Written evidence submitted by Kelly West, a freelance BSL/English Interpreter (ATW0317)

I am submitting this evidence because I have first hand experience of Access to Work and I understand the benefits of the allowance.

Executive Summary:

1. Introducing my involvement
2. Highlighting personal pressures and problems
3. Raising issues experienced with processes
4. Conflicting information
5. Possible solutions

1. I work as a BSL/English interpreter and over the years I have worked with many deaf clients and agencies who pay me via the Access to Work allowance. I know first hand what an invaluable resource it is. Not only to allow equal access in the work place, but also to support with developing roles and provide career opportunities for the Deaf community. In addition, Access to Work enables access to the general social interaction, banter and relationship building which is imperative to healthy well-being in the work place. I am in a privileged position to see how the Deaf workforce have benefitted from the scheme and I know what devastation it would cause if big cuts and changes were made.

2. My personal experience with Access to Work in recent months has not been positive. I have had to chase payments, deal with cuts to allowances and pay more to cover my travel costs. I have trained for a long while and worked hard to reach this professional status, big cuts are affecting the quality of provision. BSL/English interpreters travel a lot in the specialist work we do as there aren’t many of us. The work location is rarely fixed so travel is a big outgoing for the week. Access to Work used to cover mileage at 25p per mile, but that was the scrapped without any discussion. I do have large outgoings (living in the South east) and I feel any further cuts to the allowance make a mockery of what we do. Our role carries huge responsibilities - if errors are made whilst interpreting then deaf people's relationships and careers can be ruined.

3. As a freelancer time is in short supply. Lately, I have had to make many calls to the payments team. Chasing very late payments and sorting out an overpayment made to me in error (I am still waiting on the letter with the bank details on). It is really difficult trying to get through to the payments team - sometimes the phone is engaged for hours and hours on end. When I do get through no clear answer as to why there are delays in payments.

4. I have also received such a variety of responses when decisions on hourly payments are made. I understand the process is that the assessment team source 3 separate quotes from agencies on fees and then find decide on some sort of an average... but the results have been manipulated. When these agencies are asked directly as to hourly quotes given to Access to Work they have strongly denied giving such rates. This really worries me. There needs to be a joined up robust decision making system and there isn't one

5. I think Deaf people should be consulted before changes are made. I don't agree that a standard scale of fees or hours for certain jobs should be fixed. It should be an individual assessment on the needs of that Deaf person. I feel interpreters should be consulted and that our role fully understood before changes are decided. The full impact must be understood. I really enjoy working with a range of Deaf professionals and I love the flexibility in decisions that both deaf people and interpreters can make over the work we choose.

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