

STOP PRESS!

The Justice Committee has announced today (19 October) it would like to hear from individuals with direct experience of the provision of interpreting and translation services by Applied Language Solutions (ALS). The Justice Committee would particularly like to hear about direct examples of recent performance issues (during September and October 2012) surrounding the operation of the Framework Agreement between the Ministry of Justice and ALS.

The Justice Committee has heard that some stakeholders may be reticent to provide formal written evidence. These may include: court and tribunal service staff; members of the judiciary and magistracy; legal practitioners and other practitioners; defendants in criminal cases and parties in civil and family cases and interpreters providing services on behalf of ALS.

Justice Committee 'We would encourage these individuals to submit their experiences through this web forum using an anonymous user name.'

Chairman of APCI, Geoffrey Buckingham, said: "We welcome opportunity for the judiciary, legal practitioners, defendants and even the interpreters themselves who are providing services on behalf of ALS to make anonymous submissions."

See <http://forums.parliament.uk/court-language-services/index.php?index,1>

PRESS RELEASE

'Car crash' contract puts Ministry of Justice in the firing line

19 October 2012: Senior officials from the Ministry of Justice faced ridicule and derision by MPs at the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (15 October) when they examined the interpreting contract awarded by MoJ to Applied Language Solutions (ALS), now owned by Capita.

When quizzed about the "botched up procurement process", Ann Beasley, in charge of procurement, Martin Jones, senior responsible officer and Peter Handcock CBE, accounting officer, eventually admit they had not read the Equifax credit report they commissioned, which had advised them not to do business worth more than £1m with ALS:

Nick Smith MP: At the time, did either of you look at the report?

Martin Jones: I have certainly read the report

Nick Smith MP: At that time?

Martin Jones: I didn't read the report at that time.

Nick Smith MP: Ann Beasley, did you read that report at that time?

Ann Beasley: No, but staff working for me did.

Margaret Hodge MP (Chair): Mr Handcock, did you?

Peter Handcock: No, I didn't.

Faced with these shocking admissions, Margaret Hodge MP, Chair, Public Accounts Committee, asked: "But you have got advice saying 'Don't give this little company more than a million quid contract' and you give it a £42 million contract. What were you thinking about?" while Conservative MP Stewart Jackson offered some "friendly advice" that "in future you do read these reports".

Martin Jones also admitted he didn't read the full report from an academic at Middlesex University which expressed "profound reservations" about the validity of how interpreters would be assessed and graded into tiers.

Despite the fact that the number of individuals registered on ALS' online portal was 2,000 at the time the contract went live, it emerged that only 280 had actually been assessed, verified and CRB checked for interpreting in the justice sector prior to roll out – a clear indication of the inadequacy of the contract.

In relation to this, Margaret Hodge highlighted the fact that one of these 'registered numbers' was in fact the owner of a cat who registered his pet as a feline language specialist as a joke, and was then asked by ALS to bring the pet in for a language test. Another registered individual was 'Jajo' the Rabbit, who was also offered work by ALS. Responding to this, Martin Jones flippantly replied: "I am assuming that they would perhaps have not done well when they turned up."

Attending the hearing on behalf of professional interpreters were Geoffrey Buckingham and Alan Thompson of the Association of Police and Court Interpreters (APCI). Thanking the committee for inviting them to give evidence, Mr Buckingham welcomed the fact that this matter was being taken seriously, saying: "It is our view that the matter of interpreting in the criminal justice system lays such a responsibility on its practitioners that only qualified, experienced, vetted and registered public service interpreters should be employed. Failure to do so is an abrogation of responsibility and will be very costly, not just in financial terms but in human terms and in terms of the reputation of British justice across the

world”.

Capita, who recently rebranded ALS to Capita Translation and Interpreting, were not present at the hearing on 15 October. Margaret Hodge has summoned the company to give evidence on 29 October. It is expected that Capita representatives will face the same tone of questioning by members of the committee who collectively branded the contract “shambolic”, “a disaster”, “car crash” and akin to “Fred Karno’s circus”.

A transcript of Monday’s hearing reveals the extent of the gruelling questioning faced by the MoJ and the ‘shocking failings’ which were uncovered. It is available for download

<<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmpubacc/uc620-i/uc62001.htm>> here.

Figures released by the MoJ this week (18th October) show that the company has again failed to reach its performance target, six months after the new contract came into place. There were 3,937 official complaints recorded within this time period. The majority of the complaints came from tribunals (57.3%), with the most common reason for complaint being that the interpreter was late. At criminal courts and prisons, the most common reason for complaint was that there was no interpreter available (34.6%).

The MoJ officials admitted they did not impose penalties in the first four months of the contract and to date had only fined Capita (which supplies the data published) £11,000. Only spot checks are carried out and no proper system for monitoring or independent evaluation of the contract is in place.

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Additional Extracts from the hearing: Austin Mitchell MP (speaking to Peter Handcock): “It is most entertaining watching you, because most of what you say has been greeted with multilingual nods of denial from behind you.”

Austin Mitchell MP (speaking to Ann Beasley): “Did you take independent expert advice?”

Ann Beasley: "We did not take specific independent advice on the tiering."

Austin Mitchell MP: "Why not?"

Ann Beasley: "Because tiering was a solution offered by every single one of the 126 bidders and is already in operation in an OGC language framework. Although it was new to the Ministry, it was not new in the world of delivering interpreting services."

Austin Mitchell MP: "Again, you have disbelieving nods behind you."

Austin Mitchell MP: Do we know how much the directors of ALS made out of selling their crock to Capita?

Ann Beasley: No.

Martin Jones: No.

Austin Mitchell MP: Shouldn't we know?

Ann Beasley: No.

Martin Jones: No. It is not our business.

Austin Mitchell MP: If you have been involved in a huge contract worth £40 million, and you cannot fulfil it, and then you flog off your company to a bigger company, it is a good way of making money, isn't it?