



European  
Commission

# Annual Activity Report 2020

DG Interpretation

# Table of Contents

- THE DG IN BRIEF ..... 3
- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 4
  - A. Key results and progress towards the achievement of the Commission’s general objectives and DG’s specific objectives (executive summary of section 1)..... 4
  - B. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)..... 7
  - C. Key conclusions on Financial management and Internal control (executive summary of section 2.1) ..... 9
  - D. Provision of information to the Commissioner(s) ..... 10
  - E. Specific actions on COVID-19 ..... 10
- 1. Key results and progress towards the achievement of the Commission’s general objectives and DG’s specific objectives..... 11
- 2. Modern and efficient administration and internal control..... 21
  - 2.1 Financial management and internal control..... 21
    - 2.1.1 Control results..... 22
    - 2.1.2 Audit observations and recommendations..... 36
    - 2.1.3 Assessment of the effectiveness of internal control systems ..... 36
    - 2.1.4 Conclusions on the assurance..... 37
    - 2.1.5 Declaration of Assurance ..... 38
  - Declaration of Assurance** ..... 39
  - 2.2 Modern and efficient administration – other aspects..... 40
    - 2.2.1 Human resource management..... 40
    - 2.2.2 Digital transformation and information management..... 40
    - 2.2.3 Sound environmental management ..... 42
    - 2.2.4 Examples of initiatives to improve economy and efficiency of financial and non-financial activities ..... 42

## THE DG IN BRIEF

The mission of DG Interpretation (DG SCIC) is to facilitate the EU's democratic decision-making processes and enable multilingual communication. It does so by providing high-quality conference interpretation, and by delivering corporate conference organisation and meeting room management services across the Commission. As a service-oriented organisation in all its activity strands, DG SCIC comprehensively gives its 'customers' a 'voice'.

DG SCIC provides **interpretation** within the Commission and for other EU institutions, agencies and bodies<sup>1</sup> into the 24 official EU languages, non-EU languages and sign language. Interpretation activity is demand driven and varies according to the institutions' political cycle and priorities. Thus, DG SCIC faces two key challenges. On the one hand, optimising the use of available resources in striving to satisfy demand and provide quality interpretation – using staff and freelance interpreters. On the other, seeking to strike a financial balance using its charge-back mechanisms, while operating under Heading 5 of the EU budget (administrative expenditure).

DG SCIC is a domain leader for meeting room and conference management. In 2020, it continued progressively modernising and enlarging the pool of corporate meeting rooms, zone-by-zone, to provide high quality and modern **meeting room management** services. This included modernising audio-visual equipment, and providing technical assistance and maintenance services in corporate meeting rooms. Equipment and services are standardised across the board, including in smaller meeting rooms.

For **conference management**, DG SCIC's decentralised approach is characterised by the spread of activities, expenditure and staff across the Commission. DG SCIC concentrates on setting standards, offering guidance and practical conference management tools, while the Corporate Events Database offers a comprehensive overview of activities in the sector.

The COVID-19 outbreak nearly halted all meeting, conference and interpretation activities in the spring and seriously disrupted them for the rest of the year.

Director-General Florika Fink-Hooijer, left DG SCIC on 31 August. Carlos Alegria, Deputy Director General, served as acting DG until the appointment of Ms Genoveva Ruiz-Calavera as new DG, effective as of 1 April 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Primarily the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Annual Activity Report is a management report of the Director-General of DG Interpretation (DG SCIC) to the College of Commissioners. Annual Activity Reports are the main instrument of management accountability within the Commission and constitute the basis on which the College takes political responsibility for the decisions it takes as well as for the coordinating, executive and management functions it exercises, as laid down in the Treaties<sup>2</sup>.

### A. Key results and progress towards the achievement of the Commission's general objectives and DG's specific objectives (executive summary of section 1)

DG SCIC facilitates the EU's democratic decision-making processes and contributes to modernising and greening the Commission as a public administration, contributing thus mostly to the horizontal general objective: 'A modern, high-performing and sustainable European Commission'. The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on all three strands of DG SCIC's activity: conference interpreting, conference organisation and meeting room management.

2020 was an **unprecedented year**, when many objectives and indicators defined in the pre-crisis context, with 'normal' levels of activity and traditional delivery modes, suddenly became irrelevant. This report aims at highlighting how DG SCIC adapted and continued responding to the needs of the EU institutions throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

In these crisis times, attendance at meetings and demand for institutional **interpretation** changed drastically. In the early days of the March lockdown, meeting rooms emptied overnight and work almost came to a standstill. However, the Commission and our customer institutions immediately recognised interpretation services as **critical** for the smooth running of the multilingual EU decision-making process, and DG SCIC interpreters never completely stopped working in the booth.

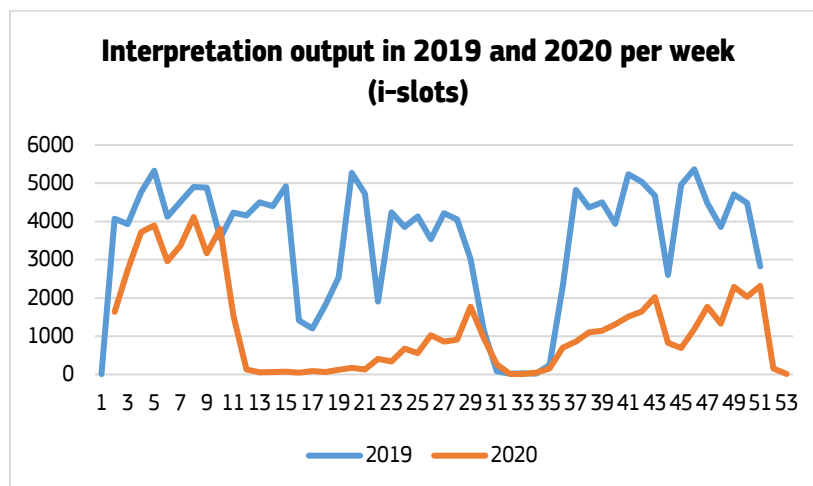
Very quickly, as the EU institutions concentrated on their priorities, multilingual communication focused mainly on **essential or political-level meetings**, forcing DG SCIC to a shift from a model intended to satisfy a high level of demand for a broad spectrum of meetings to providing very specific, innovative and bespoke solutions.

From April, in particular, DG SCIC started introducing **Simultaneous Interpretation Delivery Platforms (SIDPs)** that allow for simultaneous interpretation in online (or video-conferencing) meetings. The other institutions (EESC, CoR and the Council) also adopted them. Thanks to these platforms, **interpretation activity has resumed**, peaking in December at nearly half its pre-crisis level. Virtual and hybrid meetings currently make up a large share of meetings with interpretation. This represents a **technological revolution** in conference

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<sup>2</sup> Article 17(1) of the Treaty on European Union

interpreting in the EU, and hence a multi-faceted challenge for DG SCIC as regards the technical performance of the tools employed, the organisation of work, and staff buy-in. To address these challenges DG SCIC ran wide-ranging awareness-raising campaigns and training activities for meeting participants and interpreters. It also agreed on adapted ad hoc **interim working arrangements** for interpreters with staff representatives. In addition, the need for interpreters and technical staff to be physically present at meeting venues meant that DG SCIC radically overhauled the organisation of work to ensure full compliance with the relevant hygiene rules and to **protect staff health**.



In 2020, DG SCIC provided 62 830 interpretation slots (i-slots)<sup>3</sup>. This matched demand for interpretation in the Commission and from external customers, in particular the Council, the two rotating EU presidencies in 2020 (Croatia and Germany) and other paying customers. Although interpretation output decreased by 65% compared to 2019, DG SCIC redoubled its efforts to satisfy this **new pattern of demand**, which emerged under very challenging circumstances.

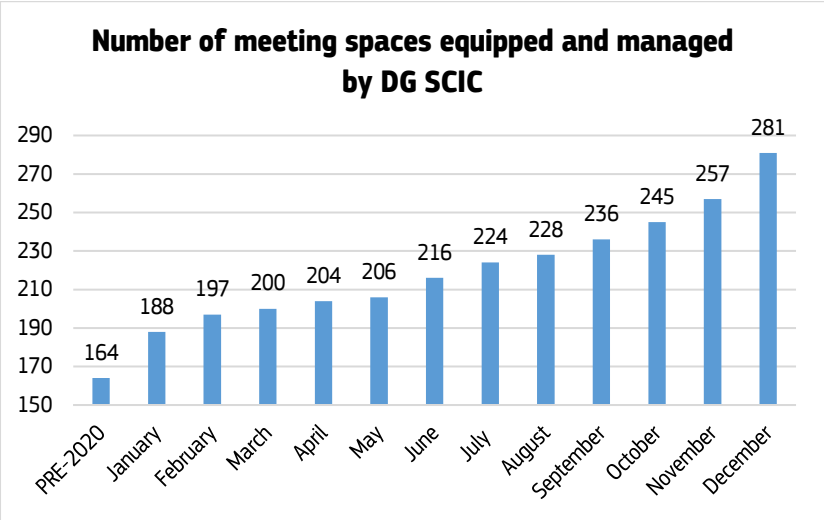
In 2020, lower demand meant lower revenue from external customers. At the same time, DG SCIC was able to satisfy 96% of overall demand. The demand satisfaction rate for external customer requests was 97%.

As a public administration aiming to contribute to a fully digitalised and sustainable Commission, DG SCIC is embarking on **digital transformation projects** to modernise and simplify its corporate services in all three strands.

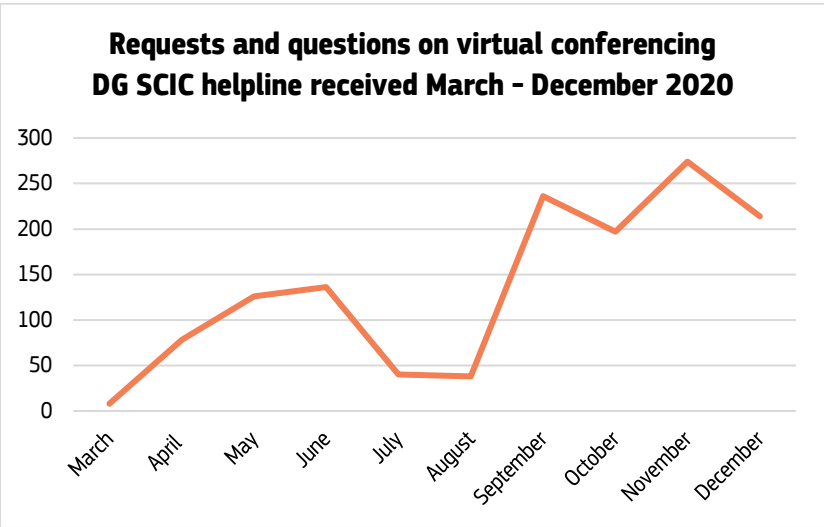
The dramatic increase in the use of digital conferencing tools provided an opportunity to speed up the work on **speech services**, from the automated transcription of recordings and videos to the instant subtitling of speakers in conferences. Interpreters from across language units contributed to post-editing raw transcriptions, thus helping to gather quality data for the creation of speech recognition models. With this project, DG SCIC contributes to general objective 2: 'A Europe fit for the digital age'.

<sup>3</sup> DG SCIC invoices its external customers for the interpretation provided. The billing unit in use (i-slot) represents roughly half a day of an interpreter. The cost is calculated by dividing the expected remuneration costs for staff and freelance interpreters and indirect costs by the expected volume of interpretation to be provided. When demand is significantly different from what was expected at the time the i-slot price was set (January n-1), DG SCIC's budget is no longer balanced, as most costs are fixed.

In the field of **conference and meeting room management**, DG SCIC continued to play its role as a corporate domain leader by providing support to transform physical meetings and conferences into virtual ones. **Meeting rooms** were upgraded to accommodate ever more hybrid meetings. DG SCIC also stepped up the deployment of meeting room services and launched several initiatives to improve its service delivery model and enhance the customer journey. The MIRA project (Meeting management and Interpretation Request Application), which implements the one-stop-shop concept, along with simpler and more user-friendly procedures, made progress in line with the agreed schedule. The project to set up the new One-Stop-Shop for hybrid meetings and conferences was launched.



