

# Reaching multilingual communities: a survey mapping MT use in the West Midlands (UK) third and public sector organisations

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## Abstract

Machine Translation (MT) has become a default language access tool in public and third sector organisations serving multilingual communities. However, how organisations and their staff actually use it, and their opinions about it, remain largely undocumented. This paper reports findings from a questionnaire study conducted between March 2024 and April 2025 with charities, NGOs, community organisations and local government authorities in the West Midlands (UK), one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the country. The results indicate that MT use is widespread, informal, and driven by necessity rather than informed decisions or policies. Google Translate is the preferred tool; policies about MT use are rare, and confidence in translation quality is limited. Risk perception varies across the sector: local government respondents identify the widest range of concerns, including legal and medical, while third-sector organisations suggest a pragmatic approach. However, greater risk-awareness does not lead to greater governance, pointing to a gap between individual MT literacy and institutional accountability. Based on this, we propose some recommendations for how organisations serving multilingual communities should approach MT implementation and training.

## 1 Introduction

Machine Translation (MT) has become a practical resource for organisations that need to communicate across languages but lack the budget or infrastructure for professional translation services. In public and third-sector contexts, where multilingual communities are increasingly the primary audience for essential information and support, frontline staff frequently rely on MT tools such as Google Translate as an ad hoc substitute for formal language access provision. Yet, despite this growing reliance, relatively little is known about how staff use these tools, how they assess their quality and whether their organisations provide any guidance.

Research on the use of MT in society has developed consistently in recent years, with studies examining practices in healthcare organisations (Pym et al., 2022; Herbert and Carmo, 2025; Valdez et al. 2025), public-facing professions (Vieira, 2024), and community settings (Delorme Benites et al., 2025; Giustini, 2024). These contributions showcase the reach of MT adoption and the risk it carries for vulnerable users. However, the mapping of informal practices across organisation types and settings remains limited.

This paper reports on findings from a questionnaire of 45 staff members of organisations in the West Midlands (UK), a highly linguistically diverse region, with over 100 languages spoken across 14 local authority areas and approximately 10 per cent of households using a language other than English as their main language, according to the 2021 UK Census (ONS, 2022). The questionnaire was designed to uncover translation-related activities that participants might not recognise, as a way to capture the breadth of MT use across organisations (see section 3). Drawing on MT literacy frameworks (Bowker & Ciro, 2019; O'Brien

and Ehrensberger-Dow, 2020), we examine how staff adopt, evaluate and conceptualise MT as part of their everyday work.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on MT use among non-language professionals and public service contexts. Section 3 describes the questionnaire design and sample. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 discusses the implications for MT literacy and institutional governance. Section 6 sets out recommendations for organisations and policy-makers.

## 2 Related Work

Although the use of MT by governments dates back to the 1960s-1970s (Hutchins, 1995), research into how public and third sector organisations employ MT to reach multilingual audiences remains limited.

One of the few cross-national studies in this area is Jiménez-Andrés and Orero's (2022) study of digital and multilingual practices across public and third sector organisations in Greece, Italy, Spain, and the UK. In interviews with staff members, they found that of the six organisations researched, only two reported using Google Translate (one routinely and the other only when interpreters were unavailable) while the remaining four expressed strong resistance to MT and no intention to adopt it in the future.

Pym et al. (2022) examined the use of Google Translate on the Catalan health service's website during the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, identifying both the practical advantages of MT adoption and the recurring types of errors. While the use of MT can expand access to essential health information, the authors argue that unregulated deployment risks alienating non-dominant language users, eroding public trust, and potentially undermining public health efforts. They conclude that the absence of a clear institutional policy on MT use for official communication is itself a significant concern.

Following early evidence from Vieira, O'Hagan and O'Sullivan (2021) that non-professional MT use in high-stakes healthcare and legal contexts was widespread and poorly understood, Vieira (2024) employed a large-scale quantitative questionnaire among 2500 UK professionals in public-facing sectors to examine the use of raw MT across healthcare, legal, and emergency

services. The study shows that one-third of participants had used MT in their work, typically during direct, in-person communication. Although MT was not used very frequently, over a third of respondents reported monthly use. Users expressed high levels of satisfaction and confidence in their use of MT tools, despite limited formal training. Notably, MT use was often self-initiated, though sometimes encouraged by employers or members of the public. To address these risks, the study recommends the institutionalisation of MT awareness, the development of adaptive language access policies, and the embedding of AI/MT literacy in workplace training and culture.

