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Introduction:

1. I am a British Sign Language/English interpreter of 14 years experience, I am NRCPD registered and a member of the Association of Sign Language Interpreters. I work with a number of Deaf people in different work places who receive Access to Work funding to provide their interpreter support, giving them the opportunity to work to their full potential and progress in their career in a way that provides some parity with their hearing peers.

Recent Access to Work difficulties:

2. Recently, the people I work with have had difficulty with the Access to Work system and their provision. They have received review letters (some due and others forced) that have significantly reduced the level of provision despite the nature of their different jobs or their levels of deafness not having changed.

3. Both the number of hours that they are allowed and the rate they are allowed to pay the interpreters has been significantly reduced, impacting on their ability to do their different jobs and stay connected with the work force and office needs around them.

4. On trying to contact someone from Access to Work to deal with this they all report difficulties getting any replies either by email or phone call. Each of them, separately, has mentioned feeling like they are being blocked whichever way they try and engage to sort the issues.

5. Reduced level of support is being applied retrospectively in some cases. One deaf person received a letter, dated 11/06/14 which stated that the significantly reduced level of support started on 01/05/14. During that time the deaf person had already had support from interpreters based on the hours and pay levels of the agreement that they had already been working under.

6. In addition the letter asked for the declaration of acceptance to be signed:

   “Please note that without a signed declaration of acceptance, Access to Work WILL NOT be able to release any funding.”

This leaves this Deaf person in an impossible position; they profoundly disagree with the levels of support that they are being offered but if they do not sign and instead appeal, they will not receive any funding to be able to continue the support that they need for their day
to day job in the mean time. In addition outstanding invoices for work that has already been undertaken will not be paid either.

**Unpaid Invoices:**

7. Myself and colleagues have unpaid invoices and the amounts we are owed is climbing. This is starting to significantly affect my household and I know colleagues who are in serious difficulty and are being pushed to the point where they will have to withdraw from Access to Work funded jobs because they can no longer shoulder the deficit or cope with the insecurity of when/if they will be paid. This goes entirely against the reasons that most interpreters became interpreters and would leave the deaf people once again at a significant disadvantage in the work place.

**Why not become an employed interpreter then – the 30 hours question?**

8. The 30 hours rule is not the solution it appears to be, either for Deaf people or interpreters.

9. For Deaf people, to only have a single interpreter has significant difficulties – different interpreters have different skills that may match different parts of a Deaf person’s job. There would be no flexibility for this.

10. Fixed 30 hour or more employment of an interpreter will not be able to take in to account the natural rise and fall of demand that different jobs have – the need for a team of two or three interpreters for a conference or the time when perhaps an interpreter is not needed at all. This would leave the Deaf person with little control or flexibility of how to use their Access to Work provision to match the real needs of the job and the interpreter unable to cover other important appointments (e.g. health or legal) for other Deaf people. (There is still a national shortage of interpreters.)

11. What about maternity cover? It is still the case that the majority of interpreters are women. If an interpreter requires maternity leave, is Access to Work going to cover this cost as well as paying for the temporary replacement interpreter?

12. What happens if the interpreter is off sick? Other interpreters will not have been in to the workplace regularly to have gained sufficient experience and background knowledge of that setting to provide the level of support that a Deaf person needs in a complex and challenging professional workplace. If there are a small number of different interpreters going to a specific workplace regularly then one not being available has a negligible impact in comparison to a sole interpreter being off sick.

13. What happens if the Deaf person is off sick? – The interpreter would have no work to do but would still be required to attend and be unavailable for other Deaf peoples’ needs.

14. What about annual leave entitlement – it cannot be expected that either the deaf person or the interpreter will want to follow the leave dates of the other person. The alternative,
however, leaves the Deaf person without the cover they need while the interpreter is away and the interpreter without work to do while the Deaf person is away.

15. For the interpreter this lack of range of exposure to different settings, vocabulary and Deaf people would significantly deskill them and reduce their ability to gain further work should they need to move from one work setting to another or back out in to more varied community work. It would also make it difficult to complete the requirements of the CPD needed to maintain professional registration.

Reduced Rates of Pay:

16. The new maximum rate of pay being offered per hour - £25 per hour, is not realistic. This seems to be an arbitrary figure and does not represent the current market rates that interpreters charge. It does not recognise the level of training (Post graduate level) and expertise needed to be an interpreter; the amount of time taken to book, prepare, travel, invoice and do accounts for each assignment and it doesn’t recognise the totality of costs that a freelance interpreter needs to cover – including tax, National Insurance contributions, business expenses, professional registration and membership fees, training fees, supervision costs, pension contributions etc. In addition this rate is now also supposed to include travel expenses.

The positive aspects of access to work:

17. Previously Access to Work has allowed Deaf people access to jobs that they have the skills and aptitude for; not allowing a difference in language to preclude Deaf people from doing whichever job they are most suited to or passionate about. These changes are putting this in jeopardy.

18. This is hard to understand when the Sayce Report shows that it is better both for Deaf people and the public purse for them to be in employment receiving this support, positively contributing to society and paying taxes when compared to the cost of unemployment benefits, housing and council tax benefits and the additional health and social costs of under or unemployment.

Recommendations:

19. Appropriate levels of support in terms of time and levels of payment need to be reinstated.

20. A level of flexibility and allowing the Deaf person control of their own agreed budget for them to be able to match their own specific needs and circumstances.

21. Access to Work needs to provide a clear, transparent and consistent, decision making framework.

22. There needs to be a clear and transparent appeals and complaints procedure.

23. There needs to be consultation both with Deaf people and the interpreting community about any future changes.

24. It needs to be possible to reliably communicate with Access to Work in a way that is not discriminatory to Deaf people (i.e. not to insist on telephone access only).
25. Retrospective cuts need to stop.
26. Access to work needs to consider supporting/suggesting better ways of booking interpreters that are more cost effective so that more of the money can be used for communication and less on agency fees (e.g. BSL Beam or cooperative websites like www.yorkshire-bsl-interpreters.co.uk/)

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