Written evidence submitted by David Phippard (ATW0146)

1. I am a British Sign Language/English interpreter and I am concerned about the drastic cuts that have been made to ATW services for Deaf people and changes to policy and the proposals for how interpreter support should be provided to Deaf people.

2. Deaf employees who have been forced to seek a full-time salaried interpreter under the 30-hour ruling have experienced huge problems in recruiting, with no suitably qualified applicants coming forward for the post. The potential for discrimination and exclusion from the labour market is glaring, with resulting adverse consequences to interpreters and the wider Deaf community.

3. There are many issues raised for the interpreter by being in a full-time salaried post, such as:

3.1 a lack of professional development for the interpreter and skill stagnation by not working with a variety of clients across a range of domains.

3.2 conflict with professional codes of conduct and overwork.

3.3 Qualified and registered interpreters are duty bound to only undertake assignments for which they have ‘the appropriate qualifications, competence, and experience’ (National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People). An interpreter working in a salaried position could find it difficult to refuse to interpret in situations that they deem to be above their skill level and capability. This could lead to errors in the interpreting process, which could in turn have serious implications for the Deaf employee’s status at work, as well as their opportunities for development and promotion.

3.4 an employed interpreter would encounter issues with maintaining impartiality by working with the same client day-in day-out.

3.5 it would not be reasonable to expect the interpreter and Deaf client to take holiday at the same time so there would be a further cost to provide cover when the interpreter is off.

3.6 It would not be feasible for the many Deaf people in work to have a full-time interpreter as we are also required to work in many other settings every day such as in the Justice system, with the Health Service and in schools with Deaf children.

3.7 Availability of support: In a recent survey by the Association of Sign Language Interpreters (ASLI), members were asked, ‘Would you consider being employed by one client's company and working for that client full time?’ Citing many of the reasons outlined above, 86% of the members who responded indicated that they would not accept salaried employment.
4. ATW advisors insist on communicating via telephone, which creates a barrier for Deaf claimants. Additionally, the complaints and appeals procedure is extremely difficult for Deaf sign language users to access.

5. Many ATW / DWP staff are rude, lack understanding and are unsympathetic when dealing with Deaf claimants, which adds to the stress they are already experiencing by feeling that their job may be at risk.

6. Several of my clients have had to fight with their ATW Adviser to avoid losing their communication support budget. This has meant that they are prevented from doing the job that they are paid to do and instead spending hours on the phone or writing to justify why they need this support.

7. I know of one previously very successful client that had to leave a highly specialised IT post because their support was cut from five days a week to two. This meant that they were unable to participate in essential meetings and communicate with their colleagues and it was simply not feasible for them to continue in the role.

8. Recent cutbacks to staff at ATW / DWP mean that a lot of expertise is being lost. Interpreters and Deaf people are having to educate staff about why two interpreters are required for a booking lasting two hours or more and the difference between a ‘signer’ and a fully qualified interpreter that follows a professional code of conduct with professional indemnity insurance and a DBS check.

9. It is a well-known fact that employment among Deaf people is much lower than that of the general public. Of those Deaf people who have managed to get a job, many have become very successful, which would not be possible without skilled interpreter support.

10. Interpreter fees have remained at around £35 to £40 per hour for the last 10 years. By reducing these rates to the recently suggested £25 for freelance interpreters outside London and £35 for an interpreter via an agency is appalling. Where Deaf people cannot fill an employed interpreter post, ATW sets limits with which to pay freelancers at an hourly rate equal to that of the employed position; in many cases this is less than 50% of the freelancer’s normal hourly rate. This reduction is totally unrealistic for skilled, self-employed practitioners who must shoulder all the additional costs of running their own business.

11. It is essential that Deaf people have choice and variety in who they choose to interpret for them. Different interpreters will have different skills to suit different environments or situations.

12. Often a Deaf person will have a pool of preferred interpreters to support them over weeks, months or years. Between the Deaf person and the
interpreter pool it is quite simple to arrange cover when it is required without the need to contact one or more interpreting agencies. Working in this way is also more cost effective as it is not necessary to pay agency booking fees.

13. It has taken years of struggling to educate employers and service providers of the need for properly trained and qualified sign language interpreters. The blanket cuts being imposed now are setting the communities of Deaf people and interpreters back 20 years.

14. By reducing funding it will only be possible to attract lesser qualified or inexperienced interpreters that will not be able to provide the quality service to allow Deaf people, especially at managerial level, to be treated equally and therefore perform to their potential.

15. Deaf people who work are being discriminated against by this government's changes to the Access to Work (ATW) fund.

16. It should be recognised that most deaf people need a different type of support to people with other types of disability.

17. BSL interpreters train for a minimum of seven years and registered interpreters are trained to postgraduate level as a minimum.

18. When Communication Support Workers are suggested as being a cheaper alternative to a qualified interpreter this results in the Deaf employee receiving an inadequate level of support.

19. It would assist everyone involved if the title and role of BSL/English interpreters were to be distinguished from the generic title and role of ‘Support Worker’ currently used throughout all ATW provision.

20. The default provision should be for NRCPD registered interpreters, not unqualified, unregistered (and possibly uninsured) workers with a basic qualification in conversational British Sign Language. Deaf people should have an automatic right to an NRCPD registered interpreter.

21. The Sayce report ‘Getting in, staying in and getting on - Disability employment support fit for the future' of June 2011 stated the value of Access to Work (ATW) to Deaf and disabled people and the value to the economy of more people in work:

21.1 “When Government spends around 20 times as much on out-of-work benefits for disabled people as on specialist disability employment support (£7 billion compared with just £330 million) something is wrong: we need to invest more in a menu of disability employment support that individuals can control if they wish (Access to Work, peer support and mentoring, support to get and keep employment). This makes economic sense: for every £1 spent on Access to Work the Exchequer recoups £1.48, and the social return on the investment is even higher. This would
(with other measures) help reduce some of the need for out-of-work benefits, which would make the whole change self-sustaining."

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