned in previous sections of this review. They refer to the stressful nature of online conversation control, diversity in assignments, and the blurring of home and work-life boundaries. This presents a changing and growing set of professional demands which the interpreter must cope with (*ibid.*)

In addition to this, interpreters reported suffering from isolation due to extended hours of working alone with no social interactions (De Meulder *et al.* 2021). Chiaburu and Harrison (2008) suggest that positive co-working relationships lead to higher satisfaction levels and a deeper commitment to the job. Alternatively, loneliness is associated with emotional exhaustion, higher absenteeism and social withdrawal (Barsade and O'Neill, 2014). According to De Meulder *et al.* (2021), interpreters reported being impacted by the loss of support usually provided by their co-interpreter on an on-site assignment. The ability to switch off the camera and leave the room whilst not on task removes the availability of collegial support, as well as the visibility of linguistic feeds. They also noted a reduction in post-assignment de-briefing due to the remoteness of the situation.

According to Meulder *et al.* (2021), interpreters complained of physical impacts as a result of remote work which included neck pain, eye strain and headaches. Napier *et al.* (2018) refer to potential discomfort surrounding remote ergonomics when facing issues such as insufficient lighting and screen glare. For professionals who transitioned from on-site to a remote environment, there were instances of weight gain due to lack of movement (Parham and Rauf, 2020). Roman *et al.* (2022) presents a study on the occupational health and safety of SLIs working remotely during COVID-19. Their findings identified an elevated prevalence of shoulder pain amongst the cohort, with only 14% of SLIs reporting no musculoskeletal pain. A rise in adverse mental health symptoms was also noted, however, the authors highlight the difficulty in discerning whether their onset was a result of remote working, or due to the mass trauma from the pandemic itself.

As mentioned previously, it has been shown that working remotely results in a faster onset of fatigue (Moser-Mercer, 2003), and it has been debated that an interpreter's working duration should be shortened for such assignments (Braun, 2015). De Meulder *et al.* (2021) expand on this issue, stating that although perceived positively by some, the flexibility of remote working may have negative implications on the interpreter. The opportunity to cover more assignments leads to the potential for extended working hours. Thus, creating an increased physical demand on the interpreter.

WELLBEING SUPPORTS FOR INTERPRETERS

During research undertaken to investigate coping methods amongst the interpreting community, Knodel (2018) identified peer debriefing as the most popular. 80% of the sample claimed they would request feedback from a colleague after being emotionally impacted by an assignment, with 50% seeking support from someone outside of the profession. Anderson (2011) states that although not yet standard practice, peer support groups with the presence of a facilitator are also beneficial in reducing emotional stress and increase self-care and well-being strategies amongst interpreters.

This process elicits self-produced solutions, validates feelings, and consequently fosters an environment for *processing emotional residue* (p.12).

In terms of professional support, the interpreting community has previously expressed frustration in its lack of availability post-graduation (Dean and Pollard, 2001). Interpreters commonly work as freelancers directly after graduation, and therefore miss out on the opportunities available in other professions such as working under senior colleagues or mentors. Thus, increasing the risk of stress and traumatization occurring and going unnoticed (Hetherington, 2012). Macdonald (2015) states that through *healthy awareness, training, and access to support services within a collaborative professional colleague network*, SLIs can process psychological stress. He suggests that with such frameworks in place, their personal health as well as the profession, can grow vibrantly.

In December 2020, a national voluntary register of SLIs was formed after many years of lobbying (Leeson and Venturi, 2017). This is supported by the Department of Justice and Equality following the Irish Sign Language Act 2017. There was previously no legislation governing the profession, resulting in limited wellbeing supports available to SLIs in Ireland. Efforts have been made by the professional representative body, the Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (CISLI), as well as government-funded organizations and the Centre for Deaf Studies, Trinity College Dublin to provide training. However, SLIs in Ireland are not required to join CISLI, nor register with the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (RISLI) if not engaging in interpretation for publicly funded services. Therefore, one wonders what support such SLIs have and how they are improving their skillset.

