

A sea change

The MoJ's decision to appoint a single provider, Applied Language Solutions, to manage all language support services within the Criminal Justice Sector (CJS) has been widely criticised. David Joseph of ALS argues that this decision is a positive step for all concerned



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The structure of the interpreting marketplace has not consistently delivered the degree of professionalism and quality required by the criminal justice authorities. The major concern of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), when it comes to language matters, is the protection of the public. However, the authorities in the UK currently draw from disparate lists of interpreters, whose qualifications have been issued using inconsistent criteria, whose experience in a given area is often unclear, and who are contacted with an inefficiency that places an unnecessary burden on already overstretched criminal justice officers.

This is not a sustainable system, and therefore I intend to explain how the relationship between linguists, ALS and the CJS will operate from October 2011.

Authenticating the standard of linguists

One of the main objectives of the MoJ procurement was to eliminate the uneven quality levels that have concerned many within the profession. Given the grave professional responsibilities of legal interpreters, the lack of mechanisms in place to guarantee, verify and continually improve the quality of language support needed to be addressed.

The solution is that all linguists wishing to work on MoJ assignments must register at www.linguistlounge.com before being invited to attend one of the Assessment Centres run by Middlesex University.

It cannot be stressed enough that the Assessment Centres process is not one over which ALS has any influence. Nor is it designed to replace the existing qualifications in the market. It has been developed independently by Middlesex University with its long and wide-ranging experience in the field. The evaluation panel will not include working interpreters among its members. Instead, it will comprise linguists whose participation will not allow for a conflict of interests. Additional working professionals in the CJS will be on the panel evaluating the performance, in English, of the interpreter. This assessment will determine who is listed on the MoJ's Legal Interpreting

and Translation (LIT) register and will remove all ambiguity regarding interpreters' qualifications and experience levels.

This is the only register that will be used to select linguists for MoJ assignments, which ALS will maintain and foster throughout the contract. Using our job-matching software, interpreters will only be offered assignments for which they are known to be qualified.

A system based on merit

It was unacceptable that there was no obligation for linguists to meet CPD requirements, when every other participant in the CJS has to meet these criteria. Some underqualified linguists have prospered to the detriment of superior linguists, holding back the reputation and authority of the profession.

The new assessment process not only identifies the current skill level of the individual, but also serves as a diagnostic for the CPD work the individual will have to complete to remain on the LIT register. From now on, every episode where a linguist is used by a criminal justice professional will be monitored and tracked. Feedback will be collected, so that the skills of a linguist can be identified and used to tailor them towards the most appropriate jobs.

A single register will allow work to be allocated evenly, with the more skilled and experienced linguists gaining work more consistently and at greater convenience to them.

The question of pay

In these financially pressured times, many linguists are concerned about how the new system will affect rates of pay. It is true that within the MoJ framework agreement, interpreter rates of pay are non-negotiable and reverse auctioning of services will not be permitted. No linguist will be allowed to undercut another by offering a lower rate.

The market has changed beyond all recognition and economic realities mean the existing National Framework Agreement rates can no longer be sustained. The pay system is divided into three tiers: £22, £20 or £16 an hour, depending on the qualifications the linguist holds and past experience working in the CJS or public sector.

We understand that this means there will be changes to the way most linguists operate, but the contract will deliver many benefits for linguists including a greater share of work, offered on a more consistent basis, with access to better qualifications that will be recognised internationally and further their career opportunities. This increased volume of assignments within a given location will reduce the need to travel and will eliminate the need for linguists to be constantly marketing their services to gain work.

The need for invoicing will also change, reducing the administrative burden for linguists. The MoJ partner will inform ALS of the length of the assignment, the linguist will log in to Linguist Lounge to check and accept their payment and the payment will be authorised. No invoice needs to be submitted, or chased.

This is a landmark moment in the profession, which will ensure unquestionable quality while bringing the UK into line with the latest EU directives and providing equitable allocation of assignments for the best-qualified linguists. We all share the common goal of advancing the uniquely challenging profession of legal interpreting and protecting the public interest.