



The National Register of Public Service Interpreters: Regulating Language Experts, Protecting the Public

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This article is intended to inform legal professionals and others about the work of the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) and Registered Interpreters. It will outline how we can help you and how you can help us to ensure you are provided with the best language service. It will discuss the challenges facing the public service interpreting profession and public services. And it will explain why, when you are looking for an interpreting expert, your first port of call should be the National Register and your first choice must be a Registered Interpreter.

NRPSI Registered Interpreters are recognised as the 'gold standard' throughout Europe and the world. They have the language expertise, experience and security clearance you need, and follow a strict code of professional conduct.

The National Register is free to search via NRPSI's website (www.nrpsi.org.uk). You can search this online database comprising 1,900 interpreting professionals, who between them speak over 100

different languages, by language and postcode. With NRPSI, your nearest language expert is only ever a phone call away.

What is Interpreting?

In order to get the best from an interpreter, it is important to understand their role. National Occupational Standards (NOS) define interpreting as the process where one spoken language is 'transferred' into another to achieve effective communication. For an interpreter to do their job effectively, they must have a full command of the languages they interpret and be able to reflect accurately the information and ideas, cultural context and intention of the speakers they are interpreting for. And they must do this impartially, clarifying language and cultural misunderstandings where appropriate. This explanation of interpreting highlights the specific knowledge and skillset required to be a professional interpreter.

Interpreting is not a mechanical process solely about converting words from one language to another; it

requires an understanding of the cultures of both languages being interpreted and the subject area of the communication. It is the ability to make sense of differences across cultural boundaries that defines a good interpreter. NOS also make it clear that interpreters must understand and respect confidentiality, have a good understanding of the subject area they are interpreting, work within their professional expertise and adhere to a common code of conduct.

An interpreter's role and responsibilities also often extend to providing a written report of the interview for which they have interpreted. In a legal context, a statement sufficient for court proceedings can be required.

The challenge

With the United Kingdom (UK) becoming increasingly multi-cultural and multi-lingual, it is more and more common for English not to be spoken as a first language. At the time of the last UK Census in 2011, our population, not including visitors, was 54 million and growing annually by 400,000. Of the 54 million, 4 million did not have English as a main language and 138,000 of these understood no English. According to the Office of National Statistics, the UK population grew by around 500,000 to almost 65 million between mid-2013 and mid-2014, with net immigration accounting for more than 50% of this increase.

By 2034, the UK population is predicted to reach between 74 and 79 million with a large proportion of the increase being made up by immigration. More recently, both the UK and the European Union (EU) generally have seen unprecedented numbers of economic migrants, asylum seekers and displaced persons seeking sanctuary. While enriching UK society, this diversity presents significant linguistic challenges for the public services including the criminal justice system, health services and local authorities.

The response

The good news is that the UK is well placed to respond to these challenges. Following a miscarriage of justice and death resulting from inaccurate court interpreting in the case of *R v Iqbal Begum*, in 1993 the Runciman Royal Commission on Criminal Justice recommended that a national register of interpreters 'with proven competence and skills, and governed by a nationally recognised code of conduct' be established. The Commission recognised that quality interpreting for the courts and public services was vital to ensure safety, fairness and justice for those who do not speak English.

In 1994, NRPSI was founded in direct response to this recommendation with initial financial support from the Home Office and the Nuffield Foundation.

The Institute of Linguists – now the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIoL) – was selected to run the National Register at its outset. Following an independent review, in 2011 NRPSI became an independent not-for-profit company with the regulatory role of protecting the quality of public service interpreting standards for the benefit of the public. This year, NRPSI celebrates its fifth anniversary of independence, an important milestone in its 22-year history.

In Europe, the EU Directive on the Right to Interpretation and Translation in Criminal Proceedings was formally adopted on 20 October 2010. It was implemented by EU Member States in the three years that followed and aims to provide consistent rights to non-native speakers in the criminal justice system of all EU countries. To help facilitate cross-border use of interpreters, NRPSI took part in the recent EU-funded LIT Search project championed by the European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association (EULITA). The goal is to facilitate searching across all European interpreter databases via the eJustice portal.

If the 23 June referendum results in the UK leaving the EU, NRPSI, and no doubt others, will be lobbying hard to ensure that the UK Government does not retreat from the commitment it has given to this EU Directive.

About NRPSI

NRPSI is the:

- Voluntary regulator of professional interpreters
- Discipline authority
- Custodian of quality in interpreting services
- Custodian of professional interpreting standards
- Custodian of the professional register of public service interpreters

NRPSI is a voluntary regulator, paid for entirely by registration fees. We are dedicated to improving and maintaining professional standards in the interpreting profession by ensuring that only qualified and experienced interpreters are listed on the National Register, and that they implement best practice by observing a professional code of conduct.

To become registered, interpreters must meet NRPSI's minimum requirements in terms of qualifications and experience, and sign up to the NRPSI Code of Professional Conduct. By doing so, they demonstrate not only their commitment to professionalism but their willingness to be held accountable as well, setting them apart from unregistered interpreters.

Significantly, all NRPSI interpreters are security vetted, the majority by the government Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), with details of their level

of clearance and date of issue displayed on their National Register record. Only by using a Registered Interpreter can you be confident that your professional language expert has been security cleared and is quality assured.

NRPSI is not:

- A membership organisation
- A staff association
- An employer
- A work-providing agency

Since 2011, NRPSI has not been a membership organisation representing interpreters but a custodian of standards with a remit of public protection. While the professional status and contact details of Registered Interpreters are listed on the free to search online National Register, we are not a work provider or employment agency. NRPSI has a regulatory role. Our focus is on maintaining high quality interpreting services in order to protect the profession and public through the public services that use the Register.

