Written evidence submitted by Heather Peachey (ATW0102)

Summary of my points

- There should be an initial registration process with AtW with support for that process as required, followed by the ability to obtain support for interviews at very short notice.
- Nobody should be forced to employ a salaried interpreter; it’s inappropriate for many reasons.
- AtW should consider operating their own in-house BSL/English interpreter agency (NOT, absolutely NOT contracted out – look at the Ministry of Justice debacle!)

1. Introduction:

1.1. I am a freelance interpreter. I have spent many years and thousands of pounds reaching this status. I am passionate about my job and it breaks my heart to see Deaf BSL users unable to obtain or retain a job due to the financial constraints that their disability imposes. I am fed up with the Access to Work issue making me feel as if I am greedy because I seek a fair rate for my work and to dissuade people from using unqualified “signers”. Deaf people deserve a professional service with inbuilt protection. The risks of mistranslation make the stakes high.

2. The AtW initial application and assessment process

2.1. When someone starts out, they’re in a catch-22 situation. I know someone who’s just achieved a Level 3 certificate in a practical trade in an FE college. He’s a 30-year old hard worker who now seeks a job which will finally achieve his ambition of getting off of benefits; however for him there is an added problem compared with a hearing person – his 1st language is BSL and his written English is below Level 1. He needs assistance to access advertisements and create applications likely to secure an interview. There is no AtW funding for that. If he is offered an interview the date for that is likely to be at far too short notice to allow him access Access to Work to try to set up a relationship and be given access to an interpreter for the interview.

3. Re-assessment

3.1. I was recently contacted by an agency. They were apologetic, explaining to me that they’re trying to secure interpreters willing to work with someone at a hugely reduced AtW budget. Apparently the client’s budget for an interpreter has been slashed by £10+ an hour. In the past, when I was still an NRCPD Trainee, I worked for this client to do odd days of cover. The rate they can now offer me, as a fully qualified interpreter, is substantially less. It feels like emotional blackmail as if this person can’t find interpreters willing to work for the rate offered, then I wonder if the person may have to leave their job. This is what I mean by AtW making me feel as if I am greedy for seeking a viable living wage!

3.2. It seems entirely wrong to me that so many requests that I receive from agencies now carry a caveat that it’s an AtW booking that implies the rate will be too low for many to consider accepting the booking. The result is that those most likely to respond are trainees who are the cheaper option; clearly that’s inappropriate.
4. **Freelance or Salaried Interpreters**

4.1. This is a big concern. I personally am 0.5 employed by a college in a small pool who serve the requirements of 5 Deaf individuals. However in that role I am interpreting at an undemanding level. Whist the benefits of employment are many; regular income, sick pay, paid leave, pension etc, if that were my full time job, I’d stagnate and be quite unable to keep my skills current for the range of domains in which I can work. This is why I also work up to 50% of my time as a freelance interpreter and will not take additional hours at the college, even though I have been asked to do so; **there is no way that I would work as an employee for just one Deaf person.**

4.2. I feel it is inappropriate on many levels to work full time in a 1:1 situation. It makes the Deaf person and interpreter come across as some kind of double-act with many assuming the interpreter to be in some form of “carer” role. The interpreter, out of necessity, has access to much personal information and the Deaf person is likely not to want to share all through the same person. In some cases a Deaf client with just one employed interpreter may become overly dependent on that interpreter, making the relationship potentially very unhealthy. Although I have a range of domains/skills, I cannot be a specialist in everything. A client needs to be able to book a specialist when needed, eg a financial whizz.

4.3. Surely AtW is there to reduce inequality? Isn’t that its raison d’être? I ask you to just imagine yourself in the position of a Deaf person at work, having to rely on another individual for all your communication interactions, business, public and personal – not able to have any private 1:1 conversations with a colleague etc? That’s hardly parity but it’s the best available. So why should a Deaf (or other disabled person) be additionally forced into the nightmare of being an employer, having to deal with holiday, sick pay, maternity cover etc etc??

4.4. My 50% freelance work is irregular, with no holiday pay, no pension, no sick pay but that is offset many-fold by the benefits to my clients (both Deaf and hearing). I maintain currency and expand my skills by taking assignments in a wide range of scenarios and I undertake relevant CPD (at my own expense) in order to keep updated. I am free to refuse (as I’m professionally bound to do) any assignment for which I feel I am not best suited.

4.5. I strongly believe AtW are entirely wrong in trying to force a single Deaf worker to employ a single interpreter. Clients need to be allowed the freedom to use interpreters as and when required and to book the right interpreter for the right job, for business or personal reasons.

5. **My Recommendations:**

5.1. Individuals should be able to register with AtW upfront and there should be funding for support for this process (eg an interpreter). This initial registration should set them up in the position that when they see a possible job advertisement they can easily access the support needed to go through the application/interview process. This could be done through the local Job Centre.
5.2. AtW could set up an in-house interpreting agency of their own to nationally service the Deaf community’s needs. I do not mean outsourcing to one contracted agency – NO NO NO!! The aim would be to make savings by the cutting out of the middle man – agencies who of course have to take their cut in fees. There’d be relatively little admin – quite simply only those who were NRCPD registered (RSLI or Trainee) would be accepted together with a list of domains each person would accept. NRCPD registration ensures DBS, PI insurance etc are in place. It could be largely automated - as long as the client had an in-credit budget, they could be free to book an interpreter through an online system, requesting individuals by name or by expertise area if desired. The interpreter would invoice AtW directly and the client would be free to do their job.

AtW would make massive savings and could then afford to offer interpreters a fair fee commensurate with our professional status. The massive pool of expertise that would be possible, were the rates to be realistic, would mean that all requests should be serviceable at very short notice. The knock-on effect would be that many Deaf people would be able to get off benefits and into work, thus of course starting to pay taxes and contribute to society (another saving!).

19 June 2014