

Summary

Att förstå och bli förstådd

Background

In recent years, the State, municipalities and county councils have experienced a growing need for interpreting services, an important issue not only for public sector efficiency, patient safety and legal certainty, but also for society's overall integration policy and development. While the need for interpreting services may vary over time, it is nevertheless expected to be significant over the long term due to changing demographics. Over the years, society's need for interpreting services has been examined several times. The problem areas have been similar over time and have come to the fore again following the increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015–2016. In summary, the question has been how to increase accessibility to high-quality interpreting services to meet the requirement under the Administrative Procedure Act for interpreters when they are needed. Today, interpreting services are provided collaboratively by the public sector, private and public interpreting agencies and 5 000–6 000 interpreters, generally independent contractors. The sector's total costs amount to approximately SEK 2 billion per year. The interpreting profession is demanding; despite this, many interpreters lack both authorisation and interpreting training because, so far, it has been possible to work as an interpreter without these qualifications.

The Inquiry's proposals in point form

A number of strategic goals for society's provision of interpreters can be formulated as medium-term goals of around five years.

- The State funds fewer educational pathways for interpreters but increases the total capacity. Volume and orientation are coordinated in relation to state authorisation of interpreters, with a basic requirement for training and workplace learning.
- The State keeps a register of authorised and trained interpreters. This forms the basis of future public sector interpreting services.
- A new interpreting services act is introduced, and the use of children as interpreters is prohibited and replaced with the use of professional interpreters. Regulatory frameworks, quality assurance and supervision of interpreters and intermediary bodies are developed.
- The public sector plans for the long term, collaborates, coordinates and uses existing interpreting resources more flexibly and effectively. An increasing share of resources is used to finance core interpreting activities, i.e. interpreting services.
- Quality-assured interpreters are offered public assignments through the State's coordinated commissioning. Authority requirements are matched against the quality of services delivered.
- The State and public sector build up their own interpreting resources where appropriate, or agree on guaranteed services. Cost increases for the public sector are held back but quality and societal benefits increase.
- The interpreting profession is valued and professionalised, which in the long term also leads to more traditional partnerships, a better work environment, higher employment rates and more labour market stability for interpreters.

Remit

The overall task of the Inquiry on interpreting services has been to conduct a broad overview of society's need for, and access to, interpreters of spoken languages and the public sector's use of these interpreters. The goal has been to find a flexible, legally certain and efficient system that will also work in the future. The terms of reference included a number of focus areas highlighting various aspects and issues such as:

- mapping the country's interpreting resources within different qualification levels and the interpreters' skills in relation to different assignments;
- structures for different educational formats and pathways that can respond to society's demands;
- an analysis of the authorisation system and skills assessment methods;
- the need for supervision in connection with interpreting services;
- areas and forms of effective cooperation between public authorities; and
- the need for knowledge and measures in relation to the use of children as interpreters.

A number of more specific issues have also been highlighted. These include inquiry tasks concerning questions of definition, error reports in connection with an assignment, the need for monitoring, evaluation and statistics, and a range of questions about interpreter training. The majority of interpreters working in Sweden have been found to lack interpreter training, and authorisation. At the same time, state-funded interpreter training is conducted in a variety of educational formats. In 2019 a pilot project will also be launched within higher vocational education. This raises questions about the need for national goals for qualifications at different levels in the field of interpreting.

During the course of its work, the Inquiry has exchanged experiences with a range of public authorities and stakeholders with responsibilities or operations in connection with training, authorisation and supervision of interpreters, as well as interpreting and interpreting agency services. Interpreting spoken languages has been the subject of several inquiries. The Inquiry on interpreting services notes that this has largely been done without close contact with the interpreters who provide society with interpreting services.

The Inquiry has therefore also focused on practising interpreters and their experiences and proposals for improvement measures.

Interpreter training and authorisation

Today, several educational pathways for interpreters are available in different educational formats. This creates confusion for students, buyers and users of interpreting services. At the same time, the volume needs to increase and training programmes need to be developed. They are significantly lacking in terms of a clear, built-in link to the practical aspects of the work, e.g. authority requirements, technology development and the authorisation process of the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency. Current technological changes, which are creating a greater demand for distance interpreting, also need to be addressed in training programmes.

The Inquiry proposes that 1 500 new training places be created over the coming five-year period and primarily at higher education institutions. Training programmes should offer quality and continuity, and have robust admission processes and teaching and examination methods. Training should be broadened and extended to include supervised work experience and the possibility of gaining a special professional interpreting qualification. The programme should meet the knowledge and skills requirements for interpreter authorisation. Today, higher education interpreting programmes are only offered by the Institute for Interpreting and Translation Studies at Stockholm University, so more higher education institutions should develop interpreter training programmes.

Authorisation should continue to be possible for interpreters who have completed other approved interpreter training programmes or been validated against such programmes. To be authorised, these interpreters will be required to pass an examination. The exam will be designed by a higher education

institution but authorisation will be issued by the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, as previously. As of 2024, an approved training programme will be required for authorisation.

