Written evidence submitted by The Deaf Agency Limited

1. Access to Work Application (AtW) and assessment processes.

Application:
Many employed deaf people have worked for many years with no AtW or limited support, due to:
- no knowledge of application process or who to contact
- no knowledge of what AtW can provide
- their supervisor telling them they don’t need any support, often quoting “we can manage” or “we cannot allow a support worker in here”.

We impart advice to Deaf to gain support but many fear losing their job so ‘go with the flow’. It is often the role of agencies to challenging employers for AtW support to be sought.

Previously assessment was made by professionals being nominated to visit the workplace and the Deaf person. Now it is done through form filling with clients and their managers then sent to an AtW office. Deaf people understandably say they can manage for fear of being thought of as ‘incompetent’, thus giving incorrect pictures of support actually required.

Assessment process:
The assessment process takes too long leaving Deaf employees struggling to cope with new demands of the job on their own, the learning process is therefore delayed and hindered affecting their ability to undertake the role in the same capacity as a hearing person.
Many times upon starting a new job, the exact requirements are unknown and budgets are set based on estimated support needs. What tends to happen is a budget is set, then has to be reassessed as requirements are realised. Current clients have requested Deaf Awareness sessions and more hours as meetings are more frequent. Three months later, still chasing for an answer. Another client given a start date for a new job, but no response re budget as yet, causing unnecessary stress.

2. Adequacy of ongoing support (Aids/support workers and help/advice from DWP)

Adequacy of ongoing support - aids / support workers:
Previously good support that worked smoothly but now problems exist. Many Deaf are told that their employers should pay for electronic aids or at least pay towards the cost. The installation of door alerts can take up to six months with constant chasing. Should a budget need readressing, it can take three months causing stress on the Deaf person and the team and lead to negative feelings.

Language Support Professionals are usually paid on a three hour minimum, due to the travel times / distances from job to job. A meeting in the morning may take 30 minutes, but stops the worker from taking other jobs that morning so therefore a 3 hour charge across the workforce is applicable. However, new budgets are being restricted to ‘face to face’ time only. Which means if a person has a meeting for half an hour, the AtW budget will only allow a charge by a support worker for 30 minutes. Clearly not viable and difficulties finding workers now exist to support clients at work.

Some employers are being told to use the AtW budget to help towards payment for a full time member of staff who can do the work for the company and sign/support the deaf employee too. These jobs are being offered, however, the salary is derisory for a fully qualified interpreter and those who take the job tend to be under-qualified and may not be what the Deaf person wants but what the company wants. The support worker then becomes a team member and leads to the client / support worker boundaries becoming blurred and dangerous.

1 Based on our experiences of the day to day working with Deaf / Hard of Hearing clients.
For a Deaf employee, using a Communication Support Worker / Interpreter is like choosing shoes. Sometimes they want the professional black shiny ones (NRCPD interpreters) whereas other times they want a comfy pair (CSW Communication Support Worker) or indeed a pair of sandals that will suit the environment they are in (Legal interpreter for example). Every Deaf person has different requirements and should be listened to.

Some clients need a 'professional' to attend meetings but budgets won't stretch to paying for that. Other employees just want to have that comfy pair of slippers, the CSW who can communicate, as well as reassure, advise, listen etc. A client has a budget set for using Relay interpreting service. However, when the same client requires an interpreter (face to face) for a meeting, often this is refused as the budget is set for Relay only - 'use that budget' is the message. Leaving an impossible situation for the Deaf employee who surely is the person who knows which service is required.

Help & Advice from DWP:
Never been any good for Deaf people with no email address and no live chat facility available - only email address known once a specific advisor is identified but to just want help re a question it’s impossible. Deaf must wait for their support worker to make the phone call with them or to help type the email. Now, it is even harder to obtain answers with the new ‘gather information’ line set up.

Now, ringing ATW means you have to leave your query with the call centre, who will pass on your message and get someone to ring, email or SMS back within 7 working days. Thats no good when the Deaf person needs an answer straight away as you are there with them. The support worker cannot set a time for call back or anything. Often for Deaf, written english can be a problem so reply with email / SMS is often not adequate. If no support worker - it is very difficult to get help / advice which is why so many do not realise about AtW support offered. The delays incurred now mean frustrations and anxiety occur for a group that statistics already maintain many suffer with mental health issues.

When speaking to AtW to try and get a clearer idea of the changes, different advice on AtW’s processes is given depending on who you speak to. Different addresses and contact numbers are given out with no explanation of why / what they are for.

