WHO ARE WE?

DCAL (Deafness, Cognition and Language) is a research centre within University College, London. We have six Deaf members of staff – some in research roles and others in administrative roles, who claim ATW for the provision of sign language interpreting. Our Deaf colleagues are highly successful professionals working within a competitive academic environment. For example, one is a Clinical Psychologist and two are Post-Doctoral Researchers. The ATW agreement funds two in-house interpreters and we also contract freelance interpreters as and when required. Our submission presents the views of both DCAL as an employer and the Deaf employees who are in receipt of funding.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our submission focuses on the following issues within ATW:

1. Accountability/Transparency
   - Inadequate communication of changes in policy or even changes in postal address.
   - No consistency in the way that claims are handled
   - DCAL’s shared agreement has been consistently misunderstood and the criteria for dealing with claims vary every time
   - No transparent complaints procedure.
   - The time taken to process and reimburse claims can be unacceptably long.

2. Competence
   - An identified lack of knowledge amongst ATW advisors of the specific needs of our Deaf colleagues.
   - When changes in personnel occur at ATW, case handover appears to be ineffective as each new case officer asks the same fact finding questions.

3. Communication
   - The implementation of a telephone based new claims procedure creates an automatic barrier for our Deaf employees and could be viewed as discriminatory.
   - ATW’s set up is not in line with good business practice: it is nigh on impossible to chase payment, speak to a designated person or lodge a complaint.

4. Administrative Burden
   - The burden of administration seems to have been placed on the employer/individual not on ATW.
   - There is no adequate reporting tool to enable us to audit claims.

5. Understanding Academia
• The unique situation of working and competing for advancement in an academic establishment is not recognized by ATW nor is it accounted for in ATW’s responses to the types of requests made by our Deaf staff.

BACKGROUND

There are two forms of ATW agreement in place at DCAL.

a) Shared Agreement: This represents a pool of interpreting hours per annum required to cover the regular activities at DCAL at which one or more Deaf colleagues are in attendance e.g. business meetings, training, journal clubs. All Deaf staff have a share of this pool of hours which corresponds with their hours of work e.g. a full-time share is higher than a part-time share. The pool of hours remains the same but the way the hours are allocated change depending on how many Deaf staff are employed. This shared agreement funds the employment of two part-time in-house sign language interpreters: a 0.8 post and a 0.4 post. The hours factor in preparation time for interpreting assignments but do not include an allocation for administering bookings, payments or ATW claims.

b) Individual Agreements: These are hours in addition to the shared agreement which relate to a Deaf individual’s specific needs e.g. external meetings, teaching responsibilities, presenting research at seminars and conferences, etc.

ADMINISTRATION

The administration of bookings, sourcing interpreters, dealing with invoices and completion of ATW forms is undertaken by our in-house team alongside their interpreting responsibilities. These hours are not included within the shared agreement with ATW and therefore this element of their salary is not being reimbursed. Under the umbrella of UCL, the team have set up a seamless process, utilising the University’s financial systems which have resulted in a clear and transparent audit trail for us and for ATW. DCAL also employs a part-time interpreting co-ordinator to manage the team, provide supervision and to monitor the service we are providing. The co-ordinator’s salary costs are paid out of our research grant.

ATW is a valuable resource for Deaf people working in the United Kingdom and they rely upon it in order to do their job. Whilst it is commendable that the Government has established this source of funding; in reality, dealing with ATW is time consuming and frustrating. Our main concerns are described below:

1. Accountability/Transparency

   • Restructure of ATW

The recent restructure within ATW has resulted in general confusion: different locations, addresses, etc none of which have been advised to claimants and employers. This general confusion gives rise to a host of problems which make day to day working very difficult. One of our Deaf staff, a Clinical Psychologist, gives an example of the impact below (note, in addition to needing interpreters because she is deaf, she also claims for taxis to work due to a visual impairment)

“ATW did not inform claimants of their recent change of address. There was no return address stamped on the forms. I had to e-mail eight different advisors who then advised me that the postal address had changed and that claimants were not informed due to a lack of resources. This is shambolic. Subsequently, ATW lost my receipts and my claim was returned. I phoned, using typetalk, and was put through to an advisor in Swansea. She informed me that the claim goes to a sorting office in Wolverhampton and subsequently to a
“Fares to Work team in Glasgow. She could not put me through to either team so I had no idea who lost my claim. Overall ATW seems like a very inefficient operation with very little accountability or transparency.”

