Written evidence submitted by Marie Vickers (ATW0012)

Summary:

- Assessment insulting to people with lifelong conditions
- Assessment shows lack of Deaf awareness
- Assessment process time consuming and interferes with workload
- Repetitive applications
- Insufficient support to maintain employment (less than half working hours)
- No opportunity to progress (training not accessible as not supported)
- Deaf people not recognised as experts in their own access needs
- No consultation with Deaf people or interpreters
- Recommend any changes to AtW to follow full consultations with Deaf people and interpreters and include an impact assessment.
- Recommend all AtW information is made accessible to Deaf people and BSL contact to AtW is made available.

Introduction:

I am a profoundly Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) user who relies on BSL Interpreting support to access employment.

I am employed as a DeafHope Outreach Support Worker, providing outreach support to Deaf women survivor victims of domestic abuse, working alongside other DeafHope projects to make sure Deaf victims and their children are protected from harm.

DeafHope is the only sign-language based service designed to help Deaf women and children who suffer domestic violence. Deaf women are more at risk of domestic abuse than hearing women, but with BSL as their first language, getting help is much harder. DeafHope helps Deaf women find a safe place, rebuild their lives and regain their confidence, as well as educating the Deaf women on how to recognise and avoid future abuse.

Evidence:

1. I recommend that any changes to AtW follow a full consultation and completion of an impact assessment. The consultation must include both Deaf people and interpreters.
2. I find AtW’s assessment process insulting to people who have lifelong conditions or disabilities. As a profoundly Deaf person it is insulting to be continually asked whether my deafness will improve. As is being asked if I am in receipt of benefits which I do not feel is relevant to my employment needs.
3. The assessment process shows a complete lack of Deaf awareness as I am asked if I am able to lipread or if a hearing aid would support me in my role. Having stated I am a profoundly deaf BSL user indicates that this is the method of communication I use, not English, yet I am expected to justify the use of my own language. I find this offensive.

4. The assessment process included a task to provide a 6 month diary to evidence the amount of time I would require an interpreter. This is a huge distraction and means my employers time is being spent on this, rather than focusing on supporting my clients who are in crisis. It is not effective and is placing Deaf people at a disadvantage as BSL is a first language and the forms are in English, meaning support being provided is being wasted on this task, this lessens the support time even further.

5. My working hours have recently increased but rather than a quick review of my support and increase the hours accordingly, I had to start a new application and reapply. This is not a good use of anyone’s time: the employees, the employers or DWP staff. The application process creates a great deal of stress, as I experience has taught me that it is a slow and difficult process and not accessible or supportive.

6. I have real concerns over my job security as the hours I have been allocated are insufficient and are placing my job at risk. I am employed for 37 hours a week, yet have only been allocated 14 hours support. This is not enough. My role involves supporting Deaf women to access community services including housing, benefits, health, legal, employment and counselling. These women are in crisis and I am responsible for all the initial contact. I need to be able to communicate with these services using an interpreter. The work is unpredictable and complex. I need full time interpreting support as I cannot say when crisis will occur or plan my work. I require fully qualified interpreters as the work involves Child Protection, legal work and is high risk. I need to be confident in the support I receive. I need full time, fully qualified support.

7. The opportunity to progress in employment is impeded as AtW are not providing interpreters for me to access training. I require two interpreters for this and AtW have said they won’t provide co-workers. I am employed by a charity who cannot afford to fund interpreters. AtW are placing interpreters in a difficult situation as they are being asked to work alone. This is not only unfair but places their health at risk. Repetitive Strain Injury is a lifelong condition and interpreters are being made increasingly vulnerable by AtW changes. The quality of the interpretation is affected if interpreters are tired and they are unable to function properly.
8. AtW advisors have recently changed significantly. Previously, Deaf people were listened to and acknowledged as the experts in their own access needs. This has now changed and we are being told by AtW what we need. This goes against everything AtW was set up to do – provide individualised support. Arbitrary rules cannot provide individualised packages and this needs to be changed. My access needs are no longer being met and my ability to perform at work is being affected. Eventually, I could lose my job.

9. There has been no consultation with any Deaf people or interpreters. We would have been able to tell the DWP that the 30 hour rule, amongst other changes would not meet our needs and could have avoided a lot of resources and tax payers’ money being wasted on this.

Recommendations:

AtW is not currently accessible to Deaf people. None of the information is accessible (or available in BSL) and any access has to be via an interpreter or written English. AtW needs to consider making itself more accessible to Deaf people - installing VRS onto their website so that Deaf people are able to contact them directly for example.

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