I have been using Access to Work ever since it first came out. The impact of this bursary grant scheme has been transformative and enabling. However, it is not a perfect system and I would like to share my thoughts on how this can be made better, bringing better value for the DWP and for its customers.

In the last 12 years, I have worked as an employment adviser serving mostly deaf people looking for support to get back into work. In my role, Access to Work is a vital element in their journey back to work because it provides crucial support at the interview stage and any recruitment agency-related activities such as registration and assessment leading to employment. In this report, I will look to cover any issues that I have observed during my time as specialist employment adviser delivering to deaf and hard of hearing people

1. Lately, I have observed that the decision making process by Access to Work have become more prolonged while the recruitment process in the labour market are increasingly more frenetic and short notice. Increasingly, majority of entry levels jobs can only be accessed via recruitment agencies. The purpose of recruitment agencies is to mobilise workers at short notice. There is also an additional problem of finding the sign language interpreter at a moment’s notice too in the critical 1st day of starting a new job. However, with Access to Work, there is no way for a deaf person to contact them quickly, more so if your fluent language is British Sign Language. Access to Work only allows application through telephone calls, which discriminate deaf people who rely on other form of communications tactics such as emails, online forms, web chat and SMS (Short messaging service via mobile phone). With the amount of money being spent of Universal Tax Credit and digitising the benefits service, the process of applying for Access to Work still remains archaic. Why not have online forms to fill out the details?

2. Since setting up my own part time employment service 2 years ago, I have seen 50 to 60 deaf people coming through the doors. None of them use Typetalk/TextDirect. So, by DWP thinking they are making themselves accessible by providing a minicom number or advising deaf people to use 18001 prefix to call through TextDirect, as found in official letters, is restrictive and inappropriate for Deaf people who can only communicate effectively through British Sign Language. Furthermore, having access to a minicom are hard to come by since most of my deaf customers rarely have one these days – ever since Access to Work have stopped providing them. To be able to conduct a TextDirect call, one has to have good grasp of English along with good typing skills – attributes that a very few of my clients possess.

3. To empower and enable deaf people to sort out their own Access to Work applications and budgets, DWP need to cater all range of communication tactics and methods. This would go a long way to prevent fraud by allowing applicants to take full control of their own application process.
This would also do away the need to nominate a third party to handle the application process and subsequent activities.

4. Information found on the Gov.uk website is entirely and wholly provided in English – easy read or not. I am aware this is a country where the common language is English but we are also a country with indigenous languages. British Sign Language is one of them and this was recognised by DWP way back in March 2003. To date, information is still only available in English.

5. One and half years ago, I gave a talk about Access to Work to a room of 40 deaf people at Leicester Deaf and Social Club. I asked if anyone is able to put their hands up if they have heard of Access to Work. Only one person raised their hand. At that point, I knew it would be futile to use my next question “Do you know what Access to Work is for”. It is hard to gauge how many deaf people have ever heard of Access to Work across the country however I am always explaining Access to Work to every single one of my customers who have I supported in the past 12 years, which are in their hundreds with exception of a handful of my customers. I am aware of numbers of deaf people currently in work who have remained on the same pay level for a number of years. One of them has been on minimum wages for 20 years with no progression or development and never heard of Access to Work.

6. When supporting a deaf client to make a new ATW application, via the telephone (I am profoundly deaf who use a sign language interpreter for telephone calls), they will only take the job interview information and will not give a decision on the spot. Information is then passed onto the decision-makers. The decision-makers always insist on telephoning back which is wholly inappropriate because the applicants are deaf and unable to hear on the phone due to “broken” ears. This process is a new thing and it is less responsive compared to what we had before where we had a decision on the spot. Most of the times, my clients comes in to see me for support to make an ATW application and they would also like to be able to arrange sign language support for the job interview especially most entry levels job interviews are short notice. Lack of decision at this point require me to take a leap of faith and proceed with the booking of interpreter in the hope that they will be reimbursed. This also requires an immense amount of goodwill and understanding by my regular agency who I book sign language interpreters through. The current situation is having a demoralising effect on the interpreting profession, the support professionals (like myself) and on deaf jobseekers who find themselves compelled to secure employment by DWP but without clear means.

7. Recently, some of my customers are being instructed, via the CSI template form (The Communication Support at Interview form) to question and extract information from their prospective employers – before the interview - on what are their recruitment policy and whether it includes reasonable adjustments. It is my view that this new obligation is
detrimental to the customer’s chances of being viewed favourably as a potential employee. No one would want to affect their 1st impression with a prospective employer by asking for these details which could potentially be perceived less than favourably.