Basic interpreter training programmes at adult education colleges and study associations also need to be developed. Programmes are offered at different locations around the country and are important for meeting capacity and accessibility needs. Certain additional resources are proposed, and opportunities should also be offered for additional continuing and further education, and advanced forms of validation for those who have previous experience and expertise in the area.

In 2019 a previously announced interpreter training pilot project for higher vocational education institutions will begin. This should be evaluated to determine its long-term prospects.

Employment training for people wanting to become interpreters does not deliver satisfactory results and is also expensive. The Inquiry believes that it should be discontinued so that the freed-up resources can be used to finance the Inquiry's proposals for other educational formats and measures.

Training for all interpreters regardless of language

The Inquiry proposes that the State and public sector should primarily use the services of interpreters who are authorised or have been registered as having approved educational qualifications. This could also apply to interpreters whose skills have been validated. As of 2024 it will no longer be possible to work as an interpreter in the public sector without formal training or authorisation, other than in exceptional circumstances. This requires training of a more general nature both in higher education institutions and adult education colleges for interpreters with languages for which, to date, it has not been possible to provide training and authorisation. The main reason for this is the difficulty that sometimes arises in finding qualified language assessors and examiners for languages that are new to Sweden or less common.

Despite the difficulty of finding language assessors, this new type of training can provide valuable occupational skills. The programme could include work experience, culture and society studies, technology, ethics and good interpreter conduct, and meet the need for discussion and reflection before entering the interpreting profession.

New interpreting services act including regulation and supervision

Society's interpreting services are an important and necessary part of a number of public activities, but also a cost-driving factor. To a certain extent, developing the necessary quality requirements and monitoring them requires increased support and governance through supervisory measures. In addition to registration and supervision of interpreting agencies, regulation involves greater supervision of authorised and trained interpreters.

Today's interpreting agency services cannot fully guarantee quality interpreting services for the public sector and do not always contribute to a well-functioning labour market for qualified, trained and authorised interpreters. Despite a lack of non-conformance management on the part of public authorities, the Inquiry has been able to identify certain quality deficiencies in interpreting services. They often involved interpreters who failed to appear or arrived late, incompetence in the practice of interpreting or breach of good interpreting practice. These deficiencies threaten individual rights and entail costs to society.

The supervisory role of the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency should be broadened to include registered interpreters with approved training. County administrative boards with experience of business supervision and market regulation should be given responsibility for registration and operational supervision of interpreting agencies. The mandate covers agencies that are approved to outsource assignments for the public sector.

Registration, regulation and supervision of interpreters and interpreting agencies contribute to ensuring quality, legal certainty and cost-effectiveness in public sector interpreting.

Use of children as interpreters to be prohibited

The Inquiry also clarifies the child rights perspective in Swedish law – as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – with a prohibition on the use of children as interpreters. The use of children as interpreters may be allowed in exceptional cases, for example, if there is a risk of serious injury or death. Inquiries in Sweden

and our neighbouring countries suggest that the use of children as interpreters mainly produces negative effects and continues to be widespread in public services. The Inquiry dovetails with the starting points that led to regulation of the use of children as interpreters in Norway and Denmark and proposes a similar prohibition in Sweden.

An adult relative may also be unsuitable as a substitute for a professional interpreter. The issues are multifaceted and include the individual's natural need for some support from friends and close relatives in dealing with authorities and public services. If a public authority assesses that an interpreter is needed, a professional interpreter should be engaged.

Commissioning and the child's perspective

The public sector's ability to commission and use interpreting services needs to improve. This applies to skills and requirements regarding interpretation as a tool for communication that ensures legally certainty or patient safety. It is also important to increase knowledge about the working conditions of interpreters and contribute to shaping a work situation that is constructive for both the interpreter and operations.

The Inquiry's proposals regarding information and support measures in this area are directed at the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency and a number of public authorities and knowledge centres that can assist in these efforts. One particular issue to be considered in the remit concerns developing knowledge about the child's perspective in interpreting for children.

Governance, collaboration and monitoring

The lack of governance and collaboration surrounding the public sector's use of interpreting services plays a significant role in the problems related to interpreting services. These include a perceived shortage of interpreters in certain languages, inefficient use of available interpreters and the poor quality of many of the interpreting services on offer. Trained interpreters, on the other hand, feel there are few opportunities for assignments and employment. The Inquiry presents a number of proposals on how to reverse the situation by

- the State developing its own coordinated commissioning,
- initial development projects being conducted around a state interpreter portal,
- the possibility of a state interpreter resource being examined,
- frameworks being developed for multilingual terminology and technology development, and
- the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency's Council for interpreting and translation issues developing into a central forum for discussion and support for the profession.

The Inquiry also recommends that municipalities and county councils improve collaboration on their use of high-quality interpreters in spoken languages.

For the State, managing an advanced interpreter register and a comprehensive portal solution means that sufficient security requirements can also be imposed within the State for the processing of personal data.

State interpreter portal

The Inquiry proposes the development of a uniform state portal for coordinating and ordering public sector interpreting services. The portal is intended to facilitate dynamic development and the membership of both commissioning authorities and future interpreters and interpreting agencies. The portal should be systemically managed by the State for proper processing of personal data and sensitive classified information. A comprehensive portal means that available interpreters of different languages with different skills can be matched with the authorities' needs in terms of skills, and geographical and time requirements. For the interpreters, the goal of increased employment can be given true meaning.