As noted, during COVID-19, interpreters suffered from the loss of peer support usually provided by a co-interpreter when onsite, or after an assignment during a peer de-briefing. De Meulder *et al.* (2021) report that when asking interpreters if they had sought mental health support to cope with changing professional demands since the onset of such changes, 13% answered yes. This included supports such as professional mental health support, support from colleagues on an individual basis, peer support groups, and support from friends. Experienced interpreters noted providing support to their less experienced colleagues, complaining that although guidelines and advice had been given by professional associations, on-going support was absent and resulted in a loss of confidence in some. However, in Ireland although supports and training have traditionally been offered on an ad-hoc basis, since COVID-19 these events appear to have become more routinely organized by the SLI professional body, referral agencies, state funders and EU-funded projects, etc.

Through the lens of a well-being perspective, the literature above explores the broad range of demands placed on the SL interpreter, and discusses the additional challenges faced whilst working during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the financial, physical, and psychological effects experienced due to work levels and a mass adoption of online platforms. For most, this was a shift to the unfamiliar world of remote interpreting. Although implications were outlined, the literature post the onset of COVID-19 is minimal, predicting that more long-term consequences of the crisis on the profession are unknown. This leaves little indication of the mark which has been left on the SLI community. Such lack of literature, paired with the scarcity of research done on SL

Interpreters working in Ireland, highlights gaps in knowledge on a national level which is explored within this research.

METHOD

As previously outlined, this study adopted a two-stage mixed methods data collection framework. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences in Trinity College Dublin prior to the collection of any data. An anonymous questionnaire captured changes to work practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether these changes positively or negatively impacted the interpreter. A pilot questionnaire was first drafted. A colleague gave feedback which resulted in some minor word/structural changes. The first section contained demographic questions to ensure the sample was representative in terms of gender, geographical location, etc. Whilst there were several scale and YES/NO type questions, the focus was on open-ended responses to attempt to capture the emotions and lived experiences of participants. These questions related to the possible impact of COVID-19 in terms of the psychological, physical, and financial ramifications. There were also questions on wellbeing and how interpreters engage in self-care e.g., coping mechanisms when needing to de-stress. Whilst the instrument appeared in questionnaire format, participants could submit extensive answers if they wished. The main aim was to carry out qualitative analysis of these open-ended reflections which would then inform focus group discussion. Participants were recruited for each phase by email advertisement. Information was forwarded by gatekeepers, the Council of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (national professional body) and the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (voluntary register), containing the Participant Information Leaflet, Consent Form, and link to the questionnaire. Participants could opt in to the first phase only if they wished. As the second phase (focus groups) involved videorecording, participants opted in by emailing the lead researcher with their signed Consent Form. Thirty-nine valid questionnaires were included in the sample, which equates to approximately 35% of registered interpreters in Ireland. Emerging themes gathered from the questionnaire responses were coded and used as discussion points for focus groups (September 2021). Eleven participants opted in to the two focus groups. The process used to analyze responses to both the questionnaire and focus groups is described below in the Data Analysis section.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

A high-level overview of pertinent demographic data is as follows:

Amongst the respondents to the questionnaire, 22 of the 39 participants indicated having worked as an SLI for 10+ years. Seven interpreters were in the 5-9 years of experience category, with seven others noting 2-4 years. Three participants had less than 2 years' experience. Of these 39, ten reported a preference for working part-time in the profession, with the rest favoring full-time arrangements. 20 of the SLIs were self-employed, with three working solely in employed jobs, and 16 partaking in both. The sample consisted mainly of female participants, with only one SLI disclosing their gender as male. However, two respondents preferred not to state a gender identity. Leinster was the current home of the largest cohort in the data, pertaining to 27 of the participants. This was followed by eight in Munster, two in Connaught, and one respondent living abroad at that time. All of the SLIs who took part in the questionnaire reported registration with the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters.

Focus groups consisted of 11 SLIs (10 female and one male) who were divided into two groups according to their availability. Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The sample consisted of novice interpreters, mid-career interpreters and some with 20+ years of experience. There was also variety in terms of location; with seven Dublin-based (capital city) interpreters and four from other locations throughout Ireland. Participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with. The aim was to create an open and safe atmosphere where all comments were respected.