8. I have also noted that ATW advisers are increasingly looking to get larger employers to pay for the communications support because of Equality Act. In principle, Equality Act is a good thing but it is still flawed in a number of areas. How the interview process can be equal footing if it costs more to employ a deaf person, than a non-disabled person, when passing on communication support costs to employer. I am sure this is not what Equality Act is striving for. With the loss of Legal Aid and a diminished body of ECHR, as well as very limited access to Citizen Advice (we even have to fight for an interpreter to meet a CAB advisor), it will be very hard to reinforce Equality Act upon the employer to provide communication support. By doing so, it will certainly ruins any chance of getting on the good side of the employer as most will either begrudgingly heed the Equality Act or inform the deaf applicant that the job is now on hold/filled. I would urge Access to Work not to create more barriers, for deaf people trying to be gainfully employed, by passing on additional costs to the employers. It is already difficult for deaf people to access the labour market due to misconceptions and prejudices towards them before all this arrangement of communication support comes into play.

9. Since I worked in the welfare to work industry for the last 12 years, which include working with A4e, Remploy, Shaw Trust, Ingeus, Working Links, I have went through a number of jobs myself. In the 1st ten years of my employment advice career, I always had one particular Access to Work advisor. We have developed a good relationship and within time, he knows all about me and what my disability it likes and the barriers that comes with it. Since I went self-employed 2 years ago and set up my own employment advice service for deaf people, I was allocated with a different ATW advisor. My experience of dealing with him was frustrating, obstructive and unhelpful. I had to justify and explain my needs all over again to someone oblivious about the nature of my disability via huge volume of emails being exchanged. Since becoming self-employed, I have observed several experienced ATW advisors becoming redundant and replaced with people who have no good insight of what support that deaf people need to gain access to the employment market.

10. My own Access to Work was stopped last weekend. I only had a week notice when I was informed of this. Apparently, ATW are saying that I am not generating an income after I have sent my accounts showing that I have generated a total of £10,000 in one year. There was no consultation with me to find out more information about my income despite sending highly private information. I have tried to communicate with them via an email. No reply. I have telephoned (with my interpreter who kindly volunteered his time) and left a message. Still no reply. I cannot operate like this while on self-employed basis. My service has seen 27 deaf people back into work, operating at a 40% success ratio, which contribute towards
cutting the welfare bills. Even the local Jobcentres are referring their deaf clients to me.

11. I would like you to point out that Access to Work are being made available to young deaf people on the Youth Contract. Due to Access to Work being the best known secret of the DWP, we have numerous long term unemployed Deaf people who have become reliant on the welfare system which have now been shaken up, quite rightly, and find themselves to be more active in looking for jobs. For hearing people who have been on welfare benefits for a long time, they can access voluntary jobs and various job clubs or provisions. For deaf people, who are too old for Youth Contract, are unable to gain meaningful work experience through voluntary work because health and safety rules stipulate that they must undertake induction training but that is not accessible without communication support. It is hindering their journey back into being gainfully employed.

12. This week, I called a company who set up a job club locally, funded by Career Advice Service. They also supply employment support provision to A4e under Work Programme. Several of my clients have tried to access their service but they have refused to provide interpreters saying it is too expensive or words to effect “But we are only funded by Career Advice Service”. Can we invoke the Equality Act here? No because of their limited funds, it is not reasonable to provide communication support. This is just one example out of thousands of request for communication support to be provided. Deaf people are always placed at substantial disadvantage and Equality Act is toothless. Either makes the Equality Act more enforceable or broadens and simplifies the Access to Work system otherwise many more will fall through the gaps or continues to be unaware of the support available to them.

13. Deaf people are 2 times less likely to be employed compared to someone with a criminal record, according to RNID/Action on Hearing Loss research. We need a viable Access to Work system to improve our chances – not a system that does not address our requirements. We need incentives to undertake route through education and into employment. Without the right level of support, deaf people will be reliant on the goodwill of future employers, charity and the welfare benefits. Remember that being deaf is not a learning disability.

14. Liz Sayce, of RADAR, conducted a governmental research into Access to Work and has found that for every £1 spent on ATW, we see economic returns of £1.60 for every pound spent. Please see this link: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/specialist-disability-employment-support

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