I am here speaking to you from deafPLUS. Our organisation supports people with hearing loss, but we also work together with our service users—staff, social workers, health and social care professionals, councils or it could be commissioners; so various people.

My work colleagues have fed back to me. We all have similar roles regarding deaf BSL users. They can’t phone. If they go to a meeting and somebody is speaking, it is impossible for them to be able to watch and write notes at the same time, so I don’t feel that I’m fully participating in the meeting until there is an interpreter present who is able to interpret and a note taker who is able to take notes, because I’m unable to take notes while watching an interpreter.

Just before I move on, when I use the word “deaf”, that covers everybody with a hearing loss—deaf, hard of hearing are all together under one umbrella. When I talk about support, I mean PA, CSW, BSL, English interpreter, note takers, hands-on interpreters for deaf blinds, so support covers all of that, and “the deaf” covers a whole range.

My points are based on my work colleagues’ experiences that they have fed back to me, and I am now presenting them to you.

Question number one: the feedback is whether it is easy to phone and ask for a new application or reassessment. Is that simple and straightforward? No, I have to ask somebody to help me because of using of the phone, so that means that I rely on them. FaceTime or anything isn’t being used, so I have to rely on somebody to phone.

One colleague was offered some temporary work, and she was very keen to do that work because it would mean that she would learn some new skills and get some new experience. She applied to Access to Work for an extra seven hours. She went through the application process in good time and they asked, “Can I employ a CSW?” and the adviser said, “Oh, based on your requirements, I think that will be fine. I will need to pass it up to the senior manager to sign it off, but it should be fine.” So, they asked the CSW to work with them and every week phoned all the time to ask about the progression. Twelve weeks went on, and they carried on working but they hadn’t been paid. At last the decision came, and it was a rejection, after 12 weeks. That means how would the CSW be paid, and could the person carry on working? How do they cover this project, because the council has paid for this service, and it needs to continue? This was stress for everybody involved. There was no warning that Access to Work would stop or it would be under investigation—nothing like that. The interpreter would carry on and then the invoice would be sent off, and they hadn’t been paid, so we would phone, and find out why the interpreter hadn’t been paid or their support worker hadn’t been paid, and it was because there had been the cuts and changes. So we phoned and asked when would they be paid for the work that they had done, and that takes lots of time. It should be quite simple to phone and say, “This person hasn’t been paid. Why not?” and get that sorted straight away without any stress.
Question number two, and there are two parts, A and B. On the assessments, I don’t feel that there is any continuity between the assessments and they all seem to be different. Two or three people may be assessed and the outcomes are different for each person. It should be more standardised. A long time ago, Access to Work advisers used to meet, assess, build up a relationship and then you would go back to the same person all the time. They used to know you and you had a relationship, but now the system has changed; you phone to a call centre and you say what you need and they then pass that case on to whoever is free, and then you have to explain to that person what you need. If there are any issues, you call the centre again, and it might be a different Access to Work adviser. All of the time it is different, and it is becoming very time-consuming and it is wasting time. There is no relationship building any more and it seems very separate from us. Does it meet our needs? No, I don’t think so, because a colleague had had some support for a while and then all of a sudden, it was cut. The hourly rate went from £25 an hour down to £8 an hour, and the PA that they had said they couldn’t work for that. They couldn’t take such a big drop, and so they left. How was that colleague supposed to carry on doing their work, because they couldn’t phone, they couldn’t receive phone calls and they couldn’t phone out to anybody? Trying to find a replacement for £8 an hour, and asking round for that type of work, the rate was too low, so nobody would accept that work.

The Access to Work advisers should be knowledgeable about deaf people’s needs and then the assessments would be less stressful, because that adviser would already be aware of issues in regards to deafness and hard of hearing. When someone explains what the role is and what they need, sometimes it comes back, and it doesn’t match the needs. It is like the adviser is thinking what’s best for me rather than what I know is best for me. It feels like they are saying that deaf people’s needs are all the same—“This is what we give to a deaf person”—and everybody is treated the same, as opposed to seeing that everybody has different roles and different levels of support that they need.

