

'Preaching to the converted on the importance of professional standards'

The MoJ has appointed an agency to provide interpreters to the legal sector, but as **may not necessarily be qualified and accountable public service interpreters – offering high levels of risk for lawyers.** Ted Sangster warns, professionals

The legal profession understands the vital importance of professional standards. Lawyers spend years obtaining the qualifications and level of experience necessary in order to practice and must abide by a strict code - being held accountable for their professional conduct.

Such standards are integral to the judicial system. For people to be fairly represented they must have access to expert legal counsel – i.e. advice that is of a recognised standard and regulated.

Just as legal professionals adhere to and uphold professional standards; I believe it should also be the case for the public service interpreters who are employed by the justice system. Particularly as they provide the access to your expert advice.

Maintaining standards

The National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) was founded in 1994 to maintain a register of professional, qualified and accountable public service interpreters to safeguard the public and profession. One of the ways it helps to protect the public is by playing a key role in fulfilling the requirements of Articles 5 and 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) concerning 'the right to be informed in a language one understands of the reasons for arrest' and 'the right to a fair trial, including the right to have the free assistance of an interpreter'.

There are currently more than 2,200 UK-based professional interpreters on the Register covering 101 languages. To be accepted onto the Register they have

each satisfied rigorous entry criteria in terms of qualifications and experience, and demonstrated their commitment to professional standards by signing NRPSI's Code of Professional Conduct. All registered interpreters are issued with a photo ID card to prove their registration and identity.

While NRPSI is a voluntary regulator, our powers allow us to discipline and, ultimately, exclude someone who breaks the code. In this way we can ensure interpreters on the Register are appropriately qualified, have



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the level of competence claimed and employ best practice.

At the same time, public service organisations and others who use the Register can be confident that they are employing a qualified interpreter who can be held accountable should their conduct or competence fall below the high standards expected of a registered professional interpreter. Essentially, using a registered interpreter provides you with the peace of mind that you are working with someone who is professionally competent and able to do their job. Using the online register to search for an interpreter is not only free but extremely easy. Something evidenced by the fact that it receives over 30,000 searches each month to:

- **Check** interpreter is registered – by searching for a specific interpreter by name or the registration number that appears on their ID Card.
- **Find** interpreter to employ – by searching for the required language and then narrowing down the results by selecting a location or type of security clearance.

Playing with fire

The risks of using an unregistered interpreter are many and the costs high. You risk using someone unqualified at best and incompetent at worst to be the direct line of communication between you and your client. The consequences of being misunderstood and serious inaccuracies in court interpreting can lead to wrongful conviction and a potential risk to public safety. And, when things do go wrong, you have no access to a formal complaints procedure.

The use of unregistered and unaccountable interpreters is a continual threat to the quality and reputation of interpreting. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the case of unregistered and unaccountable interpreters failing to show for

court hearings at a considerable expense to the legal system and taxpayer. There have been a number of such cases reported in the news over recent months. This situation has arisen since the Ministry of Justice appointed a single agency, Applied Language Solutions (ALS), to provide interpreters for court hearings.

ALS is not required to use interpreters on the Register and has successfully deterred a number of registered interpreters from working for them by cutting their pay.

A shared vision

As well as collaborating with the interpreter membership bodies to tackle this specific issue, NRPSI is working on a number of other fronts to ensure the National Register is the first choice for anyone who needs a qualified professional interpreter. To start with we have embarked on a communications programme to raise awareness of the register and convey the importance of using qualified and accountable interpreters. We are working to expand the register and enhance its usability. We are also developing guidelines to help both interpreters and the users of their services get the most from working together. These improvements will enable us to better serve the public, users of the Register and professional interpreters.

Our greatest asset is the professional interpreters who share our vision and the users of their services, like lawyers, who value professional standards.

By Chairman of the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI).

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