

Getting the Register right

NRPSI Executive Director Jessica Myint Thinn explains its current role, and looks to future developments and the goal of professional recognition

The interpreting profession is facing difficult times as the result of a challenging economic environment. Many organisations are looking at ways to make their operations more cost-effective and efficient, and are reviewing their external suppliers. This is to be expected, and the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) understands the need to reduce costs. However, as the independent regulator of the profession, with responsibility for developing and maintaining standards for the good of the public and the entire profession, we believe that savings should not be made at the expense of quality and public safety.

NRPSI cannot tackle the threat to standards alone. This challenge requires the collaboration of all those working in the sector – practitioners, service providers, consumers, educational bodies, membership and trade organisations, as well as the regulator. We are working tirelessly with the clients of interpreting services – in particular lawyers, health and council workers, social services and charity staff – to increase peer recognition of interpreting as a serious profession. We are consistently highlighting the importance of standards and the need to use professional interpreters.

The entire sector has to act professionally and be seen to be acting professionally. We have to demonstrate our commitment to regulated standards. Responsibility for this needs to be taken at an individual level, with practitioners ensuring they have the appropriate qualification(s) and experience; committing to standards by becoming NRPSI registered; adhering to its Code of Conduct; and being accountable for their work. It is only through our shared belief in – and



READY FOR BUSINESS

NRPSI's new premises at Longcroft House Business Centre in the City of London

pledge to uphold – agreed standards that we can become recognised as a voluntarily regulated profession and command the respect of professional status.

NRPSI-registered interpreters benefit from the professional credibility and endorsement that comes from having met our stringent criteria regarding qualifications and experience. The public benefits from being able to search the online Register for a qualified interpreter free of charge, safe in the knowledge that all registrants are quality assured and accountable.

We need to inform our colleagues and stakeholders outside the sector, including government officials and the public, about the important role that professional interpreting has to play in society. NRPSI has embarked on a proactive communications programme consisting of a media campaign, articles, adverts and events to underline the importance of standards, the danger of using unqualified and unregistered interpreters,

and the vital role that the regulator plays in maintaining quality and protecting the public from incompetence.

So what are the immediate aims of the profession and how is NRPSI meeting these? Addressing the threat to standards and the reputation of the profession in order to achieve professional recognition and status are not only the immediate but also the long-term aims of the profession. NRPSI is also working to develop its services in order to ensure best practice and the benchmarking of professional standards. As part of this process we plan to develop guidelines for the users of interpreting services; review and promote our existing Code of Professional Conduct; review the structure of our Qualifications Committee; and recognise continuous professional development (CPD).

NRPSI has a duty to ensure that people are provided with easy access to quality interpreting services and essential information regarding the role and significance of professional interpreting, so we're investing in a new website and search engine to make both more user-friendly and efficient. Our powers as regulator allow us to discipline and, ultimately, exclude a registered interpreter who breaks the Code of Conduct. In this way we can make sure that interpreters on the Register are appropriately qualified, have the level of competence claimed and employ best practice.

Professional standards are applicable to all practising interpreters, regardless of the sector in which they work, which is why we want to move towards focusing on all professional interpreting. To begin with we want to review and extend the scope of the definition of a 'public service' to make sure



IN BETTER HEALTH

NRPSI has been working with clients of interpreting services, including medical staff, to increase recognition of interpreting as a serious profession

there is regulation of practising interpreters across sectors. A public service need not be restricted to a service solely funded by the government but could include any service that deals with and supplies members of the public (eg, the Olympics – a global public event). By covering the entire professional interpreting sector, NRPSI will be moving towards performing the full duties of a sector regulator, including monitoring the whole profession while promoting healthy competition.

The European Directive 2010/64/EU on 'The right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings' will soon be introduced, requiring each member state 'to establish a register or registers of independent translators and interpreters who are appropriately qualified'. The UK will need to recognise and maintain its advancements with an existing independent register and voluntary regulator in the form of NRPSI.

Nobody knows better than practising interpreters the challenges they face at work. Sometimes professional standards and recognition might seem like the least of their concerns. But given the choice, who will employers appoint: the expert with the right level of training and qualifications, who is regulated by recognised standards, or someone who is unqualified and unregulated?

Addressing the threat to standards is not only the immediate but also the long-term aim

NRPSI and the MoJ

In 2012, the MoJ appointed a single agency, Applied Language Solutions (ALS/Capita), to deliver language services to the judicial system, with the aim of reducing costs. The new system employs a three-tier format, with NRPSI-registered interpreters qualifying for top-tier status. However, the arrangements have led to the supply of unqualified, inexperienced and incompetent interpreters.

The lack of quality control offered by the MoJ's Framework Agreement (FWA) is damaging to the reputation of the interpreting profession as a whole. Furthermore, as the sole provider for the MoJ, ALS has control over recruitment, pay, price, quality and other factors.

NRPSI has attempted to engage with the MoJ at various stages, in order to register its concerns about the new system. We are tackling the issue by collaborating with other professional interpreting bodies, and have taken part in the Professional Interpreters for Justice (PI4J) campaign to bring the profession's common concerns to the attention of government and policymakers.

This unified approach has provided the profession with a strong voice regarding the failure of ALS to deliver the necessary quality interpreting service to the MoJ. NRPSI has also contributed to various public inquiries regarding the FWA and the service provided by ALS, including the National Audit Office (NAO) investigation and Justice Select Committee inquiry.

NRPSI provided an independent written submission to the Justice Select Committee

inquiry calling for an urgent review of the FWA, involving all relevant sector participants and stakeholders, and emphasising the vital role that an independent register and regulator has in developing an accountable and sustainable interpreting profession.

NRPSI Chairman, Ted Sangster, appeared before the committee to provide oral evidence on 23 October 2012. Most recently, we participated with other PI4J members in a meeting with Justice Minister Helen Grant, and will be responding to her request for proposals to address the profession's concerns.

While much of the sector and media attention has been focused on the challenges facing public sector interpreters working for the judicial system, the current situation has serious implications for interpreters working in other fields. There is a risk that the MoJ/ALS system could be adopted by other sectors and organisations in the procurement of unqualified interpreting services, driving down the quality of the language services and endangering the public.

In anticipation of this threat, NRPSI has responded to various police authorities' consultations on their interpretation services to highlight the failings of the FWA and recommend that they seek quality assurance from their language service providers in order to protect the public. We have advised that only qualified, NRPSI-registered interpreters be used to ensure professional competency and accountability.