

Previous procurement of translation services have shown the need for quality assurances. **Stephen Bishop** says forces can avoid disasters by insisting on standards set by the industry.

# Language of support



**Stephen Bishop** is executive director of the National Register of Public Service Interpreters.

At times recently, it has seemed that not a week has gone by without a shock headline in the national or local media about the amount of taxpayers' money being spent on interpreters and translators by public services, including the police – and the figures bandied around have been designed to alarm.

Consequently, and understandably, police and other public services are being encouraged to review their arrangements for engaging language professionals. According to National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) records, police forces are the biggest users of registered interpreters in the UK. However, their level of use can be easily explained.

To begin with, the UK population is increasingly multicultural and multilingual and an increasing number of potential witnesses, victims and suspects do not speak English as a first language.

Net immigration was close to record levels at the end of June 2016, standing at 335,000, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Some five years before the ONS released this record figure, the 2011 Census revealed that almost 900,000 people in the UK described their English language skills as 'non-proficient'.

There is also the fact that the police are required by an EU Directive to caution and converse with members of the public in their own language to avoid miscommunication and inaccuracies. A provision that is also afforded to UK citizens when they are visiting other EU countries.

Lastly, and this point relates specifically to police forces' use of registered interpreters, police officers need the support of fellow professionals – that is, people who they can be assured are appropriately qualified, security vetted and experienced to work in their unique environment, while adhering to a professional code of conduct.

Even though police forces' use of language services can be accounted for, it is right that they continually monitor the performance of suppliers and review their procurement programmes. And it is also right that they make efficiencies and savings where possible.

That said, any successful procurement process needs to achieve such efficiencies without undermining the quality of the service supplied. Language services procurement is a complex business, but done badly it will lead to an escalation in costs and the potential for injustices to arise.

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) outsourcing its language services to a single agency in a bid to cut its interpreting costs in the early part of the decade is an example of an unsuccessful language procurement programme. The lack of quality control built into the framework, under which the agency was contracted, led to many registered inter-

preters refusing to work with it. It also led to the agency's failure to provide interpreters for numerous court hearings at a significant additional cost to the taxpayer.

To assist police forces with their language procurement, the Home Office has set up a CLEP (Collaborative Law Enforcement Procurement) languages group.

The former working group chair, Chief Inspector Sarah Shrubshall, has said: "We would encourage [police forces] to include a requirement for all interpreters under any new contract to be a NRPSI member. This offers a degree of protection to both the interpreter and the police as they hold a list of suitably qualified and vetted interpreters, they are able to investigate any issues over quality or vetting, etc – at no cost to us, and it helps us to acknowledge that we are keen to support the professionalisation of interpreting in the criminal justice sector."

As the voluntary regulator of public service interpreting standards, NRPSI aims to avoid a repeat of the MoJ situation and support the CLEP group advising police forces on language services procurement. To this end, it has made itself available for consultation by each police force's pro-

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urement team to explain in more detail the professional standards that it enforces. These standards are designed to ensure that registered interpreters provide the quality of service demanded by the police.

The NRPSI believes that whatever procurement process each force deems to be most suitable, the standards of the interpreters engaged should be underpinned by them being registered.

It is easy to check whether an interpreter is registered via the online national register, which can be accessed and searched for free. If they are, police officers are guaranteed the professional they work with is committed to best practice and the NRPSI code of conduct.

By using registered interpreters, police forces are also provided with an official course of action should they have a complaint about an interpreter's professional conduct. If such a situation should arise, the police can contact NRPSI, which has an independent and rigorous professional complaints and disciplinary process.

The role and responsibility of the police and NRPSI coincide in this area: both exist to protect the public. Consequently, there is the opportunity for greater collaboration here and for NRPSI to help each police force to deliver a successful procurement programme.