- Making Complaints

ATW’s set up is not in line with good business practice: it is nigh on impossible to chase payment, speak to a designated person or lodge a complaint.

In September 2011, our shared agreement was due to expire so we contacted ATW to begin negotiations for its renewal. These negotiations went on for 18 months, initially because of very slow responses from ATW. This was compounded by our file being moved from London to the North West. We then had to re-provide the same information as ATW did not undertake an adequate handover. During this process, a request for a copy of the formal complaints procedure was made several times and, despite a subsequent meeting with John Beasley of External Relations in May 2013, we still have not had sight of the complaints procedure.

The amount of time invested in our resubmitting the same information over and over again, the long silences that occur in response to our e-mails and the persistent lack of a consistent and helpful approach from ATW more than justified our complaints yet, to date, we are still without guidance as to how to do this formally. We have attempted to find the complaints procedure on the DWP website but without success. We are aware of statements of service levels such as “we will respond to your query within 7 working days” but these are rarely adhered to, and there appear to be no sanctions within ATW if deadlines are not met.

At one stage, in 2012, we were owed over £40,000 in outstanding claims. For smaller employers, this would have liquidated the company – it is only because we are part of a large university that we could carry this deficit for as long as we did.

2. Competence

- Consistency of Contacts

Since DCAL was established, we have had a series of named contacts (Ben Moran, Martin O’Neill, and Mick Muller) who dealt with queries from our admin team. However, we have discovered that Mick Muller, our most recent contact, is on long term sick leave and we have not been given an alternative person to deal with. It also seems that none of these contacts received adequate handover information to deal with us effectively without our having to repeat the same conversations each time.

In the last month, contact was made with John Beasley requesting a new named contact. He referred us to the Deaf Focus team (we were not advised there was one) and told that one of them would be in touch. An e-mail was received from this team some five weeks after our initial contact but we are still without resolution to outstanding queries and concerns which seriously affect the work life of our Deaf colleagues.

From our Deaf colleagues’ perspective, having no consistent point of contact results in a large amount of frustration which inhibits them from doing their job.

Examples are given below:

“It is not clear who is my named caseworker for ATW. The person has changed umpteen times over the years so I now have a collection of e-mail addresses and when I have a query I e-mail them all and often get conflicting advice in response from different people. Again, this is shambolic and inefficient use of both my time and ATW’s”.

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“[For a conference], I need two interpreters to interpret presentations into BSL and to voice-over for me when I give my presentation. I first e-mailed my regular point of contact who informed me that I had almost exceeded the number of hours allocated to me and that I would need to undergo another assessment. I was then contacted by another individual who sent me a form which I had filled in two years previously asking me to provide details about my disability and the type of support I need. This was very frustrating because it was not my disability that had changed but the nature of my job. The hours for which I need support will vary each year – it is difficult to predict. As I was making a one-off request for conference support – something I have done before although not regularly – it seemed unnecessary to go back to square one and explain my disability again to a team that should already be aware of the details.”

- Specialist Knowledge

It is understandable that for fluctuating conditions, there is a need for ATW advisors to ask if there is any change to the support required on receipt of a new or ad-hoc application. For a profoundly Deaf person, who uses sign language, the requirement for a sign language interpreter is constant and unlikely to change.

The experiences of our Deaf colleagues highlight a lack of understanding and specialist knowledge amongst advisors. This means that they experience questions such as “Has your condition changed?” each time they make a request for a change or addition to their hours of support.

Examples of experiences are given below:

“The advisor always has minimal or no knowledge of what Deaf people require and offer “alternatives” to support workers without having tested/reviewing them themselves which I do not feel is appropriate. This, to save costs, but if I cannot understand what is being said in meetings and other situations due to this “alternative equipment” I will not be performing my job correctly and effectively”

“For people with multiple disabilities, ATW can be counterproductive. For example, for people who are both Deaf and visually impaired, such as myself. I received well intentioned advice to use voice-reading software to ease eye strain from computer work. Obviously, this advice is actually daft because voiced software does not suit a person who is also Deaf. There needs to be less of a one size fits all approach. Complex needs need to be acknowledged”

“I often find that I have to defend the support I need against people who know nothing about sign language. I once applied for support to attend a conference in the United States where I needed to bring a British Sign Language Interpreter with me. The response I got from the ATW team displayed a lot of ignorance on their part. I was asked why I couldn’t use an interpreter in the United States (American Sign Language is a different language) in order to keep costs down. If staff were trained to be more aware of basic facts about the British Deaf sign language community, this would make for a less stressful experience and ensure that applicants do not repeat themselves when defending the need for interpreters each time they speak to a new staff member within the team. “

