

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

ACCESS TO INTERPRETATION FOR MIGRANTS

Nasc, the Irish word for 'link',
empowers migrants to realise
and fulfil their rights.



Nasc

Migrant & Refugee Rights

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INTRODUCTION

Access to public services is a fundamental right, yet for many migrant and ethnic minority communities, significant barriers hinder their ability to avail of essential supports. One of the most pressing challenges faced by these communities in Ireland is the lack of accessible interpretation services in public sector institutions. Without adequate language support, individuals are left unable to effectively communicate their needs, understand their rights, or navigate critical systems such as social welfare, healthcare, legal services, and housing.

This research paper examines the impact of inadequate interpretation services on migrant and ethnic minority groups seeking public services.

METHODOLOGY

Over a four-week period in 2023, we profiled the first fifteen individuals who accessed our services, all of whom had previously experienced difficulties or disadvantages in engaging with public services due to the absence of interpreters or translated materials.

To ensure ethical research practices and maintain participant confidentiality, each service user was asked for their permission to participate in the study and have their experiences documented in an anonymous case study. Upon receiving informed consent, the individuals were assigned a number for the purpose of the case study, with only their gender and mother tongue recorded to maintain anonymity. No identifying information was collected, and all case studies were anonymised to protect the identities of the participants.

The selected service users agreed to complete a short, structured questionnaire where they were asked a series of set questions designed to assess their experiences with public services and the impact of language barriers. Given the language challenges faced by participants, the questions were structured in a way that ensured clarity and accessibility, incorporating:

- Yes/No questions to facilitate straightforward responses
- Rating scales (e.g., 1 to 5) to gauge the severity of the barriers they encountered

The Nasc staff member assisting them then drafted a short summary of their experience (150 words or less).

This approach balanced the need for consistency in data collection with the flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth, ensuring that participants could effectively communicate their challenges despite language barriers.

PUBLIC SECTOR DUTY

Under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, public service providers in Ireland have a statutory duty to ensure that their services are accessible to all individuals, regardless of language barriers. The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (the Duty) mandates that public bodies proactively promote equality and protect human rights in the execution of their functions. Despite this obligation, our study underscores a gap between

policy and practice, with many public service providers failing to provide interpretation support, leading to systemic exclusion, administrative delays, and in some cases, denial of essential services.

By bringing attention to this issue, this paper highlights the need for language support policies across public services. Ensuring the availability of interpretation is not merely a matter of compliance with public sector duty, it would also make for greater efficiency of service delivery. In all fifteen of the case studies we sampled, the lack of adequate interpretation meant that delays occurred, appointments were rescheduled or further follow up was required.

The availability of phone line interpretation across all public services would significantly mitigate this and would be a fundamental step forward in ensuring that everyone can access the services they need without discrimination.