DATA ANALYSIS

DATA PREPARATION

Questionnaire data was sorted in an excel file, where some sections were presented visually on graphs. Other answers, which were not suitable for graphing, were grouped together in order to gain the overall collection of responses per question. These were reviewed by both researchers, with analytical notes taken throughout the process. Similar incidents were grouped, which aided the coding process. Focus group data was later transcribed by one of the authors. These were reviewed with attention to particularly striking comments which elicited strong reactions across the groups or stood out for being powerful. Descriptive notes were also included to present actions that were not audible, but portrayed through expressions, body language or signing. After transcription was complete, the authors highlighted and added notes to the document, similarly to that of the survey. This was helpful in identifying themes throughout the data.

CODING AND THEME IDENTIFICATION

In order to identify patterns throughout the data, the authors conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This option was seen as optimal for examining and grouping the experiences of various participants, in terms of key features, similarities, and differences across the data (King, 2004). This consisted of becoming very familiar with the data, with constant reflection to generate inclusive and comprehensive codes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

RESULTS

The results of this study will now be presented under three themes.

THEME 1: WORKLOAD VARIANCE

The first theme identified in the data related to: *Decrease/increase in work*

PRIOR TO COVID-19

Data suggests an urban/rural divide in workload pre-COVID-19. Dublin SLIs had a steady stream of work during peak season, whilst those living in rural areas had inconsistent work, regardless of season. Although some non-Dublin based SLIs were interested in remote interpreting before the pandemic, there were mixed feelings in many instances.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORK LEVELS

Similar to the reports by De Meulder *et al.* (2021) regarding a decrease in workload, only a small number of interpreters in the data stated they had access to work during the first few months of COVID-19. This was in news briefings and a small number of online meetings. Volume increased in May-June 2020 more generally, however most participants reported that it did not return to normal levels for at least the first six months into the pandemic. The quotes below illustrate financial hardship concerns as expressed in the questionnaire data (May 2021).

I didn't have rent money, I had nothing.

I am less busy and because of this I actually ended up leaving the profession temporarily to find a more stable job.

I was on the PUP (social welfare payment) for about six months. There were a few jobs coming in, but I was hesitant to take them because there hadn't been any guidelines given about accepting the odd job while receiving the pandemic payment.

In a small number of cases, income levels were not impacted because SLIs were involved in televised public health news briefings. Although Mathews *et al.* (2020) explores the implications of this type of work on the interpreter, the data shows instances of financial relief when included in this group.

I was in a lucky position that I was in the COVID team doing all the press briefings, so I had a lot of work.

WORK AVAILABILITY (SEPTEMBER 2021 - FOCUS GROUPS)

Whilst COVID-19 appeared to impact the work of the majority of SLIs, there was a noticeable increase in work available to non-Dublin based interpreters when remote interpreting became more widespread. Much like the positive opportunities outlined by Napier *et al.* (2018), the research supports the aid of remote work in providing a broader range of assignments to Irish SLIs during COVID-19. In some cases, SLIs are even *refusing work* because they could be *working seven days a week at the moment*.

More hours in the day are now available without travel. I'm still working pretty much 100% remotely, so I'm finding every hour being filled by work for sure.

FACE-TO-FACE VS. ONLINE WORK

Prior to COVID-19, 59% of the 39 respondents had zero experience of remote interpreting. 16 said they had, and this ranged from one hour experience to eight years. In the first year of working through the pandemic, seven SLIs chose not to carry out any in-person work. Points were raised about the lack of availability for onsite interpreting and in contrast, travel time impacting ability to carry out online assignments should hybrid arrangements continue to the same extent.

I suppose it's also going to be a question of just managing travel distances and then feeling if you're taking on that face-to-face stuff, then you're also potentially letting down other people who are looking for you in an online forum.

FUTURE PREDICTIONS -WORK VARIANCE AND REMOTE INTERPRETING.