3. Effectiveness of AtW in supporting people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities.

Effectiveness in supporting people with mental health conditions:
Statistics show many Deaf people suffer with mental health issues, be they depression, stress, anxiety or paranoia. This is very evident in our day to day jobs. A support workers job is to merely communicate. Often however, we have to deal with underlying mental health issues, using tactics such as counselling and clearing up issues to relieve stress. Our staff have had MIND representatives to present to us because of this.

An example could be a bank problem. The client cannot phone the bank themselves, cannot deal in person as no signer there and written English is also an issue. Deaf people take this small bank problem, which they cannot talk about it or resolve and over the coming days, in their mind, it escalates to be huge and all consuming and cannot function or focus at work issues. Support worker arrives and immediately can help with the situation by ringing the bank and dealing or by explaining its ok, calming the situation and assisting. This is therefore impossible when budgets are set to face to face time only for say a 30 minute meeting. Most employers are very thankful for the work we do to keep the Deaf person calm. CSW / Interpreters have this knowledge - unqualified workers do not.

Often more stress and anxiety is caused when having to deal with AtW issues. The delay in our current clients request for deaf awareness training for colleagues is a good example of this. Delays sometimes create situations that are irreparable.
Effectiveness in supporting people with learning difficulties:
Same issues - no immediate answers for help can be hard to understand, having the right person qualified at the end of the phone would help - this faceless person who doesn't seem to have any knowledge of deaf issues can be very frustrating and even more so when learning difficulties are involved. Wait 7 working days or 3 months for replies are not sufficient to consider effective support.

4. AtW effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to secure a job, stay in employment and develop their careers.

Securing a job:
Deaf person applies for a job and achieves an interview. Many go for an interview on their own as no knowledge that AtW could assist.

Those who do know, now need to get an interpreter. How? Before - just ring AtW and ask for an emergency budget for interview. Not easy if Deaf as cannot use phone. Typetalk is awful to use and many Deaf won't use it. They could wait for someone to phone for them - not suitable if interview date next week.

Our company devised a form which helps to ask relevant questions to Deaf person, then we can phone on their behalf to get budget approved and book the interpreter at the same time - easily managed. However the paperwork does not always arrive in time (sent only by post not email) before the interview for it all to be signed off at the time of interview which causes problems and delays. A lot of deaf clients don’t understand what the form is asking of them so they do not sign the paperwork and a lot of the time they forward it to us to help complete. Would be easier for us to be sent the paperwork & get the client to sign it at the interview.

Now the process has become harder, phone but have to wait for someone to ring back within 7 working days. Too long and 'up in the air'. Could affect ability to book an interpreter - need 2 weeks notice as they get booked quickly. This delay is stressful and the Deaf person often tries to apologise to the potential employer which never looks good. Sometimes if no interpreter - we have to ring up and ask for interview to be rescheduled. Even before an interview the process for interview is painful for a Deaf person and leaves them open to discrimination as the employer sees it as a lot of bother.

Deaf person goes to college or University and in their course, needs to do placement work to get qualification that they need to find employment. Not funded by AtW or the college / university. Many have to go and manage without support and never achieve as per hearing peers. Never heard of a deaf person being offered the job once qualified from a placement company.

Many Deaf people, who cannot find work would find voluntary work a real benefit for experience and showing ability to do the work. Unfortunately AtW does not support the hours re support workers so Deaf simply do not bother as fear would fail or are refused due to health and safety. Many complain about this as would love to volunteer.

Job Centres across the UK do not provide Interpreters. Our company has accompanied clients voluntarily to alleviate stressful situations on many occasions. The Job Centres should be paying for BSL support as they have budgets but often refuse to use them. Pen and paper is used poorly (again re English). A chap recently had a referral from a job centre to attend a course. One week (38 hrs) learning a new skill. BSL user, but JCP refused to pay for signed support on course. The training centre refused to pay for support as it was referral from JCP - they should pay. Chap stuck in the middle of this argument. Contacted us for support. We rang AtW for advice. Oh - have to wait 7 working days for someone to get back to us. No one got back in touch. Wrote to MP to complain - currently awaiting response as to who should pay for support.
Another found work, but needed to become self-employed. Went to JCP for help and advice. None could be given except a leaflet. Eventually after weeks of chasing - client finally got 1-1 support on how to become self employed.

