

Community, Court and Police Interpreters at a crossroads?

Michael Benis summarises the results of the ITI *bulletin* survey of Community, Court and Police Interpreters, and looks to the future

Are things really that bad?

For the past few years, the word has been that Community, Court and Police Interpreters (CCPI) have seen their rates and working conditions decline. Many interpreters in these fields have also lamented a fall in standards precipitated by ignorance in the public services and voiced dissatisfaction with the organisations set up to represent them, accusing them of a failure to inform the public about the profession or represent their interests. What's more, it was claimed that this combination of problems was making large numbers of CCPIs consider leaving the profession. *Bulletin* set out to verify and quantify these issues by conducting a quick survey.

Structure of survey, number and profile of respondents

The survey was conducted between two issues of *bulletin*, using a printed and online questionnaire of 53 questions. The questionnaire has been published on the ITI website (www.iti.org.uk), along with the electronic version of this article. The first response arrived on 16 January 2006 and the last on 5 February. There were a total of 80 respondents, approximately one third of whom were full members of ITI. The respondents were nearly all based in the UK (90 per cent), with other countries (seven) accounting for no more than one respondent each. The small size of the sample group makes it difficult to extrapolate any definitive conclusions, although the responses are consistent with opinions voiced widely within the interpreting profession.

The majority of respondents were Court Interpreters, who accounted for 40.2 per cent of the total (66 respondents), followed by Police Interpreters at 34.8 per cent (57)

and Community Interpreters at 25 per cent (41), possibly confirming that the latter group is underrepresented in professional interpreting associations and their circles.

A total of 87.2 per cent of the respondents also worked in other fields of interpreting, the majority as Ad Hoc/Business Interpreters (49 per cent) and 32.7 per cent as Conference Interpreters. Although 53.8 per cent of the respondents described themselves as working full-time as interpreters, 88.3 per cent of respondents also worked as translators.

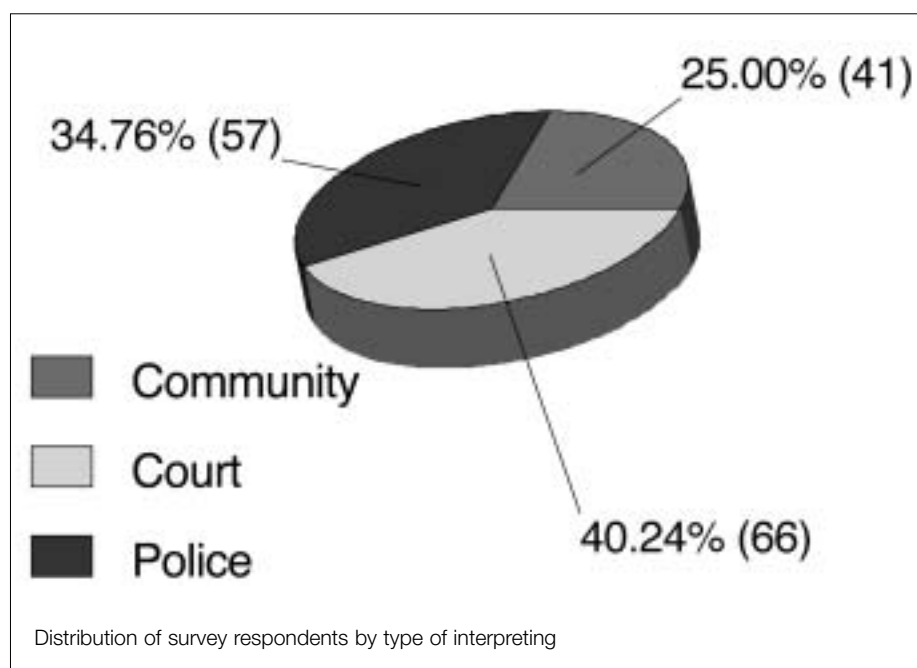
Whether as a result of personal preference, to boost their income or to ensure continuity of work between short interpreting sessions, the majority of CCPIs do not specialise solely in these fields of interpreting.

