European Commission

Annual Activity Report

2023

DG Interpretation

Contents

DG SCIC 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 [1] 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, we face 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 based also on charge-back mechanisms and by operating under Heading 7 of the EU budget (administrative expenditure).

DG SCIC is **domain leader for meeting room management**. We modernise and enlarge the pool of corporate meeting rooms and provide high quality and modern meeting management services. This includes modernising audio-visual equipment in almost 1 200 meeting spaces and providing technical assistance and maintenance services in meeting rooms. Thanks to the My Meeting & Conference Support service, we have streamlined support to our customers. Equipment and services are standardised across the board, including in smaller meeting rooms.

DG SCIC is also **domain leader for conference management**, which is based on a decentralised approach, characterised by the spread of activities, expenditure and staff across the Commission. While we provide organisational support to a limited number of Commission flagship conferences, we also concentrate on setting standards, promoting greening of events and conferences, offering guidance and practical conference management tools. The Corporate Events Database offers a comprehensive overview of conferences organised in the Commission.

At the start of 2023, DG SCIC's updated organigramme came into force. The reorganisation helped to improve synergies and efficiencies in the DG. It was a result of several internal reflection exercises carried out in 2022 to assess the framework in which the DG operates and interacts with customers and stakeholders. The aim was to further integrate the lessons learnt and adapt to new ways of working.

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[1] 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 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 [2].

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[2]   Article 17(1) of the Treaty on European Union.

A. Key results and progress towards achieving the Commission's general objectives and department's specific objectives

DG SCIC facilitates the EU's democratic decision-making processes and contributes to modernising, digitalising and greening the Commission as a public administration. We contribute thus mostly to the horizontal general objective of '**A modern, high-performing and sustainable European Commission**'.

Interpretation output in 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 per week (i-slots)
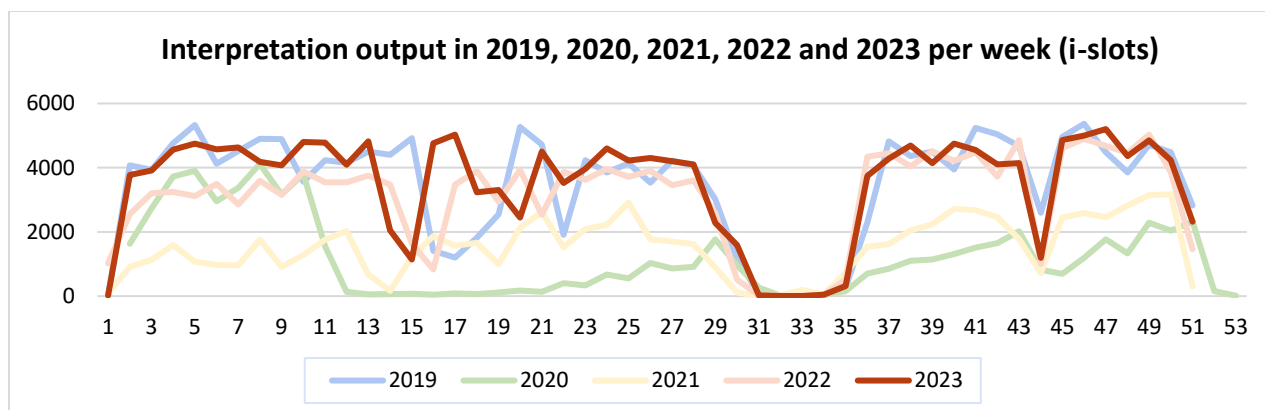
2023 was the last full year of the current political cycle and, as anticipated, demand for interpretation was high. Thanks to innovative organisational measures to increase interpreters' availability, DG SCIC was able to increase its output by 13% compared to 2022, providing 179 025 i-slots ([3]). This is slightly more than in 2019, which means that **activity is back to pre-pandemic levels**. This increase in output is spread evenly across all EU languages. Whereas it was achieved in the second half of 2022 by the lifting of health measures, in 2023 it was due, in addition, to DG SCIC's ability to provide interpretation in a higher number of meetings.

Indeed, despite the high activity level, DG SCIC was nonetheless able to **satisfy 94% of the overall demand**. In particular, demand satisfaction in the Commission rose by 11 percentage points, from 83 to 94%.

To achieve that result, DG SCIC enforced an **Action Plan to better satisfy demand** in the last year of the political cycle. This included i) rationalising activity planning, based on an outlook calendar of periods of peak and low activity; ii) improving internal workflows to successfully channel demand by systematically offering alternative dates in periods with less activity; iii) efficiently using resources, by timely recruitment of freelancers to ensure their availability and contain cost; and iv) optimising staff interpreters' schedules by prioritising interpreting over other activities during peak periods.

([3]) 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's work. 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 forecast 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.

DG SCIC contributed to the Commission's response to Ukraine by providing **Ukrainian interpretation** at both the highest political and operational levels. In parallel, we pursued our efforts to support the training of conference interpreters and increase the availability of digital resources for Ukrainian.
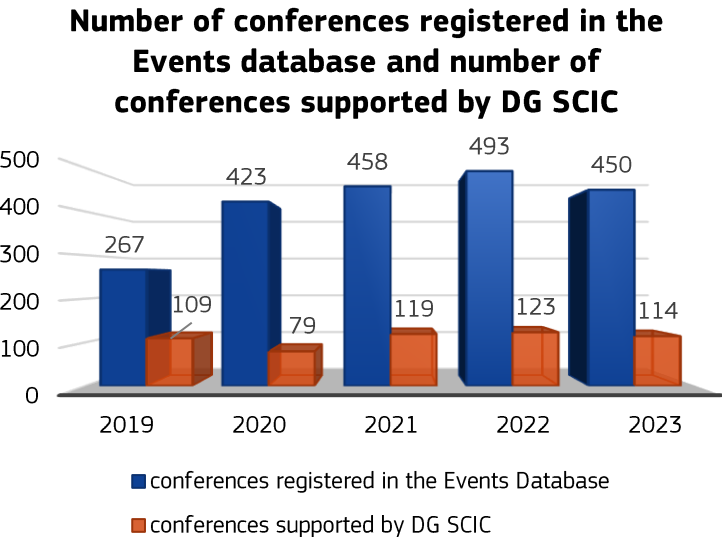
DG SCIC developed an open-source '**live transcription portal**' using language models trained by interpreters, and a project using neural voices to create voiceovers for videos. The language models will also be used to close-caption web streaming. With these projects, we contributed to general objective 2: 'A Europe fit for the digital age'.

DG SCIC is an important **promoter and enabler of environmental sustainability**. We offer multilingual videoconferencing and provide infrastructure for online meetings and conferences. We also offer sustainable-by-default services through framework contracts and advise on easy steps that can be taken to make events more sustainable. With these tools, DG SCIC encourages and empowers Commission services to reduce the environmental impact of their operations.

Number of meeting spaces equippend and managed by DG SCIC
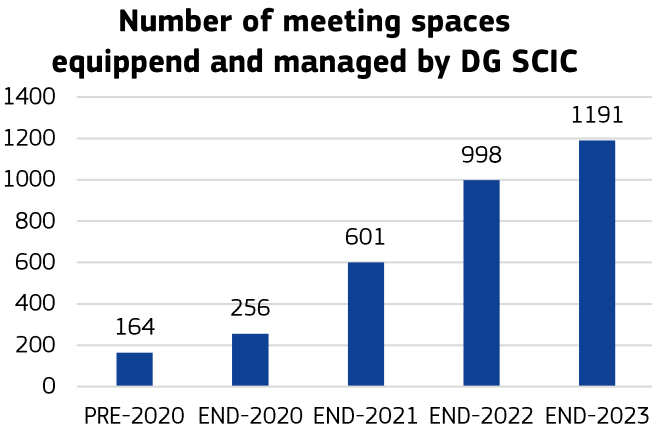
DG SCIC further increased the number of **meeting rooms fit for hybrid meetings**. However, the sharp increase in the total number of meeting rooms has not continued. This is due to the buildings policy of The Office for Infrastructure and Logistics in Brussels (OIB), which has been consolidating and reshuffling building spaces. Our activity has increasingly focused on upgrading and renovating existing installations.

We further consolidated **My Meeting & Conference Support (MACS)**, a customer service project for event organisers who need guidance and support on meetings and conferences with and without interpretation. It offers a single-entry point and helps customers navigate the complex organisation of events.

Number of conferences registered in the Events database and number of conferences supported by DG SCIC

■ conferences registered in the Events Database

■ conferences supported by DG SCIC

Thanks to conference managers, the helpline and other organisational support tools, DG SCIC was able to manage a high number of conferences and **supported the conference community** through its network with its wiki, framework contracts and participants' registration tool.