Whereas Vieira's and Jiménez-Andrés and Orero's studies focus on service providers' perspectives, Giustini (2024) focused on the experiences of service users, specifically female asylum seekers, within the UK's asylum procedure. Her study examines the shift from interpreter-mediated interviews to written questionnaires, underscoring the challenges these women face when required to depend on MT or informal language support. Findings indicate that such technological practices reduce women's agency in narrating their experiences and lead to credibility concerns when inconsistencies arise between machine translations and later interviews. MT errors, especially in low-resource languages, can compromise the credibility of claims, potentially resulting in unjust rejections and deepening institutional mistrust. Giustini's work draws attention to critical concerns around justice and accuracy in the use of MT within asylum systems.

Also building on a user-centred perspective, Delorme Benites et al. (2025) explored the use of MT in conversations between refugees and front-line workers in Switzerland, combining semi-guided interviews with real-life simulations. Interviewees noted that refugees increasingly introduce these tools themselves, particularly Google Translate and DeepL. Voice functionality was identified as crucial, especially for users with limited literacy. While MT offers opportunities for more direct and autonomous communication, particularly for women who may otherwise depend on accompanying persons who will make decisions on their behalf, professionals voiced concerns about the potential loss of interpersonal connection and emotional nuance. Data protection was also highlighted as a major concern, given the potential consequences of information being transmitted online and possibly reaching a refugee's country

of origin, where it could expose them to risk of persecution or reprisal. The use case simulations revealed generally positive perceptions among participants, who reported smooth conversations with no major difficulties. However, professional interpreters observing the sessions identified several translation errors, including omissions, interruptions, and incorrect use of gender and pronouns. These findings suggest a disconnect between user perceptions and actual translation performance. The simulations also highlighted how machine-mediated communication shaped not only the flow of interaction but also the interpersonal dynamic between participants.

A more recent research and development project, the MATIAS project (Macken, Fonteyne, Tezcan et al., 2025; Macken, van Hest, Tezcan et al., 2025; De Wild, 2026), developed a digital platform that could automatically translate messages to improve communication between staff and residents in asylum reception centres, automatically translating practical messages into 17 languages (including low-resource ones) and delivering them via WhatsApp. A pilot across seven reception centres in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels yielded positive feedback from both staff and residents, and the authors argue that MT can improve access to institutional information, while noting that accessibility depends on social, institutional, and political factors beyond technology alone. Authors have also raised awareness on risks: uneven translation quality across languages; the assumption that residents own smartphones, use WhatsApp, and can read written messages, which may exclude those with limited digital access or literacy; register shifts in which MT may alter the informal, speech-like tone of staff messages in ways that inadvertently reshape institutional voice and power relations; and the danger of institutional overreliance on a system designed only for simple practical communication.

### 3 Methodology

This paper reports on the second phase of a larger study examining MT use and implementation in public and third sector organisations in the West Midlands (UK), whose primary aims are:

- determining the institutions that use MT and understanding how it is implemented;

- analysing its implications, including the tasks it supports, and its effects on workflows and end-users; and
- identifying opportunities for intervention, particularly regarding the role of MT literacy in supporting organisations and developing guidance to improve performance.

The study received ethical approval from the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC 61/23-24) at the University of Warwick.

The study unfolds across three phases. In the first, we conducted a systematic analysis of local authority websites in the region using O'Brien et al.'s (2018) 4-A framework, which revealed that while MT is widely available, implementation frequently falls short of meaningful accessibility, and may inadvertently reinforce the linguistic marginalisation it purports to address (Orrego-Carmona and Valdez, forthcoming). The second phase of the project, which is the focus of this article, involved a questionnaire administered across public and third sector organisations in the West Midlands (UK), designed to identify and map translation-related activities, including those that staff might not recognise as translation work. The third phase built on these findings through 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff from 11 charities/NGOs and 3 local authorities, examining the challenges organisations face in integrating MT into their service provision and how decisions about its use are made.

#### 3.1 Questionnaire design and data collection

The questionnaire was designed to capture the range of translation-related activities occurring within organisations, including informal or incidental practices that staff might not readily categorise as translation work. Our focus was to provide evidence of the integration of MT into existing processes, as MT use in non-professional settings is often incidental and unacknowledged, and a questionnaire that asked directly about “translation” risked underreporting practices that respondents would not recognise as such. For the same reason, the questionnaire used the term “automated translation” rather than MT and GenAI tools throughout, to maximise recognition among participants without specialist knowledge.

