Written evidence submitted by Joanna Wootten

Executive Summary:

- Assessment should be done by experts in the area.
- Reclaim process is inefficient (for both the DWP and deaf person) and should be reviewed.
- Investigate the possibility of having an online booking system to enable a clear audit trail as well as efficient deployment of communication support professionals within a particular geographical area
- Ensure that Access to Work enables deaf professionals to flourish – we need high flying as well as low flying disabled people in the workforce.

Introduction:

I am profoundly deaf, and use Access to Work to pay for communication support to enable me to participate effectively in meetings. I also know many disabled and deaf people who have benefited from Access to Work support so that they have been able to flourish in the workforce and pay taxes.

The AtW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees and employers:

Assessment process
1. In 2013, I was re-assessed for support from Access to Work when I left Business Disability Forum, and became a freelance consultant.
2. I have always tried to save Access to Work money by employing sign language interpreters or speech to text reporters directly, and by booking meetings together so that they were effectively deployed.
3. Bearing this in mind, I was upset to be made to feel like a criminal when going through the assessment process over the telephone. It felt as though the default assumption was that I was out to defraud, and was trying to milk the system. I found it stressful doing this over the phone anyway, as I cannot hear the tone of the assessor, and was using a video interpreting service (which I pay for using my DLA).
4. Additionally, I was struck by how little the assessor knew or understood about the different types of communication support, and how they work. I found myself having to explain at great length, then do a follow up email. They didn’t even know the terminology, let alone how it works in practice. This lack of knowledge did not help.
5. I think Access to Work needs to consider having teams which specialize, so that they can assess effectively.

Employer should also be able to apply
6. Employers are (usually) unable to apply on behalf of employees for Access to Work support. Many employees and employers that I have met have expressed a desire for this, as employees don’t necessarily want to do the administration, and it enables the employers to effectively discharge their duties under the Equality Act. Clearly there should be checks and balances to prevent abuse.

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:
Inefficient administrative system

7. The administration and stress involved in reclaiming expenditure is considerable. It is inefficient and is paper based. It seems odd that it cannot be electronic (like national insurance contributions). This must be expensive to administer for DWP.

8. I would like to be able to focus on working, rather than on administration. It is hard for us to perform as effectively as non-disabled people, if we have to spend time on administration.

9. When I was working for Business Disability Forum, we paid to use an online system called BSL Beam. This enabled me to:
   a. Create a list of interpreters who were suitable for my work environment
   b. Enable me to alert the listed interpreters when I had a meeting which required interpreting
   c. Record who had been booked, and what their quoted fee was. (It would flash red if I tried to book too many interpreters by mistake, and would flash green when interpreters had been booked.)
   d. Often meeting times change, and it was easy to double-check the original booking online to see if the details had changed.
   e. If there was a last minute meeting, I could look online to see who was available, and message them directly.
   f. The finance team had access to this system. This enabled an audit trail.
   g. They would match the invoice against the quoted fee. If there was a difference, they would email me to ask me why.
   h. They would use the automatically generated Access to Work reclaim form which reflected the actual invoices entered into the system.
   i. I liked this system because it enabled me to minimize the time I had to spend booking interpreters, as well as avoiding accidentally making mistakes in over or under booking interpreters. I could also check online when at home in the evenings etc., so if there were last minute changes to meetings, I was able to do something about it there and then, instead of waiting until I got into the office to check a particular file, or asking someone else to check a file for me.
   j. The head of finance at Business Disability Forum loved it as it saved their team considerable time in relation to form filling, as well as providing a clear audit trail.

10. I think Access to Work should review its current administrative systems.

11. The above system, or similar, could also be used to enable effective deployment of interpreters and regulate their fees. For example, interpreters could be classed as level 5 – able to work with deaf people with professional qualifications – maximum daily rate £280, to level 1 – able to work with deaf people who are road sweepers – maximum daily rate £180.

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

12. Forty years ago, deaf people had to work in factories or do other manual work.

13. Access to Work has been brilliant in enabling my career, and that of others to flourish. I am a big fan!

14. I originally trained as a lawyer. I wanted to be an employment lawyer, but ended up leaving the profession as I couldn’t work in tribunals. This was before Access to Work really took off.
15. I have been able to perform as a deputy Chief Executive, a director who was a member of the management team, speak at conferences etc. all thanks to having communication support paid for by Access to Work.
16. I have seen friends flourish. They have been able to be academics, clinical psychologists, accountants, managers, film makers and directors.
17. My concern is that recent changes fail to recognize the need for well-educated interpreters to support well educated deaf people to flourish in the workplace.
18. How can deaf people break the glass ceiling if they are being served by interpreters or other communication support professionals who read the Sun?
19. If one is to progress and network in the workplace, it is crucial to be able to echo and reflect the language of managers, directors.
20. I agree that it is important to ensure that public money is spent appropriately, and that savings are made. Because Access to Work do not employ experts, this means that they have not identified how they could implement cost savings without jeopardizing careers.
21. If Access to Work wants to have a policy which says – for example – that the budget for communication support cannot exceed the deaf person’s salary, it needs to make this crystal clear so that we make our career choices accordingly.

My Recommendations:

23. I recommend investing in an online booking system for communication support, as this could enable
   a. more effective deployment of interpreters and other communication support within certain geographical areas
   b. save money on administration for both DWP and the deaf person, and their employer
   c. clarity and transparency in relation to fees/hour rates, and ensure consistency
   d. a clear audit trail.
24. I recommend investing in training and equipping assessors so that they can appropriately assess deaf and hard of hearing people’s needs.
25. I recommend investigating the possibility of a tiered fee structure to ensure that you do pay good interpreters and other communication support professionals sufficient money so that deaf professionals can continue to flourish.
26. I recommend having a Chatham House rule forum, chaired and facilitated by an organisation from the private sector, to discuss how Access to Work can work for both deaf people and DWP. There are ways of saving money, such as investing in on-line interpreting and captioning, but there needs to be a climate of trust before people and organisations are going to feel comfortable in sharing their ideas and suggestions with DWP in case they are misinterpreted.

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