B. Key performance indicators

KPI 1: Standby rate and reserve of staff and freelance interpreters, excluding periods of low interpretation activity (% of available working time) (Source: SCICView)	**Standby rate and reserve**
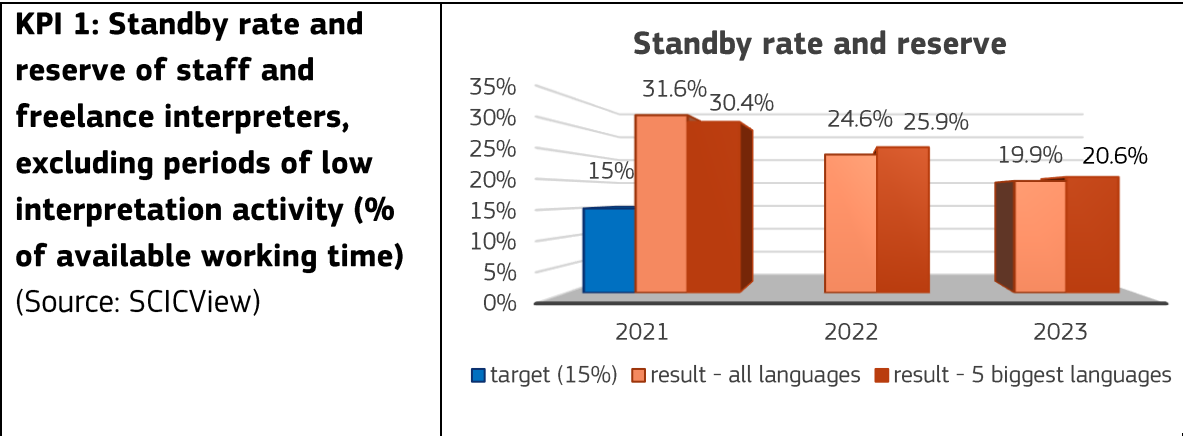
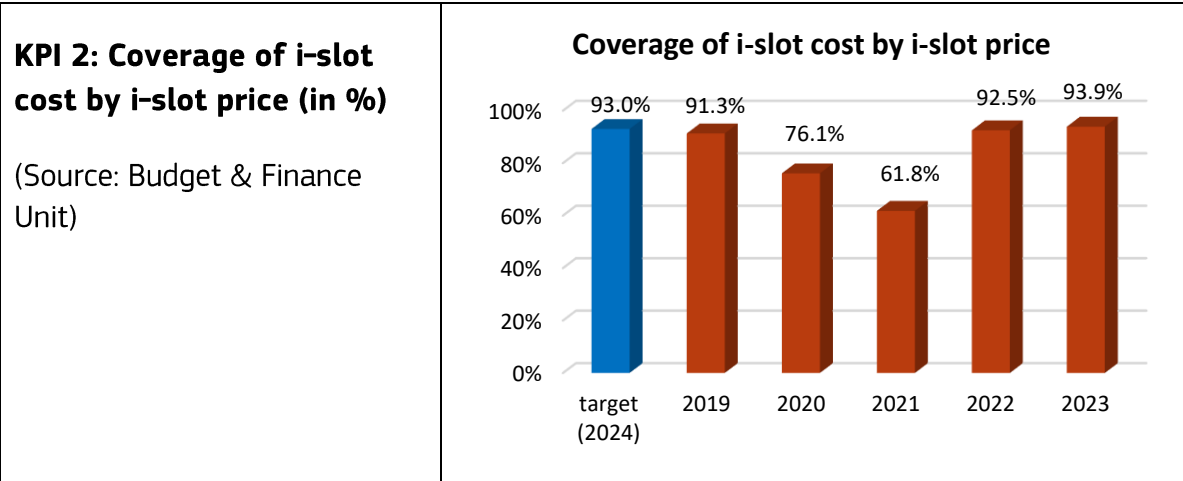The performance on this KPI improved significantly, with a drop in the standby rate of around 5%. This was made possible by measures taken in the context of the Action Plan for better satisfying demand in the last full year of the political cycle. Nevertheless, the 15% target is out of reach, as demand remains partly unpredictable, last-minute cancellations lead to standby among interpreters originally assigned to meetings, and because of specific arrangements applicable to meetings on platforms.

KPI 2: Coverage of i-slot cost by i-slot price (in %) (Source: Budget & Finance Unit)	**Coverage of i-slot cost by i-slot price**

Thanks to the measures taken to satisfy increasing demand, DG SCIC exceeded the target.

KPI 3: Satisfaction with the quality of interpretation expressed by our users *(Source: Customer Satisfaction Survey 2022*	**Overall satisfaction with interpretation**
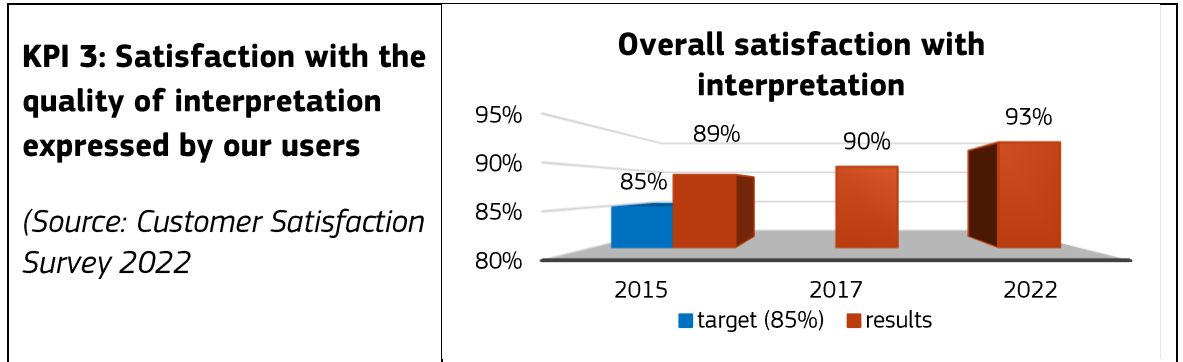
The results of the 2022 biannual customer satisfaction survey showed high overall satisfaction with interpretation. With 93% of the respondents either 'Very satisfied' or

'Satisfied' with the quality of interpretation, the overall satisfaction expressed by the users is above the target (85%) set for this KPI. This indicates that DG SCIC supports interpreters in providing quality interpretation and maintaining the very high standards reflected in previous surveys. The results also prove that we are successfully providing high-quality interpretation, also in online meetings.

KPI 4: Number of corporate meeting rooms (rooms with interpretation or with over 50 seats) *(Source: Room management tool)*	**Number of corporate meeting rooms** TARGET FOR 2022: 86 RESULT 2023: 96 TARGET FOR 2024: 90
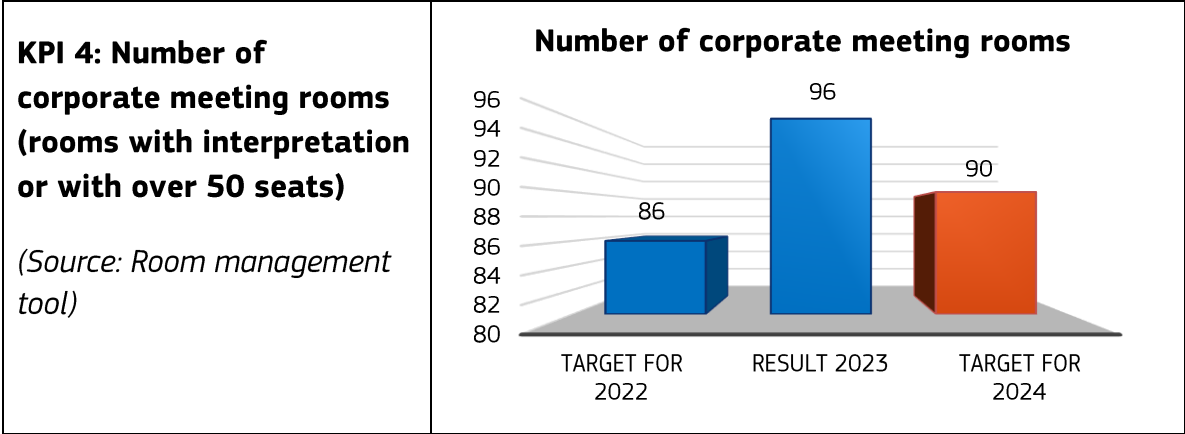
DG SCIC continued modernising meeting rooms to ensure they meet the latest technical standards. Ever more colleagues in the Commission are now able to use state-of-the-art equipment that enables hybrid ways of working and collaboration. We couple this with hands-on training sessions and streamlined support se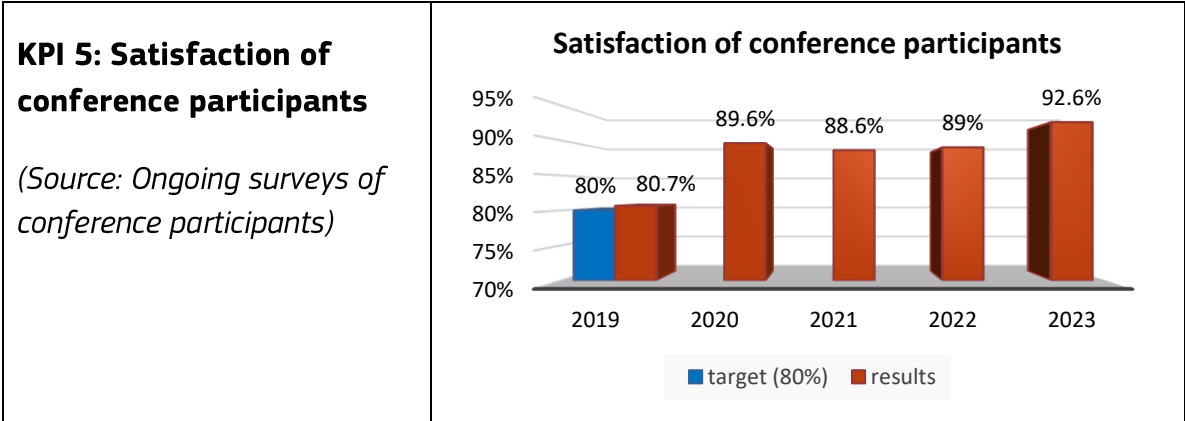rvices. We have also been putting in place various measures to ensure good sound quality, which is fundamental for interpreters to do their work.