The questionnaire was structured in five sections covering organisational profile, participant demographics, language technology use at the organisational level, translation and multilingual communication practices, and individual-level MT use. The latter included questions on frequency of use, reasons for use, device type, attitudes towards technology, and perceptions of risk and accuracy. Prior to dissemination, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of specialists and NGO staff members from outside the West Midlands region (n=4), whose feedback informed revisions to the final version. All study materials, including the full questionnaire, are openly available in the project's open-access repository.

Participants were recruited through emails targeted to public and third sector organisations in the West Midlands as well as flyers circulated via online directories, social media, and personal and institutional networks. We targeted employees and volunteers at all levels within local authorities, charities, NGOs, and community organisations in the West Midlands who engage with multilingual communities, including those involved in producing organisational materials, delivering community-facing services, and making decisions about language provision.

The questionnaire ran from March 2024 to April 2025. The extended data collection period reflects the challenges of reaching the target communities in a region with a fragmented third sector, as well as the difficulty of engaging organisations where translation-related research faces a visibility problem analogous to translation work itself; often unrecognised, deprioritised, and requiring sustained relationship-building with communities before meaningful participation becomes possible. Although the rapid pace of MT tool development during this period might raise concerns about the internal consistency of responses, no discernible differences in adoption patterns were observed between early and late respondents. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was provided.

Given the fragmented nature of the sector, which includes organisations ranging from large established charities to small community groups that may not appear in formal registers, estimating the total population of relevant organisations is not feasible. The questionnaire received 109

responses of which 45 were complete and considered valid, across four organisational categories: charities and NGOs (n=25), local government authorities (n=12), community organisations (n=5), and other organisations (n=3). Since not all questions were answered by all respondents, when reporting we always make reference to the total number of answers per question.

Respondents ranged in age from under 25 to over 65, with the largest concentrations in the 35–39 (9/45, 20%) and 45–54 (16/45, 36%) brackets. Most respondents held senior or middle management roles with decision-making responsibilities (41/45, 91%), meaning the data reflect not only individual practice but also a degree of organisational awareness.

The majority identified as native English speakers (38/45, 84%), and most had a higher education qualification: 19 held an undergraduate degree (42%) and 16 a postgraduate degree (36%). Many respondents also reported additional language skills, including Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, French, Polish and Romanian.

## 4 Findings

The following sections report the findings from the questionnaire across the four organisational categories. Although the questionnaire used the term “automated translation” to maximise recognition among participants, the findings are reported using the standard academic term “machine translation” (MT). Results were analysed descriptively and are presented thematically, with cross-tabulations by organisation type used throughout to identify variation in adoption patterns, tool use, risk perception, and governance, understood here as the presence or absence of translation policies, training, and institutional oversight.

### 4.1 Multilingual context and language provision

Respondents were asked to list the languages they encounter in their work, and results were notably diverse across the sample. Arabic was the most widely cited (14 mentions), followed by Urdu (10), Pashto (8), Bengali dialects including Sylheti and Chatgaya (8), Persian/Farsi (7), Romanian (6), Ukrainian (6), Punjabi (6), and Polish, Spanish and Chinese (5 each). Other notable languages mentioned include Pakistani Pahari and Hindi (4 each), Somali, Vietnamese, and Russian

(3 each), and Greek and Portuguese (2 each). These patterns broadly mirror the linguistic diversity of the West Midlands' largest migrant and diaspora communities (ONS, 2022).

When asked about future language needs, charities and NGOs identified the widest range, with Arabic the most frequently mentioned (6), followed by French, Kurdish, Farsi, Urdu, Pashto, Somali and Bengali, and isolated single mentions of Sorani, Dari, Tigringya, and Amharic. Community organisations similarly named Arabic, Tigrinya and French, alongside a range of African, Asian and Eastern European languages including Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Ga, Twi, Japanese, Swahili, Hindi, Polish, Albanian and Romanian. Local authorities were less specific, with several respondents unable to name languages needed or suggesting broadly that websites should be available in "all" or "popular community languages," except for one mention each for Cantonese and Pashto.

#### **4.2 MT use by organisational type, scale and service context**

Across the sample, just over half of respondents who answered this question reported that their organisation currently uses MT (24/41, 59%), though uptake varied by organisational type, scale and service context. Use was highest among smaller third-sector organisations that employed fewer than 50 members of staff (11/15, 73%), charities, NGOs, and community organisations (4/4), predominantly serving refugees, asylum seekers, and minoritised language communities, often with mental health or wellbeing components to their work. Only 3 respondents from medium or large charities and NGOs (3/8, 38%) reported using MT. In total, among charities and NGOs specifically, 14 of 23 respondents (61%) reported using MT. All respondents from community organisation who answered this question also reported using it.

