Written evidence submitted by Colette Hogan (ATW0034)

1. My name is Colette Hogan and my employment started after completing a degree in 2002. That is when Access to Work was first established.
2. Delivery of service from ATW since 2003 has never been smooth and since 2012 the quality of service from them has worsened.
3. This issue of having to justify our service needs as a deaf person has been ongoing since early 2012 which has seen people like me constantly having to explain, justify and re-explain what my needs are and it is now taking up too much of my professional time – I do not work to administer AtW and to have to justify myself to some of the most patronising people that I have ever had to deal with.

4. ATW Application

5. The applications are not Deaf friendly. As a freelancer between 2008 and 2010 I needed support from an interpreter to translate the application form in British Sign Language (BSL) - the cost of the interpreter was never met as ATW would reject this as they only cover actual paid work, which seems a self-defeating exercise as how can deaf people GET a job in the first place without access to appropriate language support.
6. Communication with an advisor always occurs via email, which necessitates the use of English - this is not my first language as BSL is my first and preferred language. This means an interpreter has to be used however ATW made it clear that the interpreter is for work ONLY and any correspondence with ATW is not a part of my job description from the time I started looking for work. This has always been very time consuming and frustrating.
7. Deaf BSL users are being disadvantaged to an even greater degree now, as AtW only accepts initial contact on an information-giving basis and that’s all - it can then take weeks to be allocated an Advisor and then even longer to be assessed. Deaf people need instant support, not to be delayed without any consequences. Again – being denied access to information in our first language means often deaf people do not fully understand these processes leading to confusion and distress.

8. ATW assessment processes

9. From memory I have been assessed three times in a total of twelve years, which I find it amazing, as my Deafness has no cure and will never improve yet I have been asked if my condition has improved time and time again. I find it very insulting that I have been asked if I wear hearing aids when I have made it clear that I do not use speech and only use British Sign Language to facilitate communication. How do hearing aids help this? Why do advisors not listen to, and then record, the factual information I provide them with?
10. Only one assessor I have had has had Deaf awareness and has assessed my needs appropriately and this was when I was granted support where an interpreter was provided every day. One assessor was from the Royal National Institute for the Blind – so completely inappropriate in terms of my needs!
11. Apart from dealing with assessors, the majority of processes happen via paperwork, again in English, which necessitates seeking support from an interpreter – this again prompts the question of fees for an interpreter, which Access to Work will not provide for -?

12. Being asked if Communication Support Workers could be used is a direct contradiction of the AtW guidance itself (using qualified interpreters only) and shows an inclination towards using the cheapest support as opposed to what best meets my needs at work.

13. Requests to see files you keep (under the Data Protection Act) have been ignored – these will have covered discussions about how salaried interpreters could possibly work. Staff are unable to confirm how people are assessed and that, quite frankly, is because we are not properly assessed. We are treated like cattle and subject to a blanket policy that has seen so many negative ramifications for not only my peers but our interpreters and myself too.

14. **Ongoing support – support workers and help and advice provided by ATW.**

15. “Support worker” is an inappropriate term for a fully qualified and registered interpreter who has had to study the language of British Sign Language for at least seven years in order to become fluent in the rich, visual and complex language that it is. Yet interpreters are treated in the same category as support workers who only offer support in terms of caring. I am a strong, native BSL user, which only qualified, and CRUCIALLY, experienced interpreters can translate ably and accurately.

16. Previously I have benefited from 2 BSL Interpreters per day - as I am a Director of 2 companies and have a huge volume of work and matters to be dealing with. In addition to dealing with clients (hearing and non signing), I have a need to deliver lots of training, attend networking and face-to-face contact situations with our clients and project beneficiaries. Also, partnerships and potential working collaborations are a vital part of my role. I am unable to do the majority of this any more and do not have any autonomy as a businesswoman, due to insufficient levels of interpreter support.

17. I have to ask permission for anything above the 'standard policy' thus meaning I cannot confirm any business meetings due to not knowing if the travel costs would be covered for my interpreters. Also, I cannot confirm any big meetings or events due to not having adequate language provision.

18. Formal complaints have been made, even directly to the Head of AtW - but all to no avail. The attitude of the staff is quite frankly abrupt and rude. I am also expected to deal with managers that I have formally complained about - all without any formal apology or investigation. Again, as with many deaf BSL users, I am left ‘in the dark’.