KPI 5: Satisfaction of conference participants *(Source: Ongoing surveys of conference participants)*	**Satisfaction of conference participants** 2019: target (80%) 80%, results 80.7% 2020: 89.6% 2021: 88.6% 2022: 89% 2023: 92.6%

The satisfaction rate remains well above the target of 80%. Digitalisation of conferences allows for more inclusive events with a larger outreach. Hybrid events (when participants can join both remotely and in-person) are by now the standard mode for conferences in the Commission.

C. Key conclusions on internal control and financial management

In line with the Commission's Internal Control Framework, DG SCIC has assessed its internal control systems during the reporting year and has concluded that they are effective and the components and principles are present and functioning well overall, but some improvements are needed. Please refer to annual activity report section 2.3 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 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. The Director-General, in her capacity as Authorising Officer by Delegation, has signed the Declaration of Assurance.

D. Provision of information to the Commissioner(s)

In the context of the regular meetings during the year between the DG SCIC and the Commissioner on management matters, the main elements of this report and assurance declaration, have been brought to the attention of Commissioner Johannes Hahn, responsible for Budget and Administration.
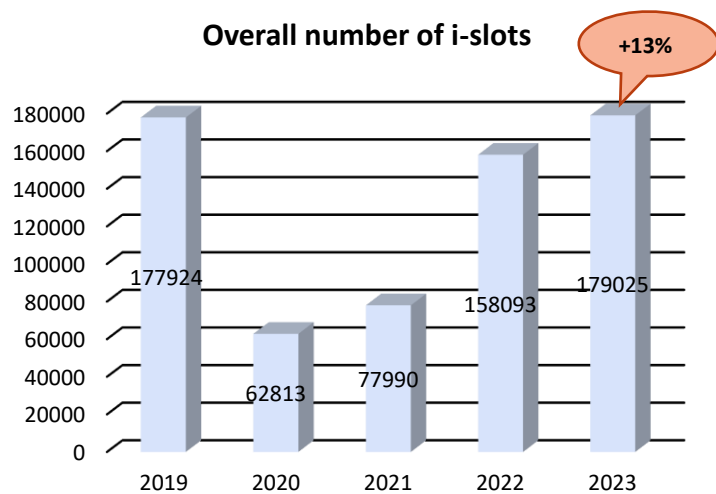
1. KEY RESULTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE COMMISSION'S GENERAL OBJECTIVES AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE DEPARTMENT

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

DG SCIC provided 179 025 interpretation slots, 13% more than in the previous year.

Activity in the Council increased by 12%, reaching a higher level than in 2019. In the European Commission, the increase in activity of 25% was even sharper. However, it remains well below 2019 levels. This is why the share of activity in the Council remains high (72% of total, whereas output in the Commission was 18% of total).

Overall number of i-slots

+13%

Year	Value
2019	177924
2020	62813
2021	77990
2022	158093
2023	179025

i-slot by institution

+12%

+25%

Institutions: Council, Commission, EESC, CoR, Presidency, Others

Legend: 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023

Contract days

53571 (2019)
23765 (2020)
17525 (2021)
50542 (2022)
54160 (2023) **+7%**
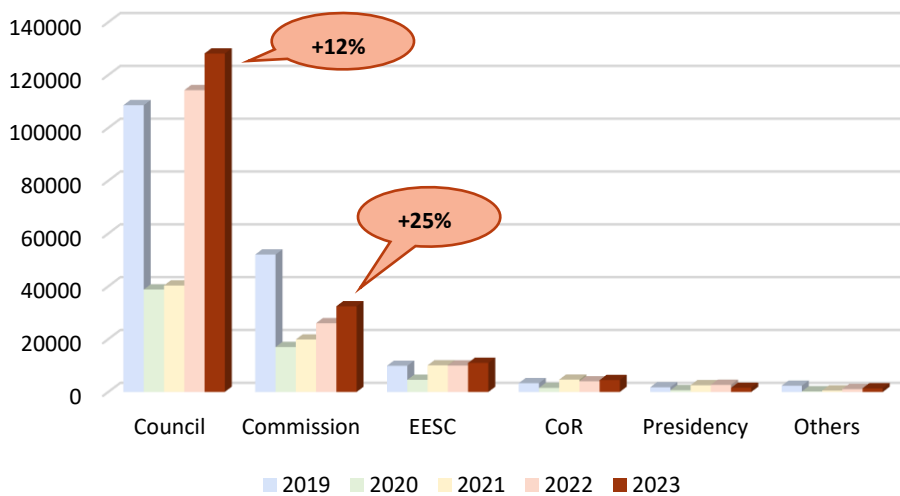
This sustained activity generated only 7% more contract days for freelance interpreters than in 2022, which allowed DG SCIC to contain costs even in a context of high inflation. This was thanks to efficient mapping of needs and recruitment management.

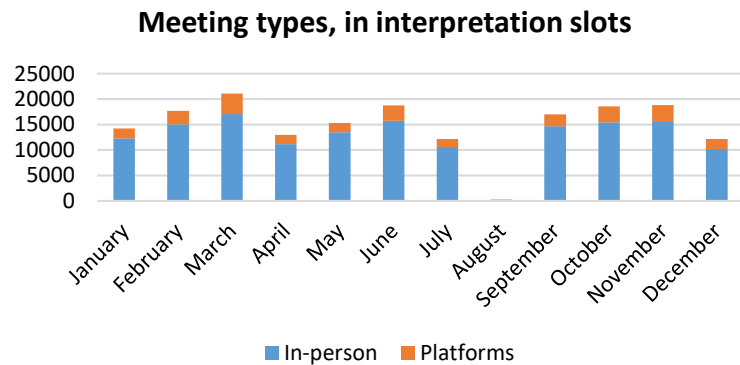Although platform meetings remain an integral part of new working methods, especially in the Commission, in-person meetings represented 84.6% of i-slots (81% in 2022).

Meeting types, in interpretation slots

In-person ■ Platforms

DG SCIC continued to facilitate multilingual communication in high-level Commission events such as the **Global Gateway Forum**, as well as in flagship initiatives promoting European citizens' participation in the EU decision-making process, such as the **Citizens' Panels**. DG SCIC also contributed to the Commission's efforts to **increase accessibility and inclusiveness** of the institutions' work by providing **Sign Language Interpretation** at selected meetings, such as the European Disability Platform and in the Commission press room.

In June 2023, DG SCIC launched an ambitious **Digital Transformation initiative** to modernise our overall business and IT landscape between 2024-2027. As a first step, an extensive **analysis of DG SCIC's business processes** was completed in December 2023, the findings of which shaped a multi-annual **Digital Transformation roadmap**. This roadmap outlines flagship projects related to the modernisation of our business processes, as well as the Digital Transformation, leveraging **innovative technologies** (**including using AI tools** to support interpretation programming, sentiment analysis of users' feedback, and improved stakeholder communication tools) according to our needs.

In parallel, DG SCIC continued existing transformation projects including the **Interpreter's Digital Toolbox (IDT)**, **automation of the interpretation requests** and cooperation with corporate initiatives (integration with **PMO's** (Paymaster Office's) **Payment Factory for SUMMA** (corporate financial system) and **HR Transformation**). Thanks to the IDT tool, the **automatic transfer of Council meeting documents** to DG SCIC was delivered in production. The IDT tool facilitates interpreters' work with electronic documents, reducing the need for paper documents in the booth. In addition, the technical architecture for the automation of interpretation requests was completed and will be used both for internal clients (using MIRA – Meeting management and Interpretation Reservation Application) as well as for the Council and the Committees.

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

We continued providing **high quality interpretation** at all kinds of in-person and hybrid meetings organised by our customers at all levels, including the College, the European Council and Councils of Ministers and the European Economic and Social Committee/Committee of Regions plenaries. We collected customers' feedback through meeting reports that confirmed the extremely positive results of the biannual Customers' Satisfaction Survey that took place in 2022. In particular, we received very positive feedback about the quality of interpretation at the multilingual Citizens' Panels organised throughout the year, where European citizens from all Member States could make good use of interpretation to communicate directly with the European Commission.

DG SCIC continued to strive for **good quality of sound** at multilingual virtual and hybrid meetings, in order to support quality of interpretation and to preserve interpreters' health. Awareness raising was intensified, with 20 initiatives such as workshops, seminars or pre-meeting presentations organised for different DGs for a total audience of over 500 people. Pre-meeting tests continued, with a total of 193 in 2023.

