Written evidence submitted by Ruth Griffiths, Executive Chair, British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (ATW0230)

Executive Summary:

- Access to Work (AtW) has enabled the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust (BSLBT) to employ Deaf people in key roles, and to develop their skills, experience and confidence so that they become more independent, more valuable employees and vital role models for other Deaf people.

- It has allowed BSLBT, a small charity, to direct its funds to supporting other Deaf people not in employment to gain skills and experience in making or performing in television programmes, short films and web clips.

- Our staff each has an individual relationship with AtW. Until late 2013 this was working well. Since then it has been a trail of disaster: not only do our staff no longer have the support they need but they have had a very unpleasant and frustrating experience dealing with outstanding AtW applications, contradictory information, endless pointless questions and unpaid bills.

Introduction:

The British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust is a small charity. For more information please see our website: www.bslzone.co.uk. We commission and distribute television programmes, short films and web clips made in British Sign Language. The charity does not have an office and all six staff work mostly from home. Three staff members are current AtW users (one retires on 30th June).

BSLBT tries hard to make all the adjustments it can to support Deaf people at work -- it provides all the IT equipment staff need, it funds a desk in a Deaf company for two days a week, the hearing staff are all very Deaf aware and know some conversational BSL.

The Deaf staff do not work closely together – one is our Production Co-ordinator and one is our Outreach Worker so their roles and responsibilities have little overlap.

As we operate in the fast-changing world of broadcasting (on television and online) our Deaf Production Co-ordinator requires qualified and expert sign language media interpreters -- for business meetings and discussions with hearing people and hearing companies. We also create marketing materials in English and run events and for this again our Deaf member of staff requires a range of high-level sign language interpreting.

The AtW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees and employers:
Until late 2013 the AtW process worked well. Applications were processed reasonably quickly and case-workers were consistent and supportive, and also understood the communication needs of Deaf people.

Since late 2013 things have gone badly wrong. Support packages are being reviewed and quite inappropriate revised packages are now being offered. Our Production Assistant has been offered no sign language interpreter support – he simply cannot do his job without it. The application and assessment process is slow, opaque, inconsistent and unhelpful – and it brings very considerable distress to applicants. This has an impact across our organization – not least in terms of financial risk. If we have to meet the costs of interpreters for our Deaf staff we will need to review our operations and staffing: Deaf people will lose out and so will DWP.

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:

BSLBT provides IT equipment and as many adjustments as it possibly can. Our Deaf staff require qualified media interpreters – and until recently this was what was provided and it met their needs. The packages being proposed at the moment are quite simply inadequate.

AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:

AtW is currently acting against Deaf people being able to secure a job, stay in employment or develop their careers. It is not offering BSLBT staff the support they need to be able to do their current jobs, and it has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear for them. For BSLBT as a charity with an ambitious programme of working with Deaf people, there are difficult choices that may need to be made. We can either pay communication support for a small number of Deaf staff or we can cut services to many thousands of Deaf people. We do not want to do either.

My Recommendations:

- AtW should have a specialist team of suitably knowledgeable and skilled case-workers dedicated to Deaf people.
- Deaf people should be able to communicate with AtW in British Sign Language. Face-to-face meetings should be readily available.
- Each Deaf person should have a dedicated caseworker, and that caseworker should look after all Deaf people in one company.
- The ‘30-hour’ rule is unworkable. It simply does not meet the work rhythms or range of activities of our staff.
- Greater flexibility in using AtW budget: not all working weeks are the same. In some weeks a Deaf person may need 35 hours of support (for a
complex training course) and other weeks they may need very little (Deaf-only meetings)

20 July 2014