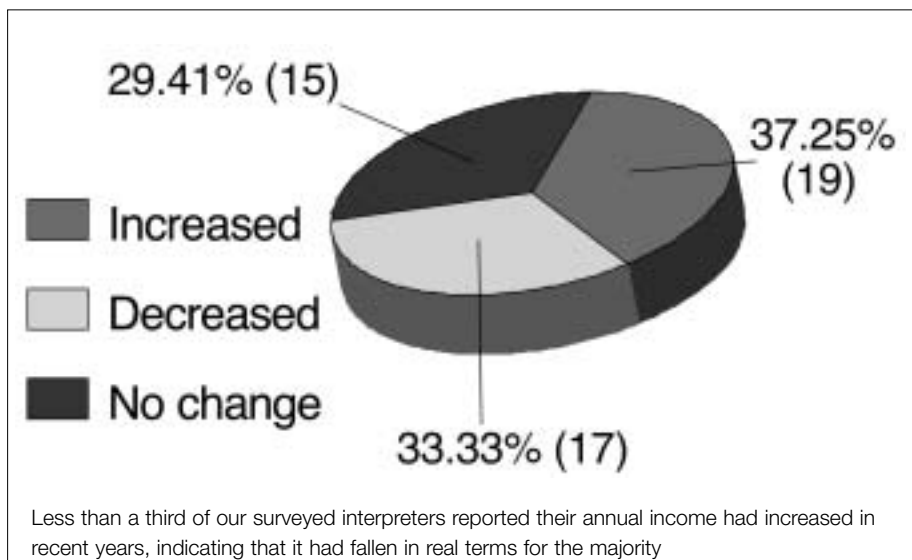
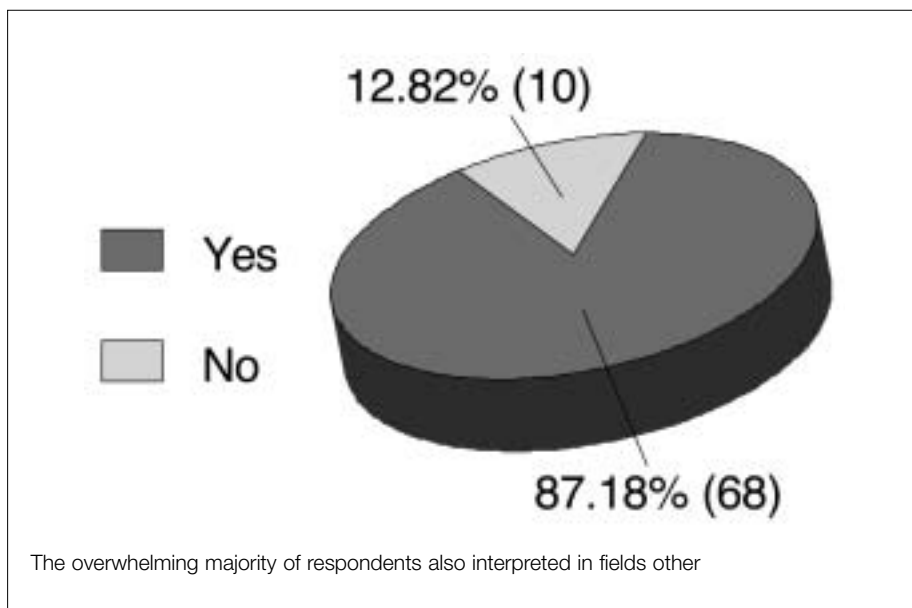
Professional Standards and Qualifications

The most prevalent single qualification of respondents was the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI), which was held by 26.2 per cent of the total. Full members of ITI (FITI/MITI) accounted for 22.8 per cent and members of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (FIL/MIL) 15.9 per cent. Community Interpreters qualified to Level 3 of the Open College Network scheme came to just 6.2 per cent of the total, with levels 1 and 2 accounting for 1.4 per cent each. In addition, 24.8 per cent of respondents specified that they had a qualification other than the above, which was in most cases a college or university degree, although the Metropolitan Police Test in particular and EU accreditation as a Conference Interpreter were also specified. It should be noted that there was some overlap across these groups.

In general, respondents were positive about professional standards, with the majority reporting no change in recent years (around 35 per cent) and the next largest group finding an improvement (around 30 per cent). Around 20 per cent noted a deterioration in standards. There were no significant differences between Community, Court and Police Interpreters in these assessments. Interpreters not working through agencies tended to be more pessimistic in their assessment of standards. It is not possible to obtain the reason from the survey results. Overall, however, the assessment was positive, and this is the only area in which the survey did not confirm the generally negative reports of CCPIs.

At the same time, it is quite possible that these responses may have focused on the standards achieved by qualified interpreters, namely the respondents themselves.





Indeed, it would be difficult to know on what basis a practitioner who generally works in isolation could do anything other than assess their own performance when replying to a question phrased along the lines of 'In your experience have standards improved or declined in recent years?'

Correspondence with the 12 per cent of respondents who took up the invitation at the end of the survey to contact me direct has unveiled a catalogue of cases of incompetence encountered in Courts and Police Stations, invariably involving improvised interpreters with no training and inadequate language abilities, including several cases of agencies supplying interpreters who could not speak the appropriate languages at all. Agencies weren't, however, the only culprits, with allegations also being levelled against courts and constabularies for having similarly unqualified interpreters on their lists and two alleged cases of incompetent NRPSI interpreters.

