

In search of justice

Chair of Council Keith Moffitt reports on developments regarding the MoJ Framework Agreement and the recent submission to the Justice Select Committee

Media interest in the role of translators and interpreters has rarely been as intense as since the roll-out, in February, of the new Ministry of Justice interpreting contract with Applied Language Solutions (ALS). Hardly a day has gone by without a story in the media about failures in court interpreting, with accounts of interpreters failing to arrive on time, unable to interpret to the required standard, not speaking the appropriate language, or even speaking incomprehensible English.

My predecessor as Chair of Council, Tony Bell, set out our concerns about the likely impact of the new arrangements in *The Linguist* at the turn of the year (TL50,6). That article certainly bears re-reading, and I take no satisfaction in reporting that many of those concerns have proved to be well-founded.

Commenting on the significant reduction in remuneration and allowances under the new contract, Tony wrote: 'It is evident that the reduction from current levels ... will be a major disincentive to the recruitment of qualified linguists and, it has to be feared, a major incentive for the provision of sub-standard or minimally qualified interpreters willing to work for the reduced rates.'

The spate of media stories seems to bear out that this is exactly what has happened, with many public service interpreters choosing to 'vote with their feet'. We are deeply concerned that this situation is seriously threatening the sustainability and development of public service interpreting and jeopardising the delivery of justice. The organisations representing translators and interpreters in the UK have often appeared to be fragmented, so it is good to be able to report that the key organisations for interpreters have been meeting regularly to address this situation.



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In recent months I have sat as an observer on the steering committee of the Professional Interpreters for Justice Campaign, alongside representatives from six other organisations representing public service interpreters, and the profession's regulatory body, the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI).

In July, we jointly wrote to Minister of Justice Crispin Blunt, more recently a casualty of the Prime Minister's autumn reshuffle, seeking a meeting to discuss how real savings and improved efficiency could be achieved while upholding high standards of justice. This represented a major milestone, as it was the first time all the bodies concerned had made such a joint approach.

No reply was ever received to our letter, which came hot on the heels of an important debate in the House of Lords, during which Justice Minister Lord McNally admitted that the estimated savings of £12 million in the MoJ contract's first year, already revised down from the original estimate of £18 million, would 'probably not be achieved'. I very much hope that Mr Blunt's successor will

be more open to such requests for constructive dialogue.

Scrutiny of the legal interpreting situation is now intensifying. The Justice Select Committee has launched an inquiry into interpreting and translation services since the ALS contract was rolled out, and a highly critical report on the contract, by the National Audit Office, has just been published.

The Institute has submitted evidence to the Select Committee, which will be published in full in due course. We have drawn attention to the many years of painstaking work done by the Institute and others in this field to promote high standards of public service interpreting. Our submission stresses that reasonable fees must be paid to attract and retain linguists with the skills and qualifications needed by the Criminal Justice System.

We have challenged, once again, the concept that a single, profit-making commercial body should have national control over the fees and working arrangements of professionals, without appropriate involvement of the relevant professional organisations. In particular we have criticised the failure to recognise the need for an independent regulator which can register interpreters who meet appropriate and necessary criteria as regards qualifications, experience and criminal record (CRB) checks, and can administer disciplinary procedures, a role which NRPSI was successfully playing before the introduction of the new arrangements, but in which NRPSI is now being undermined.

I sincerely hope that this new level of scrutiny, combined with new faces at the Ministry of Justice, will ultimately result in a resolution of the highly unsatisfactory situation currently prevailing in legal interpreting.