Written evidence submitted by Thomas Mulloy (ATW0196)

Executive Summary:

- AtW has been useful in supporting me to forge a successful career in audit. As a result, I am a qualified chartered accountant working as an Assistant Manager for Grant Thornton, the fifth largest accountancy firm in UK.
- The above was only possible due to the full time Qualified and NRCPD registered British Sign Language/English (BSL/English) interpreters support over the last seven years.
- The current level of support (exceeding the 30 hour ‘rule’) looks set to come to an end due to a guidance recommending one to employ a full time interpreter. This is not a feasible option for myself based on the numerous reasons detailed below.
- It has been proven that for each £1 spent on support, the Government receives £1.48 back (Sacre Report), clearly an investment which reaps an income benefit of 48%.

Introduction:

I currently work as an Assistant Audit Manager for Grant Thornton within the Public Sector Assurance department. Being profoundly deaf, I rely on BSL/English interpreters to communicate with both my colleagues and clients.

I have been in receipt of communication support from BSL/English interpreters for more than seven years. This support has been in place since I first started work with the Audit Commission. Part of my role at the time involved training to become a chartered accountant. The opportunity to participate in this training would not have been possible had the interpreters not been in place during the time.

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

1. My first application took place in 2007. The process at that time was rather streamlined with an external assessor visiting my workplace to enable them to understand and determine my support needs. As a result, I was advised to have full time BSL/English interpreting support. This is vital due to my on-going dialogue with various clients. This support was subject to review after three years. It was agreed for ease of administration, that the employer was to pay the interpreters and claim the payments back from AtW. Claim forms were to be submitted on a monthly basis.

2. After the initial three years, AtW re-visited my support and extended my support for another three years. This re-assessed budget ended on 31st December 2013.
3. My role during 2013-14 changed immensely due to my promotion to Assistant Manager. As a result my interaction with the clients increased due to working with multiple teams on multiple audits. Given that the majority of my work time is now spent on clients’ sites, this has resulted in more time spent liaising with various clients who I have never met before.

4. The nature of my client work has also changed, meaning that I now need to speak to Directors and Members of Boards. Quality of communication is vital for this, in order to clearly demonstrate the skills, knowledge and experience I possess. The training undertaken by Communication Support Workers and Trainee Interpreters, who command a cheaper fee, is not sufficient to accurately reflect me in my current role.

5. In January 2014, I transferred to the Leeds office from London. Due to the expiration of my previous application and the transfer, I was required to submit another application. I requested the support to continue as previously agreed and established, in order to continue to carry out my daily duties as an Assistant Manager. This was submitted in January 2014.

6. I have just received notification from AtW (Mid June 2014) advising of the reduction in the budget allocated to me, to nearly half of that previously in place. The rationale seems to relate to the fact I need an interpreter for more than 30 hours a week. As a result, I have been allocated a maximum budget of £30,000 (a cost devised by AtW for a funded salaried interpreter).

7. It is not clear how the AtW has arrived at the £30,000 figure and on asking I have not been given any clear insight into the decision making process. I have recently been informed that there is no formal cap on the hourly rate.

8. The above news came across as extremely disappointing, especially so since the Minister for Disabled People, Mike Penning MP, announced the suspension of the 30 hour ‘rule’ back in May. Therefore the AtW adviser did not work on the basis of the suspension which would have resulted in the allocation of budget to fund freelance interpreters on a 35 hour week basis.

9. I intend to ask for a reconsideration. However, this is time consuming and I may need to work outside my work hours to resolve this. In addition, there is the danger of my interpreters costs not being reimbursed. As a result, this will have a detrimental impact on my ability to liaise with my clients.

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:
10. Due to the varying nature of my job, I have a specific pool of qualified BSL/English interpreters. Through the years, I have trained these interpreters in the jargon and terminology I mention on a daily basis at work which is a specialised environment.

11. Having a pool of interpreters in place has worked well over the years. On almost all occasions, I have an interpreter in place to work with me for seven hours amounting to 35 hours a week (although I work 37.5 hours a week myself). However, there are some occasions I need two interpreters. This may be due to attending a training course or delivering training myself. In general interpreters cannot continue for more than 20 minutes without having a regular break in between. This is when I have two interpreters in place not one. AtW has previously understood my needs but given their 30 hour ‘rule’, it seems to me they have disregarded my needs as mentioned above.

12. The typical daily rate of an interpreter may cost up to £250 (Standard London Rate but would cost less outside London) amounting to £36 per hour.

13. In my current application for 2014, my AtW adviser mentioned the 30 hour ‘rule’ (AtW 340). According to their guidance, anyone needing interpreter support for 30 hours a week or more will need to employ an interpreter on a salary of £30,000 plus £5,000 on costs of employing one.

