Written evidence submitted by Claire Dodds, Team HaDo Ltd. (ATW0138)

Introduction:

I am a service provider, working with deaf sign language users. My company provides face-to-face interpreting, and remote interpreting, translation (from British Sign Language to written English) and English support. I am submitting evidence to this inquiry because much of the work my company provides is funded by Access to Work (AtW).

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

1. Some clients are having to wait long periods for assessments, which means they cannot use our services when they need to. Some clients are not being informed that they need to book a re-assessment, so their funding for support had been stopped after the agreed period ends, despite them still being deaf and still being in the same job. They are then having to wait 6-8 weeks for re-assessment, without interim support funding. This means their employer either has to foot the bill in the meantime, for unpaid invoices and during the wait, or the deaf person is unable to perform their role as expected within the workplace. This is making deaf people fear for their jobs, and prospective deaf employees are becoming an increasingly unattractive prospect to employers.

2. Clients tell me they are frustrated at the lack of flexibility in the current assessment process. They are told they cannot use certain parts of our service, as “the hourly rate is too much”, but assessors do not seem able to grasp that, with no minimum booking period and no travel costs, in many cases our services are cheaper overall than booking face-to-face sessions with support workers. Additionally, several of our clients work from home (self-employed) and do not want to book face-to-face translation services, for reasons of privacy.

3. Allowances are set monthly, and hours cannot be carried over, allowing the Deaf person little scope to cope with busy periods and encouraging “overbooking” to use up hours, for fear that their monthly allowance will be cut back if some portion of it remains unused (this is often exactly what does happen).

4. Communication with ATW is extremely problematic for many deaf people. Many assessors won’t accept email correspondence, citing data protection concerns. Phone conversations require the support of an interpreter, which, for those that have support in place, eats into valuable hours needed to support them in their work. Those who have no current support provision have to rely on the goodwill of colleagues, family or friends to make calls. Call backs often happen at times when interpreting support is no longer present, and no further attempt is made to contact the Deaf person. When decisions or changes are made, these are often not
communicated clearly to deaf people (sometimes they are not communicated at all, just implemented), and deaf people’s obligation to inform support workers of changes is not clearly communicated.

5. Numerous clients have found the complaints procedure, for those unhappy with the decisions made by their assessors, fairly impenetrable for, and it has been deliberately obscured by some ATW staff, who tell clients they have “no right to appeal”, without telling them they can still actually complain.

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:

6. In the past, provision has generally been adequate, but over recent months, many clients have had their provision slashed, both in terms of the number of hours of support they may use, and in the remuneration ATW are prepared to make for that support. This has meant they have been unable to use our service as they would have wished, and have been forced to either manage without, or use underqualified support workers, who are making mistakes in their work. Our clients are rightly concerned this will reflect badly on them in their workplace, and may affect their chances of promotion, or even put them at risk of losing their job. Clients tell me the only support workers who will accept jobs at the price the assessors are setting have no interpreting training, poor sign language skills, inadequate written English skills, no insurance, no DBS checks and, as they are not registered with NRCPD, there is no way for deaf clients to complain if they are unhappy.

7. Deaf people are also concerned that payment rates fixed by assessors are sometimes two-tiered - higher in some cases when a deaf person books through an agency, rather than booking directly with an interpreter. This is disempowering for the deaf person, as they cannot choose the interpreter the agency sends, and they are unhappy about the idea of a previously uninvolved agency now profiteering from this two-tiered system by offering the interpreters they book the same lower rate they would receive from a direct booking, whilst pocketing the difference themselves.

8. Due to provision cuts, we have had a number of cancelled bookings and have lost a number of regular clients (all of whom we have supported for many years and who wish to continue using our services, but are now unable to do so). We are being repeatedly asked by clients if we can drop our prices to the hourly rate their assessor has set for them, so that they can continue to use us, however, this represents such a significant reduction in income (15%-40%, depending on the type of service used – we provide several), that our business would quickly become unviable. With the loss of business we have already experienced, our work is under threat and we are actively seeking alternative forms of income. For the
record, we have not put our prices up at all during the 7 years we have been trading.

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

9. ATW is an invaluable resource for deaf and disabled people. Without it, many skilled and talented people would be unable to support themselves and their families through work and would be unable to contribute to society. However, for those who use daily support (such as deaf people) the system is onerous and the time taken to arrange support, deal with paperwork and follow up on problems significantly detracts from the time available to complete everyday work duties.

10. The recent cuts to provision in terms of hours available and reductions in rates payable to support workers has left many deaf people extremely stressed and anxious and very concerned about their futures. The undertrained and unqualified support workers that ATW assessors are now approving for so many deaf workers are themselves a barrier to job security and career progression. Employers are now viewing deaf people as even more unattractive in a labour market which is extremely competitive and already disinclined to employ disabled people.

11. Problems within the financial administration of ATW (we have directly experienced slow payments, unpaid invoices, underpaid invoices, refusal to communicate directly with service providers, patchy remittance advice, payments in error, etc.) make ATW funded work a less attractive prospect for registered, qualified support workers, who are more easily able to transfer to other sectors, such as interpreting in police, court and health settings, where qualification and registration is valued and appropriately remunerated.

The steps taken so far by DWP to extend ATW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme:

12. Has there been any marketing produced in BSL?

My Recommendations:

13. That deaf people should be assessed by specially trained Deaf Assessors who have a genuine understanding of the barriers deaf people face in employment. Ideally, those people should be deaf themselves.

14. Deaf people themselves are best placed to understand what kinds of support they need, and when. Give them more control over their ATW provision and allow them to make their own decisions. Provide them with guidelines and an overall budget cap and stop trying to micro-manage their support.
15. Make the communication channels between deaf employees and ATW more accessible. Don’t rely on telephones. Allow deaf people to have dedicated contacts/caseworkers within ATW who understand their circumstances and will deal with them personally.

16. Repeat everything that is agreed in a letter or an email, in plain, accessible English, so deaf people can understand and refer back to what has been said.

17. Iron out inconsistencies in assessment and agreed provision. The deaf community is very small. When one person is allowed x and another, in a similar post elsewhere, is not, everyone gets to hear about it.

19 June 2014