The rollout of EventWorks, a corporate **conference** participant registration tool, also began in 2020. During the COVID-19 crisis, DG SCIC promptly set up a virtual conferencing helpline and supported the conference community by providing advice and frequent updates on key issues, such as how to organise a virtual/hybrid conference and how to deal with cancellations.



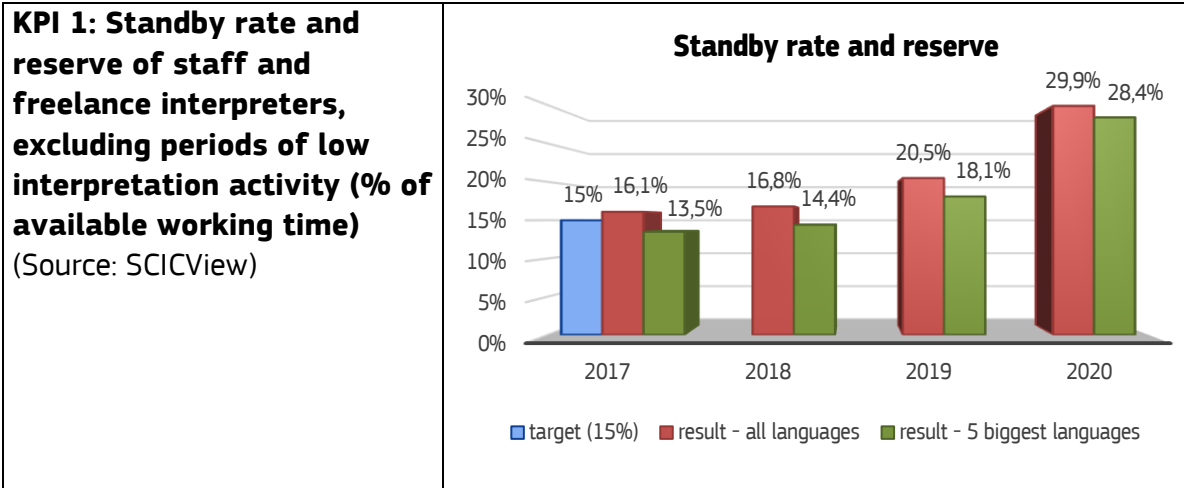
DG SCIC worked on a number of **greening initiatives**. Greening of conferences was promoted by the Sustainable Conferences and Events Awards, co-organised with DG HR, but also through different presentations and other contributions that highlighted the need for a permanent transition to virtual and hybrid conferences as a means of achieving carbon

neutrality in 2030. DG SCIC also advocated for the creation of a comprehensive method for measuring and monitoring the environmental impacts of events. Meeting rooms were equipped with energy saving equipment. Sustainability was also promoted locally through the Green SCIC initiative.

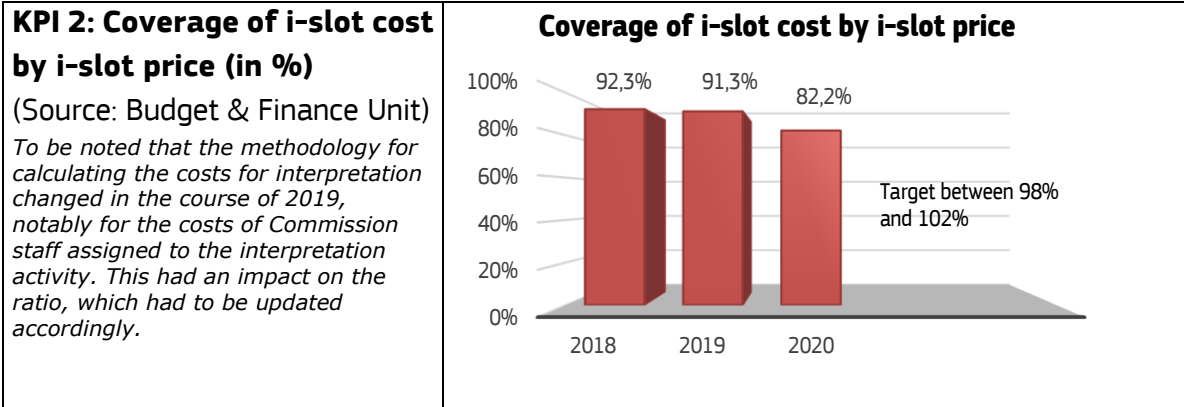
In spite of **Brexit**, demand for English interpretation is expected to remain high. At the same time, many English-speaking staff and freelance interpreters are reaching retirement. For these reasons, outreach work continued in 2020, concentrating on Ireland, to raise awareness about interpretation in Irish and English.

**B. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**

In the current crisis context, KPIs related to the provision of interpretation (1, 2 and 3), designed for usual business patterns, are of limited relevance.

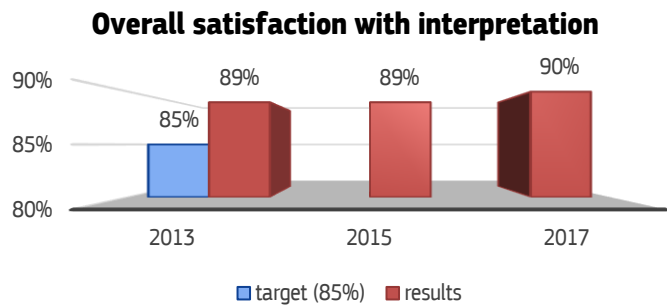


Despite the 65% overall decrease in demand levels, combined with the impact of health and safety measures, DG SCIC managed to keep the annual average standby rate below 30%. Although well above the target of 15%, this reflects the mobilisation from all parts of DG SCIC to use the quiet periods for other tasks of interest for the service.



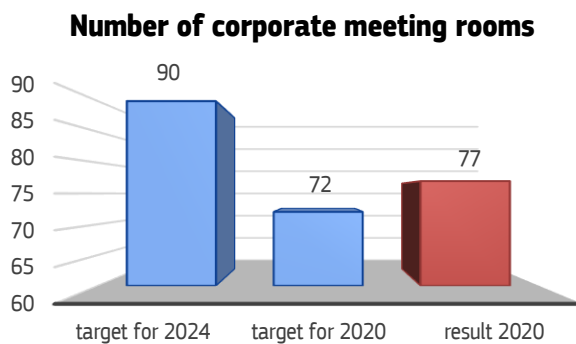
The sudden and dramatic drop in activity did not allow DG SCIC to free up resources that had already been contracted without incurring costs, or to collect sufficient revenue to cover its fixed costs, which are mainly staff costs.

**KPI 3: Satisfaction with the quality of interpretation expressed by our users**  
 (Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey 2017)



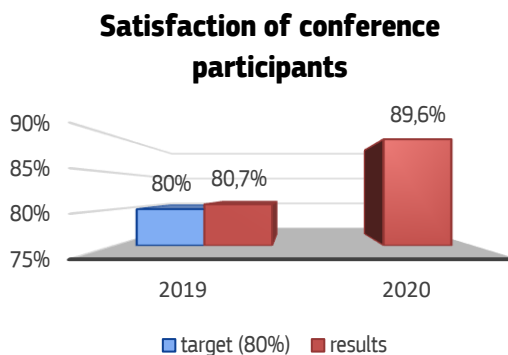
This target can be considered as having been met despite the COVID-19 pandemic making it impossible to run a customer satisfaction survey (CSS) in 2020 as originally planned. The most recent survey was conducted in 2017 when overall satisfaction with the quality of interpretation reported by customers reached 90%, in line with previous surveys. This reflects on-going efforts to provide high quality interpretation, thereby ensuring multilingual communication in meetings serviced by DG SCIC. While interpreters faced considerable challenges in 2020, in meeting reports customers consistently expressed their appreciation for the quality of interpretation provided by DG SCIC.

**KPI 4: Number of corporate meeting rooms (rooms with interpretation or with over 50 seats)**  
 (Source: Room management tool)



KPI 4 provides for the addition of at least six further corporate meeting rooms per year (to reach 90 corporate meeting rooms in 2024). The KPI was met in 2020 thanks to the roll-out of DG SCIC’s meeting room services in zone 2 (covering 17 DGs in 15 buildings). Following the roll-out in zone 2, nine additional large rooms were added to the pool of corporate meeting rooms.

**KPI 5: Satisfaction of conference participants**  
 (Source: Ongoing surveys of conference participants)



The KPI 5 target was met in 2020. Satisfaction of conference participants is measured through post-conference surveys. The actual satisfaction rate was 89.6% in 2020, well above the target rate of 80%. This result is encouraging, considering also the large-scale digitalisation of conferences seen in 2020, which did not seem to negatively affect satisfaction among participants. On the contrary, it is quite possible that the different forms



of digital conferences available may have in fact contributed to the relatively high satisfaction rate when compared to 2019. Digital conferences are often shorter and they avoid the need for travel to the venue.

### **C. Key conclusions on Financial management and Internal control (executive summary of section 2.1)**

In accordance with the governance arrangements of the European Commission, (the staff of) DG SCIC conducts its operations in compliance with the applicable laws and regulations, working in an open and transparent manner and meeting the expected high level of professional and ethical standards.

To ensure the achievement of policy and management objectives, the Commission has adopted a set of internal control principles, based on international good practice. The financial regulation requires that the organisational structure and the internal control systems used to implement the budget be set up in accordance with these principles. DG SCIC has assessed its internal control systems during the reporting year and has concluded that all the internal control principles are present and functioning, but some improvements are needed. Please refer to AAR section 2.1.3 for further details.

In addition, DG SCIC has systematically examined the available control results and indicators, as well as the observations and recommendations issued by the internal auditor and the European Court of Auditors. These elements have been assessed to determine their impact on management's assurance about the achievement of the control objectives. Please refer to Section 2.1 for further details.

In conclusion, management has reasonable assurance that, overall, suitable controls are in place and working as intended; risks are being appropriately monitored and mitigated; and necessary improvements and reinforcements are being implemented. The Director General, in his capacity as Authorising Officer by Delegation has signed the Declaration of Assurance.

## D. Provision of information to the Commissioner(s)

**At regular meetings on management matters held during the year between the DG and the Commissioner, the main elements of this report and the Declaration of Assurance were brought to the attention of Commissioner Johannes Hahn, responsible for Budget and Administration.**

## E. Specific actions on COVID-19

In 2020, Europe was strongly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission has proposed a strong and coordinated response to the health crisis as well as to the impact on Europe's economy and society. COVID-19 has also posed challenges as regards performance, control, audit and assurance in relation to the 2020 EU budget. In an exercise coordinated at corporate level, all Commission services have promoted the consistent and rigorous protection of the EU budget ensuring that appropriate mitigating measures were put in place.

DG SCIC ensured, with its three strands – interpretation, conference management and meeting room management – that the Commission was able to maintain business continuity and interact with stakeholders and citizens alike. Virtual conferencing almost overnight became a crucial factor in the Commission's operations, as physical attendance at events was severely disrupted by travel restrictions and public health measures. DG SCIC, as a domain leader for conferences, moved quickly to build the necessary expertise and provide information for other Commission services. It also cooperated closely with other partners in the Commission, in particular DG DIGIT and DG COMM. DG SCIC made a crucial contribution to the President's COVID-19 pledging event in May, working in close cooperation with the President's cabinet, and with DGs COMM and DEVCO (now called DG INTPA). Multilingualism was quickly established in remote and hybrid meetings thanks to new delivery modes such as Simultaneous Interpretation Delivery Platforms (SIDPs). DG SCIC supported what is likely to be a long-term move to virtual conferencing by deploying digital tools.

DG SCIC was able to dematerialise its financial circuits. As a result, it was possible to avoid simplifying or discontinuing any of the previous paper-based checks on financial files. Moreover, it avoided the need to activate simplified financial circuits in ABAC. The sound financial management of DG SCIC transactions was therefore not affected by the crisis.

