Introduction
The ATW scheme has been instrumental in enabling Disabled people to work and, as such, is a fantastic and necessary support that is greatly valued by many.

Unfortunately, some developments that have crept in over the last decade, and changes in the workplace/economy, have led to it receiving less positive feedback, especially the:

a. removal of the Disability Employment Advisor role, in local jobcentreplus bases, as an ‘expert’ one undertaken by highly experienced staff, in the early years of 21st century;
b. disbanding of sub-regional teams of ATW assessors who operate on the basis of each individual beneficiary having a named officer who deals with their support on a repeat basis i.e. same person deals with them whether it is their first, second or third application or review;
c. change to totally centralised ‘switchboard’ service i.e. can be put through to, or contacted by, a different officer every time;
d. continual narrowing in recent years of what support is offered and how frequently they get it; and, consequently,
e. cutting of the number of hours communication support that ATW will fund;
f. the unrealistic requirement for Deaf people to have to rely on generic interpreters and for them to be employed on a salaried basis; and

g. undermined Disabled people’s ability to gain and keep employment.

Bristol Disability Forum is aware that there are also ‘gaps’ in the process of securing employment that have always existed under ATW rules, that we believe demonstrate the need to change those rules. In particular, our members have frequently highlighted that they need ATW support to gain the experience needed to secure a job in the first place, that volunteering would provide.

We have therefore divided our submission (below) into sections which consider what ATW needs to be, and how it can be as effective as possible in supporting employment of Disabled people:

1. Getting ready to work;
2. Securing employment; and
3. Retaining employment.

1. Getting ready for work
As our country increasingly looks to volunteering to ‘fill the funding gap’ nationally, it becomes even more essential that individuals seeking work get ATW (or equivalent) support to volunteer.

Doing so would not only increase the employment-related skills of the individual, it would improve the chances of voluntary sector organisations who would like to prioritise involving Disabled people in volunteering, securing funding in the first place. This is because organisations that take fully supporting accessibility seriously are at a substantial disadvantage in successfully competing for funding due to their projects being more expensive, per head, than their competitors.

Consequently, if Disabled people are to be able to access volunteering, as a stepping stone to employment, on an equal footing with non-Disabled people, meeting Disabled volunteers access requirements needs to be taken out of the volunteer-funding equation.

Given the year-on-year funding reductions the VCS has experienced in the past seven years, it would also mean individuals more frequently getting the right support, and the right support makes all the difference in gaining experience and securing employment.

The ‘wrong’ support not only results in people not getting the range of experience the workplace demands, it undermines the individual’s belief in their ability to work.

Example:
A Disabled people-led organisation (DPULO) explored the possibility of DoH Volunteering Fund grant aid. The fund will let organisations apply for a maximum of the equivalent to 25% of their current annual income. This raised two barriers to them securing that funding:

a. most DPULOs are, on average, smaller than organisations that aren’t DPULOs therefore the maximum they could apply for was less than the average others could apply for; and
b. meeting the Disabled person’s access needs had to be included in this amount.

As a consequence, they were not able to run a project that would not only have saved the DoH money but it would have given Disabled people who have never worked, and those who have not worked since becoming a Disabled person, the skills needed to secure employment.
Recommendation
Provide ATW support for those volunteering as a means of acquiring employment related skills and experience. It is provided for those elected as Councillors and, in doing so, is a beacon of good practice internationally. It is time for other volunteering to be included.

2. Seeking and securing work
2.1 Disability Employment Advisor
The removal of local jobcentreplus Disability Employment Advisor (DEA) role as an ‘expert’ one undertaken by highly experienced staff, in the early years of 21st century, has resulted in poorer quality support at the job-seeking stage and individuals seeking work without always knowing that ATW exists. Even where people know of it, they rarely appreciate the variety of support that can be provided.

Trying to get work and navigating the employment/ unemployment market is hard enough – for those dealing with the additional difficulties posed by having access needs and combating the assumptions and lack of understanding of employers it is a nightmare.

To make it possible to overcome all these barriers Disabled people need well informed and experienced jobcentreplus staff who are well networked and have an ongoing relationship with staff in other agencies. Putting generic staff in the role, and moving experienced DEAs to undertake generic roles, has benefitted no-one.

It also does not help progress people’s journey into employment if they are seeing a different person every couple of months.

Recommendation:
What is needed is a knowledgeable, experienced individual who can take the Disabled person through the options available, discuss the scope of what is possible within those options and follow that jobseeker through from initial enquiry/registration to starting work.

This is something all humans benefit from but, given the additional needs of many Disabled people this arrangement can be essential, rather than just preferred.

2.2 ATW Officers
There is a great variety of experiences of ATW Officers and changes to their deployment that have adversely affected Disabled people’s experience of ATW support.
Some Officers consistently attract high commendation from those they have been the caseworker for. In our area, one Officer in particular has been greatly valued and, indeed, praised.

What members also feedback though is that the re-organisations that have led to very few and much more remote offices in which officers are based, has adversely affected the service.

This has been combined with a move away from consistent contact and caseload-based working, resulting in a current situation where the employer as well as the applicant rarely knows, and probably never met, the Officer dealing with the application – and that officer being a different person each time contact is made.

