1. Executive Summary

1.1 I welcome this independent parliamentary inquiry into Access to Work (AtW), along with the Minster of Disabled People’s own review. I hope that both reviews will ensure a fairer AtW system for deaf people, there has been a number of issues in relation to its operation particularly in the past year that needs addressing.

1.2 As a deaf person myself, I have used AtW since 1999. Formerly I worked as a full time employee, and worked as a project manager for several years. I then went and worked as a Research Associate at UCL. Since 2009 I have freelanced and successfully run my own business (www.sally-reynolds.com). I still continue to use AtW, it enables me to access information relating to my work, attend courses, and deal with telephone calls and to network with other people. I would not be able to run my business without it.

1.3 In this submission, I outline the main areas of concerns in relation to the quality of the service from the DWP and the level of support that I have received through AtW. It is important to highlight also that AtW is not a benefit, for every £1 spent on AtW, the government recoups £1.48 (Sayce, 2011). Deaf people want to be economically active and pay taxes, instead of being unemployed and claiming benefits.

2 Application and Assessment Process

2.1 I have generally had very positive experiences of AtW; however the approaches taken by staff in dealing with my queries have shown a noticeable decline in the past year. I understand the need for ensuring that the service is cost effective, however it is apparent at times that advisors do lack awareness, for example about booking Sign Language Interpreters or asking why I need someone to manage my voice phone calls for me. The questions at times really do feel like intense micromanagement.

2.2 My main issue relates to my recent review that took place in December 2013. I was emailed on 12th December and told that I must telephone the DWP:

“You must telephone me no later than 02/01/2014 on 020 8426 3159 to book an appointment so that I can carry out this review. The review appointment normally takes 20 minutes and once the review has been concluded, you will be required to sign and return a review declaration so that you can continue to receive your support.”

Previously I would have been sent a letter, the timescale was very brief and it was also the Christmas period. I was also surprised that I was being asked as a deaf person to do a telephone interview. There needs to be other means of communicating with deaf people rather than insisting that the telephone be used.

2.3 At the foot of this email was this statement, which did not leave me with the impression that the DWP were flexible with their communication:

1 Sayce L (June 2011) Getting in, staying in and getting on – Disability employment support fit for the future. Report presented to the DWP.
You have asked us to use e-mail as the standard means of contacting you. Regrettably, because this is not a secure method of communication, we can only provide you with general information and guidance using this method. We cannot send any information that might identify you to a third party if the e-mail is intercepted as it passes across the Internet. We apologise if this makes the situation difficult for you but we are required by law to ensure that we safeguard your personal information. Incoming and outgoing e-mail messages are routinely monitored for compliance with our policy on the use of electronic communications.

This statement is not helpful for deaf people who largely rely on email as a means of communication. The DWP need to look at alternative options.

2.4 I rang in for the telephone interview in mid-December, and was told that I must reply to the agreement within 5 days. I pointed out that it was the Christmas period and that post was likely to be delayed, so there had to be some flexibility.

2.5 I realised in mid-January I had not heard anything, so emailed to see what had happened. Apparently the advisor had sent an email on 16 December, which I had never received. I was relieved that I had followed this up. They had further questions; I answered promptly and was told that I would receive a declaration which would need to be returned within 5 days.

2.6 I received this declaration but the information in it was wrong. First of all there was no mention of Sign Language Interpreters, then I was allocated Sign Language Interpreters at just £45 per month, no hours were inserted. I pointed out that the wording was incorrect and I would not sign this. It took 2 emails with attachments with incorrect wording before I finally said let me change the wording for you so that it is correct. This I did myself, although it is the advisor’s job.

2.7 In addition I find the language that the DWP uses now is becoming rather hostile. As a specific example in this declaration letter it states:

You must return the declaration to me no later than 06/02/2014. Please note you are required to sign and return a review declaration for your support. Failure to have a review and return the declaration will lead to your application being closed and your support being stopped.

Is there really a need to put writing in red? I have managed perfectly well with AtW for over a decade. The irony with this 5 day deadline is that I spent most of the time chasing up what was happening with the review, eventually correcting the advisors wording. My concern is if I had not kept on top of this, I would have lost the support. This would have meant that I would have had to make a new application, and be without support in the interim.

3 Ongoing Support

3.1 I would like to see an online system. The system in its current form is heavily paper based, and relies on postage. This causes delays with decisions, and reimbursement.
3.2 I would like to see better organisation of AtW budgets, the ability to go online and to manage it in some form myself. The system also needs to build in timely reminders, letting me know when a review is due, whether a budget has been exhausted etc.

3.3 As a self-employed person I have to carry round a bunch of Support Worker forms, get them to sign this after a job e.g. Sign Language Interpreters. This is immensely bureaucratic and was not something I had to do when in full time employment. This aspect of claims needs reviewing.

4. AtW effectiveness in helping Deaf People in Employment to:

- Secure a job;
- Stay in employment; and
- Develop their careers; and

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

4.1 I have become aware of self-employed people being asked to provide 3 years accounts, in the past month. I know that some have had their support stopped completely. This is because they appear to have earnt less than the minimum wage. This has not yet happened to me, I have no concerns about presenting my accounts. What concerns me is that this appears to be an assessment that has become means tested. As a result deaf people will lose their business, along with myself and have to claim benefits. This is a disconcerting and demoralising process for many to have to go through after being economically active for so many years.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Contact with AtW is mainly telephone based, which is inaccessible for many deaf people. The initial assessment is conducted as a telephone interview, and does not take allow flexibility for deaf friendly communication via other means e.g. online chat via Sign Language or face to face. Considering that this is a government department that deals exclusively with disability, this is a clear barrier, there is very little flexibility on communication and how advisors communicate with deaf clients.

5.2 The DWP should be using experts to advise them on how to make their procedures deaf friendly.

5.3 A more efficient online procedure is essential in order to minimise bureaucracy and save time.

5.4 Advisors need to undergo Deaf Awareness Training.

5.5 Advisors need to be clear about any decision making in relation to budgets and maintain consistency with hourly rates awarded. The support given must be sufficient to enable deaf employees to work. In addition, this should not be means tested.

5.6 Communication with AtW recipients need to be more accessible, deaf friendly and less telephonic centric. Some of this interaction needs to take place face to face.