19. It took months for me to be 'assessed' for my RSI and the outcome is just a wrist-wrest for me and I am expected "to use the phone more" - which just puts even more pressure on my sole interpreter. All of my work by its very nature is complex and high functioning, which requires lots of processing from the interpreters to turn this into an accurate, and more importantly, coherent translation – and this includes even just the days when I am office based and overseeing services and staff.
20. During the 'reconsiderations' process and a subsequent complaint I issued which I know was escalated not once has anyone contacted me directly to discuss anything or to update me.

21. Before my maternity leave I was told that I could use the existing support when I returned back to work meaning I could use freelancer rates to pay my interpreters for the intensive work they undertake - such as translating my delivery of training and translating my directorship work in written and spoken English. Upon my return this agreement was scrapped and I was informed that I needed to follow the application of a salaried interpreter rate, which was non-negotiable. There was no advance notification of this; no negotiation and the demands of this were unrealistic due to the salary level not being commensurate with the level of skills I need to look for in a qualified interpreter. Again, I have to fight and appeal to get an extension of my support to at least give me time to advertise the position and to recruit. I was unable to get any interest in this post at all.

22. My case was approved for a salaried interpreter. I strongly object to this. As a Deaf professional, having a sole interpreter work with me is not appealing. The salary offered is substandard for the BSL interpreting community – they are not Support Workers. There was no clarity about the Terms and Conditions of employment. Not one person responded to the advertisement – what does this tell you? The salaried policy does not reflect additional costs – for example - annual leave, CPD for interpreters, supervision and management of them (they need professional guidance). This would lead to an inability to develop skills and linguistic progression. There is no scope for annual leave and sickness – we would be two separate people that you seem to expect to be ill or on holiday at the same time!

23. My emails to Managers and Senior Managers were ignored for over a month – resulting in having to contact the Head of ATW directly. I was left with no choice.

24. ATW’s effectiveness; for deaf people to secure a job; stay in employment and develop their careers.

25. I also deal with lots of funding applications and grants in order to sustain my business and non-profit projects in the long term. I cannot do any of this work at present, due to not having sufficient interpreter support and also am putting my interpreter at serious risk of health and safety and long term RSI themselves. It is seriously worryingly for my other staff and their employment is at risk as I need to secure funds to keep their jobs safe – not to mention the difficulties they have themselves in being allocated support themselves – at this present time they have no support AT ALL, meaning that I have to support them myself using the meagre resources I have.

26. My inability to support a core Big Lottery funded project where a large amount of awareness training is needed to be delivered using two fully qualified interpreters is very distressing. The salaried interpreter/30 hour rule made it impossible for me to use two interpreters, stating that the second interpreter cost must be absorbed by the organisation. The project I am delivering for does not have a budget for interpreter access. The project was started in 2010 and was running successfully until last Christmas when ATW
began to refuse to pay for the second interpreter. This has had a serious impact on the project delivery target.

27. There are also occasions when I will need 2 interpreters (attending training sessions, delivering training sessions, networking and conferences to promote my company) and yet there is no scope for this within the present policy. This again puts me at a lower footing than my hearing peers, which is what ATW exists surely exists to counter.

28. AtW staff not replying to emails in regards to the terms and conditions of employment has contributed to the fact I have been unable to recruit someone to this post. Luckily, I have support from co-Directors that are interpreters. However, the fact remains that without them putting themselves out financially and accepting unacceptable working practices, my companies and projects would have closed and I would be without a job.

29. I would not be able to progress my career with a salaried interpreter only – and given present circumstances my own job is at risk. Deaf people only really get interpreter support consistently at work and we are now being reduced to being second-rate professionals and being sidelined due to lack of access. People work partly in order to maintain their own mental health, well-being and social status – not to mention the contribution to society and to the exchequer too. AtW are creating lots of problems, I know of several people that have lost jobs or have been refused them due to the difficulties with AtW restrictions and lack of insight.

30. In summary, it feels like deaf people’s predicament in terms of work is regressing twenty years. All the progress made by the BSL using community in becoming of equal status with hearing people is being undone at a rapid pace.

31. This is heart-breaking for us and needs to be rectified immediately as this situation will only get worse. Deaf people will once again become second-class citizens forced to exist on benefits and relegated to the second tier of society. Changes to Access to Work are shortsighted and grossly unfair.

16 June 2014