Hello. My name is Kristy Cooper. I am a deaf project manager and a deaf advocate for an organisation called Living Options Devon, which is a charity. I am here today to explain to you some supporting evidence for Access to Work. I do have an interpreter with me who’s voicing over as I’m profoundly deaf and my first language is British sign language.

In answer to the first question, which was how has Access to Work been previously, I would say fantastic. So far Access to Work has helped me get promotions in my job, which I have been in for about six years, as a deaf project co-ordinator. I have regular interpretive support for my meetings. I now do attend a lot of professional meetings. I go out to events and all the different types of meetings with hearing people that happen in my job, and interpretation is also important for office support and telephone calls.

If I want to make a phonecall, for example, maybe to a health or mental health call to a fellow professional, I would make sure I have an interpreter with headphones and I would ask them to make the call on my behalf. Obviously I would sign to them and they would voice over to the hearing person on the other side. The hearing person would speak and the interpreter would translate it into BSL for me. I wouldn’t be able to do my job without that kind of interpreter support, and that is an effective way of working for me.

Also sometimes I need to write an e-mail, so the interpreter would support me in writing that e-mail in written English. I need fellow professionals to understand distinctly and clearly exactly what I want to get across. That is why having an interpreter with me in the office to check over my English and tweak it so that it is formal and professional and so I can send it on is very important. I could not do that without an interpreter; it is a very important part of my work.

Recently I became a deaf project manager, which was a great promotion for me. Also I have trained to become a deaf adviser. All my training was done using a fully qualified BSL interpreter. I need continuous training in CPD to help me increase my skills base. Again Access to Work pays for provision.

The agency I use currently is called Definite Interpreters agency, which covers the whole south-west and has not increased its rates for eight years. It has charged the same rates for eight years and has been helping me in my job.

The next question is about access to Access to Work. The Government are currently trying to support people with disabilities getting to work. I would recommend that you read the Sayce report, which is written by a lady called Liz Sayce. She wrote the report on behalf of our Government. She spent many years researching how our being in work benefits the Government.

I am sure if you gave a politician or anyone else who works in the Government a choice, they would rather be in work than receive benefits. That makes it very
difficult if Access to Work were to change or reduce the rates it was able to pay interpreters, as it would force professionals like me to be on benefits; it would not help me be in work and carry on doing my job. It helps if Access to Work makes a contribution to pay interpreters rather than my being on benefits, which would cost the Government more.

The report says that for every £1 Access to Work pays for interpreters or any support for reasonable adjustments, you get back £1.48 in national insurance and the tax I would pay. If you have not seen the Sayce report, please look at it.

What are the main changes that have affected me in my work? I go to a lot of meetings with hearing professionals, and it is a very important part of my job that I support deaf people in making informed choices. I try to make them as independent as possible, which helps them find work in turn. That is a major part of what I do. All the changes have really stressed me out; they have not helped or supported me in doing my job. For the past four months, my employer, Living Options Devon, which is a charity, has had to fund the costs for interpreters while my budget has been on hold. Of course, this is money it cannot afford. Because we are a charity we have a small reserve and a very small surplus, but by no means can we afford this cost for interpreters every month. I am concerned that we are having to borrow money from other projects’ reserves to fund my interpreter support. Our company cannot support that kind of temporary loss.

It is a great thing that I have got a job at the moment. I have got a contract that allows me to do my job. In the future if that contract runs out things might not remain the same. I should be able to focus on my job, supporting other deaf people and working with professionals, without having constant stress and worry about where my support is coming from. I am a professional. I have worked for the past 20 years in different jobs, here there and everywhere, and as I say, this has been one of the biggest stresses that I have encountered.

Why have these changes caused me problems? I need to focus entirely on my job. I need to be able to rely on interpreters being there at regular intervals and times, and not have to worry about how we will pay for that. If the charges go down, it will mean that I have to stop attending some meetings and doing some office work, which would hinder my job significantly. Whenever I am in meetings or in the office I need an interpreter. Reducing my interpreter hours, means that I wouldn’t be able to support as many deaf people or continue in my role. It is not effective, not professional and would mean that the quality of my work had been lowered. It is not acceptable.

What do I think of the changes and how they would affect my job? If I am given interpreter support, it will help me get promoted. That is always a good thing in people’s jobs. If the changes were to happen now, they wouldn’t help me at all. In fact, I’d have to give in my notice and live off benefits, because I’m not able to do my job without continual interpreter support.

