Written evidence submitted by Faye Stewart (ATW0320)

Executive Summary:

- Access to Work has provided valuable, long-term support to me over the course of my employment since leaving university in 2004.
- In July 2013, when I reapplied for three year ATW funding, I felt for the first time that the brand ‘Access to Work’ no longer reflected its title.
- My evidence shows that the structure is not working for individuals, particularly for D/deaf clients.

Introduction:

I am sending evidence because Access to Work is vital for me and has always previously given valuable and long-term support; it has been an ongoing hidden presence to me, enabling me to be a whole, confident person, to operate as an equal, to show my ability and to address my ambition to work in mainstream employment.

Although, there have recently been rapid changes in AtW, it is sad to see that ‘cost effective’ has become more a priority rather than an individual’s needs and benefits.

Instead of living on benefits I like to work for a living, I enjoy it, it gives me independence and adds diversity and richness to my life. I have overcome so many barriers to get to where I am. My current employment is at an NDPB, a well-known development agency, a job I never thought that I would achieve because of my disability. It makes no sense that AtW having supported me so well should now make things harder.

The AtW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees and employers:

1. The AtW application process is straightforward, requesting details on access requirements appropriate to address my needs and my work environment. I was reassessed in July 2013 for a three year program. I joined my current employment in 2010 and this was my second application to AtW since working here. I was unaware that I had overspent the previous budget and this led to a 4-month delay in payments without AtW informing me. I used to have a relationship directly with an advisor, who had a good understanding of my needs and knew the benefits of full communication support; we had discussed my new employment during a face to face meeting which helped them gain clarity of my role and a clear in depth picture of my new job. However, a manager who had no knowledge of me or the demands of my job later made decisions about my funding.

2. The process has now changed from face to face meetings to a telephone appointment. The new advisor who led on my assessment this time was helpful but inexperienced without background knowledge that my previous advisor had. We spoke over the phone via an interpreter, the advisor asked inappropriate and unexpected personal questions e.g. How deaf are you? Can you lipread? How good is your written English? It made me uncomfortable. The advisor suggested if I could use a communication support worker, which is completely inappropriate for the demanding high level job I do. I was surprised that they tried to downgrade my needs. My needs were clearly explained on my AtW application form, I can’t change this as it enables me to address to my job description and my disability is indefinitely permanent!

3. I was shocked to discover the new proposal included the recruitment of a full time salaried interpreter. This is not appropriate or reasonable for my role within a NDPB, one I have held for 3 years. My role is demanding, work is intensive, it is people and relationship focused and requires me to travel extensively. I feel that AtW are still not fully aware of my role and its demands.

4. During the three years I have developed a small pool of highly qualified interpreters whom I trust and who have gained understanding of information, terminology and structures within my company. A large number of qualified experienced interpreters have spoken of the difficulty of this particular work, one senior interpreter from an agency commented that she would never send a trainee interpreter as they would be out of their depth. I employ interpreters who undertake training and develop knowledge and understanding in these fields which enables them to provide a high quality service.
5. I appreciate interpreters’ outstanding professionalism and commitment to deliver a high quality service; they work hard to address my needs and enable me to do my work to a high standard. If I were to use a salaried interpreter, I would lose this valuable team. I am required to travel extensively to meet various individuals and organisations in order to fulfil my role and responsibilities. In theory, when travelling to different locations in the UK, I aim to use one interpreter local to the venue and one regular interpreter. In this way travel costs can be reduced but I still have one interpreter who knows me well and the field in which I am working. Unfortunately, this has resulted in a number of negative experiences with local interpreters, for example, struggling in their voice over or interpreting incorrectly given the context of the meeting. As far as I am concerned, this seriously affects my reputation, both personally and professionally.

6. I was not aware that the AtW complaints process had different stages. I asked AtW to reconsider their decision, they did and said they stood by their first decision. They then told me how I could complain to their Senior Operational Manager if I wasn’t happy with the outcome of the reconsideration. I chose not to continue the process because I didn’t know how to further argue my case when I had already fully explained my needs and demands and sent two strong letters of support for them to reconsider. My report was very clear and included full details. It made me realise they are no longer interested in my personal needs, they have moved to a ‘cost effective’ model where saving money is their priority. Even my employers felt helpless to help me out as they didn’t understand AtW either.