Deaf people are often very direct. During an interview, a question of why do you want this job may appear. A Deaf person will simply reply ‘money’. We all think that, it is true but not what is supposed to be said. Assistance on interview practice and form filling is an area where support by interpreters is required and AtW funding should be available to those who wish to attend these courses.

Many Deaf have lost their jobs over past few years and find it impossible to obtain new ones. One BSL user has worked on a contract basis driving HGV for years has been trying to gain employment on a full time basis for years but is never accepted yet he drives every day for contract work. Employers need more educating with regards to employing Deaf people.

DWP/ JCP/ AtW therefore doesn’t support Deaf getting a job in the future. What Deaf people need is a budget for communicating at JCP, finding work, work experience, assistance re interviews / CV & form filling and work placement in addition to employers education.

Staying in employment & developing careers:
Deaf people tend to not like change and often once in a job will remain in that job forever. If that important support at the beginning of a job is delayed or not put in place, it delays the learning process (comparing it to hearing peers) and therefore career development rarely occurs. Many Deaf in jobs are given ‘easier’ tasks to do, scanning, filing to start with. Deaf also really need background information as to why they do something, what does it affect etc. If this knowledge is not provided then they have a very small picture of ‘work’ and the only desire they have is to earn more money but not higher status.

Training sessions require extra budget. To request this, emails or support worker phone calls need to be made, and again can take 3 months to authorise once of course you have contacted the new call centre & got call back 7 days later.
Many firms now use Webex for training or online sessions. Deaf people need to access this but cannot until funding is secured. The process needs to be faster.
Deaf people spend time at work, booking interpreters & form completions when they should actually be doing their job thus appearing slower at work than hearing peers. Deaf awareness would solve this but as colleagues change, deaf awareness should be held more regularly and budgets ready for this.

An employee had to attend a conference in Europe. Needed two support workers. AtW agreed budget minus specific expenses such as car parking, travel to airports, taxi & food etc. The employer would not pay for these either. So the employee had to ask for support staff to quote an ‘all inclusive’ charge. If no one volunteered for the lower paid work, then the employee would not have been able to go thus affecting career progression.

AtW delays are frustrating - often the employee has to make excuses or complaints to the boss. This creates negativity in workplace when rescheduling needs to occur for meetings / training. It is easier to position the Deaf employee somewhere no problems will occur, no meetings, just filing for example. Makes everyones life easier but discrimination!

5. Effectiveness of steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme.

Effectiveness of steps to extend AtW:
A news item said some work placements given funding but upon questioning this, it appears the person has to apply in writing. Cannot do this until phoned the call centre, waited for reply and forms.
Limited budgets equals interpreting jobs not fulfilled. The way the new postal system was implemented led to severe delays in processing invoices for workers. An employee sent off 4 invoices to AtW all registered post for work completed September 2013. One invoice was still outstanding March 2014 - 6 months to get paid means ATW jobs not viable for workers.

Marketing and funding:
No marketing seen.

As a disability service, VAT should not be charged - Government earning money from its own department? Agencies costs & VAT means pay for workers becomes less. No travel allowance means workers now incorporate this in their hourly charge - means higher rates. Problem finding workers. Self employed interpreters don’t charge VAT and can take on the AtW jobs but agencies are regulated, insured, professional, and can offer the whole package of support. Self employed workers do not.

Recommendations:

- Use professionals to assess budgetary needs of a Deaf person in a workplace.
- Use electoral records to mailshot deaf re ATW advice
- Have specific phone lines for requesting emergency budgets - with immediate answers given and also allocation of advisor with email contact for forms & contact re future correspondence to reduce delays and stress.
- Return to the old system of allowing minimum hourly charge to be permitted to ensure regular support but maximum charges levied.
- Allow deaf awareness sessions every year (budget aside)
- Do not permit full time members of staff to also be support workers. Crosses boundaries.
- Permit budgets to be utilised as required by the client (relay, face to face, notes etc)
- Train staff and bring back the proper help line.
- Having specific departments who have knowledge of the actual disability would be more beneficial. Shared experiences and understandings enhance service provided.
- Allow AtW budgets for voluntary work for short periods at set amounts to be charged.
- Issue clear advice as to whether JCP or training venues should provide support costs. Be clear (like SLC do re University budgets)
- Set budgets for JCP to communicate with Deaf
- Making ATW more visible, less stressful and more of a ‘service’ will empower deaf people to take charge of their careers and be more valuable employees. This will give a positive feeling for employers.
- Look at removal of VAT to help regulate the service providers.

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