

'Maintaining standards: Protecting the profession and public'

– an interview with Ted Sangster, NRPSI Chair

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

Ted Sangster was appointed Chair of the National Register of Public Service Interpreters in April 2011 to manage the process of setting it up as an independent entity. As we mark NRPSI's Fifth Anniversary of Independence, an important milestone in the organisation's

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22-year history, it seems fitting to hear about his views on this and the interpreting landscape – past, present and future. And how NRPSI

has evolved and will continue to evolve to meet the challenges of the profession.

[continued on next page](#)

How and when did you become involved with NRPSI, and why?

I already had some experience of taking on new challenges and of running a membership organisation when I became involved with NRPSI. Not that NRPSI is a membership body, but there are similarities in how it and membership organisations are structured and governed. I am always looking for ways in which I can develop my knowledge and skills and learn something new – and the interpreting profession was certainly a completely new area for me.

When I saw that the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CioL) was looking to recruit a chair to manage the process of setting up NRPSI as an independent organisation, I indicated my interest and was delighted to be selected. I took up the post as Chair in April 2011.

NRPSI celebrated its fifth anniversary of independence on 1 April 2016. What was the reason for NRPSI becoming independent?

NRPSI was originally set up in 1994 in response to the 1993 Runciman Royal Commission on Criminal Justice recommendation that only qualified interpreters be used in court and that a national register of qualified interpreters be established. This recommendation was designed to protect the public services and their clients from the use of unqualified and unaccountable interpreters.

The Institute of Linguists (now the CioL) was selected to run the National Register at its outset. NRPSI then became independent from the CioL in April 2011 to fulfil its role as the independent voluntary regulator of the public service interpreting profession.



NRPSI Board

In the present contracting climate, NRPSI could not effectively protect public service interpreting professional standards, regulate against any threat to these and maintain public confidence in them if it were not an independent entity.

The first Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Framework Agreement (FWA) for Language Services in the courts was signed with Applied Language Solutions (now Capita TI) in October 2011, not long after NRPSI became independent. Was the convergence of these two events coincidental, and what impact did the MoJ contract have on NRPSI?

While these two events were not directly connected, in the lead up to NRPSI's independence, it had become obvious to senior managers in the CioL that the Government tide was running very much towards outsourcing public service contracts. This meant that the existing National Agreement, which governed the recruitment of interpreters and assured the standard of language services supplied to the justice sector, was very much under threat. It was a brave and far-sighted decision to make NRPSI an independent organisation with a regulatory role and focus on protecting the quality of public service

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interpreting standards. This clearly distinguished its function from that of the membership organisations.

The timing of these two events meant that it was also one of the first priorities of the newly appointed NRPSI Board to respond to the MoJ's consultation on its proposed changes to the provision of interpreting services across the justice sector.

In our response, we stated that we believed that the proposals would lower public service interpreting standards. We also highlighted that some of the changes, including assigning interpreters to one of three competence tiers, were unnecessary, divisive and merely added to the cost and complexity of the system for providing interpreting services. While we acknowledged that there were inefficiencies in the existing arrangements and the need for cost efficiencies to be made,

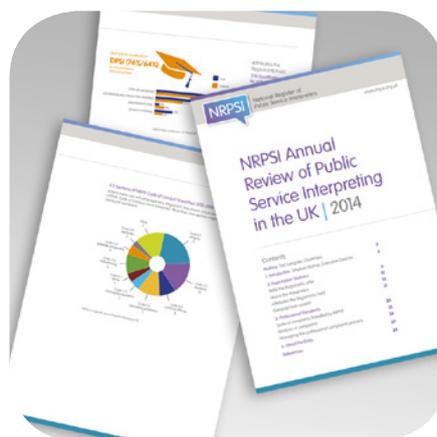
"If the coming referendum results in the UK leaving the EU, this will pose an immediate challenge. Should this happen, NRPSI, and no doubt others, will be lobbying hard to ensure that the UK Government does not retreat from the commitment it has given to the EU Directive 2010/64."

we advised that these issues could more effectively be addressed by making changes and improvements to the existing system. Above all else, though, we stressed the need to take into account the potential impact of the proposed changes on the underlying quality of the interpreting provision.

As an early statement of our intent and long-term aim of seeking statutory protection for our Registrants, we also highlighted the fact that the proposals would run counter to the guidance and strictures coming from the European Union (EU) concerning public service interpreting standards and delivery. We pointed out that public service interpreting is at the forefront of ensuring that human rights are maintained and miscarriages of justice are prevented, and that such services should not be abandoned to market forces without strong oversight and control.

Becoming independent is a landmark in NRPSI's 22-year history. What for you have been some of the other key landmarks in the organisation's history?