## 1. Key results and progress towards the achievement of the Commission's general objectives and DG's specific objectives

DG SCIC contributed to the achievement of the horizontal general objective: 'A modern, high-performing and sustainable European Commission', by:

- providing conference interpreting services to ensure that meeting participants can communicate effectively;
- providing corporate meeting room management services; and
- providing corporate conference and event management services.

Through its speech recognition project, DG SCIC contributed to general objective 2: 'A Europe fit for the digital age'.

### General objective: A modern, high-performing and sustainable European Commission

#### Specific objective 1: Interpreting services meet our customers' priorities and demand and are effectively managed

The pandemic has created a situation in which both interpretation needs and the availability of resources have become highly **unpredictable**.

Since the introduction of Simultaneous Interpretation Delivery Platforms (SIDPs), interpretation activity, which had almost stopped in March, has resumed and, by the last quarter, had returned to around one third of its pre-crisis level. Given the worsening health situation, a large share of meetings with interpretation took place in **virtual and hybrid environments**.

DG SCIC also provided interpretation with SIDPs for the German Presidency in the second half of the year. DG SCIC extended its contractual obligations vis-à-vis the Presidency, to include on an ad hoc basis the use of SIDPs and the provision of meeting rooms to accommodate interpreters, and thereby established **innovative forms of cooperation** which helped the Presidency to achieve its objectives.

With its well-established framework for social dialogue, DG SCIC reached a consensual agreement on **interim ad hoc working conditions for meetings with platforms** for the period of the crisis, and was therefore able to continue providing interpretation. As interpreting requires a presence in the workplace, DG SCIC adopted a set of measures suited to interpreting assignments to **ensure interpreters' safety**. They translate corporate health protection and business continuity guidelines. DG SCIC has thus been in a position to continue providing essential interpretation with the **highest possible degree of multilingualism** throughout the pandemic, and adjusting its approach to changing needs until the health situation allows a return to normal working conditions.

In 2020, DG SCIC together with staff representatives, agreed to apply a **derogation from the Agreement on Working Conditions**. Under the derogation, in cases where strictly necessary, two interpreters – instead of the required three – can be assigned to provide interpretation into each active language. This pertains to meeting rooms where the number of booths is not sufficient to accommodate a full language regime while also respecting social-distancing rules. The presence of all languages is of regulatory importance for the legislative procedure in the Council of Ministers. In this way, DG SCIC was the only EU interpretation service that could **consistently provide full language regimes** (23/23) despite the pandemic. The derogation continues to apply.

Demand for broad language coverage can also be satisfied by cabling together two meeting rooms and using all the available booths to provide **crisis complementary remote interpretation**. DG SCIC embraced this crisis measure that temporarily expanded the scope of its delivery mode. However, the arrangements for complementary remote interpretation at ministerial lunches in the Europa building, which began in 2020, will only resume once the health protocol allows a resumption of ministerial lunches.

At the start of the crisis, characterised by an extended period of extremely low activity, DG SCIC had to **adjust its freelance recruitment** and cancel contracts given in advance. Following intense discussions between Senior Management and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), DG SCIC offered mitigating measures in the form of pre-paid contracts to be fulfilled in the future, for those freelance interpreters who work more regularly for DG SCIC. With the gradual resumption of interpreting activity in the final four months of the year, it was possible to keep contracts scheduled for that period.

To ensure its capacity to satisfy demand at all times, DG SCIC launched in December an **adapted long-term freelance recruitment** exercise (LTR) for 2021. Based on experience and best estimates, DG SCIC decided to run this very restrictive exercise in two rounds. By maintaining some stability in recruitment policy, this decision also aims at maintaining trust and communication with freelance interpreters, who have traditionally ensured half of the interpretation needs, and at limiting their ongoing exodus from Brussels and thereby helping to **maintain a pool of locally available interpreters**.

For interpreters to continue improving their linguistic, thematic and digital knowledge and their professional skills, **learning opportunities** were adapted by organising virtual language classes, on-line modules, remote peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing. A catalogue of on-line learning resources and activities, and potential peer coaches, was made available in all the above-mentioned domains. So far, this choice of **virtual professional support** has allowed interpreters to make progress with their learning throughout the pandemic. However, virtual and online teaching does not always suit all learning needs, particularly for language acquisition. Additional support measures have been put in place to ensure continuity of language learning paths.

Interpreters took advantage of the low level of interpretation activity in 2020 to follow a large number of learning initiatives and create new content for courses and presentations, all delivered virtually, as well as to design and record online e-learning modules for their colleagues.

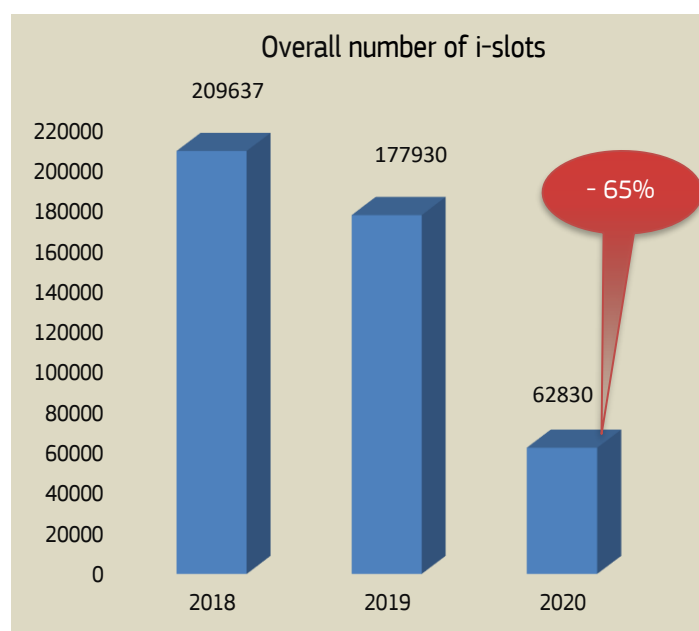
The COVID-19 crisis also had an impact on inter-institutional **freelance accreditation testing**, with 13 tests having to be put on hold. DG SCIC, together with EP-DG LINC and EUCJ-DI (the Interpretation Services of the European Parliament and the Court of Justice), explored options for running tests in safe conditions, by including virtual components, while also maintaining quality standards in test organisation, candidates' and jury members' participation and candidate assessment. As a result, the first **remote tests** were run as a **pilot scheme**, targeting some of the most urgently needed languages.

In addition, due to the COVID-19 crisis, **interpreters were reassigned to other tasks**, such as providing pedagogical assistance virtually, and preparing and recording speeches for students on mobile devices, and also transcribing existing material for the Speech Repository, one of DG SCIC's e-learning tools that will be feeding into the speech recognition project.

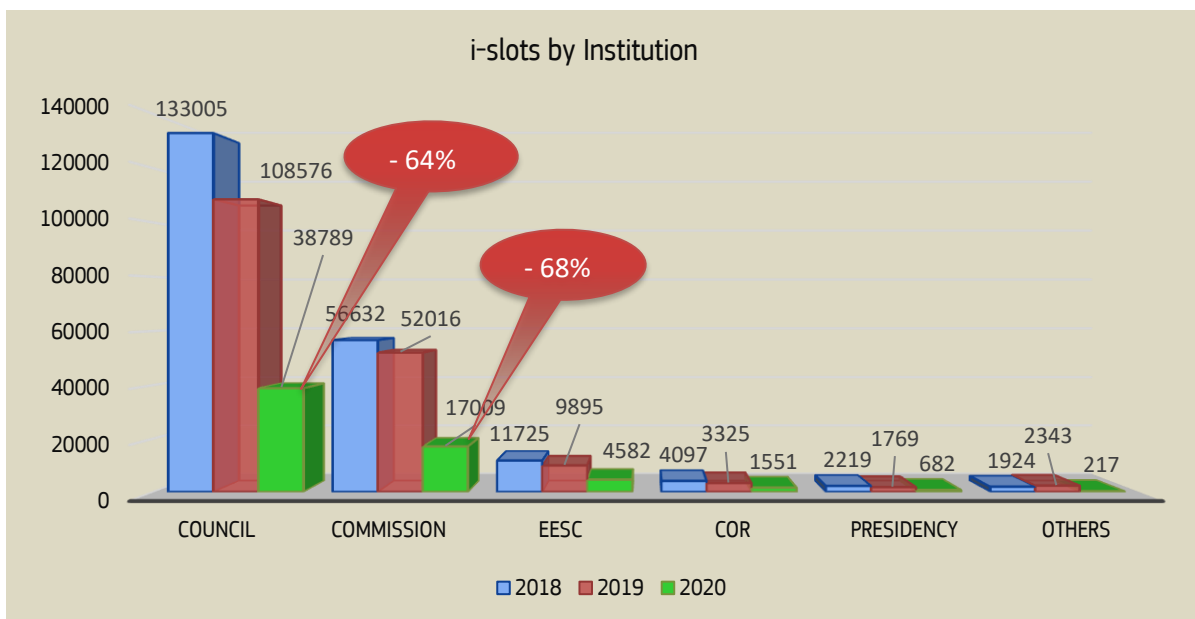
As part of the Interpreter's Digital Toolbox project, preparations started for **DG SCIC terminology to become part of IATE** (Interactive Terminology for Europe), the inter-institutional terminology database. During the period of low interpretation activity, many interpreters helped to prepare for the migration of more than 200 000 terms to IATE, which is to be completed in mid-2021.

Interpretation is also a vehicle for the **inclusion of citizens** in the European project. To make high-profile meetings accessible to all, they need to be interpreted into **international sign language**. After providing sign language interpretation for President von der Leyen's video-recordings throughout the pandemic, as of September 2020 the Commission's weekly press conferences are also interpreted into international sign.

In 2020, DG SCIC provided 62 830 interpretation slots, 65% less than the previous year.



Activity in the Council, which usually represents almost two-thirds of DG SCIC's overall output (62% in 2020), decreased by 64%. In the European Commission, activity decreased by 68% (overall output of Commission activity was 27% in 2020).



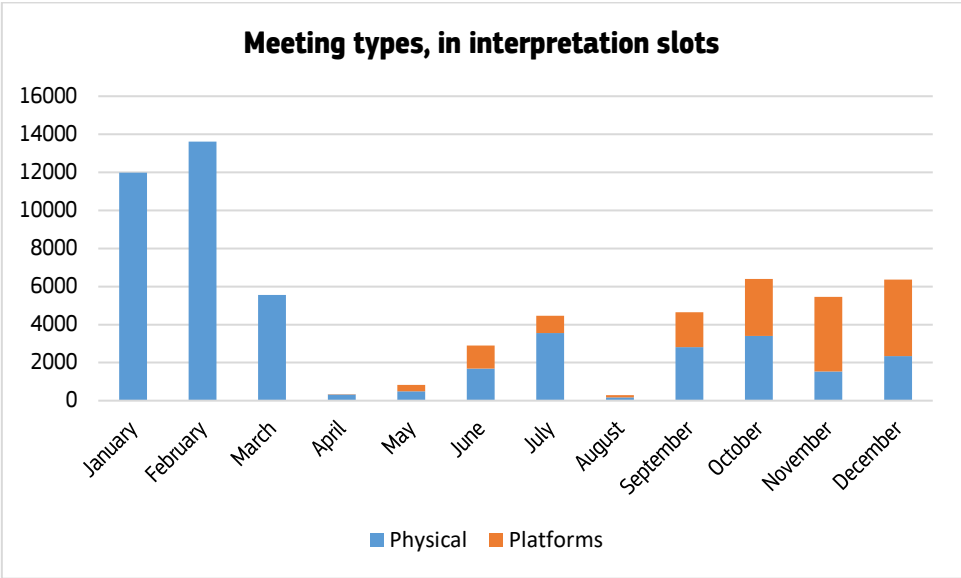
Overall, there were 56% fewer contract days for freelance interpreters in 2020 compared to 2019. In the first two months of the year, the recruitment rate was already lower than in previous years by around 45%. From March onwards, the decrease in interpretation demand had a direct negative impact on the need to recruit freelance interpreters, an effect felt across all languages, with falls in recruitment ranging from 48% to 80%.



