

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) submission to Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry

Employment support for disabled people: Access to Work

Summary

- Access to Work (AtW) plays a vital role in supporting deaf people in employment. However, we believe that its effectiveness is currently undermined by how the programme is administered, organised and run. In particular, in the past year, we have noticed a severe deterioration in the quality of support that many of our deaf members of staff receive.
- We are also concerned that AtW is not providing deaf young people with effective support as they begin to enter the workforce. This is having a detrimental impact on deaf people's employment prospects.
- When it works well, AtW provides deaf young people with confidence that their success in employment will be determined by their skills and qualifications, and not by the ability of their employer to fund appropriate support or their awareness of what effective support looks like.

Background

1. The National Deaf Children's Society is the leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for every deaf child and young person. Our response is informed by:
 - a) Our work to support deaf young people over the age of 16 as they start to enter the workforce and reach independence
 - b) Our experiences an organisation which is led by a deaf person and which employs a large number of deaf people.

AtW application and assessment process

2. In our experience, the assessment process is often limited and superficial. Deaf members of staff report simply being asked what support they 'wanted', with this forming the basis of the assessment. Our concerns are that:
 - a) Many deaf people, particularly those who are younger, may not understand the full range of potential support options available. For example, one deaf member of staff reported that he only found out about speech-to-text support by chance, and not when he was assessed for Access to Work.
 - b) The focus on 'outputs' results in a lesser focus on individual needs and a more in-depth understanding of their hopes and ambitions in employment.
 - c) There is also a lack of flexibility. For example, deaf members of staff report feeling pressured to commit to having a set number of meetings within a particular timeframe in order for an AtW budget to be set, even though, in many cases, this can be difficult to predict in advance. This is especially the case for deaf young people who are new to employment and have no previous experience to draw on.
3. The National Deaf Children's Society recommends that AtW produce or signpost deaf people to accessible information about options for communication support. We also recommend that the assessment process be reviewed to ensure it considers the individual needs of deaf people in more depth and allows for greater flexibility.

Adequacy of ongoing support

4. Unfortunately, our experience of the ongoing support provided by AtW is negative, for the following reasons.

Lack of deaf awareness

5. AtW officials often demonstrate **poor deaf awareness**. This results in them having a poor understanding of deaf people's needs or the different types of communication support options. This also results in officials behaving in ways which are inappropriate. For example, a number of deaf members of staff report that AtW frequently try to contact them or ask them to make contact by telephone. In one incident, when it was explained that AtW could use a text relay service to communicate with a deaf person, the official asked if the line manager of the deaf person could speak on the deaf person's behalf instead.

Poor customer service

6. The National Deaf Children's Society believes that **AtW customer service is poor**. We find that officials are often unresponsive and unhelpful. There is a perception that AtW officials are more focused on looking for reasons to deny support, than they are on supporting deaf people to succeed in employment.
7. Key issues include:
 - a) A lack of response from officials with emails having to be chased to ensure follow up. One member of staff reported having to wait for two months before his renewal application received a response, beyond the date after which his current package of support had expired. Another member of staff has had a complaint ignored for over a month.
 - b) A lack of a single contact. Members of staff report being passed to different people to deal with different aspects of their claim for no clear reason or explanation, causing further delays.
 - c) A perception that AtW staff often display an attitude which is not helpful, supportive or constructive and which instead is seeking to 'catch staff out'. For example, some members of staff have received 'renewal' letters bluntly stating their support will be cut off if no renewal application is received within just 2 weeks.
8. In one case, a deaf member of staff had a claim for support at a conference rejected on the basis that the conference had occurred. This was despite the fact that the claim had been submitted several months before the conference and that the reason for it being retrospective was because of delays on AtW's part. When the deaf member of staff complained, he was told that the claim had not been sent to the right person and that he 'should have known' who to send it to. The support was only provided after the NDCS member of staff had exhausted the complaints process and it was recognised that there was no reason why the initial AtW advisor could not have dealt with the request for support.
9. The poor customer service wastes time and causes stress among our deaf members of staff. Our staff should be focusing on supporting deaf children and young people. Instead, our staff frequently have to spend hours chasing AtW officials for response and making formal complaints when support is not provided for reasons we regard as unfair. This means that our staff are not always operating at their best.
10. We are conscious that our staff may be regarded as reasonably confident and assertive in dealing with issues like this. We are acutely aware that other less confident individuals and deaf young people who are new to the process, may simply give up at an earlier point and go without the support they need, thereby jeopardising their employment prospects.

11. In light of this, the National Deaf Children's Society recommends that AtW officials undergo customer service training in order to ensure that they are genuinely supportive, flexible, helpful and constructive with deaf young people's needs put first, above internal 'processes' and rules. We also recommend that AtW officials regularly undergo deaf awareness training or that only advisors with expertise in deafness are assigned to support deaf people. We believe that all claimants should be provided with a single nominated contact who can handle all aspects of their claim and be contactable by email.
12. We also find that the complaints process is opaque and unclear. We recommend that AtW publish clearer information about how issues or concerns can be resolved and include this in all correspondence.

Bureaucratic claim process

13. The **claim process is bureaucratic and cumbersome**. We recognise that the claim process needs to be robust to minimise the risk of fraud. However, we believe that the process could be streamlined. The fact the claim form is not online makes the process feel more cumbersome and drawn out. We are concerned that young people in particular may struggle with the process and the bureaucracy involved.
14. The National Deaf Children' Society recommends that AtW move to an online claim process as soon as possible and works with disabled people to streamline the claim process as much as possible.

