Summary

1. Access to Work (AtW) enables me to do my job and make a contribution to society. However, I believe that the service provided by AtW is extremely poor and has been getting worse. Key challenges I have faced in working with AtW include:

   - Customer service that is unresponsive, unhelpful and inflexible.
   - Lack of transparency over AtW rules and processes.
   - An inadequate assessment process that does not look at the individual needs of deaf people nor which seems to ensure they are signposted to information about different communication support options.

2. There have been times where engaging with AtW officials has been extremely stressful and has detracted from my day job. I believe that urgent improvements need to be made to this service.

Background

3. I am a deaf adult, responding to this inquiry as a user of AtW. As a profoundly deaf adult, I largely rely on lipreading to communicate. In meetings, I struggle to follow what is happening without access to speech-to-text communication support. I am also unable to use the telephone. I currently work in a middle-ranking managerial role as Head of Policy and Research for a large charity that supports deaf children. However, this response reflects my personal views rather than those of the organisation that I work for.

4. I am grateful to the Government that it provides me with this support and do not take it for granted. I have little doubt that, without Access to Work, I would be forced to quit my job for something that did not involve regularly meeting with others and, most likely, on a lower pay scale where the contribution I could make to society would be limited. Equally though, I believe that AtW support should be provided on a fair, transparent and equitable basis, and currently I do not feel that it is.

5. In my response, I have focused on my own experiences of the application / assessment process and the adequacy of ongoing support.

AtW application and assessment process

6. To me, a key flaw with the application and assessment process is that there is an assumption that deaf people know what support they need. This is not always the case – when I first got a job, I was unaware that speech-to-text reporters existed. For many years, I relied on lipreading when actually speech-to-text reporter was a better fit to my needs. Reliance on lipreading throughout the day meant that I was often extremely tired. As a result, I do not believe that I fulfilled my potential in my first job.

7. It was not until I moved to my second job where I learnt about speech-to-text reporters. At no point did AtW inform me of this option. This makes me question how thorough and effective the assessment process is – whether it is more than just a tick-box exercise rather than an in-depth assessment of deaf people’s needs.

8. When I first applied to AtW, there was a lot of discussion as to how many meetings I was going to have. This was extremely difficult to do – often I do not know how many meetings I am going
to have next week and yet I was being asked to come up with a figure for the whole year. This created some anxiety as to what would happen if I incorrectly guessed the number of meetings or if I reached the ‘limit’ before the end of the year. AtW did not provide me with any real assurance on this point.

**Adequacy of ongoing support**

9. AtW does not always feel ‘supportive’. Instead, particularly over the past year, the support I have received has been, at best, unhelpful and, at worse, hostile.

10. I had an extremely difficult time engaging with AtW whilst renewing my support last year. In summary, AtW refused to cover a retrospective claim for support even though the reason that the claim was retrospective was because of lengthy delays on their part in dealing with my application. I found AtW officials to be curt, unresponsive and unhelpful. I have set out the chain of events below because I believe it illustrates the customer support provided by AtW.

   i) I submitted my renewal application in late June. I then heard nothing from AtW for nearly 2 months. It was only until my line manager chased that I finally got an acknowledgement.

   ii) My first contact I got from AtW after this was to say that they were reducing my support. There was no discussion as to what my needs were. It was not until I pointed out that, as I had been recently promoted, I now had more meetings and needed more support than before.

   iii) Once a support allocation had been agreed, the paperwork had to be returned to AtW a total of 3 times before it was finalised because the AtW made a number of mistakes and seemed to be unaware of the type of support I needed.

   iv) At the very start of the process, I made clear that, I would also need support to attend party political conferences. Part of my job involves meeting with MPs to represent the charity that I work for. For reasons that were never explained to me, this element of my application was treated separately. The one-off element was not progressed at the same time as my renewal. When I raised this, I was told that I would have to contact “my AtW advisor”. I found this confusing because I thought the person dealing with my renewal was, in effect, my AtW advisor. It was not clear to me why I needed to speak to different people and what their roles were.

   v) As I was confused, I asked who I should speak to. I also asked if it was possible if the AtW official forward my application to the “advisor”. My initial emails were ignored and despite several emails chasing this, I did not get an alternative contact email address until several weeks later. The tone taken in the eventual reply seemed to imply that I was ‘pestering’ the AtW official and acting unreasonably.

   vi) When I followed up with a second AtW official, this was also delayed for a fortnight, during which period I had to regularly chase for follow up.

   vii) It was not until after conference had passed that I finally received a response saying that AtW would not cover the cost for support at conference as it was now a ‘retrospective’ claim. There seemed to be no recognition that the fault for this lay with AtW.

   viii) I made a formal complaint and received an apology for the delays. However, the AtW manager upheld the decision on the basis that I “should have known” who to contact. I felt that this was unfair and, even if this were true, questioned why it was so difficult for the AtW official to remind me of the contact details when I first asked or even to forward it on herself.

   ix) I escalated the complaint. The complaints manager acknowledged that there was no reason why the support for the conference could not have been dealt with at the same time as my renewal. Five months after my initial renewal application, the support for conference was finally agreed.