It should not be overlooked that

a substantial number of respondents considered the use of agencies not only to be increasing, but to have had a negative impact on standards, this being the view of more than two thirds of our Court and Police Interpreter respondents (see *Relationships with Agencies*).

Rates and terms of payment

The annual incomes of respondents varied widely, with a minimum of £6,000 and maximum of £60,000. The median was £33,000 and the mean income £27,594. While 37.3 per cent of respondents reported that their annual income had increased in recent years, almost as many (33.3 per cent) declared it had decreased, while 29.4 per cent stated that it had not changed. We can consequently state that CCPI income has been declining in real terms, taking inflation into account. The situation for hourly rates was similar, with 32.5 per cent reporting an increase, 58.4 per cent reporting no change

and 9.1 per cent a decrease.

The average hourly rate charged by respondents was £29.70, with a minimum of £13 and a maximum of £125. Community Interpreter rates were below the average, while Court and Police rates were clustered around it.

Minimum charges can have a significant impact upon the income of CCPIs, since jobs generally last less than a day and in most cases less than half a day, but the fact that the length of an assignment is not generally predictable makes it difficult if not impossible for interpreters to accept more than one per day. In court work, for example, it is rare for a court to be able to guarantee that the interpreter will not also be required for the afternoon session, although it is often the case that they will not be needed. The responsible interpreter consequently has to keep the entire day free of other work although they are very unlikely to be paid for all their time. The situation has further deteriorated now that UK Courts in most cases no longer pay interpreters travelling time, following a magistrate's decision not to award such payment to an expert witness.

Similarly, Community Interpreters may be required to travel for much longer than they spend interpreting during a GP appointment. In addition, interpreters for particularly rare or hard-to-find languages are frequently asked to travel disproportionate distances.

The mean minimum charge for Community Interpreters was two hours of their time, with a minimum of one and maximum of three. The mean charge for Court Interpreters was 2.91 hours, with a minimum of two and maximum of four. Police Interpreters reported an average of 2.66, with a minimum of two and maximum of three.

Approximately 45 per cent of Court and Police Interpreters reported that they received a lower minimum charge and were paid lower rates by agencies than when working directly for the Courts and Police. Around 30 per cent of the same group reported there was no difference, while 24 per cent reported they were treated more favourably by agencies, indicating that some Courts and Constabularies are happy to pay higher rates when outsourcing and that some agencies operate on tight margins, to the benefit of their interpreters. The minimum charges and rates of Community Interpreters were largely the same irrespective of whether they were working for agencies or directly for service providers.

Most respondents declared they stipulate payment within 30 days (67.5 per cent), although 17.5 per cent specified within 45 days and 3.8 per cent within 15 days. Three respondents had longer terms (two with 60 days and one with 60-90 days, in all cases for agencies). However, 53.8 per cent reported

National register

Although the questionnaire referred to national registers in general, the fact that 87.8 per cent of respondents were based in the UK means we can assume that most of the responses regarded the registers of the APCI, CloL, ITI and National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI). Whereas 69.2 per cent of respondents were a 'member' of a national register, only 40.4 per cent felt that their 'membership' was good value for money. Connected with this, only 26.8 per cent of respondents reported that more than half their Court and Police work came through the register, 35.7 per cent stated less than half and 19.6 per cent none at all.

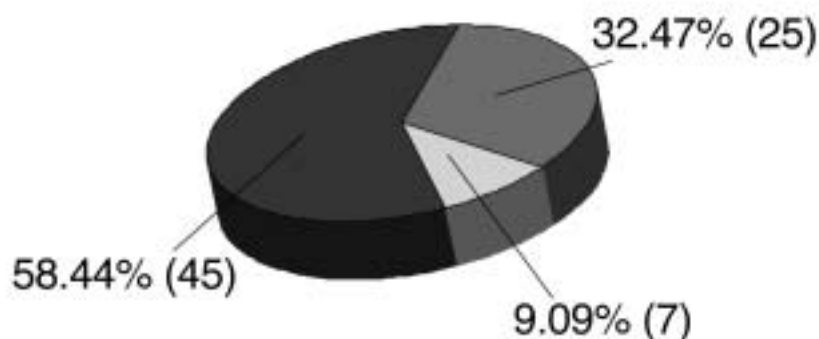
More alarmingly, considering the potential danger for a CCPI whose identity and details are known, only 38.2 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the confidentiality of their registers. Although public service interpreters have expressed significant confidentiality concerns about the provision of the NRPSI to agencies, reservations were also expressed about other registers and the amount of information on members they provide directly to the public via their website directories, for example.

