Written evidence submitted by Adam Walker, Director, Solutions 4 Community Support (ATW0245)

I am writing to lodge my concerns about Access to Work (AtW) and how the actions of this public service has affected my business and is threatening to put me and my 12 workers out of work. It will leave the vulnerable disabled adults our service works with, without, their much needed daily support.

I am a profoundly deaf British Sign Language (BSL) user. I am the director of a social enterprise business, based here in the Midlands. We support clients across the midlands. The business is now three years old. We have grown substantially and are still growing and developing. Our clients are supported by our 12 freelance specialist community support officers. Some of whom are deaf professionals themselves. The organisation has one member of office staff who is also deaf and a BSL user. Our clients are mostly deaf and Deafblind and some of these clients have additional disabilities. We also provide our services to some hearing clients too. I work a minimum of 50 hours a week to ensure my business runs smoothly and provides an excellent service to all our clients. I normally have had Access to Work funding to fund 41 hours of qualified Interpreting and Communication Support Worker (CSW) provision to enable me to access the hearing world in which I live and conduct my business. My role requires that I am able to communicate within all aspects of my business, from the social work team of a region, the commissioning department of a particular council or the medical practitioner of a client to booking a taxi for a client to enable them to attend a social activity. Without my AtW funding I am not able to run my business successfully. My disability, being deaf, means that the barriers I can face are no longer an issue when I have an interpreter to facilitate communication through my preferred method of communication, BSL. But also through other channels; written correspondence and telephone conversations.

Recently there have been many changes occurring with regard to AtW and I was lucky enough not to have experienced any of the issues being reported across both Deaf and mainstream media. Unfortunately this was until my funding was due for review. Earlier this year I was informed that, without discussion, my AtW would be changed. I would no longer be able to use my regular freelance CSW or interpreters and book them according to their experience and needs of the business I conduct. Due to the controversial ‘30 hour’ new rule I was being told that I would have to employ a single member of staff. At a considerably lower salary than any freelance interpreter would accept. Since then, there has been a suspension of this ‘rule’ pending a review by the government into such changes. I have since experienced ongoing issues whilst trying to resolve my interpreting provision. At this moment in time I have had all funding removed, despite my attempts to resolve issues and despite my deep concern that workers are at risk of losing their jobs. As of last week I have not been able to book an interpreter or CSW. I have been forced to cancel meetings and having to delegate work to a worker who has a CSW to carry out any interpreting or translating tasks required. This has meant that the role they are employed to carry out is not being completed having a knock effect to the running of the business.

The reason I write to you is to inform you of the poor handling of my support and the lack of consideration being placed on my communication needs in order to resolve these urgent matters. Access to Work is undergoing a crisis.
Currently I am only able to contact AtW through a contact mainline. I then must wait until my logged request for contact is responded to. In the first instance I am already at a loss as I am unable to use a phone due to being deaf. There is no other method offered so that I can contact AtW and request contact from the team. These call backs take a minimum of 48 hours to respond to. I have requested a response in email, this too should occur within a minimum of 48 hours. In my experience this has taken far longer. In a situation like mine, where my business is being threatened with closure, with workers concerned about future work and clients potentially losing a lifeline to their everyday living, surely this matter should be acted upon with some urgency. The internal situation of AtW is affecting those that use the service. We are being made to suffer poor service and inconsistent communication at a difficult and worrying time.

The points I am making below reflects to the problematic issues that I have encountered in the last month:

1. Termination of a telephone call between my accountant and AtW adviser. The adviser became increasingly agitated and aggressive when my accountant tried to explain that, in fact, the accounts did show that I had paid myself above the minimal wage (2012/13) and that I would be paying myself over the minimal wage for the 2013/14 period and therefore was over the eligibility criteria. This would therefore mean that would be entitled to the funding. The adviser abruptly terminated the call without resolution mid conversation, without warning. It is my opinion, and that of my accountant, that the adviser’s decision was in fact an error as the information on the accounts had been misread, leading her to note earnings far less than actually recorded. I have acted as a freelance worker through my business and not as an employee as the adviser suggested I should be. To my understanding this is not the case and that I have demonstrated that my earnings are above minimum wage.

2. It was said that the accounts were sent later than the agreed deadline of Friday 30th of May. When I spoke with the adviser on the 28th she said she was unable to call my accountant and so I agreed to ensure that the accountant forwarded the required accounts by the following Friday, 30th May. It was on this date that my accountant forwarded the accounts at my request on Friday 30th May 2014 to adviser at 13.12hrs. We now learn that the adviser was then on leave the following week. We suggest that in fact the accounts were sent in the agreed time, but they were not read until after this date by the adviser.

3. I called the AtW office in the morning of 2nd June, to learn that adviser was on leave all week and that I would not be able to speak with any person directly. A message was forwarded to the AtW team asking someone to call me with a decision based on the accounts sent. At this point it was not certain my interpreters would be available as no information could be provided with regard to future funding. I did not receive a telephone call back within the 48 hours as promised. The manner in which this was handled meant I was not able to confirm with any interpreter that they would be guaranteed payment for their time. Other contact details were offered and were also not used within the 48 hours.
4. No information was given to guide me to say that I should change from being freelance to an employee of the business because I am a director of this social enterprise business at any point throughout my AtW provision. In addition I have been unable to locate any such guidance on any AtW information source that would have indicated this to me. I feel therefore that this has left me unsupported at a time of importance.

5. During an interpreted conversation AtW manager shouted and came across in an aggressive manner. Despite being asked by the interpreter to refrain from shouting, due to her not being able to clearly understand him or interpret what he was saying, he continued. Adding to the difficulties.

6. During earlier conversations with various AtW staff, we have been told, that they apologise for the inconvenience and that it is due to the departments being great strain. Once a member of staff noted that they were all facing redundancy. Whilst I understand that this causes great strain on the workers it should not affect my communication with the AtW departments. I feel that this situation has been exasperated by the stresses that the AtW workers are facing. In the instance of my accountant and I being shouted at and the phone being put down during a conversation this would certainly reinforce this complaint.

20 June 2014