Written evidence submitted by Jack Lorpesti MP

On the Friday 13th June I met with constituents who are members of the South Gloucestershire British Sign Language Forum (SGBSL) in regards to problems they face accessing society. The SGBSL are a regional forum which is made up of volunteers, dedicated to helping raise awareness of issues of concern to the deaf community in South Gloucestershire and ensuring that deaf people can have fair access to local services. In this meeting they raised several concerns about the changes to the Access to Work (AtW) programme ranging from:

- The AtW application and assessment process,
- communication between AtW and the customer
- ongoing support
- provision of interpreter

In my role as their representative I committed to making a formal submission to your inquiry on their behalf, raising their concerns about the changes to the AtW programme.

1. The AtW Application and assessment process

The SGBSL raised concerns with me about the AtW application and assessment process being inconsistent and unpredictable; even in the same geographical location two similar applications to AtW can have wildly differing outcomes. A constituent, Miss T, gave her own experience as an example of how erratic the application; assessment processes and outcome for AtW can be.

The constituent, Miss T, is deaf and a senior social worker. In this role she is expected to undertake and manage her own caseload, manage a team and oversee their caseload. Miss T also works with a part-time, junior social worker who is also deaf.

Miss T recently had to put in a new application for access to work. After her initial application was submitted she was subjected to a lengthy questioning process about her needs; her role and its requirements. Further to this she had to provide evidence of her needs and justify the support she needed. Miss T found the application and assessment process for AtW very trying and felt like she was fighting a constant battle for the support she needed. However, her colleague had a distinctly different experience, she put her application in, was asked what hours she was needed and was given them without question.

Miss T was initially given 4.5 hours support while her junior colleague was given 9 hours of interpreter support.

I was informed that Miss T’s experience was not an isolated incident as the rest of the SGBSL shared a similar experience of AtW application and assessment process. I was informed that many of the AtW users felt they had to constantly fight for and justify the support they needed. Furthermore, I was informed that a lot of the deaf community is losing faith with AtW given the disparity between the application process and outcomes. Concerns were also raised with me that service users were never spoken to on face-to-face capacity and were never observed in the workplace.
The SGBSL also raised concerns with me about the nature of the questions being asked during the application process. An example given to me of an inappropriate question asked was ‘how and when did you become deaf’. I was informed that this question is not applicable to all deaf people but furthermore, this question has no relevance to a deaf persons needs in the work place.

2. Communication between AtW and service users

During my meeting with SGBSL considerable concerns were raised about communication between service users and AtW. They informed me that communication with AtW advisors is very poor and causes considerable stress and anxiety to the service user. Obviously, a deaf person cannot communicate via telephone and to do so require an interpreter, concerns were raised with me that deaf people were having to use time with their interpreter to either get updates about their AtW application or challenge decisions made by AtW. This is not good use of a deaf person’s time with an interpreter and will ultimately disadvantage the deaf person at work. Furthermore, specific concerns were raised about information and telephone calls not being properly logged by call handlers and the service user having to repeat themselves. This means even more time with an interpreter is used in a fashion it was not devised for.

Again I will refer to Miss T’s experience, further to Miss Ts initial award of 9 hours interpreter support AtW, she challenged the decision, to do this she needed to directly contact AtW, Miss T, like other deaf people had to use her time with an interpreter to do so. Through her interpreter Miss T would contact AtW and have long detailed discussions about her access needs and AtW award. She would later call back to discover that her original call was never logged let alone the information she divulged. This resulted in her having to discuss her needs once again. This not only is a poor use of her supported time but also was very upsetting and disheartening for her.

Concerns about the AtW advisors taking the call were also raised. I was informed that there is a general lack of understanding and sympathy from AtW advisors about deaf people’s needs. Indeed, clarification is often needed to explain to some advisors that it is the deaf person making the call themselves via an interpreter, not an interpreter making the call on the deaf person’s behalf. SGBSL informed me that this is particularly frustrating as this is basic information that an AtW advisor should be aware of furthermore, it amounts to additional stress for the deaf person and adds to the lack of confidence deaf people have in AtW to understand their needs.