7. I managed to get support from my employer (paying for long-distance travel for my interpreter) to see if I could manage to continue using freelance interpreters with a limited budget. I am grateful to them and at the same time heartbroken to have to rely on an employer when I have spent years working to be independent. If this is taken to extremes, they could end up employing two people. No one wants to employ two people to do one job.

8. I haven’t got enough energy and time for the hassle and conflict to complain to try to get provision that properly meets my needs – it is too big a battle to fight on my own. It did make me frustrated and was stressful at the time to be in a situation that shouldn’t be happening. I simply want to get on with my job as an equal with my hearing colleagues.

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. There is no help or advice offered by DWP. Over the years, I have been self-taught on interpreter admin, budgeting and bookings, I have improved over time only through learning from experience.

2. I am fully responsible for my budget over the three years, this gives me control and flexibility over my interpreter bookings. Initially, AtW wanted me to employ an in-house interpreter (due to a 30 hour rule) so agreeing to manage the budget in this way was a ‘work-around’ to avoid this happening. The budget is obviously restricted and I am fortunate that my employer have been gracious enough to cover travel expenses when my ‘daily’ interpreter needs to travel for work with me.

3. I have a fixed date, to manage on top of my demanding workload, when I send all the invoices I have received to AtW. It then takes approx. 21 days for payment to be sent to me. Once I have received the payment, I need five working days to sort out payments to interpreters. I always do this when I don’t have an interpreter with me, obviously it can be hard to find time to do this. Although, it doesn’t address that sometimes payment will fall outside of interpreter’s terms and conditions, which are usually 28/30 days. There is nothing I can do to prevent this, and I would not want to make any guarantees that I cannot keep. Unfortunately, I have received a few emails from regular interpreters to inform me of admin charges due to late payment which frustrates and upset me when I am trying my best to ensure that this process is as smooth and transparent as possible.

4. It has been almost a year since my new contract with Access to Work, I could not continue my work without my interpreters. I have reviewed my budget to see how things are going and to check I haven’t
over spent - thankfully, it’s looking ok so far. It was difficult to know how I would manage my job cutting out networking sessions and events to visit by invitations because I was cautious of my budget. With new evidence from my previous year, I now have a record to help me better organise interpreters and my AtW budget.

**AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:**

5. AtW support in the past has been outstanding. From first starting employment with a small arts organisation to currently being employment as an NDPB. I didn’t realise how crucial it was until the recent change. Up to this time I have always look for jobs that would be suitable for me to develop without thinking about my access requirement.

6. I major concerns for my future. Where will the support be from Access to Work? What about my future employment? Do I have to limit my job ambitions? For the first time, when I see a job opportunity or promotion, I will wonder if Access to Work will agree to increase support. For the first time, I am not confident, because the support is no longer there as it used to be.

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

7. From my experience I discovered AtW through word of mouth. It is so low profile that not many people are aware of.

8. During all the previous the interviews I have attended, most companies are not aware of AtW, therefore I always ensure I make them aware of Access to Work and that is there to cover the access costs to assure them that they will not be employing two people.

**My Recommendations:**

1. AtW needs an advocate for Deaf and Disabled people in the assessment and provision process with better knowledge of costs and practicalities. This would provide to improve communication from top to bottom, with better understanding on individual needs and disabilities against access costs.

2. Technology has changed rapidly over the years, AtW needs to upgrade to an electronic system to speed up the whole process, including application form, budgeting, admin, uploading invoices. This would be helpful for a quick turnaround for those with responsibility to manage their own tight time schedules. It would save money and time instead of written application/postage.

3. Better understanding and improved communication with individuals. The position to make decisions on an individual needs basis, e.g. not the blanket 30 hour rule, because jobs vary. The applicant is the person who knows their own needs best, we can try and work together within budget. No two jobs are the same.

4. It is up to a deaf client to employ interpreters suitable for the job, whatever the level of qualification they require. I have good reason to employ qualified interpreters because I want to excel at my job and I expect my interpreters to deliver excellence.

5. Packages of support need to be tailored to address access costs/ practicalities on an individual basis.

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