I don’t really feel that we have been listened to. Like I said before, the advisers seem to feel that they know best rather than what I know is best for me. I know a colleague who needed some support, some human support, and really what they decided to do was to give some equipment worth £3,000 to the person, rather than human support. When they asked why not human support, they said that they had given that colleague equipment, but the equipment isn’t really useful for that person’s needs. If they listened to us, the money would be used more cost-effectively by offering the correct support. There is technology, and then there is human support, and it seems to be that they want to replace human support with technology, but that is not always the best way. For example, you might need a face-to-face interpreter, so individual needs need to be met.

Question number four has different elements – A, B, C and so on. So far, I don’t think it is working well, because lots of deaf people seem to have been made redundant and have had to leave work because there isn’t any support, and they can’t get on with their work. There is no progression either in work, in terms of promotion, and it seems they are not able to do the job they currently have. As for helping people get back into work, it is important that companies and employers know how to work with Access to Work support and know that they can rely on that. Their hearing person
works well, but we want to explain that a deaf person can work just as well with some support from Access to Work. With all the problems with Access to Work, I feel that companies are looking at it and thinking that they don’t want to take that on really. For example, a deaf person with a job interview needs an interpreter for their interview, and they phone Access to Work to say that they need an interpreter for the next two days for an interview, but no, we have to go through the proper process, which means they miss that interview and they miss that opportunity for work.

Access to Work is really important to keep deaf people in work, and we can contribute to society and we have experience to give. Also, it is good for the economic environment, as well as our well-being, so we can be proud of earning money and working with Access to Work support and we are the same as hearing people. However, if we have no support and we have no more work, no more income, that might affect our health, and we might have mental health issues such as depression. Access to Work, with good support, means a deaf person can integrate into the hearing society.

There is one really difficult issue with payment. When the staff send off an invoice to be paid to their support worker there is sometimes delays, and then their support worker is saying that they haven’t received payment, and that is causing them stress, and then sometimes they leave because they don’t want to do that work any more if they can’t be paid on time. That means that people are affected when they are trying to find a replacement for that support worker. Also, that means that the employers might hear about that and again think, “I don’t want to employ a deaf person because the Access to Work support is not going to be there, so I won’t do that.”

If the process was simple and straightforward, it would work smoothly, but at the moment it seems to be breaking down a lot—lots of delays in payments; departments moving all over the place. It seems to be in quite a lot of chaos.

I understand the need to look at saving money, but you should have consulted with the deaf people, and explained, “We need to save some money. We need to make some cuts.” But we should work together and help each other to make sure that you save money and we carry on getting some support. Again, there needs to be clear communication between Access to Work and the deaf people in employment.

Question number five: how well is Access to Work known out there? I don’t think it is very well publicised, because our staff are still having to tell people about Access to Work, and trying to speak about deaf disabled people not having barriers because Access to Work should be there to help people. So I don’t think it is well publicised. When you go to a job interview, you can ask for an interpreter, but again with the issues, you need an interpreter there straight away or as soon as possible for an interview, rather than the delays of going through the process of application.

In regards to whether Access to Work has a big budget, I don’t know what the issues are, and why the changes have happened. It seems to be that there have been a lot of cuts, and is that because there is not enough funding? I don’t know. Before the changes or cuts, there was no consultation with us—no letter to inform us that there would be changes, so that we were prepared. Nothing. No update, so that we were
aware of any changes or cuts, or why they were going on. Again, there was no communication. We need to have clear communication between us.

I would say that recommendations for improvement are really about consistency in assessments. We all receive a similar assessment process, but obviously it should be matching individual needs. Somebody should be experienced and knowledgeable about deaf needs, and not always just rushing in with technology, so that they can understand better what that person needs, and listen to us. They shouldn’t just get the information from us, and then go back and come out with a completely different report to be approved for what is our support needs.

Equipment is not the best answer for everything. We must stop thinking of technology as the answer to everything; human support is needed. Also, a quicker system is needed so that if people get a job or an interview, they can get that support in place straight away, and then continue the rest of the process if they are successful in employment.

Thank you.

5 August 2014