### Specific objective 2: The quality of interpretation meets our customers' needs

DG SCIC responds to customer feedback and takes measures to continually improve the quality of interpretation. The COVID-19 crisis, the very different arrangements for providing interpretation and changes to how interpreters interact with their delegates meant that the customer satisfaction survey could not take place in 2020 as originally planned.

However, DG SCIC’s customers consistently expressed their **satisfaction with the quality of interpretation** provided in meeting reports, meetings and via other channels. This is a major achievement, because the **technical conditions at virtual and hybrid meetings** for interpretation are not up to the existing standards for conference interpretation. Interpreting in these circumstances increases the **effort and strain on interpreters**. Cognitive and sensory load are consistently reported to be considerably higher. There are numerous technical and operational problems that are beyond the interpreters’ control and which increase stress and reduce interpreters’ job satisfaction. DG SCIC took **measures** (such as ad hoc working conditions, awareness raising, technical improvements, etc.) to help interpreters **provide quality interpretation**.



Using platforms to provide interpretation at virtual and hybrid meetings required a great effort by technical staff and interpreters: testing the platforms, starting to work with them and improving the numerous operational and technical issues that arose. DG SCIC made a considerable effort towards improving the technical features of the platforms and the connectivity requirements to make them fit for use in virtual and hybrid meetings.

As a result, much progress was achieved in 2020, but the quality of the sound and image is often still problematic, as it depends on the quality of IT connections, end-user equipment and other factors. At the same time, DG SCIC worked very hard to raise awareness among users of interpretation at virtual and hybrid meetings by producing guidelines in all 24 EU languages for participants and chairpersons as well as different video clips. Moreover, DG SCIC had to focus on acceptance of the technology among interpreters, and their feedback on it. In April, DG SCIC produced guidelines for interpreters on using platforms and disclaimers if problems arose or connections failed. Unfortunately this frequently occurs in virtual and hybrid meetings and can affect the quality of service provided. Moreover, DG SCIC ran focus groups, unit meetings, town hall events and stepped up social dialogue to engage interpreters and increase ownership of this **radical transformation**.

On the very important matter of working conditions, DG SCIC established a task force, which included staff representatives - and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), which had observer status - to gather interpreters’ feedback on using platforms and

prepare for negotiations on ad hoc interim working arrangements. Thanks to this work, DG SCIC achieved a consensual framework of specific interim arrangements for working with the platforms during the crisis. The task force collected over 4 000 responses to its survey of interpreters which highlighted the main unresolved issues, i.e. those relating to technical conditions, problems with the infrastructure, and participants' conduct. The findings of the survey constituted the foundation block of the ad hoc interim working conditions agreed at the end of the year.

To provide support for interpreters with meeting preparation, and working with documents and glossaries in meetings, DG SCIC continued developing the first stage of the **Interpreter's Digital Toolbox** (IDT) with DG DIGIT. The project proved to be more complex than originally expected, while understandably the pandemic provided an additional challenge for DG DIGIT's developers. This contributed to delays in delivering the Minimal Viable Product (MVP) as described in the Memorandum of Understanding between the two DGs. Intensive cooperation took place in the second part of the year and many steps were achieved. The first stage was not finalised, but is expected to be ready in early 2021. Preparations for the integration of DG SCIC glossaries into IATE is underway. Development of the IATE user interface for interpreters has started.

DG SCIC provided support to its interpreters through continuous **learning opportunities** in the linguistic, thematic, professional skills and digital domains, and provided them with the digital tools necessary for their work.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, DG SCIC continued to invest in capacity development by **supporting universities** that provide conference interpreter training. This was done to create a pool of candidates for future recruitment who can demonstrate the level required by the **quality standards** of the EU Institutions, for both EU and candidate-country languages.

DG SCIC adapted its choice of training resources for universities, replacing face-to-face events with a wide range of online support activities, such as virtual training sessions, webinars, mock conferences and ad hoc coaching sessions for students. DG SCIC expanded its training resources in line with universities' needs during the crisis. This new way of cooperating with universities focused on the **use of virtual tools** to provide support. This meant a fast-track digital transformation, both for the support team and for interpreter trainers, and a real opportunity to learn, not least by piggybacking on what universities are already doing and making the most of the communities of the **Knowledge Centre on Interpretation (KCI)**. Adapting to new circumstances and diversifying the activities which are offered is helping to design a coherent approach, focused on profiles and language combinations of interest to the service.

DG SCIC cooperated closely with DGT, the Irish authorities and academia in order to expand **Irish interpretation capacity**. The aim is to prepare for the phasing out of the Irish language derogation. Two additional interpreters were recruited as temporary agents in 2020, following an immersion internship for graduates with Irish.



## External communication

The COVID-19 crisis also had a major impact on DG SCIC's external communications. As the pandemic and its effects created new challenges, DG SCIC needed to reassure its target audience that it had successfully adapted to the new situation and remained a reference point for conference interpretation on a global level. DG SCIC also needed to demonstrate that multilingualism continued to support the smooth functioning of the EU even in times of crisis.

The traditional **SCIC Universities Conference** was cancelled in March 2020. However, to continue providing support, to stay connected and demonstrate its commitment and dynamism to universities, in December DG SCIC organised an online **SCIC meets Universities** #SCIConline event entitled 'Closer than ever: Interpreting in the time of a pandemic'. Important actors and stakeholders from around the world were invited to discuss interpreting practice, interpreter training and interpreter selection under COVID-19 conditions and to debate how the pandemic will change the profession in future. The repercussions on social media and in the interpreting community in general were quite substantial, and the results uploaded to the KCI for the benefit of all. The traditional language regime for our face-to-face event was provided (FR, EN, DE, IT, ES into FR, EN, DE) as was, for the first time, **interpretation into international sign**. In this way, the event clearly reflected the Commission's commitment to facilitating access to all through interpretation.

DG SCIC largely relied on **social media** to communicate these messages and, as a result, experienced a considerable expansion of its activities on the various channels (ranking for example fourth among all DGs in terms of increasing its presence on Instagram). All of the outreach events DG SCIC participated in were held virtually as a result of the pandemic. DG SCIC was present at inter-institutional webinars and/or provided pre-recorded video material at the Drongo festival (NL), the Language Show (UK) and the Languages Connect #Think Languages Event (IRL).

DG SCIC's external communication activities also included production and on-line diffusion of video material (user guides, tips for speakers etc.) on the new interpreting formats (Simultaneous Interpretation Delivery Platforms) for speakers and participants of virtual and hybrid meetings and conferences.

## Fostering human networks through multilingual communication

The COVID-19 pandemic seriously affected **international cooperation projects** in the field of interpreter training with public administrations and universities in China, Macao, Mongolia, Cuba, Africa and Russia in 2020. All pedagogical assistance missions, traineeships and study visits had to be cancelled, or were postponed and replaced by virtual classes or other forms of remote training and assistance using IT tools.

DG SCIC continued to work on the training project for interpreter trainees from Mongolia, which is expected to be launched in 2021 in the form of a mixed (hybrid) course. This will start with two months of virtual classes, followed by three months of presential training in Brussels (when the COVID-19 situation allows). DG SCIC, together with DGT, also actively

prepared an exhibition on 'Multilingualism in the EU' to be inaugurated in 2021 in the new Museum of Language of Shanghai International Studies University (SISU).

### **Specific objective 3: Modern meeting room services are available for the European Commission**

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on meeting support services. DG SCIC, in cooperation with other DGs, redoubled its efforts to introduce Simultaneous Interpretation Delivery Platforms (SIDPs), provided support to turn physical meetings/conferences into virtual ones and scaled up the upgrading of meeting rooms to allow for ever more hybrid meetings. At the same time, it had to maintain its role as corporate domain leader role for meeting room management, while continuing to extend meeting room services and pursue the roll-out strategy.

Following the decision to start using **Simultaneous Interpretation Delivery Platforms (SIDPs)** to provide interpretation for virtual and hybrid meetings, the chosen SIDP was installed and integrated in 15 meeting rooms and became an integral part of the services offered by DG SCIC. Since the end of April 2020, interpretation has consequently been provided for more than 500 meetings and conferences with participants at remote sites. In particular, on 4 May 2020, SIDPs were successfully used at the Coronavirus Global Response Pledging Conference.

Following endorsement by the Corporate Management Board of DG SCIC's proposal to **roll-out meeting room services** over four years (2019-2022) and by geographical zone, DG SCIC continued the **roll-out for zone 2** (covering 17 DGs located in 15 buildings). In addition an ambitious **renovation plan** was put in place at the end of August 2020 to support all DGs during the pandemic crisis. Its aim is to renovate 300 meeting rooms by the end of the first quarter of 2021. Moreover, thanks to the roll-out, nine additional large meeting rooms have been added to the pool of corporate meeting rooms, allowing meeting organisers across the Commission to have a wider choice for their conferences and expert group meetings.

In 2020, **Commission's new flagship Conference Centre** project was approved by the Commission services and submitted to the budget authority. It is anticipated that the contract will be signed in the first quarter of 2021.

### **Specific objective 4: Improved customer journey through high-quality digital solutions and workflows in meeting room management**

DG SCIC took specific measures to upgrade its service delivery model, optimise its internal processes and workflows, and enhance the customer journey. In particular, the **MIRA project (Meeting management and Interpretation Request Application)**, the tool that will implement the one-stop-shop concept and introduce simpler and more user-friendly procedures, made progress in line with the agreed schedule. In June 2020, DG SCIC completed a study of off-the-shelf solutions that could be used. A proof of concept with two shortlisted

solutions that allow for the booking and management of meeting rooms was finalised in October and, finally, in November 2020, the Project Steering Committee took the decision about which market tool would be used for the project.

Moreover, the setup of the new **One-Stop-Shop for hybrid meetings and conferences** is progressing well. The scope and the resources have been identified and some services have been made available, most notably test services for some remote participants, as well as regular training sessions for meeting organisers.

Not travelling and not being able to meet in person made it necessary for all meeting rooms to enable **remote connections**. Introducing an SIDP solution allowed departments to organise meetings with interpretation. Meeting rooms were upgraded with room cameras, room audio systems, 'bring-your-own-devices' solutions, and wireless connection methods to allow meeting organisers to connect with internal and external partners/colleagues.

### **Specific objective 5: Modern and sustainable conference organisation services are available for the European Commission**

DG SCIC has further extended its offer to meet new needs: **a new virtual conferencing chapter** with useful information and links has been added to the **Conference Wiki**. This new addition was clearly helpful for our community, as indicated by the high number of hits (4 039 from May 2020 to December 2020).

A **conference helpline** was opened in March. Most requests for guidance and information in 2020 related to virtual conferences. DG SCIC organised **workshops on virtual and hybrid conferences** in June and September, an **Espresso-session on digital engagement** in November and a **CommLab dedicated to virtual events** in December. All these contributed to managing the process of change required to make virtual conferencing a success.

The **Events Database** was enhanced to allow for **registration of virtual and hybrid conferences** and to request necessary services. These include the **corporate framework contract for events management**, through which virtual and hybrid conferencing services can be obtained.

DG SCIC conference managers also acquired **new skills** to support the **transition to virtual conferencing**. They supported the organisation of 82 events which took place in 2020. Due to the uncertainty, 42 conferences were cancelled and 55 were postponed. Preparing for conferences that did not take place as planned, and managing the rapidly changing situation, constituted a substantial workload.

The roll-out of **EventWorks** as corporate participant registration tool to DGs to use independently started in 2020 and continued into early 2021. DG SCIC's registration team also adapted the tool enable it to register pledges made during the Coronavirus Global Response Pledging Conference held on 4 May.