Based on both the survey and focus group data there is an appetite for hybrid working. However, those based outside of Dublin would like to see remote interpreting remain so that work levels remain stable and to avoid long distance travel. There are mixed preferences; some SLIs are concerned that both SLIs and deaf people are being forced into remote appointments even though in-person appointments may be preferable in certain circumstances. In the focus groups, concern is expressed by some SLIs about remote working conditions and loss of autonomy.

Interpreters should be part of the conversation and asked their professional opinion on what suits a given situation. We are often informed rather than consulted.

Whilst we may be *primed* to try new technology, concerns have been raised in terms of digital literacy issues and the impact that this may have on some Deaf people becoming more isolated. Furthermore, Wi-Fi was noted as being problematic in some rural parts of Ireland.

You can't expect that just because you have got interpreters and captioning, deaf people are going to feel comfortable in such an online space where they feel they can actually speak, where in an intimate personal space that might work a lot better. I think we've got a lot of learning ahead of us in terms of what works and what doesn't work. And in terms of our professional standards. So, if we're working online, do we automatically work as a team?

It'll be interesting to see how much of a divide there will be in that gap because for those who have benefited from it, they have really benefited from it, but it has been detrimental to a lot of people.

THEME 2: THE REMOTE INTERPRETER

The second theme identified in the data related to: *Technology as an extra layer.*

Technology has allowed remote interpreting to occur. However, several SLIs discuss technical issues that impact interpreting performance. The focus group quotes below highlight the complexity of interpreting a three-dimensional language from a two-dimensional screen. There is also a concern that these limitations will cause service users to underestimate the SLI's interpreting

performance and that SLI confidence is reduced as a result of this. This may be one example which showcases the low satisfaction rates of interpreters in remote assignments, compared to that of their onsite experiences (Braun and Taylor, 2012).

We can't rely on the other end, what's happening with the deaf clients that we're talking to... And I've actually said to one person, I've said to them repeatedly, your background is really distracting and I'm losing your fingers. And today I had a meeting with them and I'm actually going to send them an email saying please, your lighting and your background is just it's very, very difficult to read.

Despite your best laid plans, things still go awry. And what's that going to mean in terms of how you can perform in a given context to the best of your ability and to the level expected?

SLIs also raise instances where video-interpreted assignments are unsuitable or impractical. This may be due to the nature of the topic or health issues which result in technology becoming an unwelcomed or an extra burden.

The other thing is around deaf people with visual impairments. I think there are a lot of issues that are being missed here. And I think sometimes it's kind of an easy excuse to say, "Oh, look, we have the interpreter provided there". But they (the interpreter) were tiny on the screen.

THE LOSS OF TOGETHERNESS

SLIs are concerned about being unable to build rapport with service users when remote interpreting and they report that it often feels like a mechanical process. Similar to the difficulties presented across the research (Napier *et al.*, 2018; Palmer *et al.*, 2012, Warnicke and Pejert, 2012), on-demand interpreting with little time to gain comfort with the service user, led to a *disconnect* between members of the interaction with reports of feeling *like a robot*.

I find a lot of the pleasantries before we meet somebody and getting used to their style and them getting used to your style, they're all gone or you are straight into interpreting.

Comments were put forward on the topic of citizenship and how that impacts individuals in the Deaf community when they are not consulted around which interpreting format works best for them. Furthermore, how remote access may result in less exposure and ability to instigate meaningful change.

There needs to be conversations around citizenship and engagement and consultation. They are really going to have to look closely around what do they mean, what do they expect, and what will they get because that online environment and certainly the hybrid environment is going to shift that. I'm also really concerned about the move towards hybrid engagement because I do feel that there's going to be a prestige variant, you know that those who are physically present are going to have more engagement, they're going to be seen, and there will be a fallout from that, whereas those who are online are removed or less visible, less considered and may have an even harder time then to engage in influencing change.

The loss of togetherness has also raised concerns about lack of job satisfaction (i.e., linked to performance) and more broadly.

Job satisfaction, I wonder is that lower? Because when you leave a job, especially with a co interpreter and you leave discussing if we “did well there, and that was good wasn't it?”.