Relationship with agencies

Relationships with agencies appear to be particularly fraught in this section of the interpreting community, judging by both the comments of respondents and feedback to me during the survey period. That's partly because it's more difficult for an agency to demonstrate that it's providing added value where interpreters are concerned compared with translators, whose work is frequently checked, corrected and edited. But above all it's because the Courts and Police in particular have historically dealt directly with interpreters and the NRPSI was indeed set up to ensure they could rely on access to qualified and vetted professionals. The trend, however, appears to be towards outsourcing the organisation of these services, with the NRPSI now being provided to agencies. Moreover, according to data recently collected from constabularies under the Freedom of Information Act by the Campaigns Officer of the National Union of Professional Interpreters and Translators (NUPIT), usage of NRPSI interpreters by such agencies tends to be substantially lower than when provision is organised directly by the Police themselves. The figures for most constabularies using agencies are less than 50 per cent and in some cases substantially lower, compared with 100 per cent for those that use the NRPSI directly.

Interestingly, 72 per cent of respondents working for the Police did not do so through

■ Increased ■ Decreased ■ No change



Hourly rates were found to have fallen in real terms (taking inflation into account) for most CCPIs

'More than 76.2 per cent of respondents had felt threatened or experienced violence in the course of their CCPI work'

experiencing occasional problems with late payment and 27.5 per cent stated they experience such problems frequently; 18.8 per cent never had such problems.

The situation was better for non-payment, with 42.5 per cent experiencing occasional problems, 1.3 per cent reporting frequent problems and 56.3 per cent stating they did not have any problems at all. Several respondents commented that they have no say over rates or terms of payment.

Overall the situation is far from rosy, with rates having fallen in real terms and Courts having recently found themselves obliged to stop paying travelling time to interpreters (as explained above). The fact that these rates are in many cases substantially less than an accomplished interpreter can earn in commercial fields may explain why so many CCPIs also work in other areas.

Working conditions and awareness

There can be no doubt that CCPI work is stressful. More than 76.2 per cent of respondents had experienced violence or felt threatened in their work and 56.3 per cent have found it difficult to cope with traumatic cases and/or felt isolated in coping with these difficulties. Only 11.5 per cent of respondents who work with agencies report that they are provided with any support in these areas.

Court Interpreters continue to have to mix with the general public when waiting outside court, which can lead to threatening or intimidating situations that increase this stress. Only 23.5 per cent are provided with a separate waiting room or area, while

24.6 per cent report that they are more likely to be provided with such an area now than in the past, which could reflect recent improvements. Nevertheless, 72.3 per cent state there has been no change in the situation and 3.1 per cent have observed a deterioration.

The Courts are also found wanting when it comes to providing suitable infrastructures for interpreters: 72.1 per cent of respondents found that the way security screening had been implemented made it more difficult for them to hear the court proceedings, while 19.7 per cent reported no difference and 8.2 per cent thought there had been an improvement (through, for example, the installation of loudspeakers).

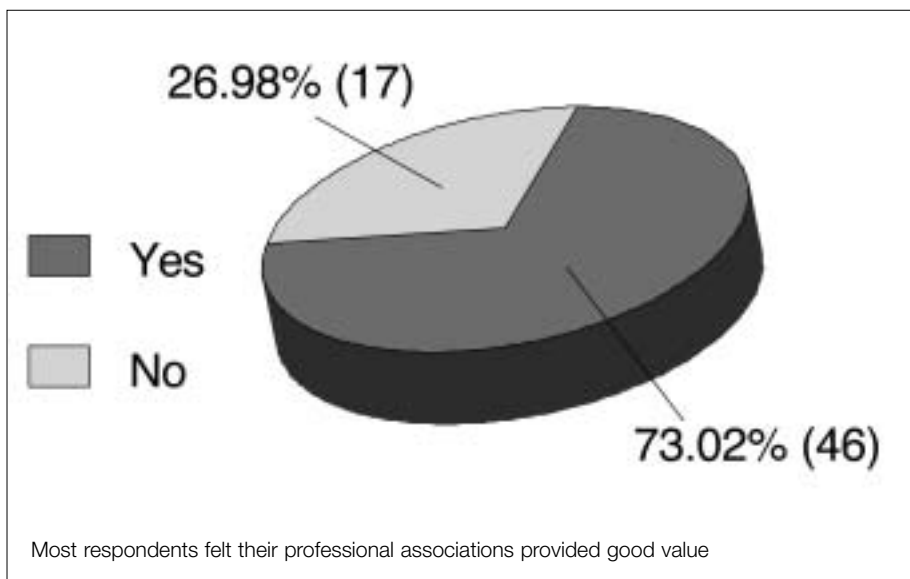
Community Interpreters noted a slight improvement in understanding of the CI model, with 9.4 per cent feeling they were more likely to be supported in requests for a pre-interview than in the past, but 46.9 per cent felt the situation was unchanged. Only 1.6 per cent found it had become more difficult to hold a pre-interview. It should be noted that where pre-interviews are requested this is in agreement with the service provider (eg primary care trust), and difficulties in arranging one will be as a result of a lack of understanding or facilities on the part of the individual practitioner (eg GP).

