Executive Summary:

- Graeae employs 80 Deaf and disabled people every year and 40 support staff
- We are a registered charity and rely on Access to Work (ATW) to enable our employees to carry out our charitable objectives
- Key members of staff are at risk of losing 70% of their support
- The process of application is now inaccessible to many
- Turnaround of applications has made it harder to plan into the future
- As part of reasonable adjustment we employ two members of staff to assist employees with the paperwork around their applications. We are being advised by the Access to Work team that this must stop
- As ATW budgets have been reduced over the last few years, we have compromised as far as we are able, any further financial restrictions will seriously affect our employees ability to do their job
- Following The Paralympics in 2012, there has been significant interest in the skills of Deaf and disabled people in international co-productions, this is at threat under the proposed changes.

Introduction:

Graeae is UK flagship disabled-led theatre company placing Deaf and disabled people centre stage. Access underpins the company’s work artistically, practically and functionally. We have a local, national and international reputation for the work we do and the way we work.

Graeae employs over 80 Deaf and disabled people a year, five on a full time basis and the rest on short or fixed term contracts. ATW has been and is a key component in the success of Graeae (and the Opening Ceremony Paralympic Games 2012, of which we were part) as there has been a long term working relationship supporting the access requirements of Deaf and disabled core staff and the huge diversity of freelance Deaf and disabled actors, stage managers, designers, writers etc we employ.

We employ 40 people a year in an access support capacity and ATW support has included specialist seating, assistive software (such as JAWS), BSL interpreters, palantypists, access support workers, voice enablers. This, combined with our own flexible and supportive approach, has enabled us to function as a highly professional inclusive company, allowing individuals to work to their full capacity.

Closure of the Access to Work programme would require us to find additional funding of £125,000 per year. At a time when Arts Council England budgets are being frozen, local authority funding is disappearing and trusts and foundations have fewer funds to distribute, the cumulative effect would be the loss of approximately 50 jobs or the closure of the company.

Furthermore, the recent changes to ATW services and provision are severely impacting on core staff and our freelance workers.
1. CEO/Artistic Director/Jenny Sealey is Deaf and a leading figure in Deaf and disability arts. Her work is not only involves leading the company but also working with Arts Council England, British Council and other government bodies and academia on cultural policy, inclusion and accessibility. She represents UK internationally and advises on policy in the theatres, academia and Government and is an international ambassador. She works with two level 6 interpreters at the majority of work situations as required by the detail and high professionalism of her work. Access to Work are proposing working with one interpreter at a junior level. This will severely hinder her ability to access complex information, diminish her status within the different settings she works in and prevent total and full engagement.

2. The Access to Work application process is now only telephone. Jenny does not use the phone nor do some of our workers who are also deaf, learning disabled, on the Autistic Spectrum, have mental health issues, cognitive fatigue, or have differing speech or speech impairment. They all for a range of reasons, find the act of listening and understanding a speaker on the phone, then responding appropriately, and retaining what has been discussed for long enough to note that down a significant barrier to contact. It is not reasonable to assume everyone for whom the telephone is inaccessible will have someone who can call on their behalf, or wishes someone else to speak on their behalf.

3. Applications are now taking longer to process. In addition to waiting to hear of decisions some assessors are requiring a level of detail around support needs that borders on intrusive.

4. Graeae's Access Team has traditionally supported the ATW process with the work involved in making the initial call; returning the application form; correcting any errors in the form; providing cost estimates and support details; arranging support; filling in claim reimbursement forms and we have had an excellent working system where all ATW is claimed through us. This takes the pressure off our artists having to make individual claims and dealing with administrative work they do not have the skills to do. Graeae has been told they can no longer operate this system and everything has to be done on an individual basis. We are continuing to support people making individual claim as it is important to us but the set up is time consuming, makes no economic sense and creates unnecessary stress.

5. The restrictions placed on ATW support have forced us to compromise. For example, on our last tour we had one support worker for two blind actors which on paper looks feasible, but the individuality of the experience of being blind and both people requiring a different sort of support created a working situation we cannot repeat.

6. Effective support and adaptation are vital to ensure disabled people can continue to work for Graeae. We do not have the resources to cover access costs but we do work hard to ensure working patterns, location, workload and a supportive environment works alongside to maximise the ATW provision. We cannot be seen not to employ someone because of their access requirements as this goes against our rationale and charitable objectives.
7. We are also mindful of ATW's inability to support volunteer workers. Voluntary work is a valuable way for many people to trial different types of work, learn new skills, test suitability for further work, and benefit from regular social interaction. This limits disabled people from accessing the same means of personal and professional development that non-disabled people can access.

Recommendations:

- ATW should not dictate what BSL level interpreter a Deaf person works with
- ATW should support some international work as it is essential Deaf and disabled people can fulfil their international ambassadorial duties.
- Access to Work must reinstate email as a means of contact other than telephone call.
- The application process needs to be streamlined to decrease the administrative burden on disabled people. Alternatively, support workers to carry out this admin work need to be funded / provided or in Graeeae's case allow us to reinstate our original highly cost effective and resourceful scheme where everything came through the company's administration.
- There should be an expansion of the scheme to support any volunteer workers with access needs.

20 June 2014