Written evidence submitted by Caroline O'Neill (ATW0153)

Executive Summary:

- Claim protocol and being a freelancer
- Rigidity of support system, communication and sound-operators
- Pros of Access to Work, my restrictions in my role, how I am disadvantaged
- Funding and publicity
- Recommendations

Introduction:

My name is Caroline O'Neill and I am profoundly deaf. I am a BSL user and I work as a freelance producer/director in the television broadcast industry. I am sending in evidence because I am concerned by the sudden changes at Access to Work and I fear the negative repercussions this will have on my career.

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

1. My position as a freelancer means I am employed by different companies throughout the year. My job for these companies is essentially the same, yet each time I secure employment I must reapply for Access to Work and wait months for a decision. If a role requires an immediate start (which is often the case in television) then I will be in a position where I'm unsupported for weeks, perhaps even months whilst Access to Work discuss my case. As a result of this I am reluctant to apply for mainstream work for fear of being offered a job that I cannot adequately complete without support.

2. I find it extremely strange that all initial claims must be made over the phone. Not all deaf people have a textphone at home. Additionally, not all deaf people live with an interpreter or have regular access to one. When applying for Access to Work you should not be put in a position where they have to ask family members or friends to make calls for them.

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:

3. The support offered by Access to Work is extremely rigid – I am fortunate that all my office hours 10am – 6pm are covered by Access to Work. However, on the days where I have to go out filming or when I’m in the edit these are hours outside of my agreement. Very often filming is undertaken at the last minute and when this happens we need to contact Access to Work to make a brand new claim to get some extra hours.
agreed. In previous years when this happened it was a matter of emailing your personal advisor and you’d have a decision very quickly. These days advance notice needs to be given and I’m not in a position to do this. I need to know I can go filming or go into an edit at a moments notice and thus put support in place without having to worry whether this will be approved or not.

4. I find it extremely hard to get an answer out of the people at Access to Work as to how your claim is processing and who to speak to about your claim. On the 9th May 2014 I emailed Access to Work offering feedback on my experiences and asking if we could open a dialogue. I received a response on the 12th May 2014 advising me that my email had been allocated to an advisor. Since then I have heard absolutely nothing back from them.

5. Previously through Access to Work I was able to employ a sound-man for a certain amount of days a month to assist on shoots. In television you are more employable if you are able to self-shoot, operate sound and do your own edits. I am not in a position to learn how to do sound and neither is it viable to train up an interpreter and have them work with me 24/7. At the moment when I go off self-shooting I often have to rely on a researcher to check the sound for me. Having a sound operator made me more independent and employable. This has since been removed from my Access to Work agreement meaning once again I am reliant on a hearing colleague attending filming with me.

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

6. Access to Work is a brilliant thing – I’ve worked in television for thirteen years now and worked my way up to producer/director level. Through Access to Work I have successfully completed work-related courses in editing, in script-writing, in health and safety and production management. I have filmed in the States and Europe and even won an award for one of my programmes. This wouldn’t have been possible without the support provided by Access to Work. Now I find myself reluctant to apply for new roles on productions as I worry that Access to Work will not grant me the coverage I need and that it will take too long to put in place.

7. As a deaf television producer/director I actively work in deaf programming but there is not enough work to go round and finding full-time employment in this field is not viable. I need to be able to return to work in the mainstream industry on hearing productions. I’m keen to prove to mainstream television producers that employing someone who is deaf or disabled is actually a positive move; that we are capable of the same, if not higher, standards of our able-bodied colleagues. At the moment I do not feel that this is something I can do with my current
agreement and I am concerned that I will miss out on potential contracts or even end up unemployed.

8. By having an interpreter and the occasional sound-operator I am able to work at the same capacity as my hearing contemporaries without disadvantage to my employer. If my Access to Work is restricted or removed then this creates a disadvantage between me and my hearing colleagues and an employer is not likely to hire me when such a disadvantage is present.

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

9. I gather that there has been an increase in funding for Access to Work, if this is the case and they are encouraging more people to apply and want to keep people in employment then why is funding restricted? Why are deaf people being told they can only have a limited number of hours per week for less money than previous agreements? Why are people being encouraged to employ full-time interpreters when this is unrealistic? Why are the allowances being cut meaning that deaf professionals are not able to fund fully qualified MRSLI’s? Interpreters charge a certain amount and deaf people should not be punished for this nor used as a pivot to bring around change.

10. I have seen articles in the paper about how the British government want to encourage more deaf and disabled people in the workforce. How this is a time of change and there are more and more disabled people being employed. I’m not sure what facts or figures they’re quoting here, but with the current changes that are taking place and with the restrictions that are being imposed more and more deaf people are being forced out of the workplace.

My Recommendations:

11. Access to Work need to make applications transparent and easy to use and understand for everyone, regardless of their disability.

12. Cases need to be dealt with quickly and efficiently – a better system of communication needs to be put in place. Clients shouldn’t have to chase Access to Work begging for news on their application.

13. More flexibility should be allowed with contract agreements – if you have explained the unpredictable nature of your job then surely some leeway can be given in the instance of filming or editing/extra hours needed to be put in.

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