Written evidence submitted by Pilgrims Friend Society (ATW0054)

Our experiences of Access to Work in employing deaf people has not been good. We had no previous experience of accessing funding and the deaf person we were employing had no experience either.

The application process was mainly telephone-based. Example from an email: “Can you please ask David to contact Access to Work on xxx xxxx xxxx to allow us to take his application over the phone.” The email did later say that he could send his details by email “If he is unable to speak to us on the telephone due to a disability” but why even ask a deaf person to speak by phone in the first place? Why make written communication a “fallback” position, rather than one of the mainstream options? This is demeaning.

This meant that the deaf person could not do their own communication without the help of a support worker, which is what the funding was for anyway. Minicom is used by relatively few deaf people but is often the only alternative means of communication offered. Even email is difficult for very many deaf people as English is not their first language and many have difficulty with written English. Deaf people use SMS and some email but generally prefer their first language of British Sign Language (BSL), which means having some form of online communication service, services which are readily available.

The application process is complicated. As time went by, and with help from other agencies we realised that the secret to obtaining funding was to put in a comprehensive report of what was needed and why. Access to Work gave no advice in this respect and so for a long time our deaf employee was under-supported. To encourage more employers to employ disabled people, the system needs to be easy to understand and use; it should not be only available to those who know how to “work the system”.

It was always difficult to know who to contact for (eg) additional funding. On one occasion I emailed the person I though was our advisor for some additional funding for a special event and was told:

“Unfortunately I cannot take direct applications – to apply for additional funding, please have David contact: xxxxx@dwp.gso.gov.uk” This was an email address I had never used before. We are based in London. Incidentally the email address given was wrong anyway and so my email bounced. I found the correct address myself.

On applying for the extra funding, I got the reply shown earlier where I was told that the deaf person had to phone up and give all his personal details again, which AtW already have on file. This was for 5 hours’ extra support for a one-off special event. Again, this is demeaning and making disabled people jump through hoops to get funding.

On only one occasion did we have access to an advisor who seemed to understand the communication support needs of deaf people. When I tried to contact this advisor a few months later I received no response and it seemed that she had moved on. Other advisors did not understand the communication support needs of deaf people.

The main purpose of advisors seemed to us to be to reduce the amount of support given to the deaf person to a minimum to reduce costs. The latest round of applications was the icing on the cake in this respect. Funding had gradually reduced and reduced. We had been getting £40 and £45 per hour, depending on the level of support required. When we applied for a renewal in March this year, I got the following response:
“For a level 3 Interpreter or CSW, we can fund £18.00 an hour maximum if they are Freelance, but if you cannot find a Freelance Interpreter/CSW, we could go to £25.00 per hour through an Agency. These amounts are inclusive of travel costs and VAT. Level 6 BSL Interpreter is funded at a maximum of £24.00 and hour Freelance or £35.00 per hour via an Agency. A fully qualified BSL Interpreter can be funded at £35.00 per hour and this would be the same for Freelance and Agency. The only difference here would be that in the London area, we can in some circumstances go to £45.00 per hour via an Agency but that wouldn’t be the case here. If you use the same Interpreter all the time, then our guidance states that the CSW should be employed wherever possible and paid a salaried rate not an hourly rate.”

Incidentally, since agreeing this rate with Access to Work, I have not had confirmation of the renewal of the support arrangement – that was in March and it is now June.

A reduction of £10 to £15 PER HOUR in funding! We had already had to change our agency to one that supported its Access to Work provision with other activities that subsidise it and so could afford to provide communication support workers at AtW rates. When we used a qualified interpreter from the same agency and funded it ourselves, they charged £50 per hour plus travel and VAT. The £35 quoted above includes both! As you will see, no explanation was given to me as to why, although “in the London area, we can in some circumstances go to £45.00 per hour” that was not allowed in this case. Again, lack of transparency and, it seems, fairness.

A fully-qualified BSL interpreter will have to a very minimum of 5 years training to get to that status – and that is fast-track. Their profession is very skilled and yet they are expected to work for £35 per hour. Bear in mind that, in most case, they will not be able to work 40 hours a week at that rate, because assignments are often in different places and their travel time is unpaid. They also have to do preparation work and post-assignment paperwork, which is also not paid for. If they are employed through an agency, the agency also have to take their costs out of that same amount.

As for “If you use the same Interpreter all the time, then our guidance states that the CSW should be employed wherever possible and paid a salaried rate not an hourly rate” this is laughable. Whilst most employers and deaf people will prefer the same interpreter for consistency, there will be times when interpreters are sick or on holiday. Unless the interpreter and supported person are always going to b absent at the same time, this means there will be times when cover is not available, if the interpreter is employed, rather than through and agency. We have tried to employ salaried support workers before without success.

Freelance is cheaper but that then means that either the deaf person or the employer will have to arrange support workers, including cover for absence and so on. Agencies have been excellent at providing continuous cover, even when the regular support worker has been sick etc. This is vital. If a deaf worker is involved in, say, training or an important meeting and their support worker goes sick on the day, alternative cover is needed at short notice to enable them to continue with their work.

I queried the drop in rates and the restrictive requirements and was told:

“The rate was based on research into various organisations, what they charged, Freelance rates, what was being charged all over the country and how best to deliver our programme to meet these costs for the benefit of everyone, so the decision was taken that these are the rates we can offer. ATW is a discretionary grant so there isn’t a set amount like there is with a benefit but a customer
can still use support that costs more and use the grant to put towards it – not ideal but that is the guidance we are working under at present”

So AtW is a “discretionary grant” reluctantly given where you can prove you really need it. The entire system makes disabled people feel that they are “suffered” in the economy and the world of work and, as it works now, makes them feel like a burden on the state.

As a deaf-aware employer, we have been happy to work through this morass of paperwork and obstruction to get the support we feel our deaf staff need. We have also been happy, where necessary to, subsidise the funding we get from the government to provide extra support.

However, the system does not encourage employers to employ deaf or other disabled people; for many employers the trouble will just be too much. Many deaf people do not have the English communication skills needed to fight their way through the confusing and obstructive system and insist on their rights; it will often require an employer to help them fight for this. A prospective employer, considering employing a deaf or disabled person, will often just give up and decide it’s easier to employ a hearing or non-disabled person than have the extra hassle.

If AtW really IS going to provide Access to Work, as it says on the tin, it needs to be easier to Access for all groups, transparent, simple in process, responsive, employing advisors who understand the needs of different groups AND ARE SYMPATHETIC to those needs, flexible. It is currently none of these things.