DG SCIC co-organised the first corporate **competition on sustainable events and conferences**, together with colleagues from DG HR/EMAS. An all-virtual award ceremony attended by Commissioner Hahn marked the conclusion and the high point of the competition. In its wake, the DG SCIC EMAS team organised a workshop for the conference community highlighting how the prize-winning conferences went the extra mile in terms of sustainability.

Digitalisation of conferences and events on an unprecedented scale drastically **reduced the carbon footprint** of the domain in 2020. The DG SCIC EMAS team actively contributed to work led by DG HR in preparing the forthcoming Communication on the greening of the Commission, by providing input on how to lock in these sustainability gains and how to quantify and monitor them once the pandemic has abated.

### **Specific objective 6: The conference community is further professionalised and engaged**

During the COVID-19 crisis, DG SCIC stepped up **communication with the conference community**. Frequent updates on crucial issues were sent out, such as how to deal with cancellations and postponements, what to bear in mind when re-scheduling events later in the year, and many other topics besides. More than ever, the Commission services relied on DG SCIC as **domain leader and trusted partner** to respond to their many questions related to the conference domain, and to coordinate with other services. Guidance on virtual or hybrid conferences destined for conference organisers Commission-wide was instrumental in helping conference managers to cope with the new reality ushered in by the pandemic.

### **General objective: A Europe fit for the digital age**

### **Specific objective 7: A European speech technology is used by the EU institutions and the public**

In 2020, DG SCIC cooperated with DG CNECT and DGT on a speech recognition project in the context of the **Connecting Europe Facility**. They set up the **repository for speech data**.

DG SCIC also cooperated with DG DIGIT to develop a corporate speech services solution, based on the infrastructure provided by Microsoft Azure. DG SCIC's role is to create speech recognition models catering for the specificities of various domains and events, for example press briefings. In December 2020, the Project Charter was presented to the Information Technology and Cybersecurity Board (ITCB).

Finally, DG SCIC took the lead in setting up an **Interinstitutional Task Force on Speech Recognition**. This Task Force is an initiative of the Inter-institutional Committee on Translation and Interpreting (ICTI) that allows the translation and interpretation services to exchange information and investigate possible synergies in the area of speech recognition.

## 2. Modern and efficient administration and internal control

This section explains *how* the DG SCIC delivered the achievements described in the previous section. It is divided into two subsections.

The first subsection reports on the control results and other relevant information that supports management's assurance on having achieved the financial management and internal control objectives<sup>4</sup>. It includes any additional information necessary to establish that the available evidence is reliable, complete and comprehensive. It covers all activities, programmes and management modes relevant to the DG SCIC.

The second subsection deals with the other components of organisational management: human resources, digital transformation and information management as well as sound environmental management. It also describes the examples of initiatives to improve the economy and efficiency of non-financial activities.

### 2.1 Financial management and internal control

Assurance is provided on the basis of an objective examination of evidence of the effectiveness of risk management, control and governance processes.

This examination is carried out by management, who monitors the functioning of the internal control systems on a continuous basis. The results are explicitly documented and reported to the Director-General. The following reports have been considered:

- the contribution of the director in charge of Risk Management and Internal Control (RMIC), including the results of internal control monitoring at DG level;
- the reports by Authorising Officers by Sub delegation (AOSDs);
- the limited conclusion of the Internal Auditor on the state of control and the observations and recommendations reported by the Internal Audit Service (IAS).

These reports result from a systematic analysis of the evidence available. This approach provides sufficient guarantees as to the completeness and reliability of the information reported and results in a complete coverage of the budget delegated to the Director-General of DG SCIC.

This section covers the control results and other relevant elements that support management's assurance. It is structured into (a) Control results, (b) Audit observations and recommendations, (c) Effectiveness of internal control systems, and resulting in (d) Conclusions on the assurance.

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<sup>4</sup> Art 36.2 FR: a) effectiveness, efficiency and economy of operations; b) reliability of reporting; c) safeguarding of assets and information; d) prevention, detection, correction and follow-up of fraud and irregularities; and e) adequate management of risks relating to the legality and regularity of underlying transactions

## 2.1.1 Control results

This section reports and assesses the elements identified by management which support the assurance on the achievement of the internal control objectives<sup>5</sup>. The DG's assurance building and materiality criteria are outlined in AAR Annex 5. Annex 6 outlines the main risks together with the control processes to mitigate them and the indicators used to measure the performance of the relevant control systems.

DG Interpretation (DG SCIC) operates under Heading 5 of the EU budget (administrative expenditure) implemented under centralised direct management. In 2020, DG SCIC executed payments of:

- €55.9 m from Chapter 31 of the Budget;
- €0.7 m from co-delegated expenditure on conference and events organisation on behalf of other Commission services; and
- €0.08 m from co-delegated expenditure on cooperation with third countries.

The expenditure managed by DG SCIC in 2020 can be divided into the following Relevant Control Systems (RCS). The effectiveness, efficiency and economy of *ex ante* controls conducted in these areas is presented separately in Annex 6.

Relevant Control System	payments made	%
<b>ACI<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>43 631 714.55</b>	<b>76.96%</b>
<b>Procurement</b>	<b>12 032 905.34</b>	<b>21.23%</b>
<b>Grants</b>	<b>678 795.78</b>	<b>1.20%</b>
<b>Cooperation 3rd countries</b>	<b>73 354.61</b>	<b>0.13%</b>
<b>Staff expenditure</b>	<b>274 448.01</b>	<b>0.48%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>56 691 218.28</b>	

**ACI** covers the recruitment, remuneration and reimbursement of non-permanent interpreters. Freelance interpreters (ACIs) are employed when needed by DG SCIC on a day-by-day contract basis to ensure it can meet demand for interpretation and achieve its mission and strategic objectives. Additionally, the reimbursement of ACI candidates participating in inter-institutional tests is also included in this RCS. These payments are managed via decentralised financial circuits in Unit SCIC.B4, Joint Management of Conference Interpreting Agents.

The Inter-institutional ACI Payments Office in Unit SCIC.B4 processed ACI payments for a total value of €53.3 million. €18.5 million corresponds to SCIC contracts, paid from the SCIC budget, plus €2.1 million for ACIs recruited by the Court of Justice and €32.6 million for ACIs

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<sup>5</sup> 1) Effectiveness, efficiency and economy of operations; 2) reliability of reporting; 3) safeguarding of assets and information; 4) prevention, detection, correction and follow-up of fraud and irregularities; and 5) adequate management of the risks relating to the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions, taking into account the multiannual character of programmes as well as the nature of the payments (FR Art 36.2). The 2nd and/or 3rd Internal Control Objective(s) (ICO) only when applicable, given the DG's activities.

<sup>6</sup> Out of the €43.6 million spent on the ACIs budget line, only €18.3 million were actually paid to ACIs. For technical reasons in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, €18.8 million of assigned revenue had to be transferred to PMO and €6.3 million had to be returned to customers who did not fully consume the advances paid early 2020.

recruited by the European Parliament. Such payments are made from 'Hors Budget' accounts financed from advances paid by the same Institutions. All payments to ACIs are processed applying the same internal controls regardless of the recruiting Institution, via a fully decentralised financial circuit complemented by *ex post* controls performed by Unit SCIC.C2. Moreover, an additional €25.1 million was paid out from the SCIC budget: €18.8 million as a repayment to the PMO for deploying staff interpreters for assignments of SCIC's customers, and a €6.3 million as a repayment to the Council and the Committee of the Regions resulting from advances they paid at the beginning of the year exceeding the related services provided. Both of these one-off payments became due as a result of the pandemic crisis.

In estimating the costs of control however, account is taken only of transactions financed from DG SCIC's budget and resources allocated to their handling. The other Institutions nevertheless contributed to the functioning of the Payments Office in form of compensation for the salary of affected contract agents.

**Procurement** covers transactions where budgetary appropriations are consumed by procurement procedures. The most important areas of expenditure for DG SCIC in this system are the management of meeting rooms, informatics expenditure, conference management and professional development. All these transactions are handled through a centralised financial circuit, where operational initiation and verification of commitments, contracts and payments takes place in the relevant operational unit, while financial initiation and verification is performed centrally in the Finance Unit. It should be noted that, as with the ACI process, a payment of €1.2 million was made to PMO from the funds for Procurement.

In the Relevant Control System for **Grants**, specific transactions are encompassed, i.e. grants to universities and scholarships to students. As with procurement, centralised financial circuits are used for the *ex ante* controls. As the transactions are treated by the same operational unit and the aim of the programme is also to contribute to the training of interpreters, the very limited funds (€0.003 million) co-delegated from DG NEAR are also included in this RCS.

**Staff expenditure** includes transactions for the professional development of staff interpreters (and ACI) related to language learning made via a system of reimbursement. As with Procurement, centralised financial circuits are used for the *ex ante* controls.

For **Cooperation 3rd countries**, the funds are co-delegated by DG DEVCO (now renamed DG INTPA) and FPI. The purpose of the programmes is to support the training of interpreters in third countries. As with Procurement, centralised financial circuits are used for the *ex ante* controls.

**Income** is a crucial factor in DG SCIC's operations. Consequently, a Relevant Control System is dedicated to this area. Of the over €46.6 million in cashed revenue reported in Annex 3, Table 7, €39.4 million of the revenue was collected from external customers (under Heading 5, expenditure). €36.4 million came from the provision of interpretation services, €2.5 million was cashed for other services delivered, while €0.5 million was due to refunds. Of the €36.4 million in interpretation-related revenue, €6.7 million (18.4%) were assigned to the PMO. The €7.2 million balance corresponds to the taxes on revenue collected on the payment of the salaries of ACIs recruited by the three European interpretation services and paid on their

behalf by DG SCIC. The €7.2 million forms a part of the general revenue of the European Union.

Besides the above-mentioned Relevant Control Systems that concentrate on *ex ante* controls in the different areas of expenditure and on income, DG SCIC has two *ex post* Relevant Control Systems:

- Specific **ex post controls** on payments to non-local ACIs. As the payments are made as part of a decentralised financial circuit, a sample-based control is performed. The results are summarised each semester in a specific dedicated report. The controls also cover payments made on behalf of the European Parliament and the Court of Justice, and the reports are transmitted to them for information.

- **Accounting controls** are conducted in the areas of expenditure, pre-financing, assets, guarantees, income and commitments. Their main goal is to provide the Director General with reasonable assurance on the quality of DG SCIC's accounts.

DG SCIC's management considers that control mechanisms implemented in the DG successfully mitigate the risks presented in Annex 6 and provide a reasonable assurance as to achieving its internal control objectives.



Overall conclusion table

<b>Risk-type Activities</b> /	<b>Relevant amount in € million</b>	<b>ICO indicators</b>	<b>Independent info from auditors (IAS, ECA) on assurance or on new/overdue critical recommendations available?</b>	<b>Any reservation?</b>
ACI	43.63	L&R=OK SFM=OK AFS=OK RER=0.09% CEC=OK	N	N
Procurement	12.03	L&R=OK SFM=OK AFS=OK RER=0.28% CEC=OK	N	N
Grants	0.68	L&R=OK SFM=OK AFS=OK RER=0.28% CEC=OK	N	N
Staff expenditure	0.27	L&R=OK SFM=OK AFS=OK RER=0.28% CEC=OK	N	N
Cooperation 3 <sup>rd</sup> countries	0.07	L&R=OK SFM=OK AFS=OK RER=0.28% CEC=OK	N	N
Income	39.36	L&R=OK SFM=OK AFS=OK CEC=OK	N	N

Legend: OP=Operational Programme, PA=Paying Agency, NA=National Agency, AOXDs =Authorising Officer by Cross-Delegation, EA=Executive Agency, JU=Joint Undertaking, NEI =Non-Expenditure Item(s), OBS=Off-Balance Sheet, ICO=Internal Control Objective, L&R=Legality and Regularity, SFM=Sound Financial Management, AFS=Anti-Fraud Strategy

measures, SAI=Safeguarding Assets and Information, TFV=True and Fair View, RER=Residual Error Rate, CEC=Cost-effectiveness of controls, Mngt=Management Text

In DG SCIC there were no cases of:

- 'confirmation of instructions' (new FR art 92.3); these should be known by the RMIC, similarly as e.g. Non-Compliance Events
- financing not linked to costs (new FR art 125.3); i.e. when contributions are based on the fulfilment of conditions or the achievement of results
- Financial Framework Partnerships >4 years (new FR art 130.4)
- flat rates >7% for indirect costs (new FR art 181.6); as decided by reasoned Commission Decisions
- 'Derogations from the principle of non-retroactivity [of grants] pursuant to Art 193 FR' (new FR art 193.2); the acceptance of costs incurred before the project grant application was submitted.

