



National Register of
Public Service Interpreters



Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP
Secretary of State
Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
1 Victoria Street
London, SW1H 0ET

13th August 2019

Dear Ms Leadsom MP,

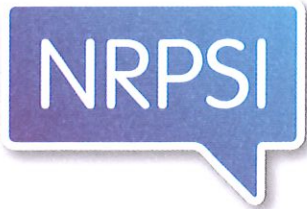
I write in the interests of the general public concerning foreign language interpreting firm Debonair Languages, a supplier of court interpreting services. This entity has recently ceased trading, leaving a number of highly qualified and experienced Registered Public Service Interpreters (RPSIs) who are Registrants with the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) unpaid for services rendered. This has been the subject of various recent media reports.

It should be noted that Debonair Languages was a subcontractor to thebigword, the Ministry of Justice's main contractor for supplying interpreters, which is responsible, according to Lord Keen of Ellie's written response to a question submitted by Baroness Coussins on 12 January 2017 (ref HL4611), for ensuring subcontracts contain obligations no less onerous on the sub-contractor than those imposed on it by the Ministry, including those relating to quality and performance standards.

The liquidation of Debonair Languages has affected a great many court interpreters, not just RPSIs but also linguists, bilinguals and pseudo-interpreters who have either no experience, are poorly qualified as interpreters or indeed have no interpreting qualifications at all. Accounts made by numerous RPSIs to NRPSI indicate they are owed considerable amounts of money, thousands of pounds in some cases, for their services. As I am sure you can understand, this is leading to very real hardship for them and their families.

These RPSIs who have written to NRPSI also indicate the far from professional practices of the organisation and disrespectful treatment they received at its hands. Indeed, there are multiple accounts of a lack of transparency in its dealing with interpreters who chased it for payment in the weeks and months leading up to it ceasing trading. Not to mention reports of the firm offering franchises at a cost of £25k to individual interpreters as recently as three weeks before it went into liquidation. Furthermore, there are accounts of interpreters turning to thebigword for information only to be turned away and advised to take up the issues with Debonair Languages' liquidators.

This is a horrifying case and the way interpreters have been treated is nothing short of contemptible. Sadly, however, it only serves to punctuate the ongoing poor treatment and unfair remuneration of qualified and experienced public service interpreters more generally due to inadequately written frameworks; the performance indicators set by the public services focusing on price and supply at the expense of quality; and the need for privately-owned language agencies to compete on price to win public sector language service contracts and then squeeze the fees they offer to interpreters to preserve their profit margins. The result of this situation is to lower engagement fees to unacceptably low levels and foster the use of linguists who are not qualified interpreters, lesser qualified and even unqualified interpreters, and bilinguals who are willing to work for reduced fees.



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It is not an achievement to produce cost savings and meet supply targets when these are at the expense of quality and good governance. Such activity is driving many professional interpreting practitioners who are qualified and experienced out of the market. This is a direct threat to public service interpreting standards and the supply of and availability of qualified and experienced interpreters to the public services. Furthermore, it poses a clear and present risk to public safety.

How many reported instances of the courts not being able to find suitably qualified interpreters do there need to be before action is taken to address this? To do nothing is a disservice to the public services and the public.

While it is the case, as stated by the Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP, Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office in a recent letter to NRPSI, that each public body currently makes its own purchasing decisions based on their specific requirements for interpreting services, it is just such 'Wild West' conditions that have led to the situation outlined where public service language contracts are awarded on cost and supply considerations with no or inadequate quality demands.

As the voluntary regulator of RPSIs in the UK celebrating its 25th year in operation, it is NRPSI's role and responsibility to do everything within its power to defend public service interpreting standards in order to ensure public service organisations and the public can access the high-quality interpreting services they require when these are needed.

That is why we are calling on the government to act immediately, before there are further miscarriages of justice. The government needs to ensure it is a statutory requirement for all interpreters to be accredited, registered and regulated by an independent not-for-profit organisation rather than have lists created by agencies which are often padded-out by non-registered ersatz bilinguals.

It should be mandatory for all public service organisations to use only those interpreters who have been accredited, registered and regulated by a body free from commercial and political influence to avoid erroneous and often mendacious claims by profit-driven private companies.

We are also asking the government to set mandatory standards for privately-owned language agencies which are operating on behalf of the public services to avoid future situations where other privately-owned agencies can be assigned as sub-contractors without effective oversight by either the public service or the principal agency. Without such standards, unscrupulous actors will continue to devour funds from the public purse and then hold back agreed remuneration to the very interpreters who have already toiled for the public services.

NRPSI would be more than happy to meet with you to discuss and consult on this matter. We are also willing to work with others to find a consensus for a coordinated, cooperative, collaborative and realistic approach that enables a more stable environment that exposes malpractice and supports the highest ethical standards in the public services interpreting ecosystem.

Yours Sincerely,

Mike Orlov
Executive Director and Registrar