What NRPSI does

Keeps the UK Register of Public Service Interpreters

The NRPSI database (www.nrpsi.org.uk) is a free service that allows users to search for and find interpreters when and where they need them. It also allows people to check that an interpreter is registered and security cleared. NRPSI has around 1,900 interpreters across the UK covering 100 languages.

Recognises qualifications needed to become a professional interpreter

The majority of NRPSI Registered Interpreters are qualified to honours degree level or above in the skills required to work in one of the three major public settings: Health, Law or Local Government. In addition to holding a recognised qualification, they must demonstrate a level of professional experience by having achieved 400 hours of interpreting practice in a particular language to have it registered at Full status. This level of training and experience combined sets Registered Interpreters apart from those who are not registered. In surveys we conducted in 2015, users of the Register gave NRPSI interpreters a satisfaction rating twice as high as unregistered interpreters they had used.

The NRPSI represents the ‘gold standard’ in interpreting. Those on the Register hold 2,733 qualifications between them, the most common being the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) Law option, which is at an equivalent level to an honours degree. In order to become registered at Full status, an interpreter must possess at least one of the following language-specific qualifications:

- Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI)
- Diploma in Police Interpreting (DPI)
- Equivalent Interpreting Qualification [honours degree level or above]

Plus:

- 400 hours of public service interpreting experience undertaken in the UK
- A valid and up-to-date security clearance

Ensures NRPSI interpreters meet the highest professional standards

Registered Interpreters demonstrate their commitment to professionalism by signing up to the NRPSI Code of Professional Conduct. Should the worst happen, though, and an allegation of poor practice be made against a Registered Interpreter, NRPSI provides a rigorous, free and easily accessible complaints process. This service is only available in cases involving a Registered Interpreter.

Investigates complaints about poor professional conduct or practice

The low number of complaints referred to NRPSI overwhelmingly demonstrates how professionally registered public service interpreters perform their role. However, NRPSI investigates all complaints of poor professional conduct or practice about Registered Interpreters in order to uphold standards, protect the reputation of the profession and safeguard the public. Complaints are initially reviewed by the NRPSI Professional Conduct Committee (PCC). If appropriate, they are then referred to the Disciplinary Committee (DC) for a hearing before a panel. Between 2014 and 2015, of the 52 complaints actioned by the PCC or DC, 27 were not upheld, 16 resulted in advice or an admonishment being given, 7 resulted in a suspension and 2 in expulsion from the Register. All disciplinary committees comprise a majority of lay members to represent the interests of the public.

Promotes the importance of regulation and registration

NRPSI is not a political organisation. However, we actively promote the importance of regulation and the Register to central Government, to public service users, and to the general public at national events including the Language Show Live. We also have good relationships with language schools nationally and regularly give presentations on professional standards to language students.

Implicit in the Runciman Royal Commission on Criminal Justice’s recommendation is NRPSI’s responsibility to provide Registered Interpreters who meet the current and future needs of the public services without compromising on quality. This represents a continuing challenge, especially given the recent worsening working terms and conditions

experienced by interpreters, which has led to an increasing number retiring from the profession.

While we cannot influence commercial arrangements between employers and interpreters, we do have a legitimate interest in ensuring that remuneration remains sufficient to make public service interpreting a viable and sustainable profession. The very future of the profession depends on the value placed upon interpreting by those who use language services. By using professionals to provide a professional service, you can make a significant contribution towards ensuring the best interpreters remain available the next time you need them. The NRPSI Board recognises the need to maintain and grow the number of Registered Interpreters, particularly in the light of a predicted growth in demand.

NRPSI continues to work with the Government in the pursuit of quality. In December 2014, in its 'Independent Review of Quality Arrangements' the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) recommended that NRPSI should be 'given a more vital role', to 'send a positive signal that the MoJ holds the interpreting profession in high regard'. Furthermore, the Government in its response indicated it was 'keen to engage with professional interpreter organisations and with NRPSI to see how it can use its expertise on the potential development of a regulatory framework'.

How can we help each other

Recent analysis of NRPSI complaints data shows that poor communication between the interpreter and the client is the most significant single factor in situations where things go wrong. To get the best from an interpreter, always ensure that they are fully briefed and agree with them in advance how the interview will proceed. When time allows, agree dates, times, fees, and the extent and conditions of the assignment in writing in advance. Ensure that your interpreter has an up-to-date telephone contact number for you so that they can keep you informed. Most importantly, arrange for them to arrive in time for the briefing and check that they understand what you are hoping to achieve. And remember that an interpreter is there to facilitate an interview between two other parties – not to instigate communication.

We believe we can assist you by making your services accessible to those who do not understand English. As professionals in whatever discipline, we all bear a responsibility to uphold standards, the standards of our own profession and that of other professions, by bringing shortfalls in behaviour or performance to the notice of the relevant regulator.

We aim to have the best interpreters and for the UK to have the best interpreting service in the world. If we fall short, however, please tell us. Our complaints procedure responds to breaches of our Code of

Conduct and we encourage you to use it with confidence. We also seek to listen and respond to other concerns and needs of users. As users of interpreters, you are uniquely positioned to observe NRPSI interpreters and your staff are similarly placed to give feedback. If we fall short, let us know.

Only NRPSI guarantees to provide qualified experienced, accountable and vetted interpreters. By ensuring that every interpreter you commission is registered with NRPSI you can ensure you have the best. All NRPSI interpreters carry an identity card. Please ask to see it every time.

We feel passionate about what we do, and I know our interpreters do as well. Let us help you. Ensure every interpreter you work with is an NRPSI interpreter. ■