

# Standard-bearer

## The newly appointed Executive Manager of the NRPSI Jessica Myint Thinn talks to *ITI Bulletin* about the importance of maintaining standards in interpreting, amid a climate of cost-cutting and outsourcing

Jessica Myint Thinn joins the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) at a crucial time in its history, and although she has been in her new post for just a week when we meet on a blazingly hot day in July, she demonstrates an impressive grasp of the issues facing the interpreting profession.

A British citizen raised in New York by Burmese parents, Jessica brings with her an international perspective and strong management experience. She returned to the UK in 1993 to do a Master's degree and has since worked in senior roles at the British Standards Institute (BSI), Energywatch and, most recently, at the London Borough of Newham where she was Head of Business Development. The move from client (she procured translations at both Energywatch and the BSI) to heading up a key player in the translation and interpreting sector has been, by her own admission, 'a steep learning curve', but she displays great enthusiasm and energy for the challenges of the weeks and months ahead.

### **What is a typical day for you at the moment – if there is such a thing?**

I'm happy to say that no two days are alike. I do like variety. But mainly we're concentrating on improving our services. I've been engaging with various departments – having said that, we're a very small team, so it's one or two people per department – gaining their views and combining this with the feedback that we get from registrants. As a result of this we're

reviewing our database, which is connected to the Register, updating it, correcting errors and omitting obsolesces. One thing that we have realised and are taking into account is that outsourcing has been affecting a lot of registrants. To help, we offer to waive the reinstatement fee for registrants who came off the Register. Some people are actively boycotting the Framework Agreement, and they can't provide the ten hours they need to renew, so we're taking that into account too, and considering each case on its merits. If you can't provide public service hours, maybe you can provide other related work. Plus some people may have had an accident, or been injured, and unable to work. So for that reason we're looking into each case individually. Trying to improve our services is the main thing that I've been concentrating on for the first week.

### **Is that going to continue to be your key objective?**

Absolutely. I think my personal goals are to improve the services that we provide but also to expand the regulatory services that the Register provides, because the Board have decided that they want to seek and explore options for being recognised as a statutory regulator. To do that we have to start performing the role of a regulator, taking on all the responsibilities. It will benefit registrants as well if there are more services being provided, so we'll be looking into that while of course also consulting people in the profession.

### **So what do you think about the Framework Agreement?**

I'll be really honest with you, I haven't looked into it word for word as I've only been here a week. But our view is that it's not for a voluntary regulator or a statutory regulator to comment on how any organisation – governmental or private – procures, as long as it's legal and transparent. But the procurement criteria should be set out more clearly. We are saying that for the protection of the public and for the protection of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) itself. They should be getting value for money, ie the quality of service that they procure and source should not be compromised. So we have no objection to government bodies or organisations trying to be cost effective, but they should ensure that quality remains stable and standardised.

What is a bit confusing about the Framework Agreement is that it seems to introduce an additional tier

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to the sourcing mechanism, which I understand to be elongating the procurement and sourcing process. As I understand it, they could source interpreters from the National Register, which exists already. We have gone through stringent procedures in vetting quality and qualified interpreters on our Register. But they are introducing another tier in that the agency providing the services developed their own register. Why not use one that already exists?

Another thing is that the Framework Agreement does not emphasise quality. There were no criteria stating that ALS, or any other agency providing the service, should only provide qualified interpreters from the Register. The weakness in that is that some unqualified interpreters are now being provided.

The public and the judicial system will suffer – we already have evidence, as people call us up on a daily basis saying that the interpreters that they booked either didn't show up or did not perform as expected. The judicial process is then prolonged, as you have to correct mistakes. It will be the public who suffer following these miscarriages of justice. It's not the way they source interpreters that we take issue with, it's the quality of the service that they're sourcing.