Today's difficulties lie in the fact that different authorities and public providers develop their own special solutions, as do the interpreting agencies that are used. This consolidates the development of separate framework agreements, separate prime suppliers and different technical solutions, and presents serious difficulties in terms of flexibility and adaptation to a changing market for interpreting services. A comprehensive solution creates conditions for greater public responsibility for interpreting agency services.

The purchasing and provision of interpreting services need to be uniform and coordinated, which is hampered by today's fragmented sub-ordering system. Coordination means better management of the quality-assured interpreting resources listed in the register of the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency. Development resources to the National Government Service Centre are proposed for a pilot project for an initial two-year period. Several other authorities need to assist in the work, primarily the Swedish Public Employment Service, the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency and the Swedish Migration Agency, which manage the current framework agreement for the provision of services, have their own experiences and, in some cases, technical expertise. The pilot project should include relevant technical, legal and economic conditions. Moreover, the professional requirements that could apply for establishing sustainable and sought-after support for the State's interpreting services should be developed.

This portal should be developed as a central tool for planning, service provision, invoice management, statistics, monitoring, nonconformance management and supervision of public interpreting services. Ultimately, the establishment of a state source of interpreting expertise including employed interpreters should be tested to meet the State's need for interpreting services within the languages that have been in greatest demand over time. This would provide the conditions to secure skills and a basic level of staffing to meet the needs of society that are prioritised from time to time. The interpreting profession would thereby be given a higher status in the public sector, along with stability, reasonable working conditions and pay levels, and the possibility of longer-term planning both for individual interpreters and users.

Terminology work

Consistent terminology and systematically built term databases as support for interpreting and translation services are a basic utility for the public sector. The State should therefore take clearer responsibility for the development of term databases for the most frequent languages. Work has begun to make open digital language data accessible, for example in connection with activities in other EU countries.

Technology and service development

New technological advances will play a crucial role in the future development of the interpreting profession. Technology is significant in various ways, which are addressed in different parts of the Inquiry. They relate to the interpreter's tools, support for terminology and language management and, in the long run, digital translation functions. Digitally managed terminology databases in different languages are, as stated previously, a fundamental and valuable resource for both interpreters and translators.

The Inquiry proposes that the Institute for Language and Folklore and their Language Council of Sweden be commissioned to develop a model for collaboration and development of multilingual terminology as a basis for interpreting and translation. A number of relevant authorities should be tasked with assisting in this work, with the long-term aim of developing joint basic terminology to support services and technical applications.

Municipalities and county councils

It is estimated that municipalities and county councils account for almost two thirds or slightly more than SEK 1 billion of publicly funded interpreting services throughout the country. This includes agency fees arising from their own or contracted private provision of interpreting services. The public benefits of greater coordination and efficiency improvements in the sector would therefore be substantial. This also applies to internal efficiency improvements that the relevant authorities can achieve through enhanced commissioning skills and clearer guidelines on how and when interpreters should be called in, use of internally available language support and new technological solutions. Municipalities and county councils should, to a greater extent, be encouraged to collaborate on the provision of interpreters of spoken languages. However, such collaboration

can only be regulated or encouraged by the State to a limited extent; changes must stem from the sector's own ambitions to ensure that the tax revenues used produce greater quality and efficiency. Significant experience of municipal collaboration already exists, both in the procurement area in question and in relation to interpreter rates, and organisational and coordinated activities.

Costs and funding

The Inquiry proposes that the funding of its proposals come partly from the appropriation for employment training for people who want to become interpreters, and partly from the savings that would result from more effective use of interpreting services. New resources in the order of SEK 40 million should be directed at

- training at higher education institutions and adult education colleges
- validation measures
- supervision of interpreters and interpreting agencies
- pilot projects on the state interpreter portal including interpreting agencies
- advanced terminology work
- information and development of commissioning skills.

Impact of the Inquiry's proposals

The Inquiry's proposals will have a number of direct effects, but will ultimately also create conditions for structural and indirect developments. One of the fundamental aims of the proposals is to create better conditions in the long term that will enable public authorities to access the quality interpreting services they require. The interpreting profession needs to be strengthened and professionalised; for interpreters, this involves clearer training and authorisation requirements. The public sector needs to manage its interpreting resources well, which can be done in several ways. This could mean, for example, that when managing assignments and collaborating within its own sphere, the public sector should create the working conditions and employment opportunities to make the interpreting profession attractive and long-term. Putting quality ahead of quantity is costly, but it pays in the long run in terms of increased legal certainty and effective use of the qualified interpreters that society trains and uses.

For certain stakeholders, the Inquiry's proposals may be more demanding. In the long term, interpreters not wanting to invest in authorisation, training or validation will be in declining demand. The market for interpreting agencies will also be more limited, at least in relation to the public authorities. However, remaining interpreting agencies could add value and raise the quality of their services, and by doing so also retain their role in the system in the long term.