

POLICY BRIEFING

Interpretation Failure in the UK Asylum System
Three reforms that would reduce structural injustice

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Addressed to: Home Affairs Select Committee; Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

THE PROBLEM

When an asylum seeker is interviewed, their account is mediated by an interpreter before it becomes the official record. That record determines whether they're believed. It determines whether they stay.

The problem is structural; not individual competence. The Home Office outsources interpretation through a procurement chain through organisations such as thebigword: Home Office to contractor, contractor to agency, agency to interpreter. Cost drives every decision in that chain. The result is a system where the quality of interpretation is subordinate to the price of the contract.

The consequences are documented. Staff interviewed by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration in 2023 reported that 40% of cancelled asylum interviews were due to interpreter issues. The Home Office had no data to confirm or deny this figure. That absence of data is the accountability failure this briefing is addressing.

Interpreters operate without guaranteed qualifications. No verbatim record of what the applicant actually said is routinely kept. If meaning is lost in the room, there's nothing to check it against. The record isn't what was said. It's what survived.

THE EVIDENCE

Translational Justice has spent one year investigating this failure. The research draws on:

- The ICIBI inspection of asylum casework (June-October 2023), which found that interpreter booking demand increased by 200% between February and November 2023, that mandatory quality assurance targets were missed every single month, and that only one interview withdrawal was quality-assured between January and October 2023
- Academic literature, including Jacobs & Maryns (2022) on narrative co-construction and credibility assessment in asylum hearings, and Maryns & Jacobs (2025) on languages of lesser diffusion and the right to interpretation
- Interviews with immigration lawyers, barristers, interpreters, and caseworkers
- Analysis of the Home Office procurement framework and NRPSI/DPSI accreditation structures
- Case studies from Belgian and Afghan asylum proceedings and informal interviews with refugees

This research is published with the Refugee Law Initiative (University of London) and the Legal Action Group, and is set out in full in *The Manifesto of Translational Justice* (2026).

THE THREE REFORMS

Reform 1: Mandatory accreditation for all interpreters in asylum proceedings

The Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) is the established professional qualification for legal and public service interpreting in the UK. It tests linguistic competence, professional ethics, and

knowledge of the legal context. It's not currently required of interpreters working in asylum proceedings procured through Home Office contracts.

The 2023 ICIBI inspection found persistent dialect mismatch: Arabic speakers were assigned any available Arabic interpreter regardless of regional variety, and the Home Office acknowledged insufficient interpreter resource for Kurdish (all dialects), Vietnamese, Tagalog, Georgian, and Bengali/Sylheti. These are the ordinary populations that asylum systems serve.

This reform has a working precedent. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada has required mandatory accreditation testing for all interpreters in refugee proceedings since 1991. The test has three components: a hearing simulation, a sight translation, and an official language test. When it was first introduced, 40% of interpreters already working for the IRB failed it. The IRB now provides interpretation in over 260 languages across 40,000 to 60,000 procedures a year, and every interpreter under contract is subject to at least one random performance audit. The UK has never tested its asylum interpreters at all.

This raises the question as to why human interpreters matter. The use of machine translation has been documented in the asylum system, with an article describing the Home Office as pressuring asylum seekers to use machine translation tools to answer a questionnaire in a short amount of time (see: <https://slator.com/uk-asks-asylum-seekers-use-online-translation-tools-high-stakes-contexts/>).

Refugees we have spoken to comment that while these tools are accurate, they remove the human and connective aspect of interpreters. Interpreters provide trust, safeguarding and rapport, all which is lost in machine translation. *Managing narratives, managing identities: Language and credibility in legal consultations with asylum seekers* (Jacobs & Maryns, 2022) describes the tension created in an asylum interview by the interviewer. A trusted narrator can reduce the tension and increase comfort for an asylum seeker.

The interpreter pool isn't uniform. For widely spoken languages, a sufficient number of DPSI-qualified interpreters exist. For languages of lesser diffusion, rare dialects, and minority languages, the pool is far smaller. So: a two-tier framework, based on the Canadian model.

Tier 1 (common languages): mandatory DPSI accreditation for all interpreters where a sufficient qualified pool exists. Contractors and agencies must evidence compliance as a condition of Home Office contract.

Tier 2 (languages of lesser diffusion): a separate, language-specific competency pathway, administered by an independent body, for interpreters working in languages where full DPSI qualification isn't available. This pathway must verify at minimum: accurate interpretation in a legal context, understanding of professional ethics, and awareness of the consequences of interpretation failure.

The principle is the same either way: no interpreter walks into an asylum interview without independently verified competence. The standard is the highest achievable for that language. Not the lowest that fits the contract.

Reform 2a: Mandatory transcription and retention of the original language testimony

There's no requirement for a verbatim record of what an asylum applicant said, in their own words, to be retained by the Home Office. The record that is kept is already interpreted: it's what the interpreter produced, not what the applicant said.

