

'A commitment to quality'

– an interview with Paolina Hawthorne

'Movers and Shakers' is a series of interviews with the interpreting profession's leading lights.

In this interview we hear from Paolina Hawthorne, Director of Diversity NI. Having worked as an interpreter for almost a decade, Paolina founded Diversity NI in 2010 as a direct response to the need for professional interpreting and certified translation services in Northern Ireland. Here Paolina talks to us about the business and legal landscape that interpreters in Northern Ireland face and how this differs from the rest of the UK.

How did you come to set up Diversity NI Ltd and what is its approach to working with interpreters?

Northern Ireland's demographics have changed dramatically in the last 15 years, with a significant increase in the number of migrant workers and ethnic minorities living in the country. I started Diversity NI in 2010 and today it is a successful company specialising in the provision of accredited training programmes for interpreters and translators, as well as professional interpreting and certified translation services that are tailored to meet client needs. I felt at the time that there was a need for a professional linguistic company to provide not only work for interpreters, but also better qualifications for linguists.



"The focus on cost alone by certain public service providers is a threat to the quality of interpreting and translation services."

Coming from a linguistic background myself, having worked as a professional interpreter for nine years, I wanted to establish a quality driven, pioneering, highly inclusive and socially focused organisation.

Close to 400 professional interpreters living in Northern Ireland are registered with our agency. These interpreters, who are from a variety of languages and backgrounds, are recruited

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according to demand. This ensures employment opportunities for a significant number of highly talented linguists and helps non-English members of the public to access public and private services locally. Through Diversity NI, professional interpreters are able to use their rich cultural backgrounds and expert skills to contribute to the local community.

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What do you think are the differences in working with interpreters in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK?

In addition to adhering to UK and European legislation relating to human rights and the provision of language assistance to enable access to private and public services, in Northern Ireland we must also adhere to local equality legislation set by the Northern



Ireland Act 1998 – Section 75. It is a legal duty for public service providers in Northern Ireland to offer interpreting services to anyone who does not have English as a first language or as a second language. While the rest of the UK seems to take a more inconsistent approach to the provision of interpreters (with the exception of the Criminal Justice System), professional interpreters who work for public service providers in Northern Ireland are contracted to do so through interpreting agencies. That is with the exception of the NHS, which has its own in-house interpreters.

The vast majority of interpreters who work for public service providers via local statutory agencies are highly qualified and adhere to strict contractual regulations in relation to the quality of their service and conduct. The quality of interpreting services offered to members of the public accessing public services in Northern Ireland is assured by the contracted agencies managing those services. These agencies should always be contacted in cases of malpractice or inappropriate conduct by the interpreter. In the rest of the UK it is common to recruit the services of independent interpreters. Centralising the provision of interpreters through agency contracts in Northern Ireland increases the possibility of

ensuring the quality of the service delivered and the accountability of interpreters, who must adhere to the regulations, good practice guidance and the code of ethics operated by the agency they are registered with.

Do you think there are enough qualified interpreters in Northern Ireland, and if not what can be done about this?

Currently, there is a significant number of interpreters covering the top five languages that are in greatest demand (i.e. Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Slovak and Chinese). As a result there are a number of things that need to be considered when recruiting and selecting interpreters if we are to improve and expand our service.

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To begin with we must meet the need for so called ‘rare language’ interpreters from communities who speak Somali, Tetum, and Tigrinya to name a few. At the moment there aren’t enough qualified and available interpreters who speak these languages in the region. There is also the matter of having a geographical spread of interpreters to reduce mileage expenses and deliver a more cost effective

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service. Another key consideration for agencies is the rise in industry standards and the importance of professional development and further qualification. The natural tendency for interpreters to undertake the minimum level of qualification required needs to be addressed.

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Language agencies have recently focused their efforts on meeting the demand for a geographical spread of qualified interpreters and those who speak 'rare languages', primarily by helping people to qualify as interpreters through the Open College Network (OCN) qualification. However, to address the issue of ongoing professional development, we must encourage interpreters to go on to obtain the more advanced Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) qualification, to invest in their continuing professional development (CPD) beyond this and to show their commitment to standards by registering with the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI).

Could you tell us more about the work you have been doing on the DPSI?

Diversity NI was the first organisation to set up as an Institute of Linguists Educational Trust (IoLET) centre in Northern Ireland and to introduce the renowned Level 6 Diploma

in Public Service Interpreting. We have delivered the DPSI preparation course and hosted the local examination process for the last two years, helping the majority of candidates to qualify in the Health and NI Law pathways of this qualification. Each year we have made improvements to the courses and the 2014/2015 preparatory courses are the most advanced to date in Northern Ireland.

Professional qualification and standards are so important to Diversity NI that we also implemented a programme of funding the NRPSI registration fees for graduates who passed all five units of the DPSI in 2013 and 2014 – and we continue to encourage each new class of graduates to become registered with NRPSI.



Do you see any trends in particular languages being required or sectors where interpreters are needed?

As I mentioned, the demand for interpreting services in relation to public services access (i.e. criminal justice, health, education, housing and welfare benefits) is currently relatively well-covered with regards to the top five or six languages spoken in Northern Ireland. However, there is still evidence of interpreters not being provided to certain public services

when necessary, due to a lack of information and effective policy, economic myths and prejudice.

In addition, some issues, such as the increase in asylum seekers in the Belfast area in the last three years (e.g. Arabic, Somali, Tigrinya, Amharic, some Asian dialects, Farsi, Turkish and Afghani languages) and a rise in demand for other languages in certain regions (there has been a general increase in demand for Slovak interpreters and Polish/Hungarian interpreters in the North West of the country) still require special attention and us to focus our efforts on the strategic recruitment of interpreters.

Language assistance arrangements for certain sectors – such as the private legal services provision, and employment recruitment, rights and training – are also in need of development.

How would you like to see the interpreting profession develop?

Training opportunities, professional development and standards are our priorities. The focus on cost alone by certain public service providers is a threat to the quality of interpreting and translation services. It is therefore important that we recognise the extraordinary service interpreters provide to the public. We can do this not only by supporting the profession and individual interpreters to progress, but also by financially rewarding those with significant experience and expertise who invest in their skills and knowledge to provide a better service. ■