Despite these problems, 51.4 per cent of respondents felt that the health and public services are more aware of the role and needs of interpreters now than in the past; only 6.9 per cent felt they were less aware, while 41.7 per cent considered there had been no change.

agencies, whereas 48.6 per cent of those interpreting for the Courts worked through agencies, a figure that rises to 55.8 per cent for Community Interpreters. However, while the majority of Police and Court Interpreters working through agencies described those agencies as generic agencies (66.7 per cent and 64.7 per cent respectively), just over half of Community Interpreters (51 per cent) described themselves as working for specialist agencies. Nevertheless, 56.1 per cent of Community Interpreters considered the use of agencies to have had a negative impact on standards, a figure that rises to 67.7 per cent for Court and Police Interpreters.

Shedding some light on this, a massive 85.7 per cent of respondents have refused to work with an agency/service because of the terms and conditions it offers, and 52 per cent have refused to work for an agency or service that in their opinion does not always work with qualified interpreters. There is clearly a very strong feeling that quality standards are threatened because some agencies are offering unacceptable terms and conditions, or working with inexperienced interpreters who are prepared to accept lower rates. In both cases interpreters are prepared to vote with their feet.

It should be noted that the percentage of 'Don't know' replies regarding the difference between the fees etc paid by agencies and directly by service providers was high for all three areas of CCPI, consistently exceeding 40 per cent and rising to 52.9 per cent for Police Interpreting. This suggests there may be little mobility across those groups of interpreters working with agencies and those not working with agencies, if we are to assume that most respondents have been practising for more than a few years, something that is likely considering their qualifications.



The situation was similar regarding whether the use of agencies had increased in recent years, where the 'Don't know' responses varied between 40.5 per cent and 52.9 per cent. The figures were nevertheless conclusive that the use of agencies for CCPI had increased, with affirmative responses of 37.1 per cent for Police Interpreting, 40.5 per cent for Court Interpreting and 45.6 per cent for Community Interpreting. The figures for 'No change' were 5.7 per cent, 10.8 per cent and 2.9 per cent respectively, while those for 'Decreased' were 4.3 per cent, 8.1 per cent and 5.9 per cent.

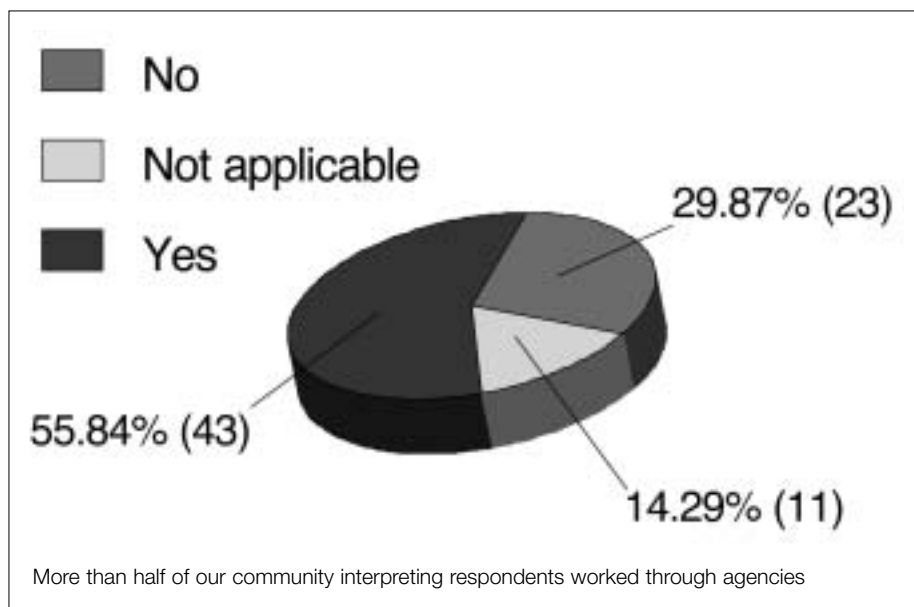
When it comes to providing support for interpreters, 51 per cent of Community Interpreters stated the agencies they work with provide help with some sort of training, but this figure fell to 32 per cent and 31.7 per cent respectively for Court and Police Interpreters. These figures were even lower

when it came to providing support for coping with traumatic cases. Only 25 per cent of Community Interpreter respondents indicated the agencies they work with provide support, and that was more than double the 11 per cent for Court and Police Interpreters.

