Written evidence submitted by Eleanor Craik (ATW0302)

A bit about me.

I am deaf. I grew up orally but also use sign language. My register is such that I use a mixture of BSL and SSE. In the workplace I prefer more SSE delivery. I struggle with BSL interpreters who are unable to adjust to my register. This hugely impacted on my work based training, as did having different people all the time, which was not only difficult for me, but for the children I taught during my training. As such I prefer to receive support from a degree level language qualified Communicator or Communication Support Worker in the workplace or someone who knows my sign language style and register well.

My first experience of Access to Work was in relation to interviews for prospective employment.

When I gained my first interview I contacted Access to Work with the details. They funded the communication support for my first interview no problem. I then attended several more interviews and did exactly the same thing. Initially I was unable to gain even a response from anyone. I emailed again and again and got no reply. Eventually I gained a response telling me Access to Work would not pay for other interviews and that it was the respective Council’s responsibility.

I was given no other help or guidance. No explanation as to why the first interview was funded but not the subsequent ones and no other help or information regarding which department or who to contact at respective Councils. Being unable to use the telephone, as I am deaf, often meant that email responses were delayed leaving me with no choice but to rely on friends and family to make calls for me. This is extremely disempowering, can be confusing as I have to rely on lip reading as none of my family use sign language.

This situation caused me huge additional stress on top of the already stressful situation of trying to pass my PGCE course. I almost gave up, but was supported to keep fighting by close friends and family. I constantly asked myself how is this equality? The system is meant to be set up to put me on a more equal level with my peers but what it is actually doing is causing me additional stress.

On being offered my post I set about applying to Access to Work aware they would have to assess my need. Again I had difficulties in gaining a reply. When I did gain a reply the responses & questions I got were somewhat bizarre and showed the complete lack of awareness of deaf issues amongst staff.
I am a Newly Qualified Teacher, yet I was asked “do you have a Teaching Assistant?” How is this relevant to my work? Teaching Assistants in Schools are for the children.

It is VERY important that Access to Work understand deaf issues and the huge spectrum that it covers. One size does not fit all. I thought funding was meant to give the best support that suited the deaf or disabled person and enabled them to do their job?

I have found a communicator who I feel comfortable with, I understand her well and she understands my needs. She works very hard to ensure I always have equal access and that it is in a format, a combination of SSE and BSL so that I can understand quickly. I informed Access to Work that I want this person and was flatly informed I could not receive funding for anyone who is not registered with NRCDP. This confused me as I have regularly seen complaints from people who WANT a registered interpreter, but are being told they can only be funded for a Communicator or Communication Support Worker (CSW), whereas this support suits me best but I am being refused?

The whole system is failing not only me but also many others in my situation. We are all individuals with individual needs and should be treated as such. Surely the support that is best suited for me to do my job well and support me starting my career is what should be funded? I know this. Access to Work however seem to want to squeeze me into a box into which I do not fit.

I am now extremely concerned that I will be left in a position where I start my career in September and no support will be funded or in place. If it is in place via a variety of BSL interpreters that I do not fully understand this will be at the detriment of my ability to teach and also upsetting for the Special Education Needs children to constantly have different strangers in the classroom.

I am very concerned I will be unable to take up my first teaching post.

Summary

Access To Work needs to provide continuity on several levels:

1. Access to Work advisor be allocated to an individual so they can deal with the same person at all times. This will build up their knowledge of the individual and start to identify ways to provide what they need. Having a different advisor each time who simply says ‘I will look you up in the system’ at the start of the conversation, doesn’t demonstrate someone who knows you and your needs.

2. Access to Work need to respond quickly and clearly giving clear information using a method that suits the individual. Telephone calls will not help a deaf person but emails will. Deaf people pride
themselves on being independent and having to rely on interpreters to make phone calls can be disempowering.

3. Access to Work need to understand that for some people continuity is important. Freelance BSL interpreters don’t usually work in one place with one person for any length of time. Each individual case is different and the deaf person themselves knows best what support they need. Please allow them the opportunity to tell you what they know in regards to their own needs.

4. If Access to Work wish Support Workers to be paid for via a salary through an Employer they should state clearly and precisely how this could work. Would funding be paid forward to employer? Would Access to Work be responsible for funding Class 1 NI employer contributions? Would employer or Access To Work be responsible for Employer pension contribution, which I understand, is now compulsory?

5. Access to Work need to be clear and concise about funding. Their website simply says ‘access to work grant helps pay for practical support if you have a disability, health or mental health condition’ – it does not mention that this only applies if the workplace is not run under a council. They do not give you any advice on who to go to next, not even a phone number for a specific area of the councils.

6. Please be honest and keep the individual in the loop. It will help avoid any unnecessary stress and frustration. It will also help the individual feel as if they have built a rapport with the Access To Work advisor, and lead to a healthy discussion with an equal understanding that they both just want what is best for the individual.

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