

## ITEM 2 INTERPRETER SERVICE - FUTURE DIRECTION

Established in 2004, the Interpreter Service function provides face to face language support within the Wollongong Local Government Area (LGA). It is a fee for service offering and income from bookings funds the Administration Officer – Interpreter position. There has been a significant reduction in the need for the service over time and the number of bookings is no longer meeting the income required to cover the position cost. New services are also now available for the community to access.

This report seeks Council endorsement of the proposed closure of the Interpreter Service

### RECOMMENDATION

Council discontinues the Interpreter Service from 31 August 2023.

### REPORT AUTHORISATIONS

Report of: Sue Savage, Manager Community Cultural + Economic Development  
Authorised by: Kerry Hunt, Director Community Services - Creative and Innovative City

### ATTACHMENTS

There are no attachments for this report.

### BACKGROUND

#### History and function

Council's Interpreter Service was established in 2004 and provides a fee for service, face to face interpreter service for organisations throughout the LGA. The service was established as a response to local need. In 1997 the Ethnic Affairs Commission (now Multicultural NSW) closed the language service branch in Wollongong and relocated to Sydney resulting in decreased availability of interpreters and increased costs to use the service, due to travel costs associated with bookings. Culturally diverse communities were significantly impacted as they could not access interpreters for important conversations. Council undertook extensive consultation with community and other stakeholders which led to the establishment of the service.

Bookings are made online through Council's webpage or by calling a dedicated Interpreters telephone number. Examples of bookings received include casework, parent/guardian teacher interviews, counselling, client assessment, community consultations and group information sessions. Court interpreting and health related interpreting are not covered by Council's Interpreter Service. Bookings can only be made by organisations, not individual members of the public. Booking requests of this nature are referred to a suitable service provider.

The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters Ltd (NAATI) is the national standards and accreditation body. The agency issues accreditation for practitioners who complete training and work professionally in Australia. It gives both credibility and quality assurance to agencies who employ practitioners. Gaining accreditation can be a difficult and costly process which has been a barrier for many of our local interpreters. To support the continued provision of the Interpreter Service, Language Support Worker (LSW) positions were introduced to accommodate the needs of emerging communities in 2008. LSW's fill the role when local NAATI accredited interpreters are not available.

Our Interpreter positions are 'casual' and are recruited through a non-merit-based process. There are currently 39 interpreters engaged as casuals, however only 17 are being used since reopening in February 2022. We have interpreters for 26 languages, with only 12 commonly used. It is noted Council also provides a Language Aide service. Language Aides are people who work at Council and can speak languages other than English. They are not professional interpreters but can help customers who are dealing with Council. We currently have Language Aides for 14 languages.

## Administration Officer - Interpreter

The Administration Officer - Interpreter is a nine hour per week position and is responsible for the day to day administration of the Interpreter Service. The position was established in March 2016 as the result of a trial and evaluation process. Prior to the establishment of the Administration Officer – Interpreter, the administration function was delivered by the Graffiti Management Administration position or the Community Development Worker – Multicultural.

The position is fully funded from the fees charged to agencies using the service. The current operating hours are Monday, 9am-12pm, Wednesday 2pm-5pm and Fridays 9am-12pm.

The responsibilities of the position include receiving requests, booking interpreters, entering details into the OneCouncil system, processing interpreter timesheets, processing cancellations and collating reporting data. Periodic recruitment and promotion of the service is undertaken by the Community Development Worker – Multicultural.

## Fee structure and Interpreter Payment

The fee charged to the agency and the rate at which the interpreter is paid is dependent on the qualification. There is a minimum 1½ hour booking and the interpreters are paid for a minimum of this duration. The differences between NAATI qualified and LSW are outlined below along with the margin Council retains which is used for the Administration Officer – Interpreter salary.