The criticism of agencies and the service providers using them voiced by many public service interpreters is based on allegations, substantiated by this survey, that they provide little if any training and even less support, while paying lower rates and offering worse terms of payment than the public services whom they supply. It has been heartening to note that there are however, some exceptions, including in Community Interpreting.

Professional Associations and representations

Around one third of respondents were members of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (33.8 per cent), and a quarter were members of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (25.2 per cent). The Association of Police and Court Interpreters accounted for 10.1 per cent of respondents, while 2.2 per cent were members of the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (to whom I apologise for not having created a dedicated tick box in the survey, and likewise to those on the omitted Directory of the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP), which is of course a national register). A further 2.2 per cent were members of the American Translators' Association, while the remainder were members of other national associations and 12.2 per cent did not belong to any association at all. On the whole, these respondents felt their membership represented good value for money (73 per cent). Those who did not had three common



complaints: they were not receiving as much work through their membership as they had expected, they found their membership and other fees too high, and lastly they felt their associations were not doing enough to represent their interests.

One respondent referred to NUPIT's increasingly vigorous work to represent the interests of NRPSI interpreters, who are now also networking strongly through a lively campaigning and discussion group at Yahoogroups (http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/nrpsi_action_group/). This is a closed group to which you have to apply or be invited to join, providing your NRPSI number.

Conclusions and discussion: dedication and frustration

The results of this survey largely bear out the concerns voiced by CCPIs in recent years regarding their comparatively poor working conditions and terms and conditions, together with reports that these have caused experienced practitioners to leave the profession. Considering the large number of respondents who already work in other areas of interpreting and in translation, the fact that only 35.9 per cent stated they have considered leaving CCPI to achieve a higher income is testimony to their dedication. At the same time, a figure of more than a third is unquestionably cause for alarm, especially if one considers that almost all these respondents offer at least one form of qualification. The situation is even more worrying when one also notes that of this 35.9 per cent a full 62.5 per cent reported they are now more likely to leave the profession than they were in the past. They quite clearly believe that their hard-won skills will be rewarded better elsewhere.

Too many experts, but not enough ears

Despite years of consultation through the Trials Issues Group's Interpreters' Working Group and the institution of the DPSI

and NRPSI, awareness of how to select competent Court and Police Interpreters and of what they require to perform effectively continues to be poor, pay and conditions have – far from improving – actually deteriorated, and insufficient work is being done to prevent unqualified interpreters practising. As a result cases collapse or go to appeal or retrial, which wastes public funds and undermines the image of and public confidence in interpreters.

A consistent problem has been the influence of 'interpreting experts' who are not themselves experienced interpreters. These 'experts' cannot help identifying requirements from the perspective of their own background in other services that use interpreters, something which does not, sadly, mean they are aware of the many different cultural and linguistic 'blind spots' which an interpreter needs to negotiate to work effectively. They are consequently very unlikely to have a detailed practical grasp of the knowledge and skills required to provide interpreting services effectively and are in many cases unable to judge the effectiveness of interpreting unless the process breaks down entirely.

Similarly, the fact that someone has commissioned or used interpreters does not mean they are qualified to design, test or troubleshoot an interpreting service. This doesn't just apply to police officers, members of the judiciary and doctors. Agency owners and their project managers are no more likely to have experience as interpreters or any training in the different models of Community, Court or Police Interpreting, never mind in interpreter training, evaluation and quality control.

The problem with these 'experts', who obviously aren't representative of all committee members, service providers or agencies, is not so much that they don't know enough, but that they often don't listen enough, and that when talking to the uninformed they frequently leave them with the impression

that there is no more to be said.

