Written evidence submitted by Shana Weinbaum (ATW0042)

Executive Summary:

- Currently Access to Work (AtW) is failing deaf people in seeking employment, at job interviews, in keeping deaf people employed, cutting costs once reviewed, taking away support originally awarded at the risk of deaf people losing their jobs.
- AtW is creating barriers in the process and making deaf people stressed, depressed and demoralised.
- Face to face assessments when requested should be done instead of over the telephone. Dedicated, trained staff with awareness should be allocated to review Deaf applicants.
- AtW should fund interpreters at job interviews, at the appropriate level for their qualifications, offer option of continued use of freelance interpreters, agree funding for co-working Interpreters for training purposes.

Introduction:

1. I am a profoundly deaf person who uses British Sign Language to communicate. I have been severely affected by the changes implemented by the 30 hour rule created by Access to Work. I am sending in evidence to show the impact it has had on me personally and at work.

The AtW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees and employers:

2. I applied for Access to Work several times in my career without a real issue, until it was time for my second re-application on my current job, where I was suddenly told I had to either employ an in-house salaried interpreter or be given a budget of £36K per year to employ full time (37 hours) freelance interpreter(s). The review process was very stressful as it was all mainly done through English correspondence, emails and telephone calls where the Advisor had no idea of my job role, the responsibilities I hold and how important it was to my colleagues/manager and staff as well as myself to have the most appropriate suitable communication support. I went back and forward with calling AtW and the advisors to get my support extended every month from November to March and mostly only just informed a day or two before the end of the month whether they have got approval if my support is to be extended. This was very risky as I had to book Interpreters at least 1 month in advance so I was feeling the pressure every month from November to March. My line manager was trying to support me but AtW were putting words into his mouth so it was a very difficult situation making me feel demoralized, guilty and depressed.

The adequacy of ongoing support, both in terms of the aids, adaptations and support workers provided through AtW, and the help and advice offered by DWP:
3. Currently the support I receive is only possible through the additional funding my employer is paying towards the freelance interpreter costs. This is a short term solution as I could not do my job without the right Interpreters working with me. My pool of interpreters has been working with me since 2009 so are fully aware of the jargon within my job. My employer have secured additional funding for this only up to September so I am very concerned what will happen after this date.

4. AtW is not supporting deaf people enough, they should be meeting them face to face. I have offered my advisor on two occasions to come and see me face to face, see my work environment, understand more about how I need to have a work pool of 3 interpreters in order to function effectively and deliver my work performance at a high standard. They have declined saying they understand my position but clearly they do not. They are only interested in cutting my budget to the salaried interpreter’s cost. I have been considerate of the costs, at every chance, I have negotiated a flat rate for the daily fees for my regular interpreters, booking directly rather than via an agency to avoid the administration fees that agencies charge but still am made to feel that I am “wasting money” when it is the other way round as my interpreters and I pay tax to the government as I am working full time.

5. My employer have not been given accurate information, nor the advice given is consistent – different advisors have given differing advice which only adds to the stress. They have not followed up from their prescribed budget/hourly rate as to how I am able to continue doing my job once the budget they awarded started. When I complained I would not be able to seek an interpreter at the cost of £18 per hour, one advisor merely asked me what would I do if tomorrow there were no AtW scheme and laughed when I said I would lose my job and be on benefits.

AtW's effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:

6. Originally, Access to Work have been very effective in enabling me to gain a job, remain in my job, get promoted twice within the same organization through full support and in providing equipment when I acquired Repetitive Strain Injury. I would not be able to obtain my job, nor pass the probation period, or learn the role effectively without attending training with full support, having Interpreters translate conversations, relay telephone calls speedily and accurately, giving me the wider picture on the environment I work in, expressing when a staff member/colleague has problems that I could not hear through their voices et cetera.

7. Now this is at jeopardy through the implantation of the 30 hour rule, funding cuts, expecting employers to contribute to the funding awarded, being unable to provide co-workers when required for training purposes, there is now a glass ceiling for deaf people where promotion is impossible let alone getting a job as employers will associate deaf people with more expense.
My Recommendations:

1. Access to Work should understand all deaf people are individuals with differing job roles, with a variety of preferred communication methods. They should assess face to face rather than over the telephone where it is hard to explain needs, they should have trained dedicated staff whom understand the cultural/language needs of the Deaf Community allocated to deaf applicants. The advisors also need to understand the role of a fully qualified interpreter and the linguistic factors that they face daily and appreciate the complex training required.

2. Employers should not have to fund any additional costs to meet the total rate of the Freelance Interpreters, this will only create inequality for the deaf employee, create difficulties for new applicants who may be deaf as well within the same company. Deaf employees will also feel guilt and be concerned about job security when costs are being cut everywhere in this kind of economic climate, when redundancies are being considered, the most expensive employee would go first. Deaf people also would feel they have to remain within the same job, in case their new employer would not be as generous to fund the costs required, hence they are oppressed by the system with no equal opportunities of the freedom to choose their career path.

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