The 2023 ICIBI inspection found that the Home Office couldn't confirm whether 40% of interview cancellations were interpreter-related because the data simply wasn't collected. Quality assurance targets were missed every single month of 2023. Only one interview withdrawal was quality-assured

in the entire ten-month inspection period. Without a verbatim original record, there's no mechanism for identifying whether an inconsistency in the official record reflects what the applicant said or what the interpreter produced. The two possibilities are indistinguishable. Decisions are made on that basis.

We're calling for mandatory retention of a verbatim original record of every asylum interview, in the form of either a full audio recording or a written verbatim transcript, held by the Home Office interviewer. This record should be available to legal representatives and, where applicable, to appeal proceedings.

The audio recording of a UK asylum interview captures the room, including the applicant speaking in their own language. But the written transcript, the working document for decisions, credibility findings, and appeals, records only the English: the interpreter's rendering, attributed to the applicant as if it were their own words. No transcript of the original language testimony is ever produced. The original exists only as unanalysed audio. It's never transcribed, never checked against the English version, and never enters the decision-making chain. As documented by Dr Laura Smith-Khan (*Language on the Move*, 2023), multilingual interactions become monolingual documents, and interpreters, though physically present in the interview room, are all but erased on paper.

This reform has a working precedent. Hearings before the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada are recorded, and Canadian case law demonstrates the recording being used exactly as intended: counsel can obtain the recording and provide evidence of translation issues in post-hearing submission (see *Khutan v. Canada*). The objection that recording is impractical fails against a comparable common-law jurisdiction doing it routinely at scale.

The purpose is for accountability. If the interpretation is challenged, there must be something to check it against. Without that, the challenge can't be made.

Reform 2b: Where AI is used in asylum decision-making, it must operate on the original language testimony

The Home Office piloted an Asylum Case Summarisation (ACS) tool between May and December 2024, which condenses asylum interview transcripts to support caseworker decision-making, saving an average of 23 minutes per case. This tool is now being rolled out across asylum processing, and it is not without its drawbacks. Only 42% of caseworkers said that the tool provides the right amount of information, and 9% of the summaries proved to be inaccurate or incomplete. These were only caught due to technical specialists manually reviewing the cases. In a larger sample, this raises the question of whether such a tool is scalable and can remain reliable. Of the remaining summaries, 23% of users did not feel fully confident in the information (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-ai-trials-in-the-asylum-decision-making-process/evaluation-of-ai-trials-in-the-asylum-decision-making-process>).

ACS summarises the English transcript, which is already an interpreted rendering of the applicant's original words. The original testimony has passed through three layers of transformation before reaching the decision-maker: original speech, the interpreter's English rendering, and the AI summarisation of that rendering. A March 2026 legal opinion by Cloisters Chambers and Doughty Street Chambers found that the Home Office's failure to inform asylum applicants that AI tools are being used is likely unlawful.

Reform 2a addresses the structural gap: the original testimony must be transcribed and retained. Reform 2b addresses what follows. If AI tools are used in asylum decision-making, they must operate on the original language testimony, not on an interpreted version of it. An AI summary of an already-

interpreted transcript compounds the original distortion. The decision-maker receives a rendering of a rendering.

The objection that processing original language transcripts is technically unworkable doesn't survive scrutiny. Translational Justice has developed a proof-of-concept Tigrinya summarisation model, fine-tuned on 6,813 BBC Tigrinya news articles totalling 2.8 million words, the largest documented Tigrinya NLP corpus. Tigrinya was selected because Eritreans represent the second largest group of UK asylum claimants (9% of claims, year ending March 2026), and because Tigrinya is specifically identified by the ICIBI as a language of lesser diffusion causing interpreter supply failures. The model demonstrates that accurate natural language processing in low-resource asylum languages is achievable. With proper resourcing, native speaker annotation of asylum-context testimony language, and institutional support, a production-grade system is within reach. The model beat GPT-3.5 in ROUGE-1, ROUGE-2 and ROUGE-L, and fell just a few points behind GPT-4.1 in these metrics.

This proof of concept was built without institutional funding, without a research team, and without access to real asylum transcripts. The obstacle is the absence of political will to require that AI tools meet the same standard as human interpreters: operating on what the applicant actually said.

We're calling for a requirement that any AI tool used in the asylum decision-making chain operate on the original language testimony where that testimony has been transcribed and retained under Reform 2a, and that the Home Office publish a technical standard specifying what constitutes adequate AI processing of original language asylum testimony.

THE ASK

We're asking the Home Affairs Select Committee and the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to:

- Examine the current accreditation requirements for interpreters in the Home Office asylum procurement chain, and consider whether the two-tier framework above should be introduced as a contractual condition
- Examine the current record-keeping requirements for asylum interviews, and consider whether mandatory retention of a verbatim original record should be introduced
- Examine the Home Office's use of AI summarisation tools in asylum decision-making, and consider whether any such tool should be required to operate on the original language testimony rather than on an interpreted rendering
- If appropriate, invite Translational Justice to give evidence on any of these questions

These are specific, enforceable, costed reforms. They don't require new legislation: they require a change in contractual requirements. The mechanism exists. The question is whether the will does.

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