Our role is to protect the public, and in doing so, of course, we represent the profession. We monitor and at least try to voluntarily police the profession. Another benefit of sourcing interpreters from the Register is that we're the only body that has a disciplinary procedure. We have a redress scheme, so even if you were to source somebody from the Register and they provided a bad service, you could contact us and we would look into the case and hold a hearing, and if the interpreter concerned is found to be in breach of a code of conduct, we will take action.

**Some interpreters have expressed concern that, following the Framework Agreement, interpreters might stop signing up to the National Register. Is that a concern for you?**

I'll be very candid, it is a concern for us in the sense that the National Register operates solely on the funding received from registration fees. So operation-wise it is a concern for me. But the bigger concern is that if people are saying that they're not going to sign up for the National Register, on account of the National Agreement or the proposed Framework Agreement, I think there's a huge misunderstanding of the role of the regulator and the Register. As a voluntary regulator, our role is to maintain an efficient, correct and stringent register listing qualified interpreters. That's our main role. So if you're listed on the Register you are saying that you are endorsed and qualified to provide a service, you are recognised as a professional.

Our other role is to protect the public, to be sure that they have access to qualified interpreters. Anyone can freely search the Register, and you can be approached for job opportunities [if you are listed

## PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETERS FOR JUSTICE

Six professional interpreters' organisations, representing 2,350 registered public service interpreters in 101 languages, and the profession's regulatory body NRPSI are united in the Professional Interpreters for Justice campaign.

The campaign's three aims are to:

- Reverse the outsourcing to commercial agencies, and the reintroduction of direct employment of freelance interpreters by the courts and police services
- Establish regular dialogue between interpreter organisations and government
- Persuade government to provide statutory regulation of the interpreting profession and protection of the title of Legal Interpreter.

The seven organisations which are partners in the campaign are:

- APCI – Association of Police and Court Interpreters
- ITI – Institute of Translation and Interpreting
- NRPSI – National Register of Public Service Interpreters
- NUPIT – National Union of Professional Interpreters and Translators, part of the Unite union
- PIA – Professional Interpreters' Alliance
- SOMI – Society of Official Metropolitan Interpreters UK
- SPSI – Society for Professional Public Service Interpreting

In addition, the Chartered Institute of Linguists, CIOL, is a participant in the steering committee with observer status only. The Scottish Interpreters and Translators Association, SITA, is another associated organisation.

on it]. We have no problem with that, in fact we're happy for this to happen. We have made it free for that very reason, so that registrants may be approached for employment. But that's a secondary and add-on benefit of going in the Register. The first benefit is an endorsement and seal of approval. It shows that you are qualified to hold the title of professional interpreter. That would be my key message.

**Is it possible to convince people outside the industry of the importance of standards – or do they have to witness the results of poor interpretation to get the message?**

It is something that I've been tasked with and it is a very important objective to achieve. It's not going to be easy but I think on the ground level, people who work in the judicial system – the judges, the lawyers, the court clerks – know that qualified, approved, registered interpreters are needed. This is based on day-to-day experiences with interpreters not showing up, or when they show up they're not qualified to do the job. My challenge in this role will be persuading the decision maker, whether it be the Ministry of Justice or anybody who is employing interpreters, to use qualified interpreters. That will be a little bit difficult. But we can't do this alone, we need the contribution of all registrants, future registrants and

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people who are working towards professional qualification, but also our colleagues from related sectors – lawyers, police, doctors and nurses – to champion us, work with us, support us and to acknowledge us.

**Talking of working together, does the Professional Interpreters for Justice campaign (see box, above), which unites six different organisations representing interpreters, represent a big step forward?**

Absolutely. If you want to be recognised as a profession you have to act professionally and stand up for yourself. On 18 July the House of Lords Select Committee for Judicial Affairs announced an inquiry into the Ministry of Justice contract with ALS. They are seeking written and verbal evidence – the National Register will be submitting, and the deadline is 3 September. I believe that inquiry is the result of unity in voicing our concerns. If people do listen and react to it they will also understand that our sole objective is to protect the public and represent the profession. 