

Suspects freed as a result of court interpreters' boycott

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As many as 1,000 interpreters are boycotting a privatised contract to supply linguistic services to all English and Welsh courts, resulting in postponed hearings, suspects being released and compensation claims.

The revolt within the profession against cut-price employment terms imposed by Applied Language Solutions is spreading amid criticism of the quality of interpreting supplied by the Oldham-based firm.

The five-year deal with the Ministry of Justice, which began on 1 February, is intended to save £18m a year out of an annual budget of £60m. ALS also has exclusive contracts to supply translation services to the London 2012 Olympics and a number of NHS trusts.

Within the courts, solicitors, magistrates and judges have complained of disruption and warned about the danger of miscarriages of justice. In some cases suspects have had to be released when no interpreters were available; in others people have spent extra time in detention.

The justice minister Crispin Blunt admitted in the Commons that there were "an unacceptable number of problems in the first two weeks of full implementation of the contract". The Ministry of Justice said it was monitoring the situation.

ALS was bought by the public services provider Capita last December. Two weeks later, after problems emerged, the department authorised courts to bypass the centralised system for urgent cases.

According to interpreting organisations' estimates, about 60% of the 2,300 people on the National Register of Public Service Interpreters are refusing to work for ALS. Last week there were protests outside Manchester's crown courts. Interpreters claim hourly rates have been slashed and that they are being offered minimal travel allowances.

Ian Kelcey, former chair of the Law Society's criminal law committee, said: "The problem with ALS is that the government ... chose someone who probably can't provide the capacity. We are not sure they are using interpreters of a requisite standard."

David Evans, chairman of the Magistrates' Association in Lincolnshire, where scores of cases have been postponed, said: "There have been instances of interpreters just not turning up. We have had people arrested but because there's no interpreter they have had to be released. Some have been arrested and released several times for that reason. It's not good for justice."

Ken Sheraton, a district judge in Peterborough, said he had been unable to go

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ahead with two cases in one day because interpreters failed to materialise.

In an attempt to recruit more interpreters, ALS has begun offering more favourable terms in recent days. A spokesperson said: "We have consulted with linguists and listened to their feedback regarding the new payment terms and the fact that court case durations are often much shorter than the original booking time. As a result we have increased payments and travel expenses to combat some of this loss of earnings for interpreters."

ALS, which admits cases have been cancelled, said it worked with "hundreds of public sector customers, providing a range of language services. We currently deliver on our commitments to all of these customers." A spokesperson added: "We investigate, in full, any customer complaints that we receive."