In addition, DG SCIC continued actively participating in the ISO work on **technical standards for interpretation** and cooperating actively with manufacturers to influence and enable technical advances in sound quality and other factors that can contribute to the quality of interpretation over platforms. In 2023, we organised 20 awareness-raising activities (presentations, seminars, workshops) and performed 193 sound quality tests.

Language learning plays an important role in meeting our customers' needs, maintaining the quality of interpretation and anticipating future demand. DG SCIC continued supporting interpreters adding a new passive or active language. Within the framework set by the Action Plan for satisfying demand, interpreters were supported through **life-long linguistic and thematic learning** as well as **professional skills development** and a wider offer of **digital upskilling** training courses, including a Digital Week in the summer.

A high number of interpreters attended our various courses – thematic training, language maintenance, digital upskilling and professional skills (including Head of Interpretation Team, Pedagogical Assistance, Speechmaking, etc.). Training sessions were attended by staff interpreters (2 064 participations), freelancers (501 participations) and interpreters from other institutions (255 participations).

We enhanced our **succession planning** effort by investing in capacity development in universities of the Member States and candidate countries, in line with the language priorities and up to the standards of the Institutions. DG SCIC's pool of experienced trainers and its budget line for grants and scholarships were instrumental in this work. The **pedagogical assistance** initiatives offered to universities consisted in both on-site and on-line training sessions and study visits, virtual mock conferences and **Training for Trainers** seminars. We made further steps in the development of technical instruments for remote training, contributing to the greening and cost-effectiveness of the Service.

Moreover, we launched **innovative targeted actions** to enlarge our pool of interpreters for some languages, including a pilot project involving two Blue Book trainees, who recently graduated as interpreters.

The **Academy of Trainers**, a forum where DG SCIC trainers meet experienced trainers from universities to discuss interpreter training took place online in April. Its conclusions are helping to shape the evolution of DG SCIC's pedagogical support and feed into the topics discussed at the Interpreting for Europe Conference.

The succession planning effort embraces new technologies and digital platforms: the **Speech Repository**, a dedicated speech bank for interpreter training purposes, was visited more than 883 000 times in 2023. In line with the political needs of the Institution, a channel for the Ukrainian language has been added. A satisfaction survey was sent to external stakeholders to further improve the platform. DG SCIC received the survey results in December, and they will be used to develop new features by the end of 2024.

DG SCIC scaled down its international cooperation projects, focusing on EU languages and the languages of candidate countries.

To prepare for future enlargements and in line with political decisions, DG SCIC launched a mapping exercise to identify **Ukrainian universities** offering training in conference interpreting. In that context, DG SCIC organised a hybrid **Training for Trainers seminar for eight Ukrainian universities** in July and offered each of them a virtual visit to better assess their capacity to train conference interpreters at the level required by the interpreting services of the EU Institutions.

External communication

DG SCIC's **social media** channels remained the main tool to reach external audiences. We continued to cooperate closely with DG COMM and participated in the Commission's Social Media Network. We also produced a multilingual video (New Year's wishes in 24 languages) and co-produced an interinstitutional video to promote interpreting as a profession. We continued to **promote multilingualism**, focusing particularly on the contribution of interpretation to the democratic decision-making process of the EU Institutions; it included regular coverage of the DG's day-to-day activities. On the occasion of the **European Day of Languages** (EDL), a dedicated campaign (*Twitter storm*) was organised on X (formerly Twitter) jointly with the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) and with participation of EC Commissioners including the President of the Commission. DG SCIC's external communication also regularly promoted the **European Year of Skills**.

This came in addition to messages targeted at interpreters, students, as well as other language aficionados who form DG SCIC's traditional target audience. They were informed about our activities in new ways, such as Instagram Reels, Instagram filters, a Twitter/X voting button, animated visuals with music as well as live events. We also continued to raise awareness about the Presidencies of the Council (Sweden and Spain), with a weekly series on social media, #SwedishWordOfTheWeek and #SpanishWordOfTheWeek.

Regarding awareness-raising and outreach events, DG SCIC co-organised and/or participated in the following events: **The Language Show (United Kingdom)**, **Tolkencongres (The Netherlands) and EU Open Door Day (Belgium)**. A considerable effort was devoted to joint awareness-raising campaigns for the promotion of the interpreting profession, organised together with the other EU interpretation services. In this context, the Croatian and Danish awareness-raising campaigns resulted in a significant number of applications for the Master's courses in conference interpreting in Zagreb and Aarhus respectively.

The **annual SCIC Conference** was organised with a new branding (**Interpreting Europe**). The main objective was to discuss ways to attract talent to interpretation as an upskilled profession, to update participants on the latest developments and to generate debate and exchanges on topics related to the future of the profession.

The **Knowledge Centre on Interpretation** (KCI) continued to expand its role as a dedicated platform for exchange, synergy creation and information on interpretation for the interpreting community. We organised three KCI Virtual Cafés, of which one, dealing with 'Languages, skills and technologies for economic growth', was a special edition dedicated to the **European Day of Languages** and the **European Year of Skills.** The **Interpreter Training Support to Universities communities** (ITSU) contributed to the further digitalisation of support activities. A new feature was introduced: **The Interviews of the KCI**, with three interviews in 2023.

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

As domain leader for meeting room management, DG SCIC successfully delivered corporate services as set out in the Commission's meeting space strategy. The strategy is built on outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic, recent changes in our ways of working, including the Commission's new building policy, as well as the green and digital transitions.

After completion in 2022 of the meeting services rollout, in 2023 we continued to support Commission staff by providing modern solutions for meeting rooms, as well as corporate guidance and support for meetings and events in Brussels. In keeping with the trend of previous years, more meeting spaces, including offices of senior officials, were furnished with **new equipment for hybrid meetings**. DG SCIC also offered **support, user guides and training** for the use of these room solutions. In addition, we employed smart monitoring and control tools to ensure efficient use of the meeting room equipment, thereby contributing to the Commission's greening objectives.

DG SCIC continued to provide a **corporate solution for hybrid and virtual meetings with interpretation**, thanks to the use of Simultaneous Interpreting Delivery Platforms (SIDPs). More meeting rooms were equipped with SIDPs to allow Commission services to successfully organise hybrid and virtual meetings and conferences with interpretation (e.g.

the Citizens' Panels). We also worked on adding further security features to the corporate solution, to be able to support sensitive-non-classified meetings in the future.

DG SCIC successfully organised the annual meeting of the International Organization for Standardization (**ISO**) Technical Committee 37 on Language and terminology, in cooperation with DGT and Directorate-General for Logistics and Interpretation for Conferences (DG LINC) of the European Parliament (EP). Experts from the DG contributed significantly to the progress achieved on the three standards on the interpreters' working environment and the one on technical equipment.

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

DG SCIC moved forward with a number of practical initiatives to enhance the customer journey by upgrading our service delivery and optimising our internal processes and workflows.

The service **My meeting and Conference Support (MACS)** was embedded in DG SCIC's organigramme, further consolidating its role in the DG's overall service delivery. MACS provides a single-entry entry point for staff who need **guidance and support** for meetings and conferences. It offers support via a helpdesk as well as training and sound-quality tests for hybrid and virtual meetings and events, while other teams in DG SCIC also provide guidance and support. Thanks to MACS, DG SCIC also continued its cooperation with other service providers, in particular with the Directorate-General for Digital Services (DG DIGIT).

DG SCIC made progress with the rollout of the **Meeting management and Interpretation Reservation Application (MIRA)**, the new corporate tool for booking and managing meeting rooms, meeting room services and interpretation requests. MIRA provides simple, user-centric processes and offers a user-friendly interface, while aiming at bringing together meeting spaces from all Commission sites in a single tool. In 2023, the focus was on rolling out the tool to new meeting spaces, including sites outside Brussels and meeting spaces in some of the Executive Agencies.

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

DG SCIC continued to ensure that conference services reflect the **green and digital priorities** of the European Commission, by supporting the conference management community in its shift towards greener, virtual and hybrid conferences.

All **fundamentals of DG SCIC's domain leadership**, such as the conference wiki, the events database, the conference helpline, corporate framework contracts, conference management, participant registration and community development were further fine-tuned

and adapted to the reality of virtual and hybrid events. The **Conferences Services Catalogue**, which describes the corporate services offered by DG SCIC for conference organisation, which are available, upon request, for Commission's services and Executive Agencies, was finalised and will be presented to client DGs throughout 2024. The light conference support was newly defined, which includes the provision of advice on specific aspects at the inception phase of a conference via a dedicated information meeting with two DG SCIC conference managers.

We launched the call for tender of the **new Framework Contract (FWC) for Conference Services** in June 2023. For lot 1 (conference services in Belgium) the evaluation of tenders was completed in December 2023 and for lot 2 (conference services outside Belgium) the evaluation phase was completed in Mid-February 2024. The new FWC entered into force at the beginning of 2024. It will cover all the services related to the organisation of corporate conferences as in the past, as well as state-of-the-art hybrid or virtual conferences, with a clear political and external communication dimension.

DG SCIC's conference managers and participant registration team continued to develop their skills to support the transition to virtual and hybrid conferencing. They supported the organisation of 114 events which took place in 2023. **Conference management support** was provided for 47 of these events and for 6 it also included support for financial management. **Participant registration support** was provided for 89 conferences.