THE INTERPRETER AS THE ADMINISTRATOR/MODERATOR

SLIs frequently comment on the additional responsibilities that come with remote interpreting. Some of which are beyond their job scope but there is pressure placed on them to take on such roles. This is consistent with the research which highlights a perception that the solving of technical issues is under the remit of the interpreter, due to the threat to delivery of service when a technical glitch arises (Taylor, 2009; Napier *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, there is a lot of incoming information to attend to, which creates extra stress. The dichotomy around autonomy is also noteworthy. SLIs commented above about the loss of autonomy in terms of the actual interpreting process, however some say in relation to the technical aspects they have too much control, influence, or responsibility. This may also raise ethical concerns and role confusion when the interpreter is forced to step out of their standard role and into that of a moderator due to an inability on the participant's end to resolve remote issues (Braun and Taylor, 2012). Participants stated these additional responsibilities.

I have gone into pre seminar things, to talk to the tech people about what to do with me. And now we're troubleshooting for people saying oh, you need to pin us, you need to spotlight us, you need to do this, and then the interpreter swap...

THEME 3: PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING

The third theme identified in the data related to: *Stress amongst the SLI Community*

A prominent theme is the stress experienced by SLIs and there being *a lot of frenetic energy*. Whilst this was exacerbated during the first six months of the pandemic, some stressors remain. In comparison, other SLIs mentioned that when they overcame initial technical issues, the ability to work from home has proved advantageous. This reflected literature regarding increased work/life balance and flexibility due to remote arrangements (De Meulder *et al.*, 2022; Napier *et al.*, 2018). Research is lacking on the category of novice SLIs, who when represented in this study, mentioned that most of their experience has been online and the shift to in-person interpreting is daunting.

The stress has been through the roof every day, all the time.

We are working with people in vulnerable situations. We are at times quite vulnerable ourselves, and I don't think as a society we take mental health into consideration, but if we have complete crashes, who is looking after us?

The inability to agree on safe SLI work practices has been an additional stressor. Whilst best practice guidelines have been suggested more generally for interpreters (e.g., AIIC – The

International Association for Conference Interpreters)², they appear to not explicitly underpin the work of SLIs in Ireland. This instead is negotiated/deliberated on an individual basis. As we may experience further lockdowns due to COVID-19, there is also a sense of fear about declining work, resulting in some SLIs over-working. This is consistent with reports of pressure on freelance interpreters to accept jobs in order to ensure financial safety (Shepard *et al.* 2009), combined with a lack of supportive infrastructure to guide SLIs in their remote practices (Roman *et al.* 2022). Participants echoed similar concerns here.

What about the health and safety guidelines for working online and in person. How many jobs can be taken a day and who gets to decide that? And if it's self-done and I burnout, that's on me... but that is still an implication of feeling like I need enough money to pay rent, my mental health bills, like whatever it's going to be. I need this much money because I don't know if we're going to go into lockdown again, and if all my work is going to be gone. And that uncertainty puts a lot of pressure on individuals to feel like I have to pack my calendar. Therefore, the implications of that, like, how do agencies, or CISLI and RISLI, etc. set out guidelines to ensure that interpreters have a baseline they know they can follow, and if they go over that, they know that they probably shouldn't.

In contrast, several SLIs comment on an improvement in their wellbeing since working remotely.

Following the initial uncertainty at the beginning of the pandemic, I feel much happier and relaxed working from home. No commute/switching off fully at breaktimes has improved my wellbeing.

PHYSICAL HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

The quote below highlights some of the negative physical health implications of remote interpreting. The inability to be mobile whilst working has often led SLIs to feel constricted, and subsequently more tense. Although mentioning physical implications similar to those across the literature such as musculoskeletal pain (Roman *et al.*, 2022) and eye strain (De Meulder *et al.*, 2021), SLIs in the study question their knowledge on ergonomics. Thus, highlighting a curiosity around the long-term impact, and a potential need for more support in the area.

I get back pain now and never experienced that before. I also experience eyestrain. I don't wear glasses but that may change moving forward because of all the screen time. I wonder what toll this will take on the body in the future, e.g., repetitive strain injury. I really think we need more advice on this, practical tips, etc. Interpreting remotely is not just working at a desk with the usual challenges, it places a lot of strain on your body. I invested in equipment (ergonomics, etc.) but I don't know if it is sufficient. I probably need to attend a physiotherapist.