The communities served across the sample reflect the region's diversity and the often high-stakes nature of the language needs involved. Nearly all respondents reported serving immigrants and/or asylum seekers (41/45, 91%) and young people (33/45, 73%), alongside women (32/45, 71%), ethnic communities (32/45, 71%), disabled people (30/45, 67%), children (27/45, 60%), elderly residents (25/45, 56%) and veterans (17/45, 38%). This breadth of groups with diverse and often acute language needs makes translation capacity, whether human or MT, a practical necessity rather than an optional provision.

Most organisations operated locally or regionally, with 14 of 45 (31%) serving a single borough and 9 (20%) operating across the West Midlands region. A further 10 (22%) covered multiple boroughs, while 7 (16%) were national organisations with West Midlands offices.

By contrast, respondents from local government authorities operate at large organisations, with 11 of 12 (92%) employing more than 250 staff members, and only 5 of 12 (42%) reported using MT, with a further 3 unsure. These larger local authorities served both vulnerable groups and the wider public, including immigrants and asylum seekers, digitally excluded residents, ethnic minority communities and community cohesion groups.

Decision-making power was concentrated across the sample, with 41 of 45 respondents (91%) holding roles with organisational influence. Among charities and NGOs, 23 of 25 (92%) reported decision-making capacity, with 13 in senior roles and 8 in middle management. Community organisations showed a similar pattern, with 4 of 5 respondents (80%) in decision-making roles. In local government, 11 of 12 respondents (92%) also held decision-making roles, though more commonly at middle management than senior leadership level. The concentration of decision-makers across all organisation types suggests the data reflect also organisational awareness of MT use. This concentration reflects the recruitment strategy, which targeted staff with responsibility for language provision and organisational decision-making, rather than frontline end-users of MT. It is also worth noting that 4 organisations submitted more than one response, meaning the 45 responses represent 41 discrete organisations. In some cases, respondents from the same organisation gave conflicting answers about whether MT was in use, suggesting that awareness of translation practices within the same institution can vary across roles.

#### **4.3 Translation practices and website provision**

When asked how they translate their websites, the most common approaches across the sample were either not to translate and publish in one language only (17/40, 43%) or to use raw MT (10/40, 25%). English remained the dominant website language across all sectors, with 23 of 40 organisations (58%), 16 of 23 charities and NGOs (70%)

and 3 of 4 community organisations (60%) publishing in English only. Local authorities showed slightly more variation, with 3 of 10 (30%) respondents reporting only automated translation use for website translation and 6/10 (60%) respondents mentioning website provision in English plus multiple languages, alongside occasional support in Ukrainian, Russian, Urdu, Arabic and Eastern European languages through PDFs or supplementary materials.

Responses about specific content sections reveal a clearer pattern than the overall translation approach suggests. For general pages such as “About us” and services, raw MT (12 mentions each) or MTPE (10 and 11 mentions each) was the most common approach. Legal content was treated most cautiously: 10 respondents said they do not include it at all, the highest exclusion rate of any content type, while 8 favoured MTPE and 7 opted for raw MT. Local government authorities were particularly risk-averse about legal content: none reported using raw MT for legal sections, and some excluded it from translation entirely. This contrasts with charities and NGOs, where 6 respondents used raw MT for legal content despite the acknowledged risks. Health content attracted the most human translation (6 mentions), alongside MTPE (10) and raw MT (9). Cultural content followed a similar pattern to general pages, with raw MT (10) or MTPE (10) the dominant approaches and 6 respondents excluding it entirely.

#### 4.4 MT as a community-facing tool in everyday practice

Respondents reported that MT is used primarily by community-facing staff rather than specialist or technical roles. Community-facing representatives were the most frequently cited users (22/37, 59%), followed by content writers and community liaisons (13/37 each, 35%), volunteers (12/37, 32%), and project managers (11/37, 30%). In charities and NGOs, community-facing representatives accounted for 13 of 22 responses (59%), rising to 4 of 5 (80%) in community organisations. A further 8 mentions from charities and NGOs fell under ‘other’ user categories, extending the picture to include project beneficiaries, advisors and delivery staff, case workers, and staff using MT in sessions with service users and members of women’s collectives. In local government, use appeared more concentrated in a narrower set of roles: community-facing representatives (5 of 8 responses, 63%), content writers (5/8, 63%), community

liaisons (3/8, 38%) and marketing professionals (3/8, 38%).

Community support was the most frequently cited task for which MT is used across the sample (27/36, 75%), followed by external communications (15/36, 42%), marketing materials (15/36, 42%), community accessibility on websites (9/36, 25%), internal communications (5/36, 14%) and technical documents (4/36, 11%). Open-ended responses extended this picture further, referencing ESL class materials, AI-enabled phone lines, digital posters and face-to-face communication in the absence of human interpreters.

