Written evidence submitted by Steven Wynne

This submission has been translated and transcribed from British Sign Language

Executive Summary:

- Access to Work (AtW) is a brilliant scheme that has helped me to remain in employment. It is only since January 2014 that I have faced problems with it.
- The application process is complex and caseworkers do not understand what support Deaf people (BSL users) need and how it works in reality.
- The current move to salaried interpreters is unworkable (30-hour rule).
- The Access to Work application process is based in English. There is no BSL translation available and the system is not accessible in BSL.

Introduction:

I am profoundly Deaf and my first language is BSL. I rely on AtW to fund support for me in the workplace.

Currently I work for the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust, a small charity with the six staff. The charity does not have an office and we all work from home. BSLBT tries hard to make all the adjustments it can to enable me at work – it provides all the equipment I need, it funds a desk in a Deaf company for two days a week, the hearing staff are all very Deaf aware – but for different aspects of my role when I am setting up, and running events, I need a variety of different qualified interpreters to enable me to carry out my job proficiently, and to develop my skills and experience.

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

I have been reassessed for AtW in my role at BSLBT five times in three years. The assessment process up until recently was straightforward and efficient. I always had the same caseworker who understood my employment situation and needs. They were very responsive and knowledgeable regarding the needs of Deaf people and how interpreters work.

Then in January 2014 my support package expired; I was not informed of this so I contacted AtW to be reassessed. I was given a new caseworker who was not responsive and there were lengthy delays in decisions being made. I felt this caseworker had no understanding of my needs as a Deaf BSL user and what the difference between Communication Support Workers and Qualified Interpreters was. The application process was lengthy and confusing, and there were many detailed forms to fill in that were English based and I found difficult to understand and complete.

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1 With support from a qualified sign language interpreter.
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:

My support up until January 2014 met my needs and supported me to do my job. However when I was reassessed, I applied for 22 hours of freelance qualified BSL interpreter support per week. This was rejected and I was offered 30 hours a week of a salaried interpreter support. However, I do not need 30 hours support a week but I do require a range of qualified interpreters to support me across the different aspects of my role. I am the only Outreach Worker at BSLBT and travel around the UK as well as working in London. The concept of one salaried qualified BSL sign language interpreter is unworkable.

My new caseworker has never given me any help or advice. I was offered a trial period from January-March to see what my support needs was as a test. This was agreed via email however my interpreters’ invoices have been returned unpaid as the trial period was ‘against their policy’. There eventually agreed to pay the support, however it was to be marked confidential and sent to a specific person within AtW.

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

Access to Work has to date has enabled me to carry out all aspects of the job and it has helped me to develop my skills and my confidence. Without this support I would be unemployed and on benefits. However with the recent changes I feel this is likely to remain the case. My employer is a very small charity and it would be very difficult for them to pay for the communication support I need and continue to provide the vital services the charity was set up for. I therefore feel that I am at risk of losing my job and becoming unemployed.

My Recommendations:

- To have a specific department of caseworkers who are dedicated to working with Deaf people. These people should be knowledgeable of Deaf issues, Deaf people’s needs and BSL interpreters and the support that Deaf people use (each Deaf person has different needs and will require different support packages).
- In addition, each Deaf person should have one dedicated caseworker a central point of contact. It may be worthwhile for the same person to deal with all Access to Work claims from one company.
- The removal of the ‘30 hour rule’ as it is unworkable in regards to BSL interpreters and the manner in which they work. Being restricted to one interpreter is not practical or manageable.
- Being freer to use your budget as it suits your work, for example my work pattern is unpredictable from one week to the next. Sometimes I need a lot of support as I have a big event on, at other times I am entering data about an event and so it is minimal. Being given a financial budget, rather
than being restricted hours of support. The same amount of money would be spent but in a more cost effective manner.

- Being able to communicate and apply to Access to Work in BSL. Also having all of the information and forms translated into BSL. This is to ensure that the system is accessible.
- To have some Deaf BSL users working within the Access to Work system.

20 June 2014