## 1. **Effectiveness = the control results and benefits**

### - **Legality and regularity of the transactions**

DG SCIC uses internal control processes to ensure the adequate management of the risks relating to the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions it is responsible for, taking into account the multiannual character of programmes and the nature of the payments concerned.

The main purpose of controls in the **ACI process** is to ensure the legality and regularity of the contracting and payment of freelance interpreters. For the contracting phase, it can be concluded that the control target has been achieved as all contracts signed in 2020 were fully covered by the designated budgetary commitment.

ACI payments are, for the most part, a fully automated and repetitive procedure, with all the relevant data managed through a single, integrated information system (Management of Interpretation and Meetings - MIM), ensuring a high level of data integrity. The payment of some allowances and reimbursement of transport and accommodation costs of ACIs on mission is an area where fraud and/or errors could occur with smaller, one-off payments. However, access to prepaid travel tickets, implementation of the APR system (web-based expenses claims for non-permanent interpreters) and various automated checks considerably reduce the risk of error. A clerical error dating back to 2017 was discovered. Responsible agents received additional instructions to avoid similar errors in future, and the robustness of the applications was proven as data could still be traced back from three years ago.

*Ex ante* controls on payments were conducted according to the four-eyes principle. *Ex ante* controls are designed to allow payments to be made in the shortest possible deadlines, so at the time of the payment no statistics are recorded about corrections or additional documents requested from the ACI. Therefore, effectiveness of the *ex ante* controls is demonstrated by the satisfactory results of the *ex post* controls and accounting controls.

*Ex ante* controls conducted in a centralised financial circuit for the **Procurement process** are intended to ensure legality and regularity in the selection of tenderers, contracting of

successful tenderers and the execution/payment of the contract in an effective, efficient and economical way. Prevention, detection, correction and follow-up of fraud and irregularities is also part of these controls, as all transactions are handled according to the four-eyes principle. Control results are regularly monitored, and where necessary, remedial action agreed and taken without delay. In the selection phase of procurement, apart from one tenderer questioning their rejection and receiving a satisfactory reply, no complaints were received from unsuccessful tenderers and no procedures had to be cancelled due to unsatisfactory definition of tender specifications. Controls in this segment can therefore be considered effective. In the contracting phase, only minor discrepancies were noted (some resulting from the pandemic crisis or a lack of appropriate action from contractors). However, the presence of such observations is reassuring as they demonstrate that controls are carried out systematically and effectively. Also in the execution/payment phase few errors were noted and appropriate action was taken before payments were made. Errors that were identified were below the materiality threshold, but the fact that they were detected demonstrates the ability to identify discrepancies.

Following a cost-benefit analysis, and considering the limited number of transactions, the intensive use of framework contracts, the structure of the financial circuits and the results of the *ex ante* controls, no *ex post* controls other than accounting controls are performed on procurement, and consequently there is no detected error rate for procurement transactions.

As in procurement, *ex ante* controls in the **Grants process** are intended to guarantee legality and regularity throughout the awarding, granting and execution/payment phase as well as taking necessary measures against fraud. No claims were received about the procedure for awarding grants and scholarships. The exception recorded in this area was beyond DG SCIC's control, but the two non-compliance events, while not pointing to situations posing a high risk, did highlight the potential to improve the procedure. *Ex ante* controls in the signature and execution phase revealed only some minor discrepancies. As *ex ante* controls are performed, and as all but one of the grants awarded in 2020 were low value, on-the-spot audit missions are performed only when strictly necessary to maintain a proper balance between the costs and benefits of such controls, and when no specific *ex post* controls are performed.

In **Staff expenditure** *ex ante* controls in the commitment phase specifically aim at ensuring that the applications accepted contribute to reaching the objective of a broader language portfolio among staff interpreters and ACIs. The indicators show that in 2020, seventeen staff interpreters and eleven ACIs added a new language after a language stay funded with support from DG SCIC. There were no significant discrepancies noted in either the commitment or the payment phase. Due to the very low value of transactions and as 100% of transactions are subject to *ex ante* examination, no specific *ex post* controls others than accounting controls are performed.

Financed by budget lines co-delegated by DG DEVCO (now DG INTPA) and FPI, **Cooperation 3rd countries** comprises a heterogeneous group of transactions: procurement contracts, reimbursements, and re-allocation of funds to the ACI budget line as compensation for the contributions DG SCIC's staff interpreters make to the programmes. Similarly to procurement, *ex ante* controls are conducted on 100% of the transactions in a centralised financial circuit

for both commitments and payments. *Ex ante* controls only detected one minor case where modifications had to be made.

*Ex ante* controls of **Income** aim at ensuring that amounts due to DG SCIC are recovered from its customers and can feed into the DG's budget as assigned revenue. Additionally, legality and regularity of each transaction is checked as part of the billing process, and charged amounts confirmed by customers in the pre-information stage of the invoicing process. The best indicator for controlling recoveries is whether customers contest the amounts considered due. In 2020, only one amount billed to DG SCIC's customers was contested. After further discussion the billed amount was accepted in this case, too. Establishing what amounts were to be billed was much more complicated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 crisis and the consequent application of the principle of *force majeure*. Not only were meetings cancelled or changed, increased use of interpretation platforms took DG SCIC into new territory, where well-established procedures could not be followed. There was only one case where a recovery order had to be cancelled and re-issued, when for internal reasons the customer required a shorter payment deadline. Invoicing of certain interpretation services provided during the second half of 2020 still needs further clarification with a customer.

The **Ex post controls** on payments to non-permanent interpreters have been established to measure the effectiveness of *ex ante* controls that are performed in a decentralised financial circuit. As the payment of daily remuneration and allowances is automated, the only potential area of error is the processing of reimbursement requests when supporting documents have to be examined. Hence, the randomly selected transactions for *ex post* examination were taken from this population. The sample amounted to 8.96% of the relevant payments by value. The results of the controls in 2020 indicate an error rate of 0.09% across all transactions. This error rate is well below the 2% materiality threshold indicated in Annex 5. While this is an increase on the 0.074% error rate in 2019, it is not significant given that the pandemic in 2020 meant that non-local contracts required heavy micromanagement and sometimes multiple changes, which increased the risk of errors.

Regarding **ex post accounting controls**, in 2020 DG SCIC conducted 53 different accounting controls on a monthly, quarterly or annual basis on expenditure, pre-financing, assets, guarantees, income and commitments and contracts. This led to the DG making 4 890 corrections (compared to 491 in 2019 and 45 in 2018), of which 4 877 (as opposed to 473 in 2019 and 23 in 2018) had no financial impact on financial statements. This remarkable increase can be explained by the large-scale closure of legal commitments. Similarly to the removal of 414 duplicate records in 2019, which was the reason for last year's increased numbers, this had no effect on DG SCIC's accounts. The overall impact of those corrections which had a financial impact made up 1.04% of the total financial statements, which is well below the 2% materiality threshold. Further details on accounting indicators are presented in Annex 7. In 2020, DG BUDG also performed an assessment of the accounting risk for DG SCIC, which was assessed as low.

All of DG SCIC's Relevant Control Systems demonstrate a relatively low error rate. No significant weaknesses have been identified, hence there is also no need for making any reservations in the declaration of assurance. The analysis which has been performed

confirms that the controls can be considered effective in respect of all Relevant Control Systems.

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic crisis, DG SCIC had already fully dematerialised certain types of financial transactions. Building on this successful experience, as of mid-March, DG SCIC had to fully dematerialise all its financial circuits, without affecting the effectiveness of the checks and controls previously carried out on paper files and DG SCIC did not need to activate simplified financial circuits in ABAC. The sound financial management of DG SCIC transactions was therefore not affected by the crisis. The only area where processing of paper documents remains obligatory are the VAT forms issued for the Belgian state. DG SCIC has set up systematic follow-up of transactions to ensure that this requirement for blue-ink signature is complied with for all affected contracts.

DG SCIC's relevant expenditure, estimated overall risk at payment, estimated future corrections and risk at closure are disclosed in Table X.

The estimated overall risk at payment for 2020 expenditure amounts to €0.28 million, representing 0.5 % of the DG's total relevant expenditure for 2020. This is the Authorising Officer by Delegation's (AOD) best, conservative estimation of the amount of relevant expenditure during the year not in conformity with the contractual and regulatory provisions applicable at the time the payment was made.

This expenditure will subsequently be subject to *ex post* controls and a proportion of the underlying errors will be detected and corrected in subsequent years. The conservatively estimated future corrections for 2020 expenditure amount to €0 million. This is the amount of errors that the DG conservatively estimates will be identified and corrected by controls planned to be carried out in subsequent years.

Over the past years, performing *ex ante* and *ex post* controls has not resulted in any major financial correction or need for a recovery order after payment. This is because any financial errors were detected and corrected before the relevant payments were made. These results are expected to continue, and as a result a conservative estimate of the value of future financial corrections is 0.0%.

The difference between those two amounts results in the estimated overall risk at closure of €0.28 million, representing 0.5 % of the DG's total relevant expenditure for 2020.

In the context of the protection of the EU budget, the DG's estimated overall risk at payment, estimated future corrections and risk at closure are consolidated at Commission level in the Annual Management and Performance Report (AMPR).

Table X - Estimated risk at closure

DG SCIC	'payments made' (FY; m€)	<i>minus</i> new prefinancing [ <i>plus</i> retentions made*] (in FY; m€)	<i>plus</i> cleared prefinancing [ <i>minus</i> retentions released* and deductions of expenditure made by MS] (in FY; m€)	= 'relevant expenditure' (for the FY; m€)	Average Error Rate ( <i>weighted</i> AER; %)	estimated risk at payment (FY; m€)	Average Recoveries and Corrections ( <i>adjusted</i> ARC; %)	estimated future corrections [and deductions] (for FY; m€)	estimated risk at closure (FY; m€)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Programme, Budget Line(s), or other relevant level	as per AAR annex 3, table 2	as per ABAC DWH BO report on prefinancing	as per ABAC DWH BO report on prefinancing	= (2) -/+ (3) +/- (4)	Detected error rates, or equivalent estimates	= (5) x (6)	H-ARC (as per ABAC DWH BO report on corrective capacity), <u>but adjusted</u>	= (5) x (8)	= (7) - (9)
Total budget where SCIC is RAO for payments	56.69	-0.21	0.17	56.66	0.5%	0.28	0%	0	0.28

Notes onto the table X

(2) Payments made or equivalent, e.g. expenditure registered in the Commission's accounting system, accepted expenditure or cleared pre-financing. In any case, this means after the preventive (ex-ante) control measures have already been implemented earlier in the cycle. In all cases of Co-Delegations (Internal Rules Article 3), 'payments made' are covered by the Delegated DGs. For Cross-SubDelegations (Internal Rules Article 12), they remain with the Delegating DGs.

(3) New pre-financing actually paid by out the department itself during the financial year (i.e. excluding any pre-financing received as a transfer from another department). 'Pre-financing' is covered as in the context of note 2.5.1 to the Commission annual accounts (i.e. excluding 'Other advances to Member States' (note 2.5.2) which is covered on a purely payment-made basis). 'Pre-financing paid/cleared' are always covered by the Delegated DGs, even for Cross-SubDelegations.

\* In Cohesion, the (10%) retention made.

(4) Pre-financing actually cleared during the financial year (i.e. their 'delta' in the Financial Year 'actuals', not their 'cut-off' based estimated 'consumption').

