Deafblind Scotland employs both Deaf and Deafblind people, most of whom have British Sign Language as their first language.

Recently we have been involved in a deafblind person being re-assessed and the decision was firstly that they must comply with the 30 hour ruling and employ a full-time support worker. After much discussion on more than one occasion it was agreed that a full time or two part time posts would not meet the need. The support hours could be divided between guide/communicator hours and interpreter hours but in a prescribed ratio. The rate to be paid for guide/communicator hours was lower than normal by 5%. The rate to be paid for interpreting hours was prescribed at a rate which was 20% or several pounds lower than is currently paid to registered and qualified interpreters. No payment was to be made for travel time or travel costs.

The deafblind employee re-iterated several times that it would be impossible for them to continue with their current role with the support package offered, which in financial terms was 33% less than before and represented a considerable saving to ATW. The deafblind employee agreed that savings had to be made and he was willing to work with them to achieve some savings. He stated that most employees of Deafblind Scotland could sign in a basic way and that he could cope without a few hours of support per week.

He asked for flexibility in how he used his hours. His job involves travel throughout Scotland and some weeks he needs lots of guide/communicator hours to get him to appointments. Some weeks he needs interpreters for local meetings, or meetings where he can travel via railway stations where he is known and can access support. He understands the need for accountability of public funds, but not for a rigid allotment of hours to two skilled specialist support professions which work hand in hand to better serve deafblind people.

There was no understanding of the disaster it is when a deaf BSL user loses their sight. The employee is registered blind, has been for several years, and is one of a handful of deafblind people who remain employed in Scotland. His needs have changed dramatically over the years, he has now only 5% of his visual field remaining, is fully blind in the dark, and can no longer see any sign at all except where the distance is perfectly suited to his remaining tunnel vision. He does not speak, cannot lipread, and uses a mixture of BSL, hands-on signing, and deafblind manual, to communicate. The changes in the mode of communication used will depend on lighting, setting, skills level of the interpreter, purpose of the interchange/meeting, his level of tiredness.

Working between these different communication modes takes skill and experience not normally available in unregistered interpreters, or trainees. It also takes physical strength, commitment, and a willingness to work harder for longer to meaningfully translate from English into the mode of choice. It goes without saying that translating from BSL into English, ie a voice-over, is much more stressful when the interpreter cannot easily catch the eye of the presenter, to ask for clarification etc. Hence only a small number of interpreters choose to work with deafblind people. There is no way that this deafblind employee can use a cheaper alternative due to the nature of his role, they are working in front of an
audience, as he is, or at meetings with senior people present. The less qualified, less confident interpreter would find this really challenging work. And his need to work in different areas of Scotland means there is often interpreter travel involved.

He has worked under the new ATW agreement for 8 weeks, and has asked for his case to be reviewed under the 30 hour ruling suspension period.

From an employer’s perspective, ATW apparently expect Deafblind Scotland to any for any costs incurred by the employee over £27 per hour, and for travel costs. This means in reality the employer may well incur £5 – £7,500 over a single year for a single employee. Deafblind Scotland supports not only this employee but other Deaf only employees by having staff learn to sign as soon as they become employees, by making phone calls for taxis, to book meetings, taking messages and signing the information. It is a stated aim to encourage deafblind people into meaningful employment, and we are committed to employing deafblind people. But if we commit to providing financial support for this one deafblind person then the other 5 deafblind and deaf individuals we employ would have a right to expect the same financial support and that is just not possible.

SUMMARY

A substantial financial cut in support package funding will inevitably lead to less deafblind people being employed

Deafblind people know their needs and how best they might be met and can manage a slightly reduced communication support package more effectively if there is not a fixed and artificial division between guide/communicator hours and interpreter hours

The need to use registered interpreters and guide/communicators is essential if the deafblind person is not to be routinely disadvantaged and/or discriminated against by a poor communication service. In Scotland SASLI monitors performance, acts on complaints, and registers only those interpreters who undertake specific qualifications, and undertake CPD.

The part of the interpreter voice-over in training is critical, and if the reduced rates mean the deafblind employee uses less skilled and experienced interpreters then his bookings for training will reduce. He has targets to achieve as do all other employees.

Supporting a young deafblind man to be employed since he left college, and supporting him to grow as an individual, and to promote deafblind awareness to thousands of Scottish people should be a source of pride to ATW. Why, oh why, would ATW risk the success story which this young man undoubtedly is, by reducing his support package to a place where his employer/the professionals who work with him, the young deafblind man himself, can no longer cope.

20 June 2014