This leads to poorer service, less confidence among employers, and a lack of detailed knowledge of who the appropriate specialist assessors in the area are. This results in inadequate support being provided, inconsistent advice/decisions being given and a sense (on the part of the applicant/recipient) of having to restate the same information time and time again.

Lack of flexibility regarding the 6 week rule is highly problematic for some. It is the nature of some impairments that the individual is not able to work at the speed set by ATW e.g. those with mental ill-health difficulties that are known to result in tendencies such as stress avoidance until the last minute, avoidance of telephone calls, etc; Deaf people experiencing difficulties booking interpreters for internal meetings required before an application is made, within the 6-week window.

It is also the case that many people are reluctant to disclose their impairment to an employer until the impairment itself gives them little or no choice. This is often after the 6 week deadline, rendering it impossible for them get the support they need.

**Recommendations**

i. What is needed is a knowledgeable, experienced individual who can take the employer and the Disabled person through the options available, discuss the scope of what is possible within those options and follow that applicant and their employer through from initial enquiry onwards.

ii. Greater flexibility around the 6 week rule.
3. Retaining employment

3.1 Change of circumstance and the 6 week rule
People’s needs change and their work situation changes. This means the relationship needs to be ongoing and flexible. It also means it can take time to fully appreciate what impact on the individual’s ability to continue working as they have been the change(s) has produced. It can also be the case, for those who become a Disabled person that a period of adjustment is needed to come to terms with, and accept, the life-change involved.

In both cases, 6 weeks will often not be enough.

Recommendation
Greater flexibility in the 6 week rule.

3.2 Interpreter support
3.2.1 Lack of adequate interpreter support has a major impact on Deaf people’s ability to retain employment and/or progress in their career. Given the cost of someone being unemployed or under-employed, this does not appear to make financial sense, and certainly puts Deaf people at a very unfair disadvantage.

Deaf people are in a unique position. Other linguistic minorities can learn to speak and write in English; Deaf people can’t. This is through no fault of their own and can in no way be overcome, other than through the provision of British Sign Language interpreters.

Isolation is known to negatively impact one’s mental health yet, when ATW fails to provide adequate levels of interpreter support, this is exactly what they are consigning Deaf employees to.

They are also ensuring that the Deaf employee under-performs due to an inability to pick up on the ‘word of mouth’, informal ‘water cooler’ and ‘in passing’ communication that, among other things:

a) keeps people up to date on small but significant developments relating to their job;
b) enables them to learn from each other’s experience and share best practice;
c) helps build a sense of being part of a team.

3.2.2 A significant number of jobs – especially in the statutory sector – may require cross-topic working that calls for a different area of interpreter expertise from day to day. For example, an equalities officer may work solely on anti-racism policy and issues. In doing this they are likely to need an interpreter
with particular expertise in the language and concepts of the legal system/procedures one day, in health the next and in housing the day after.

It is therefore untenable to have to employ a single interpreter on a salaried basis, as is now the situation.

There are other reasons this is not possible – not least because it assumes there are plenty of interpreters willing to work on that basis.

**Recommendations**

a) recognition that Deaf employees require interpreters for more of the working week than is currently funded;
b) flexibility in the basis on which BSL interpreters are employed to provide workplace support.

**3.3 Employer contributions and the statutory sector**

Whilst it is reasonable for employers with a healthy profit margin to pay towards the costs of meeting a Disabled employee’s access needs and reasonable adjustments, to require it of the statutory sector is to effectively cut services.

Furthermore, with the year-on-year (and massive) cuts to statutory sector budgets – especially local authority ones – Disabled people’s continued employment is threatened. Whilst there is not irrefutable proof of this (because employers would deny it) it does appear to be the case that re-organisation and the lack of ATW support to address its negative impact is making it a lot harder for Disabled employees to retain their employment.

One example of this is a local authority that has sought to make savings by reducing the number of offices it has and relocating many staff to buildings on the fringes of the local authority area. Unable/unwilling to provide £300 for every Disabled employee with a mobility impairment to use towards accessible transport to get to the new offices they are opting for the ‘reasonable adjustment’ of home working. This often leads to them becoming isolated and missing out on important informal communication of the workplace.

Another issue that has arisen is the move towards ‘hot desking’ to save on accommodation costs. This can be very inaccessible to some Disabled people and seen as far too expensive by the employer to address via a ‘reasonable adjustment’ i.e. a permanent desk unused by others. Consequently, much as it is likely to be denied, Disabled people who find themselves in the
‘redemption pool’ are suspecting that they are being unsuccessful in securing an alternative post due to the cost they bring with them.

Recommendations
a) removal of the requirement for the statutory sector to pay the first £300 of any claim;
b) provide support for those Disabled employees who need it, when the job role is changed by the employer e.g. when employers decide to reduce/cut administrative support and expect staff to undertake all their own admin;
c) consider how to support Disabled employees, and their employers – especially those in the particularly ‘hard hit’ statutory sector - to successfully redeploy when posts are deleted;
d) consider other reasonable adjustments that ATW could fund when relocation (where transport is a major issue) and ‘hot desking’ is introduced - particularly in the hardest hit parts of the statutory and voluntary sectors and the most impacted (by the recession) private sector.

21 July 2014