Written evidence submitted by Alison Crook (ATW0053)

Executive Summary:

- Up until my clients review the process was working very well
- The front line staff at AtW since the review, appeared to have no understanding of a Deaf person's requirements.
- It took weeks of discussion to determine the support required which also involved educating the advisor on Deaf issues.
- The initial advisor came to understand the requirements but had no autonomy to influence the final decision made and therefore requested to be removed from the case.
- A new advisor was appointed who knew nothing, was unsympathetic and twisted the meaning of conversations that had been had with my client’s line manager who has been incredibly supportive.
- A decision was made to fund an hourly rate of approx. £18.60 per hour.
- This completely changes the level of support that can be recruited.
- Due to the nature of the role of a qualified interpreter and the scarceness of them this does not cover the cost.
- The employer has temporarily agreed to top up to the interpreters agreed rate.
- This puts my client in the vulnerable position of being a very expensive employee. How does this affect future of employment of Deaf BSL users and also does this put her at high risk if and when redundancies are being considered?

Introduction:

I am a qualified and registered Sign Language Interpreter working with a client at Hertfordshire County Council who is employed by Serco. She is a manager responsible for a team within Adult Care services.

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

(What is the AtW application and assessment process like for Deaf and disabled people, and for their employers? (This can be for the first time you apply, or when you are being re-assessed).

1. Whilst the initial assessment was lengthy and detailed and took time to prove my clients needs, ultimately it resulted in the full support that she required and has meant that she has been able to work her way up to being promoted into managing a team of staff because she has been able to select her own communication support (Sign Language Interpreters) and coordinate it so that she has been able to ensure the quality of regular sign language communication has been truly accessible both ways over the last 6 years. This was a great example of equality in the work place because of AtW funding. Her employer has promoted her according to her skills and abilities without concern about communication requirements.
2. When my client’s case came up for review the process was painfully slow, stressful and emotional as the front line staff at AtW had absolutely no idea what they were dealing with, no understanding of the requirements of Deaf British Sign Language users and no appreciation of the levels of communication support that were required. This created huge stress for my client as not only did it take up hours and hours of her time to deal with, she was not sure from month to month whether she would have interpreting support the following month. She had to document everything and research how to go through the re consideration process whilst carrying out her day to day responsibilities. This resulted in near breakdown and almost being signed off work for stress. Suddenly the equality she had experienced up until now was in jeopardy and the repercussions of that were putting her job at risk! Her employer made the suggestion that without her current communication support they may be forced to do a “capability” assessment to see whether she could continue in her role.

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. The support that had been funded initially was very effective and gave my client complete autonomy and equality within the workplace. Once the review started however, the AtW staff were completely ignorant of the requirements of a Deaf person. They had no understanding of the issues and ultimately twisted conversations in order to put an argument in writing that justified their decision to reduce the funding to £18.60 per hour.

4. This did not cover the costs of the interpreting support. Ultimately my client’s employer has agreed to top up the funding in order for her to keep her current bank of interpreters. This has been agreed on a temporary basis until my client’s complaint and request for reconsideration has been taken to the furthest point in the process. My client’s employer is Serco, a massive private company that can probably afford this but is accountable to shareholders. The concern is that this is surely a disincentive to employ Deaf people in the future or indeed to retain Deaf people through a round of redundancies?

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

5. Up until the review, AtW funding has provided equality in the workplace for my client and has enabled her to secure her job, stay in it and progress her career to promotion. The communication support available at £18.60 per hour however does not provide trained and qualified interpreters and
because of the scarcity of interpreters, restricts the choice and the quality of communication support available to my client. This ultimately puts the power in the hands of the unqualified communication support, which is dangerous and due to the lack of training inevitably risks misrepresentation of client and employer to each other. This is not to say that all unqualified support is inadequate but that the choice is so reduced for the client that she no longer has control of this. Registered qualified sign language interpreters are generally freelance and this allows the Deaf client choice and control over whom she can work with and feel that true accessibility is being provided within the workplace.

My Recommendations:

6. AtW go back to fully funding interpreting support according to the market rate for interpreters according to the hours required by the Deaf client.
7. There should be some sort of supervisory system for interpreters and their clients in AtW settings so that the required support can be accurately established. The supervisor though must have detailed knowledge of BSL and the interpreter’s role.
8. All companies that employ a Deaf BSL user should be trained in Deaf awareness and basic sign language. This would improve direct communication in the workplace and in some cases reduce the hours of interpreting support required.

18 June 2014