Solar Bear as an employer of three deaf people who currently use Access to Work would like to submit the following evidence to the inquiry:

None of our employees would be able to work for us without Access to Work (AtW) awards.

We have two employees who are employed through an apprentice scheme and their AtW is facilitated through a Mentor who is hearing, as well as having a positive and quick response by email from the AtW officer responsible for their awards the mentor has also been able to discuss and review the award every three months and this has worked very well.

Our third employee is a permanent member of staff who we have taken on from a freelance contract and who oversees her own AtW award. She has received very poor responses from her AtW officer even when telephoning using an SLI.

The nature of the work Solar Bear requires our Deaf staff to undertake includes working with communities and professionals, within the sector and educational establishments across Scotland and the UK. This requires a mix of RSLIs & CSWs as well as occasionally note takers. We work with some groups all year round and some groups maybe for a few months plus regular and occasional meetings. Not every RSLI or CSW will be suitable for every occasion and that is why working with a pool of freelance communication support providers is essential to our work.

AtW is an amazing service which as an organisation we are immensely thankful for however the information individuals & organisations receive is limited almost to the point of guarded - so many hours are wasted trying to extract award information from AtW officers and often this information is contradictory from one officer to another meaning the client is still unclear as to what they can request/are eligible to apply for.

For our organisation to continue employing Deaf practitioners the following in relation to AtW would be most useful:

Hours awarded can be used to employ a pool of Communication Support providers [RSLIs, CSWs, Note takers].

Hours awarded are reviewed on a quarterly basis and can be adjusted according to the schedule of work planned.

A designated AtW officer is assigned to individual clients so continuity is observed.

AtW officers are deaf aware and use Online SLI services or email & letter to contact Deaf clients. [A telephone call to the office when as SLI is not present is not affective communication].

20 June 2014