11. I was extremely unhappy about what had happened because:
i) It took a disproportionate amount of my time to keep following up emails that were not being responded to. I was unhappy that I had to escalate my complaint until the very end of the process to get a resolution. I felt extremely drained by the whole process.

ii) I did not feel that the AtW official was being helpful or supportive. It felt like their internal rules and processes were more important than ensuring I got the support I needed in a timely way.

iii) I was put in an extremely difficult position of deciding whether to book communication support without being certain that it would be refunded by AtW or saying to my line manager that I essentially could not do the job I had been employed to do.

12. I would be happy to provide the inquiry with email correspondence setting out the above chain of events.

13. Aside from the above incident, I have also experienced a number of ongoing challenges with AtW. For example:

i) Their deaf awareness is often poor. Even though my application makes it clear I am profoundly deaf, I am still occasionally telephoned by AtW.

ii) In the past few months, AtW have started refusing to cover the full travel expenses incurred by my communication support where travel is by car. These new rules have been applied retrospectively and I have received no clear information about these new rules. As a result, I’ve had to spend a lot of time adjusting my paperwork and asking my employer to cover the difference. I also question whether these new rules are fair – civil servants working for DWP are allowed to claim travel expenses at a mileage rate of 45p a mile. However, communication support workers are only refunded for 25p a mile under AtW ‘rules’.

iii) I believe there is a lack of flexibility among AtW. The number of meetings I have in any month varies. AtW have sometimes claimed that I have ‘overspent’ in busier months when I have had more meetings. In fact, I have always remained under in terms of my yearly allocation and budget. It usually involves a series of emails before AtW accept this point and agree to continue to support.

14. On a number of occasions when I have challenged AtW, I have been told that AtW is not “statutory”. The implication given is that AtW officials can do what they like without regard to the aims of the scheme or for basic fairness or equity. There seems to be no expectation that AtW could or should be more transparent about their rules and processes.

15. I am aware that as a graduate, working in a role that requires me to be familiar with deaf people’s rights, I could be regarded as being assertive and confident in challenging poor decisions. If I have to work this hard to get support from AtW, then I am extremely worried about other deaf people who may be less confident or articulate.

16. Whilst I have always experienced challenges with AtW, it does feel as if the quality of support has significant worsened in the past year. I attribute this to a lack of capacity among AtW staff but also to a government decision to stretch the existing budget across more disabled users. I believe that as many disabled people as possible should be benefiting from AtW. However, it feels perverse that this is being done at the expense of providing support to existing users.

17. I also believe there is a failure by AtW to take constructive steps, working with deaf people, to ensure funding is spent effectively. For example, new technology means that speech-to-text communication support can now often be provided remotely, using Skype technology. This is cheaper than conventional ‘on-site’ speech-to-text communication support. As far as I am aware, AtW has done little to promote this option among deaf users and to support them in using this new technology.
Conclusion

18. It is difficult to escape the conclusion sometimes that AtW is more interested in trying to ‘catch me out’ and to find reasons to reduce support, than they are in helping me to remain in employment and achieve my potential. Ultimately, all I want to do is get on with my day job. Increasingly, AtW makes this harder, generates extra stress and stops me from doing my job.

19. I believe that for AtW to be genuinely effective and supportive of deaf people like me, the following changes should be made:

   i) Significant improvements to AtW customer service with a greater focus on how they can be supportive, flexible and help disabled people prosper in employment.
   ii) A commitment to be more transparent about how AtW operates and the guidelines that AtW officials work to.
   iii) A commitment that no new ‘rules’ will be introduced without consultation with users or an impact assessment.
   iv) Improvements to the assessment process with greater efforts made to ensure deaf people are aware of the different types of communication support available to them.
   v) Additional investment to ensure that more disabled people benefit from AtW rather than trying to squeeze the existing budget.

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