² <https://aiic.org/site/world/about/inside/basic/covid>

Conversely, some SLIs are engaging in more physical activity and rest during breaks because working from home has allowed them to do this.

What I do like about zoom interpreting is that once the other interpreter takes over, if you're working in a team, you can be as weird as you want once that camera goes off. You can stretch and move around and you can lie down, keep an eye on the screen and then you just sit back up, camera on and you're back.

The literature outlines the implementation of essential practices throughout COVID-19 which took form in remote work and aided infection control (Kwok *et al.*, 2021) However, onsite safety issues whilst working during COVID-19 have also featured in the data. Although some commented on a proactive approach taken in health care situations to prevent cross-contamination, others had worrying experiences.

When you go into A&E (accident and emergency hospital room) you could be there for a long time. Even though it's very much partitioned, you're still kind of conscious that you don't necessarily know why people are in A&E. If they're in with COVID, they should be elsewhere, you know, but I would be keeping my contacts lower than before. I'd be more mindful of maybe meeting outside, maybe not going home to see my mother who's in her 80s, even though she's vaccinated.

We (SLIs) had to fight to get vaccinated (earlier than the general population) and really that was only a bit of a fluke that people got onto the vaccination list, even though we were in and out and we made fairly rational arguments. We could be in a nursing home today, we could be in oncology tomorrow and we could be in A&E this evening.

These concerns also applied to some who worked on public health televised announcements.

There were times where we had to stand back. Like this is a teeny tiny studio, that's all green screen and that's great, and I know you need someone on the floor, but this place doesn't even have proper ventilation, and you're coming in without a mask. I just felt it, particularly with media, that it was a bit performative at times that we have our two meters on camera, but once the camera switches off - let's all sit in one room and just chat away without masks... and that made me feel quite uncomfortable.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

COVID-19 has offered new opportunities to Irish SLIs. This includes the potential to be based in rural areas, or perhaps even live abroad whilst continuing to work as an ISL interpreter. Technology was a significant stressor for most SLIs; however, the benefits can be harnessed too. Furthermore, access to international continuous professional development has been very much welcomed by SLIs.

I used to be working with one or two Deaf people throughout the year and that was kind of that. Whereas now there's loads more individual jobs which is a blessing and a curse because it can be tricky because of the admin end of it. But I love that I'm getting out into the community. I'm seeing loads of people now who have not seen me before. I just feel like I'm getting more involved, which has been really nice too.

I think it's great that the (Deaf) community here has opportunities to work with other interpreters other than having to have the local interpreter. I think there's more choice.

These opportunities have extended further afield in some cases with borders/travel no longer being a barrier.

If you're looking at training opportunities for interpreters, there's lots of interpreter material online now, compared to what it used to be like in the past.

It's been a wonderful opportunity during COVID to work with colleagues that you would not have worked with before. And also, because of COVID, it actually levelled the playing field for all of us. For those of us who were living in cities, or living rural, we all had the same thing to deal with, because normally it's based on your age, your geographic location, and your years of experience.

DISCUSSION - LOOKING FORWARD

This study captures the experiences of SLIs working during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results illustrated in the previous section have been presented under three overarching themes: *Workload Variance*, *The Remote Interpreter* and *Psychological and Physical Wellbeing*. While this research is situated in the Irish context, we see parallels from other publications during this period which discuss unsettling technical shifts and an increasing familiarity with online interpreting. The current study, which uses predominately qualitative data analysis techniques, has delved deeply into the emotional response exhibited by SLIs during this time. As well as increased stress levels, other psychological factors have become prevalent in online spaces, such as a lack of SLI autonomy when deciding which assignments are suitable to be carried out remotely (online) and how the boundaries of the SLI role have become more blurred when required to give technical assistance. This study has also documented SLIs concerns as we move forward such as uncertainty about the physical impact of online interpreting and the need for additional peer support when not meeting colleagues as frequently in person. This study has limitations and the main one here relates to the last data collection point being September 2021. We also did not probe the logistics of teaming when working online. Interpreters briefly mentioned the support they received from co-interpreters and colleagues but did not go into more detail. However, it was also mentioned by several SLIs that they often worked alone. Perhaps team interpreting did not surface more because questions were very much framed around the impact that the pandemic had on their wellbeing rather than logistical matters. We are aware that the landscape continues to evolve so some of the matters discussed here may not be so pressing now, while new ones may have come to the fore. Therefore, we suggest additional research into the implications of these findings as we enter a post COVID-19 pandemic era. Let us now turn our attention to exploring specific issues, some of which are relevant to the Irish context, while others may resonate more broadly. Furthermore, we suggest opportunities for responding to some of the concerns raised by SLIs.