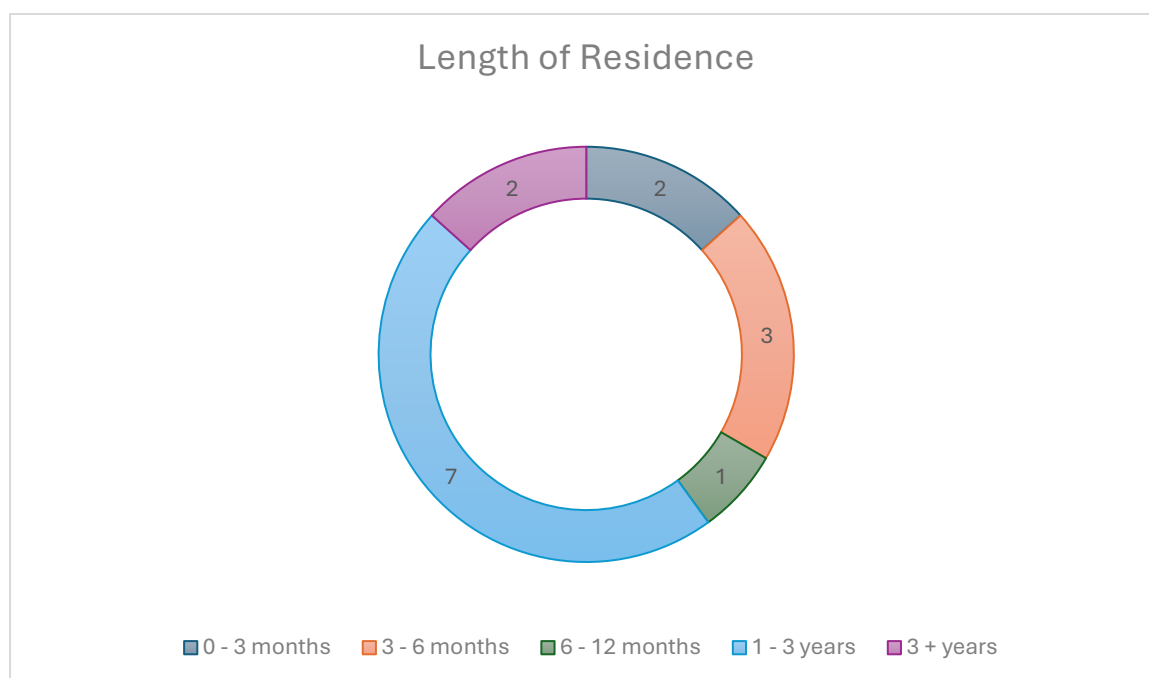
OVERVIEW OF DATA

The survey data provides insight into the challenges faced by migrants in accessing public services due to language barriers. The majority of respondents reported difficulties in reading, writing, and understanding spoken English, which directly impacts their ability to engage with essential services such as healthcare, legal aid, and social welfare. A significant number of individuals were not provided with interpretation services, leaving them to rely on friends, family, or mobile translation apps, often leading to misunderstandings and service denial. The case studies presented in this report further illustrate the real-world consequences of these language barriers.

The survey captured responses from a diverse group of migrants, representing various nationalities, linguistic backgrounds, and lengths of stay in Ireland. These demographic insights highlight the wide range of experiences among migrants and underscore the need for tailored support services to address their specific challenges. The gender distribution of respondents was relatively balanced, with seven men and eight women participating in the survey, with a significant number identifying their first languages as Ukrainian, Arabic, Bengali, and Dari. The length of time migrants had been residing in Ireland varied, with some respondents having been in the country for less than six months, while others had been in Ireland for one to three years or more.

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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

The survey respondents were asked to assess their English proficiency across four key areas: reading, understanding spoken English, speaking in everyday situations, and writing. The response options ranged from "Very well" to "Not at all."

	How well can you read English?	How well do you understand spoken English?	How well can you speak English in everyday situations?	How well can you write in English?
Moderately	7	7	4	3
A little	5	5	8	8
Not at all	2	0	0	3
Very well	1	0	0	0
Well	0	3	3	1

Reading Ability

A significant proportion of respondents reported difficulties with reading, writing, understanding or speaking English. Many indicated that they could read "Moderately," "A little," or "Not at all." This limitation poses challenges when completing official documents, understanding written instructions from service providers, and navigating online resources. The inability to comprehend important notices or correspondence from government offices can result in missed appointments, failure to comply with legal requirements, and delays in receiving necessary services.

Understanding Spoken English

Comprehension of spoken English varied among respondents, with some reporting proficiency while others struggled. Those who selected "A little" or "Not at all" face considerable obstacles in verbal communication, making it difficult to engage with service providers. This challenge is particularly acute in healthcare settings, where accurate understanding of medical advice is crucial for treatment and medication adherence. Without interpretation, misunderstandings can lead to serious health risks.

Speaking English in Everyday Situations

While some respondents indicated that they could speak English "Well" or "Moderately," a significant number reported speaking ability as "A little" or "Not at all." This limitation affects their ability to express concerns, ask questions, or advocate for themselves in bureaucratic settings. The lack of language support often forces migrants to rely on children or acquaintances for interpretation, which is neither sustainable nor appropriate in sensitive situations.

Writing Ability

Difficulties in writing English were widely reported, with many respondents selecting "A little" or "Not at all." Writing proficiency is critical for filling out application forms and engaging in official correspondence. Without adequate support, migrants may struggle to complete necessary paperwork, leading to application rejections or administrative delays.

CHALLENGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The survey asked participants to select from the following options when identifying where challenges arose in their daily lives:

- Filling out forms or paperwork
- Talking to government staff (for example social welfare, housing, immigration)
- Understanding signs, letters, or official documents
- Talking on the phone
- Talking to a friend

Participants were able to select multiple options. The most frequently cited challenge **was filling out forms or paperwork**, indicating that written communication remains a significant barrier for many individuals. Complex bureaucratic language, unfamiliar terminology, and the lack of translated materials make it difficult for migrants to complete essential applications.

Understanding **signs, letters, or official documents** was another frequently cited challenge, emphasising the difficulties migrants face in interpreting written materials in English. This issue affects their ability to read official correspondence, which can result in missed deadlines, penalties, or loss of services.

Additionally, **talking on the phone** was a notable difficulty for many respondents. Unlike face-to-face conversations where gestures or context clues may assist in comprehension, phone calls remove these visual aids, making communication even more challenging. Many migrants find it hard to understand spoken English over the phone, particularly when dealing with fast speech, accents, or complex terminology.

Lastly, some respondents mentioned difficulties in **talking to a friend** in English. While informal conversations may seem less demanding, they can still pose a challenge, particularly for those who are new to the language or lack confidence in their speaking abilities.

NEED FOR INTERPRETERS WHEN ACCESSING ESSENTIAL SERVICES

All of the participants were asked the following question: Were you offered an interpreter when talking to the doctor, government office, or other service? The participants were able to select from the following options:

- Yes
- Yes, but the interpreter was not suitable or not available
- No, I didn't need one

- No, but I needed one and didn't get one

Alarming thirteen of the participants indicated that they needed an interpreter and didn't get one. The remaining two participants has been offered an interpreter but the interpreter was not suitable or not available.

The lack of interpreters leaves many migrants struggling to communicate effectively in critical situations, which can result in delays, misinformation, and, in some cases, the denial of necessary services. Addressing this issue requires urgent policy changes to ensure that language support is systematically and reliably available for those who need it most.

Only two respondents were offered an interpreter. Follow up questions showed that in one case the interpreter spoke a different dialect and in the second case the discussion had to be postponed until an interpreter could be organised. Typically those who needed interpretation services were left to find their own solutions. Many respondents reported that when an interpreter was not available, they either:

- Used a mobile app
- Called a friend for assistance
- Tried to manage on their own

In one of the case studies, a participant noted that a stranger in the queue in the public office volunteered to interpret for her. This allowed her to resolve her immediate issue but left her feeling uncomfortable that a stranger was now privy to her private information.

CASE STUDIES: THE REAL IMPACT OF LANGUAGE BARRIERS

The following case studies illustrate the real-world consequences of limited language support across various public services:

- **CS1: Civil Registry Office** CS1 attempted to register her daughter's birth, but because her husband was not in Ireland, the process was more complex. She struggled to obtain information due to the language barrier. The staff member declined to write down a list of the required documents, which CS1 would have been able to translate and instead told her to return with someone who could speak English. This resulted in further delays and uncertainty in an essential legal process.
- **CS2: Social Welfare** CS2 visited the INTREO office to confirm her job-seeking status. Since her father, who usually accompanied her, was sick, she attended alone. Unable to understand the staff properly, she was asked to sign a document but was not given a copy nor did she understand its content. This lack of transparency and failure to provide interpretation left her uncertain about what would happen to her payment.
- **CS3: Garda Station** CS3 received a summons for an unpaid parking fine but did not recall receiving prior notification. At the Garda station, he sought clarification but struggled to communicate due to language difficulties. The officer, in a hurry, provided minimal explanation, leaving CS3 confused about the process and where he needed to go next.
- **CS4: Immigration Office** CS4 attended the local immigration office (GNIB) to register her residency. Due to her limited English, she could not provide clear responses to the officer's questions. Instead of being given language support, she was instructed to return with someone who could interpret. This meant further delays, despite waiting ten weeks for the appointment.
- **CS5: Healthcare** CS5 visited a doctor to complete a medical assessment for Carer's Allowance. However, due to language misunderstandings, the GP did not accurately assess CS5's caregiving responsibilities. When reviewed by an advocate, it became clear that the assessment did not reflect the reality of his situation, leading to potential service denial.
- **CS6: District Court** CS6 had a family law hearing. When he went to Court, the interpreter spoke a different dialect of Arabic and was not interpreting properly for him. The court case was adjourned.
- **CS7: Social Welfare** CS7 is an asylum seeker who received a letter from the International Protection Office calling him for an in-person interview in Dublin. Without any source of income, he could not afford the cost of travel to attend the interview. In an attempt to apply for an Exceptional Needs Payment from the social welfare office, CS7 faced another significant barrier—no one was able to explain the application process to him. The lack of clear guidance and language support left him uncertain about how to

