

Resolution on Sound Quality

The staff and ACI interpreters working for the European Commission, meeting in a Joint General Assembly on 16 September 2022, supported by the Staff Interpreters' Delegation at the European Parliament (Delint) and the AIIC European Parliament Professional Delegation (EPPD),

HAVING REGARD TO

- the Rules on working conditions applicable to permanent and temporary staff interpreters in its latest version of 14 November 2014,
- Agreement on the working conditions and the pecuniary regime for auxiliary conference interpreters (ACIs) recruited by the Institutions of the European Union applicable as of 1 September 2008 and its corresponding implementing rules, - the Interinstitutional Agreement on the Provisions Applicable to Teleinterpretation (IIA- RI) in its latest revision of 2015,
- the Staff Regulations of Officials and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community,
- ISO standard 23155:2022 and its definition of remote interpreting,
- the AIIC Position on Distance Interpreting,
- the 'AIIC Interpreter Checklist. Performing Remote Interpreting Assignments from Home in extremis during the Covid-19 Pandemic',
- the Interim programming arrangements for meetings with simultaneous and consecutive interpretation delivery platforms of 17 June 2021,
- AIIC Assembly's Declaration on Auditory Health of 16 January 2022,
- the AIIC UN Professional Delegation resolution entitled 'Geneva Sub Sector Resolution on Sound Quality' of 2 June 2022,
- Resolution by the staff and ACI interpreters working for the European Parliament on returning to commonly agreed working conditions for interpreters after the ending of BCM of 13 June 2022,
- Resolution by the AIIC Staff Interpreters' Committee on Global threats to interpreters' auditory health: symptoms of damage to the auditory system of conference interpreters reported by interpreters worldwide since the advent of widespread recourse to remote simultaneous interpretation platforms and videoconferencing systems of 1 September 2022,

WHEREAS

A. During the time that the European Commission was operating in Business Continuity Mode (BCM), interpreters routinely worked

- in remote mode (non co-located with the speakers), in substandard conditions which did not meet the ISO requirements;
- in undermanned teams in violation of the provisions set out in binding working conditions, and accepted significant derogations from the Interinstitutional Agreement on the Provisions Applicable to Teleinterpretation (IIA-RI);

B. Co-location of the full team of interpreters and all meeting participants is the standard and superior set-up for interpretation;

C. New scientific research¹ on the effects on auditory systems of aggressively compressed sound highlights the connection between substandard sound and negative impact on auditory health and well-being, as well as a correlation between the number of hours worked in remote and the adverse impact on auditory health;

D. A significant and growing number of interpreters have been reporting career-threatening and potentially life-altering health incidents and conditions to the Medical Service, the Delegations and in staff surveys² since the introduction of remote simultaneous interpretation (RSI) through simultaneous interpretation delivery platforms (SIDPs) and the consequent exposure to substandard, harmful sound;

E. While working with SIDPs, a number of factors, among which the most salient are a wrong configuration of the SIDP and the use of substandard equipment, have led to interpreters being forced to work under conditions and with sound non-compliant with standards ISO 20108:2017 and ISO 20109:2016.

F. The legal basis for any use of remote interpreting outside BCM is the Interinstitutional Agreement on the Provisions Applicable to Teleinterpretation (IIA-RI) as revised in 2015;

G. The Interim Programming Arrangements for simultaneous and consecutive interpretation delivery platforms were negotiated and accepted by the Staff Interpreter's Delegation (ID) to allow for business continuity in response to the unprecedented situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic;

H. Negotiations launched in October 2021 between DG SCIC and the AIIC Negotiating Delegation (ND) to find an appropriate temporary framework for Non-colocated Remote Interpreting (NCRI) deplorably did not lead to the desired outcome and were characterised by sporadic meetings and long delays in communication from DG SCIC;

I. Before BCM, the rare cases of contributions by video conferencing were notified in advance and were allowed only for external participants on an ad hoc basis;

¹ Study by Professor Paul Avan, Université de Clermont-Auvergne, for INSERM on the effects of dynamic range compression of audio signals on the hearing of guinea pigs. Professor Avan's 15-minute presentation at UNESCO's Semaine du Son, January 19, 2022: <https://youtu.be/LHbOzUaSeFI?t=2055>