With the aim of further pushing ahead with the **digitalisation of conferences**, a study was undertaken by a contractor to prepare business and cost models for two **virtual conference platforms** that were chosen for evaluation in a market study performed in 2022. This study investigated possible cost models for basic and extended virtual conference packages and carried out a test of the two platforms. The outcomes of the study and the way forward will be presented to the Information Technology and Cybersecurity Board (ITCB) in early 2024.

Furthermore, DG SCIC co-organised with DG HR (Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security) the 4th edition of the annual **competition on sustainable events and conferences**. The winners were announced at an awards ceremony in April 2023, showcasing best practices and raising awareness of the need to align all aspects of conference organisation with the objectives of the Green Deal, aiming at emissions reductions and budget savings. In addition, we coordinated the revision of the **Guidelines on organising sustainable meetings and events at the Commission**, which will be submitted to the EMAS Steering Committee for approval in February 2024.

DG SCIC explored the use of a **Carbon Footprint Calculator for events**, the aim being to support conference organisers in assessing the environmental impact of their events. After an analysis by an external contractor and having gained the support of a working group with representatives from DGs with activities/policies related to the calculation and analysis of carbon emissions, it was proposed and agreed by the EMAS Steering Committee to include carbon footprint calculations for conference participants' travel emissions in DG

SCIC's participant registration tool (Event-Works), using the same methodology as for missions of staff (MiPS).

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

DG SCIC made further efforts to **professionalise the conference community**, with a focus on providing information in bite-size packages, mail updates and workshops on topics related to conference organisation, e.g. data protection or security. In addition, during the hybrid networking meeting of the Conference Correspondent Network (CoCoNet) in October, its mandate and working methods were updated and best practices in conference organisation presented by DGs.

The roll-out of Event-Works as the **corporate participant registration tool** for independent use by DGs continued. With the support of DG HR, two rounds of training sessions for four different user levels were organised, as were several specific thematic sessions, and thirteen DGs and Executive Agencies started using the system independently. In addition, Event-Works was moved to the cloud in the summer of 2023.

With a view to establishing a **learning package** for the conference community, a thorough mapping of existing EU Learn and LinkedIn Learning courses was carried out benchmarking those competencies that had been identified as prerequisites for conference managers in the Commission. The initial selection of training courses was discussed with DG HR with a view to rolling out a first learning package on conference organisation in the beginning of 2024.

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

Transcription and closed captioning are essential tools to ensure that meetings, conferences and audio-visual material are **accessible and inclusive for all audiences**, in particular those with hearing impairments or a lower level of language proficiency, as mandated by Directive (EU) 2016/2102 on the accessibility of public websites ([4]). It also enhances the **efficiency of public services**, for instance by helping in the drafting of reports and minutes.

DG SCIC worked on the deployment and development of **speech technologies** in the Commission. With these projects, we contributed to the development and use of AI-based

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([4])   Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (OJ L 327, 2.12.2016, p. 1–15).

language technologies in the Commission. Speech services feature in the forthcoming Commission's **Artificial Intelligence action plan (AI@EC)** as an important example of the use of artificial intelligence by public administrations.

There were several successful runs of the **pilot transcription portal**, developed in cooperation with DG DIGIT, for automatic live transcripts of conferences and meetings in the Commission's different meeting rooms. With this live portal, meeting organisers and participants can follow discussions on their personal devices and download transcripts after the event. To **improve the quality** of the speech recognition output, custom models were trained by interpreters for topics under discussion in the EU institutions, e.g. with the specific terminology and background information. There were also developments enabling the creation of multilingual captions for the Commission's web streaming service.

In addition, we finished the development of an open-source solution for European public services and SMEs within the *eLangTech* strand of the **Digital Europe Programme (DEP)**, in cooperation with Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology (DG CNECT) and DGT. Within the DEP, we also contributed to the collection and curation of audio-visual data for reuse in developing language technologies in the EU.

Finally, we developed a pilot solution for the creation of **neural voices for e-learning material** in cooperation with Directorate-General for Taxation and Custom Union (DG TAXUD). Staff from DG TAXUD have started to use the portal for making synthetic voiceovers for courses available in the Customs & Tax EU Learning Portal. DG SCIC has reached out to other stakeholders (JRC, HR, EMPL, COMM, OP, EISMEA) [5] to establish **future priorities** for this solution, which offers new opportunities for e-learning and other audio-visual content.

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[5] JRC – Joint Research Centre, DG HR – Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion - DG EMPL, Directorate-General for Communication – DG COMM, The Publications Office – OP and European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency - EISMEA

2. INTERNAL CONTROL AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Assurance is provided on the basis of information on the efficiency and effectiveness of internal control systems and governance processes. The management monitors the functioning of the internal control systems on a continuous basis and carries out an objective examination with internal and external auditors. The results are explicitly documented and reported to the Director-General. The following reports/documentation 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 reports on recorded exceptions and non-compliance events;

- the limited conclusion of the Internal Auditor on the state of control and the observations and recommendations reported by the Internal Audit Service (IAS).

The systematic analysis of the available evidence provides sufficient guarantees as to the completeness and reliability of the information reported and results in the full 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 2.1. Control results, 2.2. Audit observations and recommendations, 2.3. Effectiveness of internal control systems, and resulting in 2.4. Conclusions on the assurance.

2.1. Control results

This section reports on the control results used by management to support the assurance on the achievement of the internal control objectives (ICO) [6]. DG SCIC's assurance building and materiality criteria are outlined in Annex 5 to this Annual Activity Report. 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 SCIC operates under Heading 7 of the EU budget (administrative expenditure) implemented under centralised direct management. In 2023, we executed payments of:

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[6] 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.

- €69.20 million from Chapter 20 of the Budget;

- €0.98 million from co-delegated expenditure on conference and events organisation, IT projects and for other purposes on behalf of other Commission departments.

The expenditure managed by DG SCIC in 2023 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	%
ACI	51.279.309,38	73,08%
Procurement	18.191.087,49	25,92%
Grants	407.331,21	0,58%
Staff expenditure	229.773,29	0,33%
Other	64.445,73	0,09%
Total	70.171.947,10	100,00%

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 payment of pension contributions and sickness and travel insurance is also included in this RCS. These payments are managed via decentralised financial circuits in unit SCIC.B.4, Joint Management of Conference Interpreting Agents.

The Inter-institutional ACI Payments Office in unit SCIC.B.4 processed ACI payments to a total value of €110.95 million in 2023. €51.28 million corresponds to DG SCIC contracts, paid from the DG SCIC budget, plus €4.53 million for ACIs recruited by the Court of Justice and €55.14 million for ACIs recruited by the European Parliament. Such payments are made from 'Hors Budget' accounts financed from advances paid by these 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.C.2.

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 salaries 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 spaces, 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.

In the RCS 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 co-delegated from DG NEAR (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations) are also included in this RCS.

Staff expenditure includes transactions for the purpose of professional development of staff interpreters (and also ACI) in languages via a system of reimbursement. Similarly to the Procurement area, centralised financial circuits are used for the *ex ante* controls.

Income is a crucial factor in DG SCIC's operations. Of the over €108.75 million in cashed revenue reported in Annex 3, Table 7, €95.02 million of the revenue was collected from external customers (under Heading 7, expenditure). €92.29 million came from the provision of interpretation services, €2.06 million was cashed for other services delivered (the renovation of meeting rooms being the most considerable), while €0.67 million was due to refunds. Of the €92.29 million in interpretation-related revenue, €55.03 million (59.63%) was assigned to the PMO and €0.6 million (0.65%) to the OIB. The €13.73 million balance on cashed revenue 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 €13.73 million forms a part of the general revenue of the European Union.

DG SCIC's management considers that control mechanisms implemented in the DG successfully mitigate the risks presented in Annex 6, and are assessed according to the materiality criteria defined in Annex 5 to provide a reasonable assurance as to achieving its internal control objectives.

In line with the 2018 Financial Regulation, DG SCIC's assessment for the new reporting requirement is as follows:

- There were no cases of 'confirmation of instructions' (FR art 92.3);

- There were no cases of financing not linked to costs (FR art 125.3);

- There were no Financial Framework Partnerships >4 years (FR art 130.4);

- There were no cases of flat-rates >7% for indirect costs (FR art 181.6);

- With regards to 'Derogations from the principle of non-retroactivity pursuant to Article 193 of the Financial Regulation', there are five grants where, due to the special programming aligned with the academic year, the actions started before signature date; however, no costs incurred before the submission deadline were reimbursed.

2.1.1. Effectiveness of controls

a) Legality and regularity of the transactions

DG SCIC uses internal control processes to ensure sound management of 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.