access the financial assistance he was entitled to, further complicating his ability to comply with critical immigration procedures.

- **CS8: TUSLA** CS8 received a call from a social worker regarding her son, who had been absent from school for an extended period due to illness, prompting a child protection report. Although CS8 normally speaks English well and is confident in her abilities, the stress of the situation caused her to struggle with communication. In that moment, she preferred to speak in Ukrainian, her native language, to fully articulate her concerns and ensure she understood the conversation clearly. CS8 requested an interpreter, and the Tusla social worker agreed to call her back when one was available.
- **CS9: State-Provided Accommodation** CS9 had applied for state-provided Ukrainian accommodation and later received a phone call from an official requesting further information. However, the official did not speak Ukrainian, and the two were unable to understand each other. Unable to proceed with the conversation, CS9 sought assistance from our office to facilitate communication with UCTAT.
- **CS10: State-Provided Accommodation** CS10 received a phone call from her accommodation provider regarding a complaint made against her. She was able to understand enough to realize there was an issue but could not fully comprehend the details. Despite knowing that CS10 did not speak English, the manager did not provide interpretation or written documentation, leaving her uncertain about her housing situation. A community worker had to intervene to clarify the matter.
- **CS11: Immigration Office** CS11 had an appointment at her local immigration office (GNIB) to register for her IRP card. The Immigration Officer misinterpreted her refugee status. CS11 struggled to clarify her status, and only with the help of another member of the public who spoke Dari was she able to proceed. She felt uncomfortable that a stranger had access to such personal details.
- **CS12: Local Authority Housing Office** CS12 visited the Local Authority Housing Section after receiving a termination notice from her landlord. The housing officer attempted to explain the next steps, but CS12 did not understand and nodded in agreement. Realising the miscommunication, the officer referred her to Nasc without providing written information, leaving uncertainty about what action was required.
- **CS13: Social Welfare** CS13 attempted to register for a PPS number. She filled in her details online and was given an appointment for an interview. However, when she attended, she was unable to communicate with the PPS officer. She had to call a friend and put them on loudspeaker to translate. This made the process difficult for her and for the staff member.
- **CS14: Social Welfare** CS14 received a visit from a social welfare inspector. While he could understand basic questions, he was unsure whether he answered correctly when asked about his income and expenses. He was asked to sign a document, which he did, but due to stress and confusion, he did not take the time to translate it using an app or ask for a copy. Now, he is uncertain about what impact this may have on his welfare payments.
- **CS15: Garda Station Reporting** CS15 was a victim of a crime and was expecting a visit from the Gardaí to take her statement. The authorities had been notified in advance that

she did not speak English and would require an interpreter. However, when the Gardaí arrived, they had no interpreter with them or available by phone. A community organisation was able to arrange for an interpreter so that she could give her statement at the Garda Station at a later date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure equitable access to public services for all individuals, regardless of language proficiency, the following measures should be implemented:

1. Ensure consistency in public service provision by setting clear guidelines on when and how interpretation must be offered.
2. Provide real-time phone interpretation services across all public services, ensuring accessibility at all times.
3. Introduce clear signage informing service users of their right to an interpreter.
4. Provide mandatory training for public service staff on best practices for working with interpreters.
5. Develop cultural competency training to ensure staff can effectively communicate with diverse communities.
6. Establish clear protocols for when interpretation services should be proactively offered, rather than relying on service users to request them.

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