² Available surveys:

- Garone/Vrije Universiteit survey on EU and UN staff interpreters: Perceived impact of RSI on auditory health (March 2014)

J. Only the equipment recommended by interpreters representatives, their experts and the interpreting services can bring the sound closer to the required level. Yet, in spite of the awareness-raising activities carried out by DG SCIC, a majority of meeting participants do not or will not use it, resulting in inadequate conditions for quality interpreting and thus a potential reputational risk for DG SCIC;

K. There is no binding remote participation protocol applicable to participants in hybrid meetings nor is it obligatory for them to carry out a test call in advance to check the technical compliance and quality of their remote connections;

L. Confident that DG SCIC is committed to ensuring a safe working environment for its entire workforce, including staff and ACI interpreters;

M. Determined to provide the high-quality interpretation meeting organizers and conference participants have always expected of us, and in which we take pride;

1. Call upon DG SCIC, as part of its duty of care, to safeguard interpreters' general and auditory health by urgently convening a constitutive meeting of the Interpreter Health & Safety Committee with representatives from DG SCIC, the Staff Interpreter's Delegation (ID) and the AIIC European Commission Professional Delegation (ECPD) as members, to monitor the effects of remote participation in multilingual meetings and adopt necessary measures to adequately protect interpreter health i.e. launch, together with the interpreters representatives and their experts, a comprehensive auditory health survey to map vulnerabilities, set up a complete auditory register including both pathologies which can be linked to an incident and those that appear gradually due to long-term exposure, commission a study to determine the effects of platforms on interpreters and develop a risk analysis on which to base the prevention strategy.

2. Urge DG SCIC to guarantee appropriate, adapted working conditions for interpreters through a framework fit for new hybrid and remote interpreting settings, which takes account of potential health impacts and additional cognitive load linked to these modes, notably by limiting interpreters' exposure to them and in any event resorting to them only when they are justified as they are otherwise unnecessary and counterproductive adding risk and compromising quality.

3. Call upon the European Commission and DG SCIC to make the recommended equipment and technical set-up a mandatory requirement for remote meeting participation, so that a greater degree of compliance with the applicable ISO standards can be achieved;

4. Recall that the parties to the IIA-RI explicitly recognise remote interpretation to be an inferior working method and that remote interpretation generates a heightened cognitive load and may jeopardize their auditory health;

5. Insist that interpreters have access to the information on microphones used by remote participants with a new platform feature blocking or otherwise flagging non compliant peripherals. This will help interpreters protect themselves and ensure that they can work to the best of their ability to provide the high-quality service that all meeting participants deserve;

6. Call on DG SCIC to play an active role in informing all clients requesting meetings with remote participation that sub-standard sound quality has a direct, negative effect on interpreter acoustic health, which can be mitigated in many instances through a fit-for-purpose technical set-up and appropriate remote participation etiquette;

7. Inform that effective immediately, interpreters reserve the right not to interpret speakers whose sound does not meet the standards required for high- quality conference interpreting. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Speakers not using an ISO-compliant lapel or uni-directional table microphone;
- Speakers taking the floor from spaces with significant background noise;
- Speakers who leave device notification sounds on whilst taking the floor;
- Speakers without video;
- Speakers with an unstable internet connection;
- Significant variations in volume between speakers.

8. Express their full support for the interpreters working for the European Parliament facing similar problems and applying a work-to-rule strategy in order to protect themselves from substandard sound of remote connections.

9. The Joint General Assembly calls for unity of the trade unions of all institutions, in particular in Parliament and the Commission requesting they support the cause of interpreters.

10. Instruct the President of the General Assembly of Staff Interpreters to forward this Resolution to the President of the European Commission, the Commissioner for Budget and Administration, the Director-General of DG SCIC, the Director of DG SCIC Directorate for Interpreters, the Director of DG SCIC Directorate for Interpretation Services Management & Professional Support, the Director of DG SCIC Directorate for Resources and Corporate Services, the Directors-General of all DGs of the European Commission, the Secretary-General of the Council, the Secretary General of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the Medical Service of the European Commission, the President of the Staff Committee, and the President of AIIC.