In the Irish context, past research has made us aware of the issues surrounding retention in the ISL interpreting profession (Leonard, 2016; Wescott and Stewart, 2017). From the data collected amongst the community, this seems to be further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three interpreters reported leaving the profession during the pandemic in search of new opportunities, due to inconsistent work availability, resulting in a lack of job security. Others made

strong statements regarding a lack of training and support amongst the profession, both of which were mirrored in the literature (Napier *et al.*, 2018). This results in worries around the sustainability of interpreters in such conditions. With growing concerns around supply and demand (Wescott and Stewart, 2017), one wonders what can be done to support ISL interpreters in a post COVID-19 world and ensure their well-being is protected in the profession. We must also acknowledge that the last data collection point took place in September 2021 so it would be interesting to do a follow-up study to see if remote interpreting work is still as readily available and/or if it is still as popular.

FREELANCE VS. EMPLOYED WORK

Many interpreters referred to having more stability due to their employed work in various organizations, or as a result of regular work related specifically to COVID-19. Those who were not involved in such assignments reported being severely hit by initial lockdowns, having lost nearly all their work during the early months of the pandemic. Although most participants indicated that work levels are back to those which they were prior to COVID-19, the impact of such inconsistency remains. Interpreters in this research question future work practices and protections. One interpreter highlighted concerns surrounding rights in terms of payments and cancellations due to the increasingly utilized, yet unregulated remote options. Another pointed out fears of becoming sick, with questions surrounding sick leave entitlements and a concern for the negative consequences on other upcoming jobs.

Two options were noted most dominantly in a resolution for such concerns. Several SLIs urge interpreting bodies and/or government agencies to tackle some of these protection issues for the self-employed by producing more guidelines for safe working conditions and to further support freelancers when such radical workplace changes take place. Alternatively, an increase in employment opportunities for ISL interpreters was also suggested. Although this has been on the rise over recent years with recruitment of in-house interpreters across educational and workplace domains in Ireland, over half of the survey respondents indicated being solely self-employed, leaving them vulnerable to the impact of such conditions.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Throughout the data, interpreters also report a lack of accessible mental health services in combating the psychological stress caused by the profession. Many suggest counselling services as a potential resolution, yet very few listed this as a support that they used despite the impact of the pandemic. This may be indicative of another implication of self-employment which is a lack of entitlement to Employee Assistant Programs (EAPs). According to the Health Service Executive, an EAP is a work-based support structure that is independent and assists staff in working through psychological issues. This is opted in to and funded by the organization, and offers services such as wellbeing workshops, consultations to managers regarding psychological stress, and short-term counselling to staff.

Although this does not currently apply to self-employed ISL interpreters, one participant raises the legal obligations of an employer and where the agencies might partially fall into this category due to their ongoing work relationship. They also suggest the potential of a collective

buy-in to an EAP, of which freelance interpreters can make use of. Although encouraging an exploration of such practice, the interpreter questions who would be responsible for this and how the process would work. Another interpreter states that with assistance from the agencies, government bodies and voluntary bodies, that ISL interpreters could *fit in with a bigger system* in order to gain access to the needed support. They emphasized that this would be a very realistic possibility due to the small number of ISL interpreters currently working in Ireland, whilst also accepting that this may come with a cost for those involved. They conclude with the statement that there are unexplored options for interpreters which can be used to get increased mental health support.