Much of our time at NRPSI over the past five years has been taken up with responding to the



NRPSI Annual Review 2014

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changes that have resulted from the MoJ outsourcing its language services under the FWA. By effectively encouraging the use of non-registered interpreters, the new arrangements have taken their toll on interpreting standards. Identifying the most appropriate strategy to tackle this has not been without its difficulties.

We initially took the stance that we would solely respond to and act on those issues relating to the quality of interpreting services provided – i.e. qualifications, experience and professional competence – leaving the membership organisations to focus on issues relating to the terms and conditions of service of interpreters, including their remuneration.

However, things are never that clear cut. Quality has to be paid for and if those delivering it are not being paid enough and withdraw their services, then standards fall, and that is of direct concern to us at NRPSI.

We therefore recognised early on the need to work with the membership organisations to safeguard the quality of interpreting services. The most obvious way being our involvement as members of PI4J (Professional Interpreters for Justice),

[continued on next page](#)



NRPSI Award Winner. Photo: © Chris Christodoulou 2014

an umbrella organisation comprising all the major spoken-language interpreting bodies and membership organisations, which came together to provide a common voice on the MoJ's FWA.

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As part of the PI4J campaign, I appeared alongside colleagues from other interpreting organisations in front of and made direct representation to the Justice Select Committee inquiry into the MoJ FWA. NRPSI also presented written evidence on the subject to other parliamentary committees.

While the events that led to the formation of the PI4J were not welcome, this umbrella organisation

has demonstrated to all of us in the public service interpreting community that we can work together when we share a common overriding purpose to achieve results. This can only be positive and I hope this way of working can be carried forward into other areas of shared purpose.

While the changes and uncertainty in the justice sector are obviously of vital importance and have rightly taken up a lot of our resources and attention, we are acutely aware of the risk of taking our 'eye off the ball' in many other important areas. We have therefore ensured that we continue to work with the health and local authority sectors, where many of our Registrants work, to promote the value and use of the Register. Indeed, we have continued to actively promote the valuable role that registered interpreters play to any organisation within or serving the public sector that needs to use interpreters – such as solicitors, other law firms, insurance companies, charities, etc.

Looking to the future, we will continue to work closely with universities, colleges, training providers and examination setting bodies to advise on the needs of the profession and explain the central role that NRPSI plays in future-proofing this.

What do you see as some of the key challenges facing the profession in the next five to ten years?

If the coming referendum results in the UK leaving the EU, this will pose an immediate challenge. Should this happen, 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 the EU Directive 2010/64.

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However, this to one side, what challenges I think the profession will face in the next five to ten years is a very relevant question. It has been very much front of my mind and that of my colleagues on the NRPSI Board recently. We have recognised that NRPSI is maturing as an organisation and that we need to reassess where it is going, to redefine its preferred future and determine what is needed to achieve this.

As a result, we have recently published an updated Strategy. I see that everything that we will be doing over the next few years will be framed by this and is in pursuit of one overriding long-term objective:

“The work that interpreters do every day is of vital importance for both the public services and individual members of the public being interpreted for. While the life and death situations referenced within 'Our Strategy' may be extreme, just about every job an interpreter carries out has the potential to change someone's life. This is why it is crucial that every interpreter working in the public services is properly accredited by the National

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Register. It is our mission to ensure that this is accomplished."

How will NRPSI meet these challenges?

So how are we going to achieve our ultimate goal of statutory regulation of the profession? Well, we must be and do a number of things. As an organisation, we must be efficient and financially sound. We must continuously monitor and review standards, promote and operate an effective professional complaints service, and promote the value of the Register to the widest spectrum of users.

We need to engage effectively with the public services and language agencies to encourage them to only use registered interpreters. And we need to make ourselves relevant across the whole of the UK.

Another of our priorities will be to encourage Registrants to raise their professional standards and we will be looking to develop appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives to help in this.

We will also seek to be recognised as the Government's arbiter of quality interpreting services, to define professional standards and to maintain these. The MoJ's recent tenders for language services have given us an opportunity to clearly state our intentions here in bidding for Lot 4 – the tender for ensuring the quality of delivery of the other three operational tender packages – in partnership with Interserve. If successful (and we will know soon), this will make us more robust and sustainable as an organisation, which will serve the interests of our core activity – that of maintaining and developing the National Register. There would be significant other benefits as well, for it would put NRPSI at the heart



NRPSI at the Language Show Live, London 2015

of ensuring the courts are provided with high quality interpreting and translation services.

How can professional interpreters help to improve the standing of the profession with public service users?

As you would expect me to say, by remaining or becoming registered and ensuring that this demonstrable commitment to upholding the highest standards is highly visible in their professional life.

Of course, this requires a commitment from NRPSI itself, which I am very happy to give. We will continue to make the case for interpreting standards. They are at the heart of the public service interpreting profession and registered interpreters' standing as professionals. Not only that, they are the essential means of ensuring the effectiveness of public services in the UK and public safety.

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