Written evidence submitted by Roger Beeson\(^1\) (ATW0242)

1. This is a personal reflection based on more than 50 years of living and working with Deaf people, for the last 20 years as a full-time freelance BSL/English interpreter. It is important that the Select Committee understands the context of the current Access to Work (AtW) thinking, rather than just focusing on any perceived weaknesses in the system as it exists now. The committee will receive plenty of excellent information, including from my professional association – the Association of Sign Language Interpreters – and others, which will be augmented by my appraisal of what is happening between the lines.

2. In the 20 years since AtW came on to the scene, the employment aspirations and achievements of Deaf people have risen. The glass ceiling that forced Deaf people to accept limited career and promotion opportunities, has been raised. The recent AtW clampdown, and not just related to the “30 hour rule”, is a reversal of that progress. Never having had rights is bad enough, but having them taken away is worse. The Deaf genie is being pushed back into the bottle.

3. Are there now no-go areas for Deaf employment - if you interact a lot with non-signers, especially at a professional level? If so, let’s have that ruling. Will employers be deterred from taking on Deaf employees, faced with additional communication support costs? How will SMEs meet shortfalls in AtW funding? Is there a cost cap being imposed by AtW? If so, let’s have that ruling. And in passing, the Equality Act simply isn’t working in the area of employment.

4. Nobody denies that there have been flaws in the AtW system. Assessments of Deaf employees’ needs have sometimes seemed unrealistically generous or random. There have been inefficiencies in the allocation of interpreting resources.

5. AtW staff does not have the expertise or resources to understand the working lives of Deaf people, or the work of professional interpreters. AtW still doesn’t understand that high-flying Deaf professionals with high aspirations need highly-educated and skilled interpreters, who aren’t in the same category as support workers providing physical care. Decisions on provision have been made by AtW representatives with no understanding of the barriers faced by Deaf people in employment, or any interest in supporting Deaf people in their working lives. AtW representatives have seemed to have acted punitively and with suspicion when assessing need.

6. AtW doesn’t recognize the health risks to interpreters of working alone at complex and fast-moving meetings.

7. AtW doesn’t understand the need for a pool of freelance interpreters to respond flexibly to Deaf people’s needs, or how important it is for interpreters to maintain a more detached role which puts the needs of the Deaf employee first, rather than the employer’s.

8. Unthinkingly, AtW itself fuelled the demand for interpreting services. It

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created a market in which there weren’t enough interpreters to meet demand. This led to the inflation of fees. If they had the nerve to ask, trainees and barely-competent RSLIs (qualified BSL interpreters registered with NRCPD - the National Registers for Communication Professionals with Deaf People) could demand and get bigger fees than experienced RSLIs.

9. And AtW fostered the role of “CSW” – Communication Support Worker – with responsibilities ranging from being an office-based PA who could sign (sometimes minimally and sometimes fluently), through to being essentially an unqualified interpreter. Most had little or no qualifications for their role. And yet some were being paid as much as qualified and highly-skilled NRCPD registered interpreters.

10. Some agencies joined the gravy train by adding on fees that were more than the interpreter got. But then AtW stamped down on that, making it impossible for small specialist BSL agencies to cover their costs – throwing an additional administrative burden on to Deaf employees to find and book their interpreters, as well as do their day job.

11. AtW’s laissez faire approach encouraged exploitation of the system. A tiny handful of agencies, interpreters and Deaf people have allegedly defrauded the system.

12. On the plus side, AtW money meant that prospective interpreters could see that investing in their training and qualifications was worthwhile. More interpreters joined the NRCPD Register. As of February 2014 there were 874 RSLIs (qualified registered interpreters).

13. When the recession hit, it was to be expected that AtW support for Deaf people would come in for greater scrutiny. A relatively small number of Deaf employees were thought by someone in officialdom to be taking more than their "fair" share, because their support costs were much higher than for other groups – which revealed an ignorance of what interpreting entails, the qualities required in interpreters, and the smallness of the talent pool.

14. What has followed has been a masterpiece of random and unthinking government. Policy and practice hasn’t been supported by evidence or consideration of the implications of major changes.

15. In 2002 the DWP commissioned David Brien, et al to look into the provision of BSL interpreters. See http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/The_Organisation_and_Provision_of_Britis.html?id=ZBQ8YAAACAAJ&redir_esc=y This was an opportunity to assess the real impact of AtW, but as far as the world of BSL interpreting was concerned, the opportunity was lost. The current mess is one of the DWP’s own making. And yet Deaf people are expected to carry the consequences.

16. Interpreter Darren Townsend-Handscomb has been working hard on gathering evidence showing the damaging effects on Deaf employees of changes in AtW policy. Darren's website http://www.deafatw.com is a valuable resource
17. What has been disappointing is the lack of candor on the part of Deaf and interpreters' organisations about the weaknesses of the old system. But AtW hasn't helped - accusing those who offer cheaper solutions of having been defrauding the system. That has effectively blocked open discussion about how to achieve cost savings and at the same time, preserve an appropriate level of support for Deaf employees as a whole.

18. What is needed now is an open, honest and wide-ranging look at how AtW can be made fit for the 21st Century. Technology and services have moved on, and yet AtW has had to be cajoled into embracing opportunities.

**Recommendations**

a. Increased use of VRS (video relay service) interpreting for phone calls; increased use of VI (video interpreting) for small *ad hoc* communication in the workplace

b. Sharing of interpreting resources across a number of Deaf employees within in a defined geographical area. This would break the individualized approach to communication support

c. Online interpreter booking systems like BSLBeam (see [www.bslbeam.co.uk](http://www.bslbeam.co.uk)) to save agency costs and better match demand and supply

d. Remote translation services staffed by Deaf people, for reading/writing support for Deaf people who have inadequate literacy levels

e. Implementation of a grading system for qualified interpreters that will give an incentive for interpreters to invest in their professional development. This could be linked to the assessed needs of Deaf clients.

f. Mandatory qualification and registration of all communication professionals, including CSWs, if they receive payment from AtW

19. These and other ideas for change will create (a few) winners and losers. The old status quo is not an option. More can be delivered at less cost. What is critical is that jointly-produced policy and practice is agreed and implemented nationally in a consistent way.

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