#### 4.5 Tool type, mode, frequency and essentiality

Google Translate was by far the dominant tool across all organisation types (22/25, 88%), with only occasional use of alternatives such as Microsoft Translator, Google Chrome, ChatGPT, Recite Me, social media platforms and some custom or in-house applications, among others. DeepL was not mentioned by any respondent. Frequency of use varied considerably. Just over a third of responses (12/34, 35%) reported never using MT, while 6 (18%) used it daily and 7 (21%) weekly.

| Types of organisations / Frequency | Charity / NGO (n=20) | Community org (n=5) | Local authority (n=7) | Other (n=2) | TOTAL (n=34) |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Daily                              | 4                    | 2                   | 0                     | 0           | 6            |
| Once a week                        | 6                    | 0                   | 1                     | 0           | 7            |
| 2-3 times a month                  | 3                    | 1                   | 0                     | 0           | 4            |
| Once a month                       | 0                    | 2                   | 2                     | 1           | 5            |
| Never                              | 7                    | 0                   | 4                     | 1           | 12           |

**Table 1. Frequency of use of MT by organisation type (n=34 respondents)**

How frequent and essential MT was perceived to be for work tasks followed a similar pattern (see Table 1 for frequency). In charities and NGOs, use was divided between regular users and non-users: 4 of 20 (20%) reported daily use, 6/20 (30%) weekly, and 7/20 (35%) never. Views on essentiality were mixed, with 7/22 (32%) rating MT as essential or very essential and 6/22 (27%) as not essential, and a further 6 as moderately essential (25%). Community organisation respondents showed the most consistent pattern of reliance: all 5 reported some use, with 2 using MT daily and 3 at least monthly, and the majority rating it essential or very essential (4/5, 80%). Local government authorities reported the lowest uptake, with 4 of 7 (57%) never using MT and only 1 out of 7 (14%) reporting weekly use. Most leaned towards slightly essential (4/8, 50%) or not essential (2/8, 25%).

Reasons for non-use were revealing. Some respondents worked in contexts they regarded as English-dominant; others relied on human interpreters or multilingual staff; and some suggested that MT had simply not been explored, was not a priority or they found they had little time to engage with it.

#### 4.6 Modes of MT use across settings and devices

Respondents described using MT across a range of everyday situations. The most common were typing messages while communicating with someone in person (13/22, 59%), reading texts or documents in other languages (11/22, 50%), and speaking out loud with someone in the same physical space (11/22, 50%). Sending emails or messages accounted for 6/22 mentions (27%), and 5/22 respondents (23%) reported using MT in urgent or serious situations, such as supporting someone at a hospital or police station.

Device use varied by sector. Mobile phones dominated among charities, NGOs and community organisations (21 mentions), whereas local government respondents made greater use of desktop or laptop computers (7 mentions) than mobile phones (5 mentions).

#### 4.7 Reasons for use, satisfaction and decision criteria

Among the 34 respondents who reported using MT, 19 (56%) said they used it for lack of a better alternative, compared with 11 (32%) who said it served their purpose well. This pattern was most pronounced among charities and NGOs, where 14 of 19 responses (74%) cited lack of alternatives, compared with 3 of 8 (38%) in local government. Community organisations showed a more mixed picture, with 2 of 5 (40%) citing lack of alternatives and 2 (another 40%) citing purposeful use and 1/5 citing a mix of both reasons.

Satisfaction was also uneven across sectors. Overall, 13 of 36 respondents (36%) reported being satisfied, 13 (36%) neutral, and 6 (17%) dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction was concentrated among charities, NGOs and community organisations (6 mentions combined), while local government respondents leaned toward satisfaction (3/8) or neutrality (4/8). When asked what factors influenced their decision to use MT, accuracy was the most critical consideration, with 32 of 34 (94%) rating it as important or extremely important (see Table 2). Ease of use was rated extremely important or important by all 34 respondents, followed by being free of charge (31/34, 91%), speed (30/34, 88%) and confidentiality and privacy (27/34, 79%).

