I am writing in my capacity as Prevention Officer at Deafconnect and I am a qualified social worker. I have supported a number of Deaf people to apply for Access to Work with varying success.

The main issues I wish to raise are as follows:

- Information about Access to Work (ATW) is inaccessible to Profoundly Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users because the information provided by ATW is all in English.
- Contacting ATW is very difficult for BSL users because many don’t have minicomms (text phones) and if they do English is not their first language.
- It is difficult to make direct contact with ATW advisors and there is no consistency in terms of having one person dealing with a case.
- Different advisors mean inconsistency in terms of how the criteria are applied.
- Time delays mean Deaf people can lose out when trying to attend job interviews; they also affect Deaf people in terms of carrying out their work effectively.
- Employing a salaried interpreter is generally not a viable option because most interpreters prefer to work freelance.
- Deaf people regularly need to book interpreters through an agency and cuts have seen (some) ATW advisors refusing to sanction this.
- ATW advisors often lack Deaf Awareness and therefore fail to understand the needs of Deaf BSL users.
- Recent changes have made the process more complicated and time consuming with an impact on the support needed from other organisations.
- The 30 hour rule has a major impact on Deaf people being able to use interpreters.

1. People born profoundly Deaf are referred to as ‘Pre-lingually Deaf which means there first language is BSL and English is there second language. BSL and English have completely different structure, grammar and rules. Many Deaf BSL users have limited understanding of written English because of this but even those with higher standards of English will still have problems understanding jargon or uncommon English words. The average BSL user leaves school with a reading age equivalent to that of a Nine year old. In addition whilst BSL is continuing to develop as a language there are many words that don’t have an equivalent sign making it hard to understand when written down. Information about ATW including forms are all in English and there is no information published in BSL. Ironically this limits BSL users ability to ‘access’ ATW.

2. Contacting ATW is difficult for BSL users and made harder by the centralised phone number – both for the above reasons if they have a minicom and the need for another person to do it if they don’t. Funding is limited for organisations like Deafconnect and it is time consuming to book appointments for someone to make calls on the Deaf person’s behalf. (We have no funding for this kind of work).

3. Once the initial application is made, it is still difficult to get direct contact with advisors and if phone numbers are given out, it is often a different person each time. Different advisors then apply the rules in different ways, and it means starting again to explain the situation.
4. The process is very long winded and I have had clients who have missed out on interviews and training courses because we have not had agreement for funding. Or they been employed but have not been able to their jobs properly because they have not had an interpreter because of the delays. This is particularly difficult because employers already discriminate against employing Deaf people feeling they will not be able to perform satisfactorily and this view is enforced when we cannot organise interpreters. Conversely when we have employed Deaf people it has left the burden of their work or acting as interpreters with the hearing staff who have other roles to perform.

5. Most Sign Language interpreters work on a free lance basis because they enjoy and need a variety to their work to maintain their professional competence. Very few interpreters are prepared to work on a salaried basis. Again limiting Deaf people’s opportunities.

6. The availability of interpreters is always a problem as there is a national shortage. Interpreters need to be booked in advance to ensure availability. Most Deaf people may know one or two interpreters but don’t have access to a large pool of interpreters. Recently ATW has blocked the use of agencies to find interpreters because it is more expensive to book through an agency. This makes it difficult for Deaf people to source interpreters.

7. ATW advisors very often lack awareness about the needs of Deaf people and will refuse to sanction funding because they don’t understand why the need is there. For example, Deaf person employed to work as a carer for another Deaf person – ATW saying they don’t need an interpreter because both are Deaf. Failed to recognise that part of the carer’s role was to make phone calls on behalf of the Deaf client or go to meetings to advocate for them.

8. Deaf people need assistance to contact and fill out forms for Access to work and the process is so complicated and time consuming. There is no funding for support to do this with increased reliance on good will of organisations like Deafconnect. Contracts to support Disabled people to find work are given to generic advisors who cannot help Deaf people because of communication issues.

9. The 30 hour rule has further restricted Deaf people from getting the support they need to work and discriminates against them. Communication support is needed all of the time for many Deaf people in their employment. In addition, in many situations more than one interpreter is needed – for example meetings over 1 hour, training events, complex meetings with lots of people. This is severely limited by the 30 hour rule.

Recommendations

- Information needs to be made accessible by the use of BSL windows (Interpreters signing the information on websites) and by the use of DVD’s.
- ATW advisors need to be trained fully in Deaf Awareness to understand the issues Deaf people face.
- Specialist Deaf organisations should be funded to support Deaf people into work.
- Direct contact with allocated ATW advisors should be considered for consistency and ease of contact.
- Time scales for agreeing funding need to be reduced in general and fast track agreement needs to be in place for things like job interviews.
- Forcing Deaf people to employ waged interpreters needs to stop.
- Interpreters booked through agencies should be allowed.
• The 30 hour rule needs to be dropped.

20 June 2014