\* In Cohesion, the retention which is now released by the Commission.

(5) For the purpose of equivalence with the ECA's scope of the EC funds with potential exposure to legality & regularity errors (*see the ECA's Annual Report methodological Annex 1.1*), our concept of 'relevant expenditure' includes the payments made, subtracts the new pre-financing paid out [*& adds the retentions made*], and adds the previous pre-financing actually cleared [*& subtracts the retentions released; and any deductions of expenditure made by MS*] during the FY. This is a separate and 'hybrid' concept, intentionally combining elements from the budgetary accounting and from the general ledger accounting.

(6) For low-risk types of expenditure, where there are indications that the equivalent error rate might be close to 'zero' (*e.g. administrative expenditure, operating subsidies to agencies*), it is nevertheless recommended that 0.5% be used as a conservative estimate.

(8) Even though to some extent based on the 7 years historic Average of Recoveries and financial Corrections (ARC), which is the best available indication of the corrective capacity of the ex-post control systems implemented by the DG over the past years, the AOD *replaced* this historic average *from 0.8% to 0%*. As the calculation of the ARC for DG SCIC is based on the recovery context information in credit notes, which are the result of *ex ante* controls, it does not provide any information with regards to *ex post* controls. The payments to ACI (representing about 77% of relevant expenditure in 2020) are subject to *ex post* controls, but subsequent corrections are not established via recovery orders, as the payments are processed in DG SCIC's local system, Grif. The other transactions are only subject to *ex post* accounting controls as *ex ante* controls are performed on 100% of the population. Therefore, the best conservative estimate for *ex post* future corrections is 0%.

- **Fraud prevention, detection and correction**

DG SCIC has developed and implemented its own anti-fraud strategy (AFS) since 2016, on the basis of the methodology provided by OLAF. It was last updated in 2018; the update and assessment of the DG's anti-fraud strategy was adopted by Management in January 2019 (Ares (2019)134465). Due to the pandemic situation in 2020 preparatory steps to undertake another update could not be completed. Implementation of the anti-fraud strategy is monitored annually, with an oral report presented to the senior management board meeting. In 2020, part of the actions of the AFS have been implemented. The remaining actions will be implemented in 2021 if the sanitary situation allows.

The Head of the Budget and Finance Unit and the anti-fraud correspondent were available throughout 2020 to provide individual assistance in response to questions raised by colleagues on matters where greater clarity was required. During 2016-2020 there were no financial recommendations issued by OLAF, which were of relevance to DG SCIC. The AFS correspondent takes part in the relevant network organised by OLAF (FDPNet) in order to maintain the contacts and be involved in central services actions. In 2020, OLAF followed up on the implementation of the CAFS (Commission Anti-Fraud Strategy) by Commission services. DG SCIC contributed to CAFS implementation. The central services analysed the risks related to the pandemic (exceptional procurement procedures). None of the identified risks applied to DG SCIC.

As to strictly defined issues of fraud in monetary terms there were no incidents reported to the Head of the Budget and Finance Unit or the AFS correspondent. Moreover, no incidents were detected by the Finance Unit in its everyday work that required following up in this Directorate. Each time a risk of potential error or fraud is identified as part of regular controls, especially in the area of financial management, remedial steps are taken. It is the AFS correspondent's view, based on professional judgement and the available information that the risk of fraud is under control.

- **Other control objectives: safeguarding of assets and information, reliability of reporting (if applicable)**

As concerns control activities in the area of reporting reliability, DG SCIC follows the Strategic Planning and Programming Cycle, and each year prepares an Annual Management Plan and an Annual Activity Report as required by the Commission.

Each year the Draft Budget is prepared, a complex exercise for DG SCIC as the DG relies heavily on assigned revenue to complement the funds received as voted budget. In 2020, 67.98% of available commitment appropriations (outside co-delegated funds) came from assigned revenue. As the billing of interpretation services constitutes the source of this revenue, the determination of the i-slot price is also part of this process.

For the provision of interpretation services, DG SCIC has set up a uniform and automatic compensation mechanism with a unique compensation rate, the 'i-slot'. The i-slot corresponds to the average cost of providing a single interpreter for half day, making the compensation system transparent for our fee-paying customers. Besides its significance for



DG SCIC's draft budget, the i-slot price also needs to be communicated to DG SCIC's customers. A provisional maximum figure is calculated at the beginning of the year for year n+1, while calculations are carried out towards the end of the year resulting in a definitive figure in November. To be able to monitor budgetary execution in DG SCIC in the course of the year, quarterly reports are prepared as a basis for decision-making by management. Additionally, considerable efforts are made by an operational unit to monitor the follow-up of an inter-institutional framework contract.

In the area of accountancy, monthly, quarterly and yearly reports document the results of accounting controls. The reports are also summarised under 'Legality and regularity of the transactions' in the present report. The analysis of the results of the accounting controls feeds into the annual review of DG SCIC's accounting action plan and the assessment of the accounting risk for DG SCIC.

DG SCIC is also the domain leader for audio-visual assets in the Commission. This means that DG SCIC is responsible not only for audio-visual equipment purchased from its own budget, but also for managing items acquired by other DGs. DG SCIC has implemented multiple internal procedures to safeguard these assets. It tracks the location of all items purchased upon delivery to its warehouse, after installation and any subsequent movement of them, for example, when they are sent for repair. DG SCIC performs a regular tracking exercise of inventoried items in meeting rooms it manages to ensure the maximum number of such items are identified. The latest report was issued in 2020, and found that 96.42% of inventoried items had been tracked. Checks on the quantity of items in DG SCIC's warehouse, be they assets (equipment, etc.) or on non-assets (consumables), are performed regularly to ensure disruptions in meeting rooms are kept to a minimum.

## **2. Efficiency = the Time-to-... indicators and other efficiency indicators**

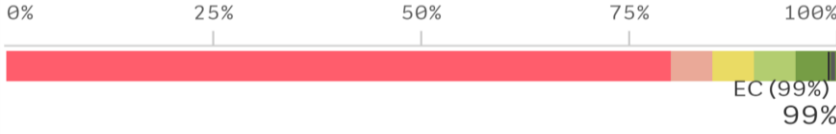
Payments to ACIs are subject to specific payment deadlines and are processed via DG SCIC's local system (Grif). The payment time statistics, which are generated automatically, are distorted by the fact that the system currently starts counting from the first day when reimbursement requests are received (or the date of the contract when that is the triggering event) even when additional supporting documents are received at a later date, or when payments are made in the framework of a subsequent salary indexation. To resolve this situation, additional reports are created both to measure precise payment processing times<sup>7</sup> and to provide comprehensive monitoring of amounts to be paid. The results for 2020 confirm the efficiency of *ex ante* controls in this area: all of the 1,246 reimbursement requests for costs associated with non-local contracts submitted to DG SCIC were completed within the stipulated deadline. This means a further improvement of the already impressive figure in 2019, when just 15 of the 5 359 payments were made late.

In 2020, 996 payments were processed in ABAC within an Average Payment Time of 14.63 days excluding suspension periods. This figure does not include payments to freelance interpreters that are processed via DG SCIC's local system (Grif) and subject to different

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<sup>7</sup> Payment processing time is only measured for payments made based on reimbursement requests, as the payments in other cases are highly automated and do not require any supporting documents.

payment deadlines. The figure also includes an average of 4.48 days needed for processing by the horizontal Commission services. Compared to the 17.42 days recorded in 2019 for the same indicator, this represents a significant improvement in processing time. Moreover, only 24 (2.41%) payments were late compared to 86 (5.78%) in 2019, which is also an improvement. Therefore, it can be concluded that *ex ante* controls on payments are carried out efficiently.

Timely Payments	DG Score	EC Score
	<b>99%</b>	<b>99%</b>

DG Interpretation performed very well and exactly in line with Commission average with regards to the value of payments made within the stipulated deadlines. A large number of payments were already processed only electronically before the pandemic crisis and DG SCIC managed to ensure a swift and efficient transition for all other payments as well without additional delays. Besides the focus of all agents participating in the financial circuits aiming to make all payments in time, quarterly reports to management and weekly reports on open invoices sent to all operational units contribute to this result.

In 2020, the time-to-inform indicator was 48.09 days for grants awarded to universities. The time-to-grant indicator was an average of 60.64 days. This average results from delays in beneficiaries returning the signed copy of documents before they are signed by the Commission, and one of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

**3. Economy = the estimated cost of controls**

The estimation of the cost of controls was conducted according to the bottom-up principle: each unit performing control activities was consulted to establish the amount of time their staff dedicated to them in 2020 as per the Relevant Control System. The detailed figures are presented in Annex 7.

Looking at the different Relevant Control Systems, the cost of control can appear high for some. A distinction needs to be drawn between the RCS, which has a systematically high cost, and the overall areas for which costs increased as a result of the pandemic crisis. For Grants (12.19%), Cooperation 3rd countries (23.54%) and Staff Expenditure (36.63%) the relatively high cost is explained by the fact that, despite the (very low) value of individual transactions, they are subject to the same control rules (e.g. the four-eyes principle cannot be modulated according to the transaction value) and to the same requirements on encoding data. Furthermore, the specific nature of the transactions concerned means that specialist knowledge is required to carry out the verification process. The share of the three relevant control systems of all the funds managed by DG SCIC's processes is 0.71% for Grants, 0.08% for Cooperation 3rd counties and 0.29% for Staff Expenditure.

Considering the very low value of the individual transactions and their limited number, automating controls by developing ad hoc IT systems would not be cost effective. Limiting certain controls to a sample of transactions, combined with additional *ex post* controls, would not significantly reduce the cost of the controls, because to be statistically pertinent, the size of the sample would still represent a considerable share of the population. In the recent years, DG SCIC has therefore opted to rationalise its processes for handling certain subcategories of such transactions, in particular scholarships.

The cost of *ex post* controls is compared to the total value of transactions examined, which also includes ACI contracts concluded by the European Parliament and the Court of Justice. The cost of *ex post* accounting controls and reporting are compared with the totality of payments made and income cashed, as they are applicable to both populations. The cost of all controls carried out at DG SCIC is also compared to this figure.

In comparison with previous years, an increase can be observed for the relative cost of controls from 1.87% in 2018 and 2.02% in 2019 to 3.13% in 2020. This increase results from consequences of the pandemic crisis. While there was a steep drop in the amounts billed to DG SCIC's customers, the corresponding controls increased to manage cancellations and meetings being shifted to hybrid mode or having on-line participation. Similarly for expenditure-related RCSs the cancellation of contracts and commitments resulted in a smaller number of payments cashed during the year, but the corresponding control activities did not decrease, and in some cases even more checks were needed. The total cost of controls increased by 4.74% compared to 2019, while the total funds managed decreased by 32.33%. As the situation around the pandemic crisis still causes uncertainties, DG SCIC is not in a position to reduce controls in any of the relevant areas or create solutions tailored to a new reality.

Considering all the above, as an overall conclusion, the level of cost of controls at DG SCIC is considered satisfactory and no corrective measures are required.

#### **4. Conclusion on the cost-effectiveness of controls**

Based on the most relevant key indicators and control results, DG SCIC has assessed the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of its control system and reached a positive conclusion on the cost-effectiveness of the controls for which it is responsible.

DG SCIC has established a control strategy that is best suited to achieving the desired control objectives.

- For expenditure-related control areas, it can be concluded that low error rates are well combined with fast payments and, while disregarding the effects of the current pandemic crisis, controls can be considered cost effective.
- For revenue, even with a steep reduction in income due to the COVID-19 crisis, and the related complications which led to more time being spent on controls, low error rates can be observed, cashing times are satisfactory to cover budgetary needs and the cost of controls remain low.

- For *ex post* controls, the detected error rates also confirm the effectiveness of *ex post* controls, while the related costs even showed a small decrease compared to 2019.

### **2.1.2 Audit observations and recommendations**

This section sets out the observations, opinions and conclusions reported by auditors – including the limited conclusion of the Internal Auditor on the state of internal control. Summaries of the management measures taken in response to the audit recommendations are also included, together with an assessment of the likely material impact of the findings on the achievement of the internal control objectives, and therefore on management's assurance.