Concerns were raised with me about the methods of communication used by AtW. I was informed that service users are regularly refused communication by email, which they find easier to communicate by and does not require use of an interpreter. I have been informed that when an email contact has been given to the service user they have had to strive to get it, however, when they have gained the email contact they have found the process a lot easier and amenable.

3. Ongoing support

I was informed that previously when an application was made to AtW a sole caseworker would be allocated to a case, recent changes mean that no one caseworker is allocated and a service user will talk to any number of AtW advisors in regards to different parts of the service. I have been informed that many deaf people are experiencing difficulties with the changes to AtW, which is being compounded by the restructuring of how queries are handled by AtW advisors. I have been told that
a deaf person can find themselves explaining a problem several times to several different advisors until it is directed to the correct advisor, furthermore, there seems to be little communication between AtW officers in regards to the nature of the service users enquiry and details of the enquiry itself. This can leave a deaf person unclear about who to contact and a lot of time can be spent repeating the problem to different AtW advisors.

I was also informed by SGBSL that specialist support has also gone. A constituent Miss W informed me that she is a self-employed writer with dissimilar need from an interpreter. She informed me that previously she was given a self-employment specialist advisor, however, this service is no longer available and she has to seek outside help that is not always available.

4. Provision of interpreter

In the meeting I attended with the SGBSL there was several concerns raised about the provision of interpreters.

Concerns were raised with me about the flexibility of hours supported; some service users are designated weekly allocations of support while other service users are given monthly and annual allocations of support giving them far greatly flexibility. This flexibility could be essential depending on the nature of work or diary commitments. Alternatively, one week supported hours could be surplus to requirements and go unused or essentially wasted. Furthermore, if there is an emergency at a place of work, a deaf person could be unable to deal with said emergency if the hours of support are unavailable because of the rigidity of the allocation. I have been informed that there is no standard rule for the amount of flexibility given, it varies person to person.

The SGBSL also raised concerns about AtW understanding of the differences between BSL interpreters and communication support workers (CSW) as AtW often suggest employing the services of a CSW. I was informed that BSL interpreters undergo years of formal training and continue to professionally develop throughout their careers in order to provide a high standard of service. Furthermore, they are bound by a strict ethical code which is essential when working with deaf people in their jobs. CSWs however, have a much lower level of signing and no formal interpreter training, this means they have no training to provide a voice over for a deaf person and are not bound to any code of ethics. The SGBSL suggested to me that if they were to use a CWS instead of a BSL interpreter, this would severely impinge on their ability to do their jobs effectively.

Another concern that was raised with me was in regards to the maximum hourly fee rate that is offered by AtW. I have been informed that the maximum hourly fee rate that is offered is vastly under the market rate for a BSL interpreter, which means the deaf person either has to employ a CWS or forfeit hours in order to afford a BSL interpreter.

The SGBSL have also informed me that while still under the market rate, the hourly rates awarded are also varying from person to person; some AtW awards are £18phr while other awards are £30phr or £40phr. They suggest there is no consideration by AtW of the actual hourly rates of interpreters in that area or region.

I have also been informed that there are serious concerns among the wider deaf community that employers will be unwilling to recruit deaf staff because of the changes to AtW as the employer would have to employ other people to carry out the roles the deaf person cannot due to AtW
restrictions. Furthermore, there are concerns that because of the current confusion being caused by these changes, deaf people are at risk of losing their jobs or being demoted.

5. Recommendations

It was recommended to me by the SGBSL that:

- personal caseworkers are reinstated
- the application and assessment processes are streamlined and standardized
- Application questions are reviewed and revised
- If necessary face to face interviews and workplace observation is undertaken
- a provision for communication by email is created
- Sensitivity training undertaken by AtW advisors
- Specialist advisors recruited and trained
- Create a provision for more/ better flexibility of AtW awards
- Offer market rate for interpreters
- Asses the actual hourly rates of interpreters in certain area or region.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this submission and I will happily supply you with the contact details for the South Gloucestershire British Sign Language Forum should you wish to consult any of them in regards to what I have submitted.

24 June 2014