NAATI Qualified Interpreter		Amount	Language Support Worker		Amount
1 1/2 Hour Fee Charged		210.00	1 1/2 Hour Fee Charged		187.00
GST		19.09	GST		17.00
<b>Fee Received</b>		<b>190.91</b>	<b>Fee Received</b>		<b>170.00</b>
<b>Interpreter Wage</b>			<b>Interpreter Wage</b>		
1 1/2 Hour Hourly Rate 67.5 inc oncosts (25%)		105.81	1 1/2 Hour Hourly Rate 54.0 inc oncosts (25%)		84.65
Grade SB37			Grade SB22		
<b>Council Margin</b>		<b>85.10</b>	<b>Council Margin</b>		<b>85.36</b>

Additional rates are charged for every additional ¼ hour and mileage outside of the LGA. A full day rate is also available. These are rarely accessed so have not been presented in the data.

A minimum of eight bookings per week are required to support the costs of administration.

To maintain alignment with industry fees and recognising the impacts of COVID-19, annual fee increases have not been introduced for two years.

## Other Interpreter Service Providers Now Available

Other organisations offer interpreting services with a wider variety of languages. A summary of these organisations, the number of languages and fees are as follows:

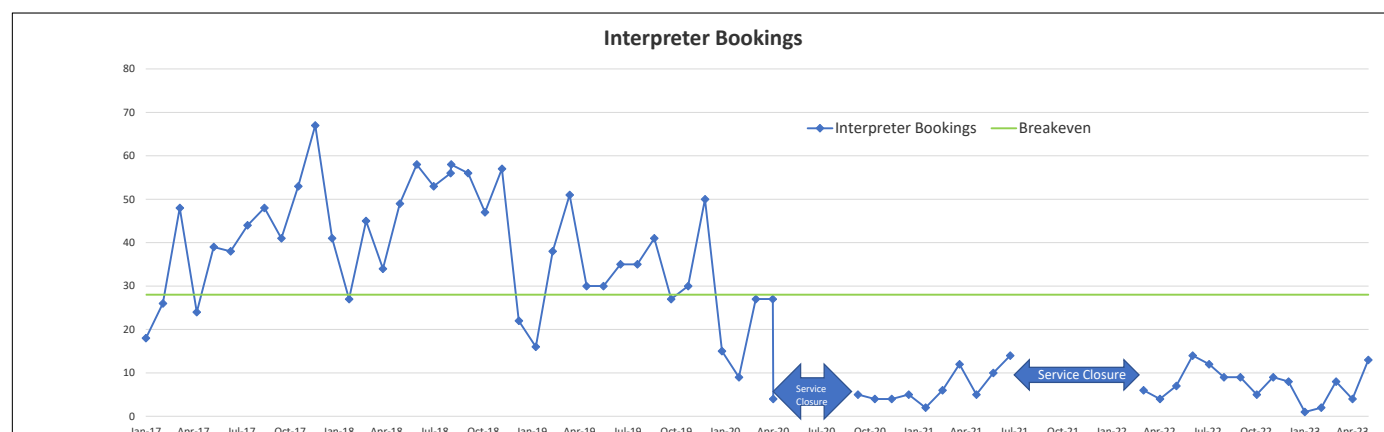
Supplier	Number of Languages Offered	Service	Cost	Notes
2m Language Services	250	In Person	\$ 330.00	2 hour minimum, \$165 per hour
		On-line	\$ 82.50	30 minute minimum
TIS National Interpreters	150	In Person	\$ 167.20	90 minute minimum
Aussie Translations	80	In Person	\$ 176.00	1 hour minimum
Speak Your Language	120	In Person	\$ 170.78	1 hour minimum, travel additional \$120
		On-line	\$ 121.00	

The range of languages Council offers (26) is very small in comparison to other organisations. The fees charged by Council are similar to those of other organisations, however other organisations charge a travel fee in addition. Interpreter services offered online do not incur travel costs, therefore incur a lower fee making them more cost effective. Online services also provide access to a greater range of

languages and with the increased use of online platforms during COVID-19 restriction, comfort in this method has increased.

## Reduction in Bookings

Our Interpreter Service was suspended from 1 April 2020 to 7 September 2020 and 28 June 2021 to 14 February 2022 due to COVID-19 restrictions. The below graph shows the levels of bookings before, during and post COVID-19 restrictions. The number of bookings required to ensure the sustainability of the service is shown by the green line.