1) Control objective

The overall objective for all Relevant Control Systems with regard to the effectiveness of controls is to have a maximum error rate of 2% of the relevant expenditure or revenue. The main purpose of *ex ante* controls is to ensure the legality and regularity of transactions for the different Relevant Control Systems:

- For the ACI process, for the contracting and payment of freelance interpreters;

- For the Procurement process, for the selection of tenderers, contracting of successful tenderers and the execution/payment of the contract, complemented by the prevention, detection, correction and follow-up of fraud and irregularities;

- For the Grants process, throughout the awarding, granting and execution/payment phase, as well as taking necessary measures against fraud;

- For the Staff expenditure process besides controlling the legality and regularity, with the additional aim of ensuring that the applications accepted contribute to reaching the objective of a broader language portfolio among staff interpreters and ACIs;

- For the Income process, ensuring that amounts due to DG SCIC are recovered from its customers and can feed into the DG's budget as assigned revenue.

The *ex post* controls on payments to ACIs (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 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 performed *ex post* and cover transactions from the Procurement, Grants, Staff expenditure and Income processes, as well as the aggregated bookings of ACI payments. Their main goal is to provide the Director General with reasonable assurance on the quality of DG SCIC's accounts.

2) Assessment of the control results

For the contracting phase of the **ACI** process, it can be concluded that the control target has been reached, as budgetary coverage of the contracts signed in 2023 was ensured. 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 expense claims for non-permanent interpreters) and various automated checks considerably reduce the risk of error. *Ex ante* controls on payments were conducted according to the four-eyes principle. *Ex ante* controls are designed to allow payments to be made with 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.

For the **ex post controls** on the payments to ACI, the sample amounted to 2.74% of the relevant payments by value. The results of the controls in 2023 indicate an error rate of 0.02% across all transactions. This error rate is well below the 2% materiality threshold indicated in Annex 5. The error rate is in line with those in past years (0.066% in 2022 and 0.092% in 2021), and is an excellent result, especially considering the complexity of transactions and the high volume of files processed.

For the **Procurement** process, in 2023 there were no open procedures concluded and there was only one procedure above the Directive's threshold. Furthermore, most transactions in the selection phase were related to specific contracts under framework contracts. There were no complaints received from unsuccessful tenderers and none of the issues noted by *ex ante* controls in this segment refer to systemic weaknesses. In the contracting phase, only smaller discrepancies of an administrative nature were noted. However, the presence of such observations is reassuring, as they demonstrate that controls are carried out systematically and effectively. In the execution/payment phase, only a 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 of the financial actors 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.

For the **Grants** process, no complaints were received about the procedure for awarding grants and scholarships. Controls at verifying agent level did not note any significant deficiencies either. As *ex ante* controls were performed on all transactions without the indication of errors, and as all grants awarded in 2023 were low value, no on-the-spot audit missions were carried out.

For the **Staff expenditure** process, indicators show that in 2023, 32 staff interpreters and 20 ACIs added a new language after a language stay funded with support from DG SCIC. The small discrepancies noted by the *ex ante* controls demonstrate that every relevant aspect of the commitment and payment files is examined. 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.

The best indicator for controlling recoveries in the **Income** process is whether customers contest the amounts considered due. In 2023, there were no contestations received with respect to the amounts billed. Charged amounts are confirmed with customers in the pre-information stage of the invoicing process. For the renovation of meeting rooms, the amounts are agreed before billing and signed with DG SCIC's clients in the form of specific conventions.

Regarding **accounting controls**, in 2023 DG SCIC conducted 56 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 751 corrections (compared to 541 in 2022 and 1114 in 2021), of which 735 (as opposed to 518 in 2022 and 1090 in 2021) had no financial impact on DG SCIC's financial statements. This high number is due to the large-scale closure of legal commitments and the removal of draft transactions that had never been validated. These operations were necessary in view of the future migration to SUMMA but have no effect on DG SCIC's accounts. The average impact of those corrections which had a financial impact on assets, liabilities, expenditure and revenue was 0.01%, which is well below the 2% materiality threshold. Further details on accounting indicators are presented in Annex 7. In 2023, DG BUDG only performed a high-level control of the accounting quality project, therefore there was no similar evaluation to 2021 when the accounting risk for DG SCIC had been assessed as low.

All of DG SCIC's Relevant Control Systems demonstrate a relatively low error rate. This is thanks to the systematic *ex ante* controls, that are carried out based on the four-eyes principle. No significant weaknesses have been identified, hence there is also no need to make any reservations in the declaration of assurance. The analysis performed confirms that the controls are effective for all Relevant Control Systems. The financial circuits are fully digitalised, which is essential for an optimal performance in the hybrid working environment. The only area where processing of paper documents remains obligatory are the VAT forms issued for the Belgian state. DG SCIC has set up a systematic follow-up of transactions to ensure that this requirement for blue-ink signature is complied with for all affected contracts.

3) *Overview of DG SCIC's risk profile*

DG SCIC's portfolio consists of segments with a relatively low error rate.

This is thanks to the inherent risk profile of the administrative expenditure and the performance of the related control systems put in place.

4) Table (X): Estimated risk at payment and at closure

Based on all the above, DG SCIC presents in the following Table X an estimation of the risk at payment and risk at closure for the expenditure managed during the reporting year:

Table (X): Estimated risk at payment and at closure (amounts in EUR million)
The full detailed version of the table is provided in Annex 9.

DG SCIC	Payments made	Relevant expenditure	Estimated risk (error rate %) at payment		Estimated future corrections and deductions		Estimated risk (error rate %) at closure	
	m EUR	m EUR	m EUR	%	m EUR	%	m EUR	%
ACI expenditure	51.28	51.28	0.26	0.5	0.00	0.0	0.26	0.5
Procurement	18.19	18.19	0.09	0.5	0.00	0.0	0.09	0.5
Grants	0.41	0.34	0.00	0.5	0.00	0.0	0.00	0.5
Staff expenditure	0.23	0.23	0.00	0.5	0.00	0.0	0.00	0.5
Other	0.06	0.06	0.00	0.5	0.00	0.0	0.00	0.5
DG SCIC total	70.17 m EUR	70.17 m EUR	0.35 m EUR	0.5%	0 m EUR	0 %	0.26 m EUR	0.5%

The underlined estimated overall risk at payment for 2023 expenditure, 0.5%, is the AOD's best conservative estimate of the amount of relevant expenditure during the year that is not in conformity with the contractual and regulatory provisions applicable at the time when payments were 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, corresponding to the conservatively estimated future corrections for 2023 expenditure, 0.0%. That is based on the very low value of errors detected and corrected.

Due to the negligible amount of estimated future corrections, the estimated overall risk at closure (7) is also 0.5%. There is no change compared to 2022 mainly due to the fact that the detected error rates remained below 0.5%. Similarly to 2022, this figure was therefore used as a conservative estimate.

For an overview at Commission level, the departments' estimated overall risk at payment, estimated future corrections and risk at closure are consolidated in the AMPR.

Based on all the above, DG SCIC management concludes that the control results are complete and reliable and has reasonable assurance about the achievement of the internal control objective for legality and regularity.

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(7) This is the AOD's best, conservative estimation of the expenditure authorised during the year that would remain not in conformity of applicable regulatory and contractual provisions by the end of implementation of the programme.

5) Preventive and corrective measures

As regards the corrections carried out in 2023, DG SCIC has in place an effective mechanism for correcting errors, through *ex ante* and *ex post* controls, resulting in preventive and corrective measures, amounting to EUR 0.02 million and EUR 0.00 million respectively. This is similar to last year with EUR 0.03 million and EUR 0.00 million respectively.

b) Fraud prevention, detection and correction

DG SCIC has developed and implemented its own anti-fraud strategy (AFS) since 2016, based on the methodology provided by European Anti-Fraud Office (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. As included in DG SCIC's Management Plan for 2023, the most important measure in the area of fraud prevention was the update of the AFS strategy. The substantial work for the update took place during the year, the final draft of the strategy was prepared taking into account the Methodology and guidance for services' anti-fraud strategies issued by OLAF and it was sent for preliminary consultation to OLAF at operational level. The formal adoption of the updated AFS and its new action plan including measures aiming at contributing to the Commission's revised anti-fraud strategy Action Plan of July 2023 was completed in the first quarter of 2024.

Additional actions contributing to the implementation of the action plan of the current AFS were the update of the Ethics Guide for Interpreters and the review of the sensitive functions register of the DG. Awareness actions concerning the AFS were implemented in 2022; the next edition of this regular anti-fraud awareness raising event is planned in 2024 after adoption of the new strategy and with the participation of OLAF.

As to strictly defined issues of fraud in monetary terms there were no incidents reported to the Head of the Budget and Financial Management Unit or the AFS correspondent. Moreover, no incidents were detected by the Budget and Financial Management Unit in its everyday work that required following up. 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.

During 2019-2023 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 (FPDNet) in order to maintain the contacts and be involved in central services' actions.

Results achieved during the year thanks to the anti-fraud measures in place can be summarised as follows: DG SCIC remained a low fraud risk service, the strong and reliable control systems in the financial processes ensured the appropriate mitigation of this low risk. The anti-fraud correspondent was available to provide individual assistance in response to questions raised by colleagues on matters where greater clarity was required.

