

Slash and burn

Kasia Beresford gives a practising interpreter's view of the current proposals for interpreting provision in the justice sector



Kasia Beresford is a Manchester-based interpreter who currently works primarily for public services in the North-West. She has an MA in Modern Languages (Polish, Russian & French) and a Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (English Law specialisation) for Polish.

The proposed changes in Criminal Justice System (CJS) interpreting are presented in Mr Joseph's article (opposite) as primarily driven by concerns about quality, and Applied Language Solutions (ALS) is presented as the harbinger of high standards and a new meritocracy. In fact the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice has said repeatedly that the changes are 'to cut the cost and make more efficient provision while safeguarding quality'. It is clear that the proposed changes are primarily a cost-cutting exercise.

Mr Joseph talks of UK authorities currently drawing 'from disparate lists of interpreters, whose qualifications have been issued using inconsistent criteria'. Currently the greatest source of inconsistency is the widespread use of agency 'interpreters'. To the extent that the CJS uses the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) it gets interpreters selected according to consistent criteria in terms of qualifications, experience and vetting. I do not claim that there are not improvements to be made, but razing an existing quality control system to the ground in order to replace it with an untested commercially driven one does not seem wise.

Meritocracy or de-professionalisation?

Currently the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) Law option is considered the gold standard entry-level qualification for working in the CJS. It tests both interpreting techniques and legal terminology. If a Middlesex University assessment centre is to be similar to the DPSI, then why on earth replicate the DPSI at great expense in these times of austerity? I suspect the real reason for devising assessment centres is not to verify existing interpreters, but in order to justify tiered pay rates.

A tier system has been proposed in order to achieve cost reductions with shockingly little knowledge of the realities of CJS interpreting assignments, as exemplified by the very limited and inept illustrations of what sort of job would be in each tier provided in the MoJ 'Quality Standards' document in March 2011. As far as I know, no proper research has been done regarding the levels of interpreting skill required for various types of CJS assignments, and without a solid evidence base, introducing tiers can only be seen as an attempt to lower standards indiscriminately in order to reduce costs.

The DPSI qualification is only a starting point and I believe Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is essential. Many of us already invest significant resources in CPD, and if there is to be an obligatory framework for this it must be implemented by fellow professionals. No other freelance professionals in the UK have their CPD monitored and enforced by a commercial agency.

Pay or peanuts?

The derisory pay rates listed in Mr Joseph's article are only one element of ALS's lethal mix, which, if implemented, will de-professionalise public service interpreting. ALS has said it will not pay for travel time or travel expenses and that it will abolish the current three-hour minimum payment period. So, for a typical local Magistrates' Court job in the Greater Manchester area, the following is a reasonable comparison of typical current remuneration under the National Agreement with what ALS might pay:

National Agreement:	
3 hours minimum	£85
1 hr 15 minutes travel time	£18.75
Mileage	£5
Parking	£5
Total paid	£113.75
Income net of travel expenses	£103.75
Income / hour	£24.41

ALS:		
Job lasts	1 hour	3 hours
Total paid	£20	£60
Income net of travel expenses	£10	£50
Income / hour	£4.44	£11.76

These figures speak for themselves. ALS rates do not even guarantee a rate equal to the minimum wage! At best the net payment to the interpreter is reduced by 52%, even though the starting point is that the rates currently paid are barely sustainable and wholly incommensurate with the skills and abilities of a professional interpreter.

A flawed framework

So ALS's marketing machine rolls into action again with high-minded words about standards and quality to draw attention away from the exploitative reality. However, the key problem is not any particular unscrupulous agency, but the MoJ's flawed framework and focus on cost-cutting to the exclusion of all else.

It is the MoJ which is ultimately responsible for the framework, for ignoring all advice other than that of its 'lowballing' preferred bidder and turning a blind eye to the destructive nature of the proposals. Outsourcing to any single commercial supplier in the way proposed would be a short-sighted, slash-and-burn approach.

As for qualified and experienced interpreters, we have no real choice left other than to refuse to participate in any such new arrangement. We are freelancers and have no obligation to provide interpreting services to the CJS and no incentive at all to do so under the proposed exploitative structures. Let them have monkeys, if that is what they decide they want... and then we will see yet another headline about large government contracts failing and costing the taxpayer money. Unfortunately it is interpreters and those unable to communicate adequately who will suffer, not the mandarins making these decisions. ©