The number of requests for interpreter services has continued to be significantly lower than the number required for the service to be financially sustainable. The service has been fully operational for more than a year post COVID-19 restrictions, however an increase in service requests has not been achieved.

The average number of bookings over the past twelve months is approximately eight per month which is approximately one quarter of the required bookings per month for the service to be financially viable. The Restricted Asset (RA) has been continually drawn on to cover the Administration Officer – Interpreter salary. The RA balance is exhausted, and the provision of the service has become reliant on Council funding.

## Prior and Current Service Users

The number of organisations using the service has decreased significantly. The table below shows the organisations using the service the year before the pandemic and those since the service was reactivated in February 2022.

Agency	Number of interpreter services provided	
	Jan - Dec 2019	Mar 2022 – June 2023
Department of Education	145	72
The Shepherd Centre	50	23
Guide Dogs NSW	29	-
Illawarra Legal Centre	28	4
Interchange Illawarra	24	-
Healthy Cities	19	-
Women Illawarra	-	9
Other	106	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>134</b>

The Department of Education and The Shepherd Centre are the most consistent users of the service, both historically and currently, however the number of bookings has significantly decreased. These services shared the key reasons for the decrease in bookings include the reduction in newly arrived

refugees, changes to NDIS requirements and that our service does not offer interpreters for some language/s they require.

Organisations who are not currently accessing the service, but had previously, were contacted and asked if they intend on using the service again. Some agencies have closed their Wollongong office including

Guide Dogs NSW, Presbyterian Aged Care and Slater and Gordon Lawyers. Interchange Illawarra have been using the TIS online service and indicated they may use the service in the future.

A range of methods have been implemented to reengage providers and increase usage including emails and telephone calls.

## PROPOSAL

The service was created to meet a need left by the closure of the Multicultural NSW Wollongong office in the 1990s.

Alternative providers are now available and can supply services in a wider variety of languages. These include online and in person services which satisfy local requirements. The demand for the service Council provides has decreased such that it is also no longer financially sustainable with the current service need. It is therefore proposed that:

- Interpreters Service ceases as a service of Council from 31 August 2023
- The staff of the Interpreters Service are managed and supported under the terms of Council's Enterprise Agreement
- The relevant stakeholders are informed of the closure of the service
- Information about how to access interpreter services from alternate providers is made available to the community via Council's Customer Service, Library and Community Development teams.

## CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Current and past users of the service were contacted to understand their current needs and how they are being serviced. A range of methods have been implemented to reengage providers and increase usage including emails and telephone calls.

The appropriate internal process for managing change has been followed.

A comprehensive communication plan will be implemented as part of the cessation of the service.

## PLANNING AND POLICY IMPACT

This report contributes to the delivery of Our Wollongong 2032 Goal 4. It specifically delivers on the following:

Community Strategic Plan 2032		Delivery Program 2022-2026
Strategy		Service
4.1	Provide our community with equitable access to information and opportunities to inform decision-making.	Community Programs

## RISK MANAGEMENT

The risks in relation to this proposal and potential mitigations have been considered. They relate mainly to the impact on Council employees who are employed in the Interpreter Service; the reduction in the level of service to community and the need to manage perceptions and maintain Council's reputation.

These risks will be managed via a risk plan, which includes:

- consultation with relevant stakeholders
- support for our employees within the terms of Council's Enterprise Agreement
- winding down of services and a comprehensive communications plan.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Interpreter Service has operated since its inception as a fee-for-service model. As outlined in this report, the service is no longer viable. The service has continued to operate at a loss for the last three years. A combination of leave, redeployment and drawing on the Restricted Asset (RA) account have been accessed during that period. The service is currently reliant on Council funding.

## CONCLUSION

The Interpreter Service has provided a significant service to the Wollongong community since 2004, that contributes to the achievement of Council's goals and aspirations for the city.

There has been considerable reduction in the community need for this service, coupled with new services now available requiring a review of the model. It is no longer viable for Council to deliver this service.