Based on the available information, DG SCIC has reasonable assurance that the anti-fraud measures in place are effective overall. However, it is of utmost importance to continue awareness-raising activities and to ensure that potential new risks stemming from the changing environment (e.g. increasing procurement activity) are analysed and appropriate mitigating measures put in place if necessary.

c) Safeguarding of assets

DG SCIC is 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. We track the location of all items purchased upon delivery to our warehouse, after installation and during any subsequent movement of them, for example, when they are sent for repair. We perform a regular tracking exercise of inventoried items in meeting rooms we manage to ensure the maximum number of such items are identified. The latest report was concluded in 2023 and found that 96.12% of inventoried items for SCIC Responsible Centre 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.

d) Reliability of reporting

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 2023, 65.99% 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.

Monthly, quarterly and annual reports document the results of accounting controls. The reports are 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.

2.1.2. Efficiency of controls

Payments to ACIs are subject to specific payment deadlines and are processed via DG SCIC's local system (Grif). Payment time statistics, which are generated automatically, are distorted by the fact that the system 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 precisely the payment processing times and to provide comprehensive monitoring of amounts to be paid. The results for 2023 confirm the efficiency of *ex ante* controls in this area: only 2.04% of the reimbursement requests for costs associated with non-local [8] DG SCIC contracts submitted by ACI were not completed within the stipulated deadline. The average processing time was 14 days. Although, as a result of unforeseen absences, these figures represent an increase from the 0.34% and 7 days noted in 2022, the average payment time remains still well below the 28 days stipulated by the agreement with ACIs.

In 2023, 1 033 payments were processed in ABAC within an Average Payment Time of 14.19 days, excluding suspension periods. This figure does not include payments to freelance interpreters that are described above. The figure also includes an average of 4.94 days needed for processing by horizontal Commission services. Considering the 14.39 days and 4.94 days recorded respectively in 2022 for a total of 1 041 invoices, the average processing time of payments remained stable. 27 payments were made late, which is a considerable improvement compared to 66 (6.34%) in 2022. The late payments were related to lower amounts (mainly including staff reimbursements, for which also a 30-day payment deadline was applied) and there were no late interest payments made. Therefore, it can be concluded that *ex ante* controls on payments are carried out efficiently.

Timely Payments	SCIC Score	EC Score
0% 25% 50% 75% 100% EC (99%) 99%	99%	99%

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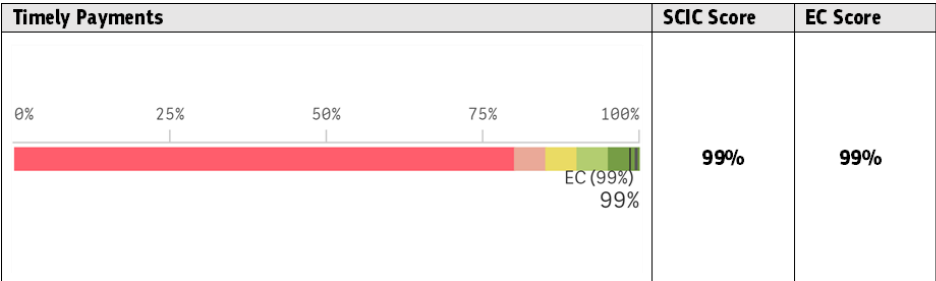
[8] With assignments taking place more than 60km away from the professional domicile of the ACI.

With regards to the value of payments made within the stipulated deadlines, we achieved 99%, in line with the Commission average. Compared to 97% noted in 2022 and 88% noted in 2021, a considerable improvement was achieved. This was the result of the continued application of measures introduced in the second half of 2021 to make the delivery process of audio-visual goods more efficient. Consequently, the related invoices could receive 'certified correct' qualification more rapidly and could be paid within the stipulated deadlines.

In 2023, the time-to-inform indicator was 70 days for grants awarded to universities. The time-to-grant indicator was an average of 90 days. The former figure shows an improvement compared to 2022, while the latter figure has increased. The underlying reason was that updated information had to be received from universities on the number of enrolled students in order to define the final grant amounts.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that controls have been executed efficiently. There is room for improving the payment-time statistics for payments to freelance interpreters in 2024. However, it is not necessary to reduce the frequency and intensity of controls. For the payments processed in ABAC it is important to keep the existing procedures to maintain a low level of late payments.

2.1.3. Economy 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 2023 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. For Grants and Staff Expenditure, 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 these two Relevant Control Systems of all the funds managed by DG SCIC's processes is 0.25% for Grants, and 0.14% 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 incorporated into the cost of control for expenditure, even though the examined transactions also include ACI contracts concluded by the European

Parliament and the Court of Justice. The cost of *ex post* accounting controls and reporting are divided up pro rata between the cost of controls for expenditure and for income. The controls on inventory are not incorporated into the total figure because inventoried items are used over several years, making a comparison with the current year's budgetary execution impossible. Additionally, DG SCIC, as a domain leader for audio-visual equipment, is also responsible for the audio-visual inventory purchased with appropriations of other DGs.

A comparison is presented of the relative and absolute cost of controls of 2023 to the four previous years. The most important figure for DG SCIC is the combined cost of controls including expenditure and income.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Absolute cost expenditure	2.12M€	2.33M€	2.39M€	2.44M€	2.36M€
Absolute cost income	0.44M€	0.38M€	0.51M€	0.53M€	0.61M€
Absolute cost total	**2.57M€**	**2.71M€**	**2.90M€**	**2.97M€**	**2.97M€**
Relative cost of control expenditure	3.50%	4.11%	7.57%	3.93%	3.37%
Relative cost of control income	0.54%	0.98%	1.21%	0.62%	0.64%
Relative cost of control total	**1.81%**	**2.83%**	**3.93%**	**2.00%**	**1.80%**

Despite the fact that the increase of the average cost of staff was more than 4% compared to 2022, in 2023 DG SCIC managed to keep the absolute cost of controls at a similar level compared to the past 5 years. At the same time, the combined value of expenditure and cashed revenue increased by 11% compared to the previous year. This explains how the relative cost of control could be reduced to the lowest level observed in the past years.

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.

2.1.4. 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 controls are cost effective.

- For revenues, low error rates can be observed, while cashing times for the most important amounts are satisfactory to cover budgetary needs and the cost of controls remains very low.

2.2. 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 the work undertaken by the Internal Audit Service in the period 2019-2023, the Internal Auditor has concluded that the internal control systems in place for the audited processes are effective. At the end of 2023, there were no open 'very important recommendations'.

In 2023, neither the IAS nor the ECA (European Court of Auditors), issued a formal audit report for DG SCIC, and consequently there were no recommendations.

2.3. 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.

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 4, 5, 8, 11 and 13.

The improvements and/or remedial measures implemented or envisaged are listed in Annex 8.

2.4. Conclusions on the assurance

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 comprehensive coverage of the budget delegated to the Director-General of DG SCIC.

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

- ACI payments (mostly remuneration), which are highly automated and subject to *ex post* controls where the actual error rate is of 0.02%; however, for reporting purposes, we use a conservative estimate of 0.5%;

- 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 appropriate *ex ante* and *ex post* controls, to the extent that they remain cost-effective and do not affect the other policy/programme objectives.

Overall Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the elements reported above, 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 her capacity as Authorising Officer by Delegation, has signed the Declaration of Assurance.

2.5. 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 ([9]).

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 and the lessons learnt from the reports of the Court of Auditors 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, 31 March 2024

Signed

Genoveva Ruiz Calavera

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[9] True and fair in this context means a reliable, complete and correct view on the state of affairs in the DG.

# 3.	MODERNISING THE ADMINISTRATION

## 3.1.	Human resource management

In 2023, we implemented our agreed HR priority actions in terms of recruitment, equality and accessibility as well as follow-up to feedback provided by staff in the 2021 Staff Opinion Survey.

To consolidate our workforce, to increase the availability of interpreters and to ensure the most efficient and balanced use of internal and external resources (staff and freelance interpreters), an **internal competition for conference interpreters** in the Czech, Danish, English and Maltese languages was published in 2023 and will take place in early 2024. Additionally, temporary agents were recruited for several linguistic units. The reinforcement of teams in other parts of the service has also been ongoing according to the strategic priorities. In cooperation with European Personal Selection Office (EPSO), we finalised the **competition for audio-visual engineering**, resulting in an inter-institutional reserve list.

In the context of **consolidation of the DG**, special attention was paid to ensuring a smooth transition by providing all staff with necessary support to acquire **new skills** by formal and informal training.

DG SCIC continued its efforts in **promoting equality, inclusion and accessibility**. We reached our target of first female appointments to middle management positions, with 66% of middle managers being women. We also implemented specific actions related to other existing equality strategies, such as promoting female participation in conference panels or providing interpretation into international sign. Moreover, we increased our capacities in the area of speech technologies aiming at enhancing accessibility of meeting and video content with closed captioning and speech recognition. Training possibilities in the diversity and inclusion domain have been advertised on the dedicated SCICnet page by the Equality Coordinator in cooperation with the DG SCIC Equality Group.

In the process of analysing the 2021 **Staff Survey** results and identifying appropriate actions, it was decided to make the following edition of the survey more relevant for specific profiles in DG SCIC. Four questions related to the specificities of the work of interpreters were therefore added to the 2023 Staff Opinion Survey. Another follow-up action identified after the 2021 Staff Survey resulted in cooperation with the Medical Service and the Office for Infrastructure and Logistics in Brussels (OIB) on issues linked to interpreters' auditory health in the context of new delivery modes of interpretation.

