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Interpreters in court pay row

Courts Service outlines plans for an 8% fees slash, prompting fears there will be a dearth of cover in the future

Mark Tighe

Irish court interpreters have been told their hourly rate is to be cut by 28%.

Lionbridge, the company contracted by the Courts Service to translate for defendants and witnesses who don't speak English, informed interpreters last week that the fee was being cut from €25 to €18 in April.

The company is among the service providers who received a letter from the Courts Service seeking an 8% reduction in fees in line with a government decision to reduce the amount paid for all professional services.

About 1,200 interpreters are employed to cover 175 languages. Interpreters have described Lionbridge's 28% cut as an "opportunistic" way to increase its take from each employee. "It is unfair that we take this cut while their budget will only go down 8%," said one.

Lionbridge did not return calls asking for comment.

The interpreters' fate is in stark contrast with that of judges, who are the only public servants not subject to the 7.5% public-service pension levy. The Courts Service confirmed it had sought an 8% reduction in fees from all its service providers. The amount of money paid to Lionbridge is demand driven and comes to about €2m annually — up from €100,000 in 2000.

According to Mary Phelan, a lecturer in Dublin City University, Lionbridge is paid €46 per hour by the Courts Service for providing interpreters. This gives it €21 per hour while the interpreter takes home €25.

Under the new rates, Lionbridge's take will increase to €24 per hour despite the 8% cut from the Courts Service. Phelan said this rate will be one of the lowest paid to court interpreters in Europe.

"The Courts Service has to be concerned about the quality of the translations," said Phelan. "We will not get able interpreters to work for €18 an hour where they may only get one hour's work in a day."

British court interpreters are paid for half or full days while their Irish counterparts may travel to courts in Kerry and Donegal for just one hour's pay.

The quality of some Lionbridge interpreters has been criticised by judges.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/ireland/article5993267.ece>