| Types of organisations    | Charity / NGO (n=19) |    |   |   | Community org (n=5) |   |   |   | Local authority (n=8) |   |   |   | Other (n=2) |   |   |   | TOTAL (n=34) |    |   |   |
|---------------------------|----------------------|----|---|---|---------------------|---|---|---|-----------------------|---|---|---|-------------|---|---|---|--------------|----|---|---|
| Criterion                 | 1                    | 2  | 3 | 4 | 1                   | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1                     | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1           | 2 | 3 | 4 | 1            | 2  | 3 | 4 |
| Accuracy                  | 11                   | 7  | 1 | 0 | 4                   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5                     | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2           | 0 | 0 | 0 | 22           | 10 | 2 | 0 |
| Free of charge            | 12                   | 7  | 0 | 0 | 4                   | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4                     | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0           | 1 | 1 | 0 | 20           | 11 | 3 | 0 |
| Ease of use               | 10                   | 9  | 0 | 0 | 5                   | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3                     | 5 | 0 | 0 | 1           | 1 | 0 | 0 | 19           | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| Speed                     | 9                    | 10 | 0 | 0 | 3                   | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3                     | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0           | 1 | 1 | 0 | 15           | 15 | 4 | 0 |
| Confidentiality / privacy | 9                    | 5  | 2 | 3 | 2                   | 2 | 1 | 0 | 4                     | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1           | 1 | 0 | 0 | 16           | 11 | 4 | 3 |

Note: 1 = Extremely important 2 = Important 3 = Somewhat important 4 = Not at all important

Table 2. Importance of MT decision criteria by organisation (n=34 respondents who reported using MT)

Confidentiality and privacy were rated as important or extremely important by respondents across all sectors: 14 of 19 charities and NGOs (74%), 4 of 5 community organisations (80%), and 7 of 8 local government respondents who answered (88%). The more notable pattern is the non-response rate in local government, where 4 of 12 respondents did not answer this question, likely

reflecting lower individual MT use or uncertainty about the consequences of MT use for privacy and confidentiality rather than indifference to these concerns.

## 4.8 Governance, policy and training gaps

Formal translation policies were rare across the sample (see Table 3). Only 5 of 36 respondents (14%) reported having one in place at their organisation, while 19 (53%) had none, 9 (25%) were unsure, and 3 (8%) said one was in progress. The absence of policy was clear across sectors: all 5 community organisations reported having no policy, and only 2 of 21 charities and NGOs respondents (10%) confirmed having one. Local government did not demonstrate stronger governance, with only 2 of 8 respondents (25%) confirming a policy and 5 of 8 (63%) unsure whether one existed.

| Types of organisations / Policy | Charity / NGO (n=21) | Community org (n=5) | Local authority (n=8) | Other (n=2) | TOTAL (n=36) |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Yes                             | 2                    | 0                   | 2                     | 1           |              |
| No                              | 13                   | 5                   | 1                     | 0           |              |
| In progress                     | 3                    | 0                   | 0                     | 0           |              |
| Not sure                        | 3                    | 0                   | 5                     | 1           |              |

**Table 3. Presence of formal translation policies by organisation type (n=36 respondents)**

Among the five organisations that reported having a policy, open-ended responses give a sense of what these cover. One described a tiered approach based on legal sensitivity and vulnerability, where translation decisions are made reactively rather than proactively, addressing potential problems after the fact rather than through preventive planning. Another distinguished between print materials, which require professional and accredited translation, and the website and helpline delivered through Language Line, where MT is used. A third reported a formalised verification process requiring a second translator to check accuracy. One organisation described a working process rather than a formal policy, while another noted that staff use Google Translate for ad hoc queries alongside a contracted professional translation service.

The pattern of multiple responses from the same local authority organisations, sometimes with conflicting answers on policy, further reinforces this picture. Where staff in the same institution disagree about whether a policy exists, it suggests not only that policies may be absent in some departments and others not but that communication about translation practice within larger organisations is itself poorly managed.

A related pattern emerges from responses about departmental MT use. When asked whether specific teams or departments relied heavily on MT, 10 of 20 charities and NGO respondents (50%) and 5 of 7 local government respondents (71%)

said they were unsure. Organisations are therefore not just lacking policies; in many cases, they do not know where within their own structures MT is being used, for which tasks and how. This points to a visibility problem that sits upstream of governance: translation activity that is not recognised cannot easily be managed or supported.

Training was even rarer. Only 2 out of 34 (6%) respondents across the entire sample reported having received training on MT use. None of the 5 community organisation respondents reported receiving any training. Out of 8 local authority respondents, only 1 reported receiving any training.