In the context of the six key priorities of the Service, several actions were undertaken around the first priority: *SCIC as a workplace.* Particular emphasis was given to **internal communication** with the aim to provide staff with transparent and timely information, as well as to create occasions to exchange on topics of relevance for the service. Apart from 290 articles published on the DG's intranet, 5 information sessions and 2 informal breakfasts were organised to keep staff informed and allow for an open debate. For the

first time in many years, a survey on internal communication was launched to identify areas where communication within the DG could be improved. 160 colleagues from all three Directorates participated in the survey. On basis of the results, a follow-up plan was agreed with senior management (including actions such as organising more informal occasions for staff to meet, improving the search function of the intranet and increasing cooperation with DG SCIC's communication network).

Moreover, DG SCIC, in cooperation with DG HR, offered workshops on collaborative communication to management and staff members.

3.2. Digital transformation and information management

DG SCIC initiated a comprehensive **digital transformation programme** aimed at modernising the **business processes** and **IT solutions**. The programme incepted with an AS IS analysis (methodical examination of the current state) of business operations, and the delivery of a strategic roadmap for the period from 2024 to 2027 to move DG SCIC to the 'TO BE' vision. This roadmap includes flagship projects that incorporate cutting-edge technologies to meet DG SCIC's requirements for increased efficiency and effectiveness. The expected result is the delivery of innovative and streamlined solutions aiming to improve work processes for administrative and interpretation activities, as well as to improve the dashboarding and reporting that inform and drive managerial decisions.

Additionally, we continued to enhance the existing business support solutions, notably:

- **MIRA**, the corporate solution for room management. The development of new interfaces with MIM, the interpretation services solution, was started with the aim of simplifying and streamlining the request and follow-up processes of interpretation services, thereby improving the experience for DG SCIC's customers.

- **IDT**, the Interpreters' Digital Toolbox solution, a new platform for interpreters to prepare for meetings by accessing documents and terminology, was delivered. IDT facilitates the electronic collection and distribution of meeting documentation from the General Secretariat of the Council, aligning IDT with the European Commission's longstanding goal of a paperless administration through improved records management and archiving.

- **GRIF**, the freelance interpreters' payment solution, made significant progress to manage the change to the Commission's new financial platform. The creation and testing of the new interfaces with the PMO's Payment Factory solution are well underway, with the goal of ensuring an in-time and seamless transition to the new financial platform, SUMMA.

We contributed to the Commission's **digital strategy** by participating in the Digital Solutions Modernisation Plan (DSMP) to ensure that our new IT developments are aligned with the Commission's other modernisation initiatives. For instance, in the second half of the year, we participated in the EPSO business analysis to define new pre-selection and

selection tools for statutory staff. We also prepared for further work with EPSO to extend, in a second phase, these new tools to the pre-selection and selection of freelance interpreters, after delivery of the tools for statutory staff.

Investments continue in the deployment of tools powered by **artificial intelligence** technologies. Indeed, in line with the AI@EC initiative, DG SCIC is advancing the development of **speech recognition** and **text-to-speech** services (synthetic voices). As part of the **MERASE** (Meeting Room Automation Software) project, DG SCIC is utilising **Internet of Things** (IoT) technologies to automate the management of equipment in corporate meeting rooms. MERASE is establishing the necessary infrastructure for 'smart building' management and allows for the continuous monitoring and automation of processes.

The use of **collaborative working tools** is becoming increasingly widespread within DG SCIC. Microsoft Teams is now extensively used by the administrative and interpreting staff to support projects, actions, and activities that require collaboration within the DG or across different DGs, as well as within and among units.

In terms of **IT security risk management**, DG SCIC has drafted new IT security plans and has continued the update of existing plans in accordance with the ITCB cybersecurity rules, standards, and practices.

There are several initiatives in DG SCIC to modernise the IT system for the management of meetings and interpretation services. An important aspect is the **exchange of data between IT systems**. We set up automated pipelines to exchange data between our information systems.

DG SCIC is committed to improving access to its data sets and extract **relevant statistics** on its activities. DG SCIC acquired skills in the management of statistical data. An internal network of data stewards will ensure the quality and timeliness of the data. The data steward network is involved in the annual update of the EC data catalogue, which serves as an awareness-raising exercise with regard to the Commission data governance and data policies, and is an occasion to promote the updating of data assets and the related metadata.

DG SCIC also improved the **management of data for external stakeholders**. This includes the sharing of data with other DGs and institutions, for example in the context of the IATE terminology database. DG SCIC also plays an important role in the collection and sharing of speech data in the Commission. We also share this knowledge with other EU institutions in the context of the ICTI Task Force on Speech Recognition, which hosted a workshop to discuss the legal issues concerning the sharing and reuse of data for training AI models, particularly speech recognition models.

DG SCIC focused on its role as domain leader for conference organisation and meeting room management as it relates to **data protection.** This included ensuring that the corporate decentralised record for meetings and conferences is fit for purpose and our record keeping obligations, as the corporate holder, are fulfilled. With this aim, data

protection Guidelines for meeting, conference and event organisers under DATA Protection Record DPR–EC-01063 (Processing of personal data linked to meetings, conferences and events organised by the European Commission) were drafted and are currently under review by the Data Protection Officer. Continued general awareness-raising activities took place – targeted at both a general audience and specific activities for controllers. The DG was also able to respond satisfactorily to data subjects' requests received during the second half of 2023.

3.3. Sound environmental management

DG SCIC is committed to contributing to a more environmentally friendly Commission and its goal of being climate neutral by 2030.

DG SCIC's main office location is the L107 building. Occupancy of the other building – the CCAB conference centre – will be wound down in the future. The L107 building is highly energy efficient, and its meeting rooms are well equipped for hybrid/virtual meetings. Moreover, we already work on a largely paperless basis. Financial circuits are almost completely dematerialised and various collaborative working tools are widely used.

We pledged, back in 2022, to implement the principles contained in the 'Guidance note on business travel and external experts' travel in the framework of greening the Commission' ([10]) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions resulting from missions. Our pledge was followed up in the note containing the 'Overview of DG SCIC's concrete efforts to implement the pledge'. In 2023, we worked on further implementing these efforts and reached a 51% reduction of CO_2 emissions resulting from staff missions compared to 2019.

DG SCIC actively participated in the two annual EMAS campaigns. Together with DGs HR and DIGIT, we continued with the **EMAS Taskforce for the One** (L107 building), in order to achieve a greater impact through collective local environmental initiatives. The third edition of the **'Less waste, more action' info fair** took place in November as part of the corporate campaign on waste reduction. The taskforce organised upcycling collections in cooperation with local NGOs (one collection of old textiles with CyclUp and one collection of used electronic household appliances with Cyreo). We also continued to collect bottle tops (plastic and cork), which was extended to even more DGs through the EMAS network.

As of the beginning of the year, the '**Green Digest**' monthly newsletter was regularly sent to the whole DG (with an option to unsubscribe, which only a few staff members used). The newsletter was originally set up to keep the small voluntary green community in DG SCIC updated about ongoing actions in our DG, as well as generally in the Commission and beyond. It received the support of the senior management and now aims to keep the whole DG informed. 'Green Digest' editions included short articles and tips for being more environmentally sustainable at home and at work.

([10])   Communication COM(2022) 2230: Greening the Commission

On top of this, DG SCIC launched, evaluated and presented, together with DG HR, the 4th edition of the **Sustainable Events Competition**. The competition culminated in an award ceremony, which was organised solely with in-house resources to comply with the 'less is more' principle. Throughout the year, webinars on the greening of conferences were given to some targeted groups and there was as a session dedicated to greener events during the EMAS Spring campaign Days.

As a **sustained transition to virtual and hybrid meetings and conferences** is crucial to achieving climate neutrality by 2030, DG SCIC extended the hybrid setup to almost 1 200 meeting rooms throughout Brussels, Luxemburg, Grange and Commission representations.

Seeking to measure and monitor the environmental impacts of events, DG SCIC conducted a study to evaluate the best way of implementing a user-friendly method of calculating those impacts. The outcome of the study was to measure only carbon footprint travel emissions of conference participants. DG SCIC promoted the sustainable approach to its upcoming wide-range framework contract for the provision of conference services. Moreover, DG SCIC coordinated a working group to update the Sustainable Events Guidelines in collaboration with several DGs.

3.4. Examples of economy and efficiency

DG SCIC cooperated with the Council on the **digitalisation of the transfer of meeting documents** and the **management of interpretation requests**. The aim is to be even more 'paper smart' whilst streamlining the management of interpretation services for our largest client. With the completion of the Interpreter's Digital Toolbox (IDT) in the second half of 2023, Council documents needed by interpreters to work in meetings are now automatically imported into the IDT and in this way made available to interpreters.

As corporate domain leader for meeting room management, DG SCIC continued to offer corporate **meeting rooms management and meeting services**. This has entailed further installation of **standard audio-visual solutions** in meeting rooms across the Commission, coupled with the provision of **professional support services for meeting rooms**. Standardisation of audio-visual solutions, together with the service **My Meeting & Conference Support**, improves the whole user experience thanks to a modern, user-friendly environment and dedicated on-site or remote support for users.