14. The above ‘rule’ is not feasible and I do not wish it to be applied based on the following factors:

   a. BSL/English Interpreters need to keep their skills up to date and by having freelance jobs, they are able to continue their professional development
   b. Not appropriate to have a full time interpreter as this would not meet my varying needs each day as mentioned above e.g. Training, Conferences etc require different skills set which may not be found in one interpreter. The AtW guidance currently supports this.
   c. Annual Leave will pose an issue i.e. interpreter may not wish to take the same leave as mine. Also, a replacement would have to be sourced if the interpreter goes on leave during my work days thus incurring additional costs.
   d. Maternity leave/Sick cover/Paternity/Adoption – who would fund this, my employer or AtW? Also one would need to consider the replacement implications i.e. re-training etc.
   e. What is the role of the interpreter if I am absent due to long term sickness/paternity etc.
   f. In my role, I am required to visit various clients locations. Some interpreters may not be flexible given their commitments back at home e.g. collecting children, transport restrictions, etc.
   g. Pension implications – who would fund the pension related costs.
15. Due to the above, the seemingly enforced 30 hour 'rule' is not feasible and practical. My budget has recently been reduced to half resulting in a maximum rate of £18.19 per hour while the going rate of Qualified and NRCPD registered freelance BSL/English interpreters is around £35 per hour. On this basis, I am being severely limited in my ability to carry out my duties. This will have detrimental impact on my career and future prospects.

16. One must note there are communication support workers (CSW) or trainee interpreters who may cost much less (around £20 per hour) than the qualified and registered interpreters. However, due to the nature of my role and duties, I can only have a fully qualified and registered interpreters. They possess the necessary skills and experience in order to provide full access to my working environment.

17. My adviser at AtW is fully informed of my needs as per my original assessment. My needs have not changed but the adviser seems to be bound by certain policy and guidance in place at AtW. I have continually challenged them to explain the rationale of their decision but have not managed to get an explicit response. This has resulted in time consuming dialogue between both parties. Additionally, my adviser has refused to give me a direct telephone number of the person who made the decision on my current budget. Given the adviser is not in a position to explain the decision in detail, I would rather speak to someone who made the decision and find out more and to be able to further discuss my support requirements.

18. My AtW adviser does not work on a full time basis. I was informed that the adviser does not work on Mondays and only works between 10.30am and 4pm on the remaining week days. This poses a problem as I am often busy in my work and prefer to ring first thing in the morning around 9am or late in the day around 4.30pm. I asked if I could speak to another adviser but was informed the nominated adviser is the only person who has access to my details. I feel this is proving to be a barrier to resolving this application in a time efficient manner. The lengthy time spent on this is having a negative impact on the time I am available to do the job I am employed to do.

19. I am frustrated at the lack of availability by the adviser to deal with my needs. This is one area I wish to see an improvement in.

AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:
20. It is clear that without the support from AtW over the years, I would not have been able to study to become a chartered accountant. In addition, I would not have been able to forge a successful career to date.

21. However, given the dealings I have had with AtW to date, it is becoming clear that the advisers are under pressure to reduce the budget. This will no doubt place a burden on the employers. As a result, I am aware of many Deaf peers who have lost their jobs. I fear this may happen to me if my budget gets reduced. I feel this is not fair as my communication needs have not changed.

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

22. Having attended some job interviews to date, not one employer has heard of the AtW scheme which is rather frustrating. I have always had to explain the scheme when it comes to requesting reasonable adjustment for the interview stage.

23. I have consulted with other Deaf Professionals, regarding the AtW approach and our dealings with them. There seems to be varying messages given to us by the AtW advisers. One person has taken the initiative to set up a website. I have relied on this website as a source for all the relevant AtW policies and guidance. This can be found at www.deafatw.com

24. As previously mentioned, I have chased up my AtW adviser for further information on my application. She noted that since my support exceeds the 30 hour ‘rule’, the application was passed on to her manager. I have no way of getting in touch with her manager and she will not give me direct contact details.

My Recommendations:

25. Continue with the excellent and useful Access to Work scheme which is enabling Deaf people to forge a career by providing them with the much needed support for job interviews and subsequently the support to carry out their duties on par with their hearing peers. As a result, this reduces the dependency on benefits and enables them to be positive contributing members of society and role models to others.

26. Remove the 30 hour ‘rule’ as it is not practical and not enforceable given the rule acts as guidance rather than a policy. This supposedly guidance was suspended by the Minister of Disabled People, Mike Penning MP, but given the recent treatment I have had from AtW, it is clear they have not actioned the suspension in full. Therefore, I wish to see a clear link between the action by the relevant MP and the AtW department.
27. No restriction should be placed on the support budget as it has been proven that for each pound spent on AtW support, the exchequer gains £1.48 back (Sacre Report).

28. The Government (DWP) should support the AtW scheme by ensuring all HR personnel (either through the various HR forums or networks) are aware of the AtW scheme. This would in turn enable organisations to overcome the barrier of employing disabled staff who possesses the necessary skills and personalities to deliver the advertised job.

29. Ensure the AtW advisers are readily available throughout the ordinary work hours (9am-5pm) during the week. If one adviser works flexi-time or part-time then the customer should be able to access another adviser. This is to ensure no delay occurs when processing the application.

30. Encourage more face to face contact between the AtW advisers and users so we are not just a 'number' in the system. It would also enable AtW to better understand our needs and deal with their queries more effectively and time efficiently.

31. Be transparent regarding guidelines and rules. It appears that 30 hour guidance is being applied as a 'rule'.

20 June 2014