## 4.9 Accuracy, risk and institutional accountability

Although 20 of 34 respondents (59%) judged MT to be accurate, risk perception varied sharply across sectors (see Table 4). Charities and NGOs were almost evenly split: 10 out of 19 respondents said MT was not risky, while 9 said it was. Community organisations acknowledged risk but rated it at a moderate level. Local government respondents were the most cautious, with 6 of the 8 who responded to this question (75%) noting MT as risky and 3 of those 6 (50%) rating that risk as high. They also identified the widest range of possible harms, including organisational/professional (9), legal (4), financial (2), medical (2), reputational (3), and work-related (3) consequences, though risk types were reported across all sectors. Across the full sample, organisational or professional risk was the most frequently cited (21 mentions), followed by work-related consequences (14), medical risk (6), legal risk (5), personal reputation (8) and financial risk (3).

| Organisation type     | Is MT risky? |     | If yes, how risky? |   |    |   |   |
|-----------------------|--------------|-----|--------------------|---|----|---|---|
|                       | No           | Yes | 1                  | 2 | 3  | 4 | 5 |
| Charity / NGO (n=19)  | 10           | 9   | 0                  | 3 | 5  | 1 | 0 |
| Community org (n=5)   | 2            | 3   | 0                  | 0 | 3  | 0 | 0 |
| Local authority (n=8) | 2            | 6   | 0                  | 1 | 2  | 3 | 0 |
| Other (n=2)           | 1            | 1   | 0                  | 0 | 0  | 1 | 0 |
| Total                 | 15           | 19  | 0                  | 4 | 10 | 5 | 0 |

Note: 1 = Very low risk 2 = Low risk 3 = Moderate risk 4 = High risk 5 = Very high risk

**Table 4. Perception of risk of MT use by organisation type (n=34 respondents to "Is MT risky?")**

## 5 Discussion

These findings map a sector where MT has become routine, but governance has not kept pace, resulting in a lack of structural support. Organisations across the West Midlands have absorbed

translation into their everyday work. Organisations do not seem to have a clear plan or critical and deliberate considerations for this implementation, but the practical need to communicate across language barriers with new arrivals, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other communities with limited English knowledge has made MT a default, if informal, solution. The informal arrangements González Núñez (2016) documented in NHS hospitals a decade ago (bilingual staff, family interpreters, ad hoc workarounds and limited formal guidance) find a direct parallel in our findings, now with MT added as an additional unmanaged resource. The dynamic of MT implementation is consistent with what Vieira (2024) found among UK public-facing professionals, where MT use was similarly self-initiated and driven by practical need rather than institutional direction. Our survey confirms this and provides a more granular account of how this pattern varies across organisation types and what it looks like in the absence of any governance framework.

Guerberof-Arenas and Moorkens (2023) argue that MT deployment is frequently framed as an inevitable technological development, warranting adoption with minimal consideration of alternatives or consequences. The finding that 19 of 34 respondents (56%) used MT for lack of a better alternative rather than out of informed preference reflects exactly this dynamic: MT fills a gap that organisations have not otherwise addressed.

The sectoral differences in how MT is used are as telling as its overall prevalence. In smaller third sector organisations, MT is woven into the ordinary interactional and outreach work of frontline staff, used on mobile phones, in face-to-face encounters, and sometimes in urgent situations, rather than being confined to formal translation pipelines. In local government, use is more diffuse, office-based, and institutionally less visible. Non-use in local authorities, moreover, does not straightforwardly reflect rejection: where respondents relied on multilingual staff or human interpreters, or had simply not prioritised exploring MT, this points to different organisational conditions rather than principled resistance.

The gap between the languages respondents encounter daily and those in which their organisations currently publish is also revealing. Third-sector organisations name specific low-resource languages (Tigrinya, Somali, Dari) that

mainstream MT tools handle poorly, while local authority responses default to “all languages” or “popular community languages.” This difference may reflect a relationship to multilingual provision shaped more by formal compliance than by direct service contact, alongside a lack of knowledge of the languages needed by the communities served.

The absence of formal policies, and the uncertainty about whether they exist at all in local government, suggests the problem is not simply one of capacity but of institutional visibility: MT use has expanded into organisational practice without being formally acknowledged or managed. Translation is treated as a procedural decision rather than a strategic one, which means that even where individual staff have a working awareness of the risks involved, as local government respondents clearly do, this awareness has nowhere to go institutionally and is not raised as a point that needs to be addressed to increase service quality. This is consistent with what Bowker (2023) calls the “autopilot” phenomenon, the tendency for MT’s speed and accessibility to lead users to overestimate its capabilities and overlook the complexities of translation, not due to carelessness but through a structural absence of the critical framework that would allow them to evaluate it otherwise. Respondents across all sectors relied on MT primarily because it was accessible, familiar and quick rather than because they trusted it fully, while simultaneously expecting it to remain affordable and reliable enough to preserve meaning in both every day and high-pressure contexts. These expectations are not being met by any governance structure currently in place. Pym et al. (2022) and Valdez et al. (2025) made a similar observation in the context of health services, and our findings suggest this is a structural feature of how MT has been absorbed across public services more broadly. Canfora and Ottmann (2020) identify three categories of NMT risk in professional contexts (harm to end users through mistranslation, legal liability, and data exposure through free online tools) that map closely onto the risk types our respondents identified. Their argument that these risks require an interdisciplinary institutional response, rather than individual awareness, reinforces the governance gap our data reveal.

