Written evidence submitted by Signing Network CIC (ATW0282)

Executive Summary:

- Access to the access to work service
- Lack of awareness from ATW support teams and Deaf and disabled people.
- Inconsistencies
- Vat and ATW support budgets
- Recommendations

Introduction:

Signing Network CIC is a community interest company working with the Deaf community in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. Our business began as a BSL interpreting co-operative, the core team having had twenty years previous experience of working with the local Deaf community. The business expanded further by developing projects identified as a need by the Deaf community; BSL training, advocacy, support, employment advice, fundraising and development. At the end of September 2013 Signing Network CIC ceased to provide a BSL interpreting service. As a service provider to the Deaf community we had an existing awareness of ATW support available to employers when employing disabled people.

We are putting our evidence to you from the perspective of an employer, employee and employment service provider.

ABR Ref: ATW: Access to work
BSL: British Sign Language
CSI: Communication Support at Interviews (ATW stencil)
LSP: Language Service Professionals

The ATW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees, employers and employment support providers: 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:
1. The ATW application and assessment process as a whole is often a complicated process for Deaf people to access. The first point of contact is by telephone call to the contact centre. For a Deaf BSL user this is the first barrier to communication they experience. Support to access the contact centre is required either by accessing the services of a BSL interpreter or the text relay service type talk; this service is becoming outdated as the technology required to access the service is cumbersome and English focused. It less favorable within the deaf community and with the advancement of modern technology. The next step in the ATW process is for the details to be passed onto an assessor by the call handler and for a telephone call back to be made within the next seven to ten days. This is the second barrier faced as a specified call back date cannot be given. Some advisors are happy to email or send letters as their ‘callback’ the delay occurs if for some Deaf people written English can be a barrier. Access to the service from the outset and during times of reassessment is a key area of concern for both our employees and service users.

2. There is growing evidence of a profound lack of awareness of Deaf people’s individual communication needs. The range of Deafness and communication needs vary greatly. It is vital that the complex profound differences between English and BSL are understood. BSL is not a pigeon form of English. BSL is a visual language relying on manual communication, facial expression and body language to convey meaning, as opposed to spoken English which utilises acoustically conveyed sound patterns. BSL does not have a traditional or formal written form. Many deaf people do not see a need to write in their own language. Written English is a barrier for many Deaf BSL users. It is important that ATW has an understanding of the differences that arises between the two languages and the barriers Deaf BSL experience when faced with English in its written form. Often Deaf BSL users will require support to complete required written responses to access to work. This has resulted in delays in responding to ATW deadlines and sadly resulted in closed cases solely because short time-limits were unable to be met.

3. Lack of information with regards to the recent changes has proven to be quite stressful for our employees and employment service users. Deaf people have had regular contact with the same advisors for many years; they felt these advisers were fully aware of their support needs. That contact has changed and created confusion. With the recent overhaul to ATW it has become apparent that the specialist advisors have been redeployed. Most of the telephone call staff we speak to today lack the essential knowledge to support Deaf people and it’s this lack of specialist awareness and understanding that is an area for concern given the problems that Deaf people are now experiencing.
ATW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:

4. As a specialist employment service provider working with Deaf people, we have experienced difficulties in obtaining access to work support for our clients attending job interviews. Our clients now rely on our employment service to support them through the ATW application process, because their service is inaccessible to them. The application process itself can take up to 7 to 10 days after the initial call is made. Job interviews are often held at very short notice. This is an identified area desperately in need of improvement.

5. The new ATW call centre has a number of inexperienced staff, who have received little or no training for this role; We have experienced one call handler not being aware that job interviews should be forwarded through as a priority; a call handler stated that they do not provide BSL interpreter support at job interviews; one call handler informed me after I explained the process to them that they had received no training and that they are taking these calls in between their usual line of work which is linked to the E.S.A benefit enquiry line. This adds weight to the lack of awareness and training given to ATW call centres.

6. The response time to approve the ATW budget for job interviews is not satisfactory. Often the response occurs after the interview has taken place. We contact the interpreting agency at the same time as contacting access to work, to allow as much time as possible to find an interpreter; sourcing interpreters at such short notice is not always practicable.

The steps taken so far by DWP to extend ATW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme:

7. The Deaf community groups we work with generally have little knowledge about access to work. We encounter Deaf people struggling at work and facing discrimination because of the lack of provision within the work environment. Examples can range from lack of career progression, no training or supervision, stagnating career, discrimination, bullying and unfair dismissal. We have ourselves have witnessed countless examples of the above. Change only happens when people are informed.

8. Budget costs, as mentioned earlier there is a vast difference in budgets agreed. The new set rate of £35 for all areas outside of London is problematic for many support users who engage the services of Interpreting agencies. The new capped rate includes all additional costs
such as vat and travel. The new figure is set at approximately £10 below
the average hourly rate charged by most agencies. We are finding that
agencies are not able to provide professional interpreters and support
needs are being unmet. The capped rate is limiting the agency’s ability to
source outside of the local area.

9. One solution to this is to not charge VAT on all provision of LSP’S under
an access to work budget, Zero VAT rating all services. Access to work
budgets are awarded on the basis of a person’s disability, said budget
supports the person to work as an equal to non-disabled people, whether
by the purchase of equipment or a support worker. Equipment is
predominantly zero rated for VAT. A support worker should be zero VAT
rated too. Having the budget zero rated would have a huge impact on
better utilizing the funds available from the public purse,

My Recommendations:

10. Recommendation 1. Improve access to the service itself. Training staff,
raising awareness and understanding varying needs of Deaf and Disabled
people. Working with key Deaf user led organisations such as the British
Deaf Association (BDA), Association of Sign Language interpreters (ASLI),
Visual Language Professionals (VLP) and linking in with all local Deaf
Forums.

11. Recommendation 2. Improving information available to employers and
disabled people. Information to be available in a range of accessible
formats.

12. Recommendation 3. Improving the CSI process to work towards making
the step towards employment less of a barrier.

13. Recommendation 4. Reviewing the capped rates set at £45 per hour for
London and £35 per hour all other areas.

14. Recommendation 5. Zero vat rating on all human forms of ATW LSP
support for disabled and deaf people.

24 June 2014