Based on all work undertaken by the Internal Audit Service in the period 2018-2020, namely

- Audit on synergies and efficiencies review (SER) (2018);
- Limited review on the new internal control framework (ICF) (2019);

and taking into account that:

- Management has accepted all the recommendations issued in 2018-2020. These recommendations were closed by the IAS and are not subject to further follow-ups;
- Management has adopted action plans to implement all the accepted recommendations. The IAS considers that these action plans are adequate to address the residual risks identified by the auditors;
- The implementation of these action plans is monitored through reports by management and follow-up audits by the IAS.

The Internal Auditor has concluded that the internal control systems in place for the audited processes are effective.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.1.3 Assessment of the effectiveness of internal control systems**

The Commission has adopted an Internal Control Framework based on international good practice, to ensure the achievement of its policy and management objectives. Compliance with the internal control framework is a compulsory requirement.

DG SCIC uses the organisational structure and the internal control systems suited to achieving its policy and internal control objectives in accordance with the internal control principles and has due regard to the risks associated with the environment in which it operates.

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<sup>8</sup> Internal Audit Service contribution to the 2020 Annual Activity Report process (SCIC), [Ares\(2021\)1218764](#), 12/02/2021.

The assessment of internal control principles was carried out according to the methodology established in the *Implementation Guide of the Internal Control Framework of the Commission*. In order to perform the assessment, the following sources were used: DG SCIC's self-assessment (Assessment of the State of Internal Control – Year 2020, including the annexes for the Register of Internal Control Deficiencies and the Internal Control Monitoring Criteria); the global analysis of the register of exceptions and non-compliance events; the risk assessment, the follow-up of outstanding recommendations from the internal audits and results of the corporate indicators reported in the new Annex 4.

The internal control assessment by the Director in Charge of Risk Management and Internal Control (RMIC) examined all areas linked to the different Internal Control Standards such as the follow-up of audits, implementation of the internal control standards and a review of the actions taken under the DG's antifraud strategy. No systemic weaknesses were identified or major improvements required in the DG's internal control system.

DG SCIC has assessed its internal control system during the reporting year and has concluded that it is effective and the components and principles are present and functioning well overall, but some improvements are needed as minor deficiencies were identified related to principles 10 and 14.

The improvements and/or remedial measures implemented or envisaged are:

- further assessment of the procedure around the verification and approval of some supporting documents for freelance interpreters in the light of ongoing development of the security and personal data policy of the three Institutions (this is relevant for internal control principle 10);
- for the KPI on Professionalism for conference organisation, the data source and baseline have not yet been defined and will be done in 2021 (this is relevant for internal control principle 14).

#### **2.1.4 Conclusions on the assurance**

This section reviews the assessment of the elements already reported above (in Sections 2.1.1, 2.1.2 and 2.1.3), and the sub-conclusions already reached. It draws an overall conclusion to support the declaration of assurance and whether it should be qualified with reservations.

The information reported in Section 2.1 stems from the results of management and auditor monitoring contained in the reports listed. These reports result from a systematic analysis of the available evidence. This approach provides sufficient guarantees as to the completeness and reliability of the information reported and results in a comprehensive coverage of the budget delegated to the Director-General of DG SCIC.

DG SCIC's assessment on the legality and regularity of the activities it manages returns a very low level of error. DG SCIC manages two different types of transaction:

- ACI payments (mostly remunerations), which are highly automated and subject to *ex post* controls where the residual error rate is of 0.09%;
- all other types of expenditure, subject to a centralised financial circuit with robust *ex ante* controls, where the error rate is estimated at 0.5%.

DG SCIC has implemented all possible appropriate *ex ante* and *ex post* controls, to the extent that they remain cost-effective and do not affect the other policy/programme objectives nor abandon the financial scheme.

Therefore, under the prevailing risk environment and from a managerial point of view, DG SCIC's AOD can sign the Declaration.

### **Overall Conclusion**

In conclusion, management has reasonable assurance that, overall, suitable controls are in place and working as intended; risks are being appropriately monitored and mitigated; and necessary improvements and reinforcements are being implemented. The Director General, in his capacity as Authorising Officer by Delegation has signed the Declaration of Assurance.

### **2.1.5 Declaration of Assurance**

## **Declaration of Assurance**

*I, the undersigned,*

***Director-General of DG SCIC***

***In my capacity as authorising officer by delegation***

***Declare that the information contained in this report gives a true and fair view<sup>9</sup>.***

***State that I have reasonable assurance that the resources assigned to the activities described in this report have been used for their intended purpose and in accordance with the principles of sound financial management, and that the control procedures put in place give the necessary guarantees concerning the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions.***

***This reasonable assurance is based on my own judgement and on the information at my disposal, such as the results of the self-assessment, ex post controls, the work of the Internal Audit Service for years prior to the year of this declaration.***

***Confirm that I am not aware of anything not reported here which could harm the interests of the institution.***

***Brussels, 29 March 2021***

***Signed***

***Carlos Alegria***

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<sup>9</sup>True and fair in this context means a reliable, complete and correct view on the state of affairs in the DG.

## **2.2 Modern and efficient administration – other aspects**

### **2.2.1 Human resource management**

The internal competition for Bulgarian, Romanian and Maltese language interpreters was run successfully in remote mode and allowed for the recruitment of permanent staff. However, the open competition for conference technicians could not be finalised due to the pandemic.

Following the Staff Opinion Survey in 2018, all staff were involved in formulating a follow-up plan, which continued to be implemented in 2020. The plan focuses on three topics: ‘Staff Engagement’, ‘My Professional Future’, and ‘Change and Innovation’. The extended period of teleworking made it impossible to organise some of the events, while others could be held on-line. The Staff Survey Development Plan includes activities such as promoting team coaching for Heads of Units (HoUs) and their Deputies, or HoUs and Heads of Sector, with the aim of reinforcing management teams at unit level. The pilot project was prepared for two teams and will be launched on-line in early 2021. As one of the responses to ‘My Professional Future’, DG SCIC piloted a scheme of internal temporary redeployment of interpreters to non-interpreting tasks. These seven new posts, like ‘rotateur’ jobs, allow participants to use, develop and enhance their skills in a new environment. In addition, given the circumstances surrounding COVID-19, in 2020 a total of 27 interpreters were assigned to work in other units or Commission services, with the latter expressing high levels of satisfaction. These temporary assignments are different from the usual ‘rotateur’ arrangement. The tasks performed ranged from translation and terminology to assisting competition selection boards, proofreading, editing and coordination tasks in policy DGs.

During the extended period of teleworking, staff strengthened their digital skills while working. Staff and managers were kept informed about corporate training courses on teleworking, and on managing hybrid teams. Activities relating to health and well-being were limited to sharing information on corporate initiatives and on-line events. Special attention was paid to communicating transparently and pro-actively on corporate and DG SCIC safety guidelines during the 2020 pandemic.

DG SCIC has set a target of appointing five female managers to their first middle management position by the end of 2022. There was no opportunity to move closer to that target in 2020, as no first appointments were made to middle management positions.

### **2.2.2 Digital transformation and information management**

DG SCIC launched several initiatives to improve the use of its data assets, as well as the reuse of this data by other Commission services. For example, DG SCIC moved ahead with the data curation of its speech data (audio and video) as a contribution to the speech recognition project. These data are curated and refined, and subsequently shared with colleagues in DGT and DG CNECT. Using these data and benefiting from the contribution of



interpreters in post-editing transcripts, DG SCIC also started developing speech recognition models using the Azure platform, in cooperation with DG DIGIT.

Secondly, DG SCIC initiated a project to automate the transfer of documents from its biggest customer, the General Secretariat of the Council (GSC). The project will improve exchanges with the GSC and facilitate the creation of a workflow that is 'Digital by Default'. The future tool will work seamlessly with the IT systems of the GSC, and respect interoperability and data transfer requirements. This data-driven approach will allow DG SCIC to enhance the use of its data with automatic processing.

Thirdly, DG SCIC worked (in cooperation with the Interactive Terminology for Europe (IATE) team) to improve the management of its terminology resources by preparing its glossaries for the transfer of linguistic data to the IATE inter-institutional terminology database. Making the data accessible in IATE will strengthen DG SCIC's participation in the inter-institutional terminology work.

DG SCIC is on track with several projects launched in the context of its digital modernisation plan to bring its IT systems into line with the requirements of the Digital Strategy (Toolbox and MIRA (Meeting management and Interpretation Request Application)).

On Data Protection, DG SCIC continued to implement the corporate action plan on EUIDPR compliance: all legacy notifications (related to interpretation management) have been transferred to the public register, and awareness raising, guidance and training actions have been organised to focus on the responsibilities of the 'assistant controllers', notably regarding the data subjects.

As domain leader for conference organisation and meeting room management, DG SCIC is a 'corporate owner' of records of processing related to conference participants' data and audio-visual support for meetings, which were published in 2020. DG SCIC has created a register of external processors, including cloud services, in the light of the rapid development of virtual or hybrid meetings and associated services.

The current data protection legislation allows international transfers of personal data in principle if the EU standards for the protection of the rights and freedoms of the data subject are guaranteed also after the transfer.

Moreover, the invalidation of the EU-U.S. Privacy Shield (the Schrems II judgment) poses concrete challenges for services transferring personal data to third countries or using international cloud services. DG SCIC will continue to assess its processing activities in light of the requirements of the Schrems II ruling and will coordinate with relevant Commission services and IT governance bodies, as well as the Data Protection Officer, to be able to draw from horizontal approaches to similar situations. The Commission services, coordinated by the Data Protection Officer, replied to a request from the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) to all EU institutions to identify and map their international transfers and to report certain categories of transfers and are awaiting the EDPS's reaction. The goal is to minimise the risks linked to ongoing and future international transfers of personal data, notably by informing all data subjects of the legal situation in which such transfers take

place, in order for operations undertaken by the Commission services to comply with EU data protection law.

### 2.2.3 Sound environmental management

The disruption caused by COVID-19 meant that many of the waste-reduction initiatives planned for 2021 could not be run as planned: promoting waste reduction in the office or supporting donation of food leftovers from conference buffets suddenly became almost irrelevant in the new context.

Instead, the EMAS team focused on providing colleagues with information on sustainability at home and elsewhere in the 'Green Digest' newsletter sent to the green community in DG SCIC every 1-2 months. Some 'Green Digest' editions include a 'green person of the month' chapter, where DG SCIC colleagues explain what they do for sustainability at home and at work.

DG SCIC raised awareness of the crucial role that sustainable event management can play in reducing environmental footprints. Together with DG HR it co-organised the first sustainable events competition, which included an all-virtual award ceremony. This was followed by a workshop in which some of the winners demonstrated how they made their conferences more sustainable and discussed their ideas with the conference community.

The EMAS team gave various presentations, and provided written information and input to various internal groups and stakeholders on greener events. One of the key objectives was to highlight how crucial a sustained transition to virtual and hybrid conferencing will be to achieving carbon neutrality in 2030, and to advocate the creation of a robust and comprehensive calculation method for measuring and monitoring the environmental impacts of events.

### 2.2.4 Examples of initiatives to improve economy and efficiency of financial and non-financial activities

As more meetings are being organised in virtual or remote environments, DG SCIC has started working with the Council on the **digitalisation of the transfer of meeting documents**. The Council has developed an API which is currently used by the 'Delegates Portal' (which allows delegates to access their meeting documents, including on a mobile app). In 2020, the project was agreed by the ITCB and funding has been secured.

As corporate domain leader for meeting room management, DG SCIC continued the rollout of **meeting rooms management and meeting services**. This has entailed the progressive installation of **standard audio-visual solutions** in meeting rooms across the Commission, coupled with the provision of **professional support services for meeting rooms**. The rollout improves the user experience thanks to modern, user-friendly equipment in meeting rooms, and the dedicated on-site or remote support for users.