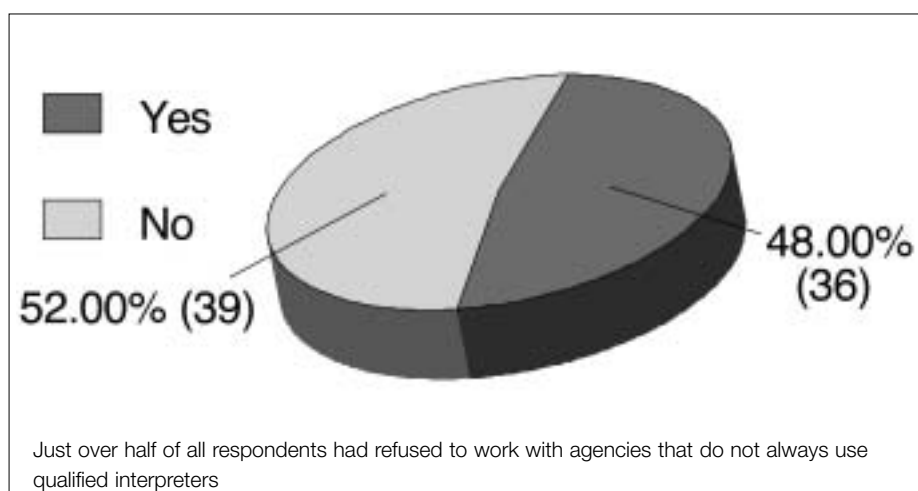
On the other side of the coin, there are a significant number of interpreters who take it upon themselves to represent the profession without researching the situation nationally and therefore speak only from their own experience, fears and suspicions. The mistaken assumptions and assurances of these 'experts' on both sides can then come to be taken as fact by their colleagues, who then proliferate these misunderstandings.

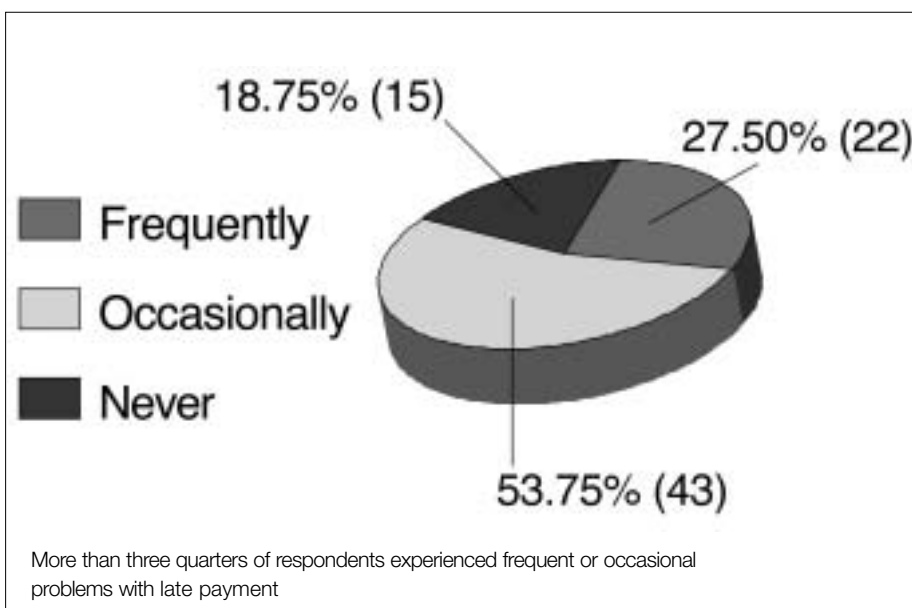
At the same time, the difficult situation in which CCPIs find themselves and the high level of dissatisfaction, disappointment and mistrust this has engendered, combined with inadequate communication, has led specialists in different areas to misunderstand each other's different interpreting models and rationales, exacerbating confusion and divisions within the profession as a whole. There is still a glass wall between Community Interpreters and Court and Police Interpreters, with none of the professional associations effectively representing or understanding the needs of the former. If Community, Court and Police interpreters are to improve their lot and therefore the level of service provided to some of the most disadvantaged groups in society, they need to speak with a united voice.

A poor grasp of standards

These problems of isolation, fragmentation and a lack of systematic consultation have also had an effect on the benchmark qualifications for interpreters in these areas. There is very little knowledge outside certain primary care trusts of the Open College Network qualifications for Community Interpreters, while the level of competency attested to by the DPSI can vary depending on the languages, specialist areas, trainers and examiners involved. In addition, the DPSI training and examinations can centre on institutional process at the expense of a focus on interpreting strategies, slang, dialect and cultural/subculture differences. A further problem is that many service providers and agencies fail to understand the importance of the different specialist areas of DPSI/NRPSI qualification.

