Written evidence submitted by Charlene Spires (ATW0043)

This submission has been translated and transcribed from British Sign Language

1. Introduction

My name is Charlene Spires, I am a profoundly Deaf fluent British Sign Language (BSL) user. Without Access to Work funding I would not be able to secure a job and carry out my duties. I need all training courses, meetings and supervisions with my manager to be translated into BSL by a fully qualified British Sign Language Interpreter.

2. Application Process

My employer is a large Deafblind charity, on securing my new role I was told that I needed to arrange the Access to Work funding myself, which I was quite surprised about, I expected the employer to sort this out. I would need BSL - interpreters and possibly note-takers for training courses, meetings and supervisions and this support would be ongoing. For this particular role it was essential I attended the induction training before I could officially start work. I did not know where to start, this was to be my first paid employment, I had heard of Access to Work but I had no previous experience of using or applying for it. I started by researching on the internet, the websites I accessed were not Deaf friendly, they were full of complex English and jargon, there were no video translations into BSL and I was unsure of what I needed to do next. There was not an option to call Access to Work via VRS (Video Relay Service) and so I finally had to ask my Mother to phone Access to Work on my behalf, having to ask your Mother to make a phone call at 24 years old is quite humiliating. The Access to Work advisor then proceeded to ask my Mother detailed questions, I remember the three way conversation being extremely lengthy and difficult, my Mother can sign but she is certainly not interpreter level! From the questions that were asked, I did not have confidence in the Access to Work advisor as I felt they lacked knowledge on deafness and the different Language Service Professionals that were available (Notetakers, Interpreters, Lip-speakers, Speech to text etc). I was told that would need to pay for the interpreters myself and then I would need to claim the money back from Access to Work, I was not happy about this, I felt this was an awful lot of hassle (and money), a person that could hear would not have to do this! I
requested that all correspondence should be sent directly to my employer. Having explained this to them, Access to Work still sent me claim forms/paperwork through the post, I asked my Mother to call AtW again on my behalf and I requested they sent the relevant paperwork direct to my employer.

3. Ongoing Support/Developing my career

Since the initial hassle, I have been receiving interpreters when they are needed, great. I was told, though, that the number of interpreter hours I have been given is for one year only. These allocated hours will need to cover the whole year. After one year I have no idea of what Access to Work plan to do, will they contact Me for re-assessment, will I have to go through this badly thought-out process every year? I will still be Deaf and I will still require BSL interpreters. Without interpreters I would not be able to do my job, this is certainly a worry for me. I am also a little confused; If I secure another part-time job with a different organisation will I need to go through a whole new process? I am a young adult, I want to work, I do not want to be on benefits and I want to develop my career. I want to feel that there is good quality support out there that’s easily accessible.

4. Marketing and Funding

I am surprised about the number of people who do not know what the Access to Work scheme is. I even have to explain to my own family what it is. My Auntie owns and runs a hairdressers/salon, before I explained to her what Access to Work was, she was unaware that the scheme even existed. I feel that small business’, like my Auntie’s, would not employ a disabled person because they would be concerned about costs. Many people I know within the Deaf community do not know or understand what Access to Work is. English is often their weakest subject as they use BSL as their first language. Take this inquiry for example, the English is not user friendly and is quite complex. This inquiry has not been publicised enough and there are no video translations in BSL. Deaf people are, once again, isolated from such important information. I found out about this inquiry from the Advocate who works at our local Deaf association, how come Access to Work did not contact me or the Deafblind organisation I work for directly?