When organisations rely on MT without governance, the responsibility for managing

translation quality and risk is transferred implicitly to the user and receiver (Pym, 2020) without any formal acknowledgement that this transfer has occurred, and without tracing the use of MT in the interventions. Koponen and Nurminen (2024) reinforce this by arguing that deploying raw MT without a structured risk management process (covering risk identification, analysis and treatment) leaves organisations without the means to identify or mitigate the consequences of translation errors, and that fluent MT output can generate unwarranted trust even when errors are present, a pattern consistent with the significant proportion of our respondents who judged MT accurate despite low overall confidence in quality.

The governance gap documented here shows a structural problem that requires structural solutions. Individual MT literacy, however well developed, cannot substitute for institutional accountability. The findings suggest that the sector has both the practical experience and the motivation to address this: frontline workers are already navigating these challenges daily, and the knowledge they have accumulated represents a foundation on which more sustainable approaches can be built. Translation research can play an important part here, providing evidence and working closely with organisations to inform and draft these policies. As a starting point, the following section sets out a series of recommendations for how organisations, policymakers, and researchers can work together to move from informal reliance towards informed practice.

## 6 Recommendations

The findings point to a set of practical priorities for organisations serving multilingual communities. At a minimum, organisations should develop a basic translation policy that acknowledges MT use, identifies appropriate and inappropriate or sensitive use cases, and assigns accountability for translation quality. Frontline staff should be supported by creating channels for them to share their experiences and flag problems, drawing on the practical knowledge that already exists across the sector. Structured practice-sharing (through peer networks, internal forums, or cross-sector initiatives) would allow the accumulated informal staff expertise to inform more consistent and accountable approaches.

Organisations should also consider the specific language needs of the communities they serve when selecting tools, given the well-documented performance gap between high-resource and low-resource languages. At the sector level, regional bodies and funders should include translation governance in their support and accountability frameworks, rather than treating language access as a technical matter that organisations can resolve independently.

## 7 Conclusions

This paper has mapped MT use across public and third sector organisations in the West Midlands, documenting that a technology that was never formally adopted has become embedded in the everyday practice of frontline staff. The survey data reveal a sector in which Google Translate is the default language access tool, policies are almost entirely absent, training is negligible, and risk awareness, where it exists, has not translated into institutional accountability.

The findings extend existing evidence on MT use in non-professional public service contexts by providing survey-based data on adoption patterns, user perceptions and governance gaps across a highly diverse region in the UK. The sectoral variation documented here, between third-sector organisations for whom MT is an immediate communicative necessity and local government authorities where use is more diffuse and institutionally less visible, offers a more granular account of how MT is absorbed into public service delivery than has previously been available for this context.

The near-total absence of training across the sample is striking, given that MT literacy frameworks identify training as a foundational condition for responsible use. The central contribution is to connect MT literacy frameworks to the concept of risk transfer in a non-professional institutional setting. The absence of governance means that responsibility for translation quality falls implicitly on individual staff members, and ultimately on the multilingual communities they serve. Addressing this requires interventions that target organisations rather than only individuals, and policies that make institutional accountability for translation quality explicit.

### 7.1 Limitations and future work

As with all voluntary survey-based research, the findings should be interpreted with caution, given the relatively modest response rate and the likelihood of self-selection bias, whereby respondents may be more engaged with language technology or multilingual service provision than non-respondents. Future research with larger samples would help establish how representative these patterns are across the broader public and third sector landscape. Studies should also examine what MT literacy interventions look like in practice and whether they shift organisational behaviour, while bringing in end-user perspectives, the voices of the multilingual communities these organisations serve, that the present study could not capture.

## Data Statement

The project materials, analysis files and data supporting the findings of this study are openly available at [https://figshare.com/projects/Is\\_Google\\_Translate\\_Enough\\_Machine\\_Translation\\_in\\_Public\\_Organisations\\_in\\_the\\_West\\_Midlands\\_UK\\_/273565](https://figshare.com/projects/Is_Google_Translate_Enough_Machine_Translation_in_Public_Organisations_in_the_West_Midlands_UK_/273565)

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