At the same time, the NRPSI benchmark – which is the absolute minimum recommended by a variety of reports, groups and committees – is, as we have seen, still not being met by certain police forces by their own admission. The situation in the courts, which is currently being verified by NUPIT, is unlikely to be any better, especially if this survey is representative in finding that 48.6 per cent of Court Interpreters also work for the courts through agencies, while 40.5 per cent perceive this practice to have increased (compared with 10.8 per cent who perceive no change and 8.1 per cent who consider it has decreased).






further, making it more difficult for them to obtain suitably qualified and experienced interpreters and translators. The ODPM recognises there are currently difficulties in this area, stating that 'with only 3,500 (approximately) registered interpreters in the UK, there are often difficulties due to shortages of translators and interpreters with certain languages, qualifications and security clearances.' Shortages may, however, not be the problem. This survey suggests that professionals with the necessary skills are there but are not prepared to accept the pay and conditions currently typical of CCPI and will also vote with their feet when it comes to service providers or agencies that offer poor conditions. NUPIT's investigation likewise makes this quite clear.

The ODPM states that it is 'also keen to support an increase in the pool of I&T providers to combat shortages and ensure high standards are maintained; and also that the appropriate level of interpretation or translation is provided for each situation'. It may therefore be that this survey proves quite timely, since it corroborates the strong anecdotal evidence that a substantial number of highly experienced public service interpreters have already 'retired' in the face of increased bureaucracy and outsourcing to agencies, combined with declining income. If new developments in the same direction are greeted in a similar way, there could well be a new haemorrhage of perhaps as much as 30 per cent of qualified and experienced professionals if our results are indicative of the UK as a whole.

A considered analysis may reveal that there is more to be saved in the long term by investing in the establishment of a central government outsourcing agency and eschewing the immediate but transient savings of outsourcing in bulk to commercial agencies, a move that could further undermine the fragile current situation. It is worth noting, for example, that Staffordshire Police Force, which has a policy of working directly and exclusively with Interpreters from the NRPSI or CACDP Directory for all criminal justice cases, reports that this policy has had no adverse budgetary impact.

The ODPM's consultation exercise is to be welcomed as an important opportunity for those representing the profession to come together coherently to finally address the problems which have long been raised by CCPIs and have been confirmed by this survey. If the professional associations and ODPM are able to work together effectively, there could be substantial benefits for the administration of justice and provision of public services in the UK. 

Special thanks to: Lorraine Gregory, Professor G. Makin, Emma Wagner and Alan Wheatley.

Future challenges/opportunities
 Many of the weaknesses in the current situation have been effectively exposed by the new Campaigns Officer of NUPIT, whose recent work illustrates the strong investigative and campaigning role that a union can play in this area of the profession. The situation could be substantially improved if the various professional associations and NUPIT were to set up an independent consultative board that could advise on standards and best practice. Such a board could also achieve much to increase understanding and collaboration between Community, Court and Police Interpreters and overcome the current divisions between them.

By pooling resources, such a board could seek to overcome another of the crucial weaknesses of the past, related to the fact that the organisations representing translators and interpreters are largely voluntary organisations. The very nature of the profession means these volunteers tend to be freelancers who sacrifice a significant share of their income to dedicate the time required. As a rule, this becomes prohibitive after a few years and so the representatives of the profession change. This discontinuity has become part of the problem, preventing interpreters' associations from maintaining a constant voice with which to inform the representatives of service providers on consultative committees and the like. This fragmented representation, often by professionals with experience in different areas that adopt different models, has in my experience made it easier for advisory committees to take the path of least resistance, encouraging them to believe that the many potential pitfalls identified by different representatives in their own ways were merely the isolated worries of

idiosyncratic minds, which could therefore be disregarded.

A simultaneous threat and opportunity can be identified in a recent Information Brief of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), available for consultation by ITI members in the 'Minutes and Reports' section of the ITI website. The Brief reports on a new initiative of the ODPM that aims to 'integrate I&T procurement across government and achieve better value for money for the tax-payer by reducing duplication and standardising the ordering and payment systems'. It is laudable that the ODPM is communicating with interpreters' and translators organisations, but regrettable – at least as far as the translation side is concerned – that it has only embarked on a consultation exercise now, when 'invitations to tender for both the translations and the telephone interpreting are being prepared in accordance with EU procurement regulations' with 'contracts to be in place in those areas by September 2006'.

Although the ODPM is consulting widely and hopes 'to deliver changes that benefit both the departments and the interpreter/translator', this timescale is likely to preclude a full examination of the many potential pitfalls that lie ahead, particularly if the ODPM is to avoid the quality problems experienced by Brussels and Luxembourg with external agency suppliers. And that's just where translations are concerned. When it comes to interpreting, which has a longer implementation timescale, the ODPM might again consider international consultation to benefit from the experience of its counterparts in Australia and Canada.

The results of this survey identify a real risk that centralised outsourcing to commercial agencies by government departments could cause the current remuneration/quality situation to deteriorate