If I stayed in my job at LOD and expected them to fund the costs, the charity would go bankrupt; they wouldn’t be able to fund the costs and survive. The deaf community is encountering big gap in services. If I were to be out of employment,
that gap would increase even further. It would cause mental health problems such as depression, not only perhaps for me but for people in the deaf community who I have been helping. A lot of people would be lost without my support.

I know for a fact that there are no interpreters available in our region who will work on the basis of the stated costs and terms and conditions. Devon is a very rural area. It is very important for you to know this. At the moment, freelancers charge anything from £28 an hour upwards. The agency I use charges about £38 an hour. Of course, that is exclusive of travel expenses. There is nothing in our area for less than that money. If the amounts do go down, I’ll be stuck.

As I said, I have worked for 20 years and this is a real hard hit for me. I feel like it is robbing us of our human rights and our right to access information. For a rural area, I think you haven’t taken that into consideration when you’ve thought about dropping charges. Travel expenses in our area are also very different from those in more urban, built-up areas where things are more accessible. That would perhaps need to be taken into account if these changes were to happen. For example, a booking in Devon could be anything from about four miles away to 100 miles away, obviously depending on the work location. In some areas, the quoted figure of £25 an hour, or £35 an hour for an agency, could be appropriate, but in our area it is not realistic, given the rural space that we live in and the amount of travel time. For example, an interpreter cannot be expected to drive three hours to a booking but only be paid at £25 an hour for a two-hour booking. That is not cost-effective an no interpreter would be expected to take that charge. Travelling three hours without being paid for travel time is not achievable, even if you get paid travel expenses.

At the moment in Devon, there are about 15 fully qualified interpreters, all within about 40 miles of my place of work, and that is a round trip. Some 12 of them are employed by the agency I mentioned, Definite Interpreters, which I regularly use, and three of the freelancers, who are also based in Exeter, all work part-time; they do not work in a full-time capacity either. Therefore their availability is limited and they won’t be able to cover my needs.

As I said before, I work in a rural area—I live and work there—so I feel that the 40-mile radius isn’t necessarily appropriate. Currently Access to Work charges 25p a mile for petrol. I think it is worth reconsidering that with the DWP. The interpreters need an increase in how much is paid in reimbursement for travel. Some interpreters have said they won’t work for me because they cannot charge the standard 45p a mile for petrol. That also needs to be looked into.

The next question is: has Access to Work listened to me in making these changes, and is it clear how to complain? I would say no to all of those. When I talk to an Access to Work adviser they are following orders, and I’d say the procedure in Access to Work is not smooth. When I speak to an adviser, they have no idea about what it’s like to be a deaf professional or about using interpreters. It is hard to get through to them; they are not friendly, and it feels like they are pitching in the dark. We need a professionals who are going to understand our culture and what we need, and how we work. At the moment that has just not happened.

I have asked them where they got the cost of £25 an hour freelance and £35 an hour for an agency. Obviously that is an out of London area charge. They did not tell me
where they got those figures from or about any kind of research that led them to that conclusion. They did tell me, however, that they had a 120 case backlog. I did not understand whether my case was on a backburner or was a current case. I do not know how to make a complaint and would say that the procedure is unclear. I did ask once how to complain but nobody understand how to do that. They did not know what I was talking about, and seemed quite lost on the other end of the phone—and they are supposed to be providing support.

The next question was: how do the DWP and Access to Work work together to support deaf people? It would be really beneficial to set up a consultation where by deaf organisations and deaf professionals could meet up with Access to Work advisers and the DWP. If they want to create new policies or have any fresh ideas, or want to implement changes, it would be great if they seek advice from deaf people in future. I don’t think that Access to Work and the DWP do work together. That is clear in how things are handled.

I would like to ask to go back to how it was in the past, as having quotes from freelancers and agencies would be the best way of understanding what rates are appropriate in different regions. Rather than using a cost that Access to Work has picked out of thin air, it would be base it on facts and evidence in each region. At the moment, the DWP are not law, but they do make the decisions without consulting people or the professionals who are actually directly involved with using Access to Work. In future it would be very useful to have a deaf adviser who is employed solely by Access to Work. I am not sure whether anyone has thought about that before.

I hope that you really listen to this carefully and understand my view and where I am coming from. Deaf people will be losing out on employment and work, and will be completely stressed by these changes. We have a right to work, like anybody else, and we want to be equal and to be treated as peers.

Thank you for watching or listening.

21 June 2014