TRAINING AND MENTORING FOR INTERPRETERS

Training opportunities are mentioned across the data, with many interpreters reporting their attendance at a range of online workshops and seminars. However, one interpreter mentions the heavy emphasis on technical aspects of remote interpreting training, with little continuous professional development related to psychological or physical wellbeing. This, paired with the frustration expressed by interpreters in terms of post-graduate interpreter development (Dean and Pollard, 2001), raises questions around what can be done to continue their progression, whilst sustaining their wellbeing.

According to Walker and Shaw (2011), a lack of training and familiarity in certain domains, such as mental health, leaves the professional susceptible to additional stress. Therefore, it seems that specific interpreter training in high-risks domains may be needed by the community in order to combat this. Currently in Ireland, registered interpreters must hold a four-year bachelor's degree in Deaf Studies, or an alternatively recognized course (SLIS, 2017). Aside from voluntary short-term training held by different organizations, no qualifications or mandatory continuous professional development exists in Ireland which is required by interpreters to work in specific high-risk domains. In other regions, guidelines are available which outline the minimum competencies for such interpreters. This may be an aspect that the Irish interpreting community should consider in order to protect interpreters, their clients and service users.

Hetherington (2012) emphasizes the risk of psychological stress going unnoticed due to the nature of the interpreting profession. They state that individuals frequently work alone, missing out on a collaborative network which allows them to process stress and improve their personal and professional health. In order to combat this, the Citizens Information Board and the Sign Language Interpreting Service have launched their Mentoring Training Program for Irish Sign Language Interpreters. This included a six-month training of nine experienced interpreters, which upon completion, certified this group as professional mentors which allows them to guide their colleagues and students within the profession. The training stage of this process was completed in early 2022. It will be interesting to see if SLIs avail of professional mentoring and how this will be structured and supported by the relevant stakeholders.

In terms of professional supervision, there are currently no SLIs with a professional interpreting supervision qualification in Ireland. According to Hetherington (2012), this type of support outweighs that of informal structures such as friends or peers, due to limited opportunities for development within the latter. Supervision provides a professional space to explore ethical

dilemmas and difficult assignments. Supervisors are also trained to recognize psychological impacts, thus, potentially limiting the interpreter's risk of developing vicarious trauma (Brunson and Lawrence, 2002). This may be something that the Irish SLI interpreting community consider engaging with in order to provide more professional and emotional support to its members with an aim to improve services and aid retention.

From the research, although general progress has been made with the implementation of the ISL Act 2017, and the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters, current wellbeing support for ISL interpreters is lagging. Strong concerns are expressed regarding psychological health and occupational burnout. In this research, the SLI community has demonstrated rich solution-focused actions to grow the profession, however SLIs frequently suggest that all stakeholders must be cognizant of the need for further support.

CONCLUSION

SLIs in Ireland faced significant obstacles whilst working during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first six months of the pandemic, most experienced a drastic decrease in work volume and did not possess the technical knowledge required to work effectively in remote settings. Whilst this knowledge gap was reduced by SLIs proactively engaging in further training and seeking out collegial support, there were still many drawbacks from interpreting online. Several SLIs report the complex nature of interpreting a visual-spatial language from a computer screen and how it can impact performance, clients' and service users' perception of them, and self-esteem levels. There were also concerns expressed about the inability to develop client and service user rapport and the isolation of working alone, even if officially working with a co-interpreter online. As we moved into the second year of the pandemic, most SLIs appreciated the flexibility of a hybrid arrangement and some of the positive aspects of working from home, as experienced by the general population. Results also indicate that for non-Dublin based interpreters, remote interpreting has provided additional assignments and the opportunity to work outside of their local area.

As we work in an ever-changing landscape, SLIs continue to navigate their working environments. As pointed out in the discussion, further research and support is required, particularly around the long-term physical and psychological implications of interpreting online. Self-employed SLIs feel particularly vulnerable and have called on relevant stakeholders to engage in dialogue so that safe working guidelines can be produced, and so that additional supports can be implemented. Debate will continue on the topic of remote sign language interpreting and the need for safeguards to protect SLIs and the deaf community. Future opportunities have been identified, as have the risks and drawbacks.

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