3. Communication

- Initial Application Process

A recent update from ATW has advised of a new application process. One thing which stands out is the phrase “telephone based service”. For Deaf people, this creates an immediate barrier. Although there is a text phone number provided, this form of technology is outdated and relies on having a good level of written English, and for sign language users in particular, their preference is to use their first language, BSL. For a Deaf person already in receipt of ATW funding, access to an interpreter to make such phone calls is possible. For someone not yet in receipt of ATW funding, it cannot be assumed that they have the same opportunity. For the majority of Disabled applicants, a telephone based service may be appropriate but it leaves Deaf people at a disadvantage.
On-going Contact

The centralisation of ATW's contact points means that speaking to a named individual has become more difficult. From an administrative point of view, the time it takes to solve simple queries is unacceptable. The process involves leaving a message with a central message-taking service and waiting for the call to be returned. This can take weeks – and means we are in limbo during this waiting period.

For our Deaf colleagues, one-off applications and requests that cannot be immediately approved often result in the individual being unable to make any progress e.g. booking flights, booking interpreters, accepting an invitation to present at conference. This is highlighted clearly in the example below:

“When a hearing person decides to attend a conference – they pay the conference registration fee and look forward to an illuminating few days. When I decide to attend a conference, there’s all this back and forth with ATW, stress and anxiety as time runs out and I wonder whether I will be able to go; additional issues with the conference organisers as they do not know how to deal with a Deaf person in attendance at their event; and then the issue of trying to find an interpreter for the job once everything is approved.”

Changes in Policy

Changes of policy within ATW are often learnt by experience rather than by formal notification. Within the Deaf and interpreting communities, important information is discovered by hearsay or word of mouth, which is a highly inconsistent and unreliable source of information. A Deaf colleague experienced this recently during a one-off conference application process:

“My support was finally approved...However, I was told that ATW will only fund the cost of one interpreter and not two and that the second would be expected to be funded by my employer. This decision was news to me. I wonder if any type of consultation was sought from employers and deaf people before this rule was put in place. This is quite a significant policy change and it would have been good to have been told about this when the decision was made. Whilst it may save money, it actually causes a lot of hassle to be told this at such a late stage in the process because I then have to negotiate with my employer (who will not have made any provisions for such support).”

4. Administrative Burden

As stated earlier, the administrative element of ATW is undertaken by our in-house interpreting team alongside their interpreting responsibilities. The funding for these posts does not include any provision for administrative time. The experience of our Deaf colleagues has shown how much time they individually spend on their own ATW business: this is in addition to the considerable amount of time spent on processing claims, invoices, etc by our in-house team.

DCAL employs more than one Deaf staff member but, from an ATW perspective, there appears to be no understanding of how dealing with multiple and varied claims is different from dealing with one individual claim each month.

There is no recognition of DCAL as an individual entity employing Deaf people or understanding of how we fit into the overall structure of UCL. Whilst DCAL deals with the ATW claims, funds are paid into the central UCL accounting system. ATW do not notify us directly of payment as all payment correspondence is sent to UCL. This makes it extremely difficult to identify payments and ensure a consistent audit trail without having to set up our own system to keep track of monies spent.

Since the restructure, forms which were originally sent to Harrow Job Centre are now sent to the central sorting site at Wolverhampton. Many of our claim forms have since been returned as an inadequate handover of
information has taken place as part of this restructure. This has resulted in a large gap of time between our payment of freelance interpreters and ATW’s reimbursement of those claims.

5. Understanding Academia

Our final testimony highlights very clearly the real life, day to day impact of the ATW “burden” on an individual trying to pursue an academic career:

“Academia is highly competitive and sadly relies on survival of the fittest principles for career success. One of the most important commodities in this race to the top is time. ATW is a huge burden on time and therefore a barrier to academic career success... This clunky system is prohibitive and means the Deaf academics attend fewer conferences, workshops and seminars. Without adequate scientific communication with colleagues, the Deaf academic gets left behind... This is a sorry loss for society, mainstream academia and science since there are many talented Deaf academics with PhDs for whom the institutional barriers created by ATW are just too great for a career in academia to be sustainable or achievable”

Submission by Susan Booth (Interpreting Co-ordinator) and Elizabeth Graham(Senior Interpreter) on behalf of DCAL with contributions from Dr Jordan Fenlon, Dr Joanna Atkinson, Ms Mischa Cooke and Ms Hattie Bowden.

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