Lack of transparency

15. There is a **lack of transparency or consistency** in what support AtW will fund. Our staff report receiving differing levels of support, even where their needs and level of hearing loss are similar. This can give the impression that the support some staff receive is dependent on the individual whims of who has assessed them. This can raise concerns over equity and fairness.
16. In the past year, we have noticed the introduction of new restrictions on how AtW can be used. These include:
- a) Requiring that, where interpreters are used for more than 30 hours a week, these are added to the employer payroll
 - b) Only allowing one interpreter for long meetings (as opposed to two, alternating)
 - c) Expecting conference organisers to pay for communication support
 - d) Restricting travel expenses. For example, where communication support workers have to travel, AtW now only seemingly allows travel expenses of 25p a mile to be refunded under Access to Work (even though the corresponding rate for civil servants under HMRC rules appears to be 45p a mile¹)
17. In our experience, some AtW officials have sought to apply these rules retrospectively, even though the deaf member of staff has received no prior communication on this and even though previous claims have been accepted without question. The National Deaf Children's Society regards this as unfair. It can also result in wasting time as claims have to be resubmitted.
18. The National Deaf Children's Society would like to see more transparency from AtW on what support deaf people can reasonably expect to receive and on the decision-making process. New rules should not be introduced without an assessment of impact or consultation with users. They should be communicated clearly to deaf people and not applied retrospectively.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224100/hmt_group_travel_and_subsidence_policy.pdf

AtW effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to:

- 1. Secure a job**
- 2. Stay in employment**
- 3. Develop their careers**

19. We believe that AtW is not as effective as it should be. Part of this is because of the poor customer service, as set out earlier. However, we also feel that many AtW officials are focused on 'processes' and dealing with claims rather than actually providing practical support to claimants and checking that this support is working well.
20. This kind of support is particularly crucial to deaf young people entering the workforce for the first time. However, we have a number of concerns over how deaf young people are supported.
- a) It is not clear if AtW will allow support for deaf young people who need it for job interviews. We had been the impression that this support was allowable but anecdotal evidence suggests that this is no longer automatically the case. A failure to provide this support in a timely and speedy way often presents deaf young people with a significant barrier to entering the workforce. The National Deaf Children's Society would welcome confirmation that this support is available.
 - b) Despite the impression sometimes given, AtW provide limited support for disabled young people wishing to undergo work experience to improve their employability prospects. Whilst support is available for 'supported internships' and other government schemes, these are often restricted to those with significant needs and not necessarily for more 'mainstream' options. Deaf young people doing informal and voluntary work experience are not eligible for support, despite the importance of such opportunities in later accessing paid employment.
21. The end result is that deaf young people are unfairly restricted in how they access the workforce, compared to their peers. This is likely to have a detrimental impact on their long-term employment prospects and their contribution to society.
22. We recommend that AtW make it clear that deaf young people can use AtW for support in interviews. We also recommend that AtW be extended to all work experience placements to support deaf young people in their first steps into the workforce.

Steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding, of the scheme

23. We believe that more needs to be done to promote AtW among deaf young people. Research² commissioned by the National Deaf Children's Society from the University of Edinburgh on the experiences of deaf school leavers found that:
- a) Very few young people used or even knew about Access to Work. Graduates and sign language users were more likely to know about Access to Work, although relatively few used it.
 - b) Those who did not have Access to Work avoided certain tasks or relied on informal support from co-workers and employers.
24. Separately, we are also aware of a deaf young apprentice who had been told that he was not eligible for AtW support. His college stated that they could not provide support to part-time students. As a result, the deaf young person went through his entire apprenticeship without

² <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/postsch-trans-dhh/postsch-trans-dhh>

support. We have now been informed that the deaf young person was in fact eligible for AtW support and had been misinformed.

25. We are also concerned that some deaf young people may need encouragement to use AtW, that they may be reticent about alerting prospective employers to the fact that they would benefit from disability related support in case this creates a 'poor impression' of their abilities.
26. We recommend that the Department for Work and Pensions do more to promote AtW among younger disabled people and to encourage them to make use of this support. We would like to see closer liaison with school career services, apprenticeship schemes and local authority specialist education support services for deaf children to ensure that deaf young people are aware of this scheme. We would also like to see AtW be more explicitly involved in transition planning before deaf young people leave education. For example, this might include AtW being explicitly considered during reviews of deaf young people's Education, Health and Care Plan.
27. We acknowledge the wider efforts made by the Department to improve its marketing of AtW. However, this seems to have been done without an assessment of the impact it would have on existing users. We are concerned that the 'pie is now being split too thinly' and believe that additional funding is needed to ensure that all those who need support, receive it. Given that AtW helps ensure deaf people stay in employment, we believe that it would be a false economy to reduce support to existing users or try to restrict any eligibility criteria.

Summary of recommendations

The application / assessment process

- AtW produce or signpost deaf people to accessible information about options for communication support.
- The assessment process be reviewed to ensure it considers the individual needs of deaf people in more depth and allows for greater flexibility.

Adequacy of ongoing support

- AtW officials undergo customer service training in order to ensure that they are genuinely supportive, flexible, helpful and constructive with deaf young people's needs put first, above internal 'processes' and rules.
- AtW officials regularly undergo deaf awareness training or that only advisors with expertise in deafness are assigned to support deaf people.
- All claimants be provided with a single nominated contact who can handle all aspects of their claim and be contactable by email.
- AtW publish clearer information about how issues or concerns can be resolved and include this in all correspondence.
- AtW move to an online claim process as soon as possible and work with disabled people to streamline the claim process as much as possible.
- More transparency from AtW on what support deaf people can reasonably expect to receive and on the decision-making process. New rules should not be introduced without an assessment of impact or consultation with users. They should be communicated clearly to deaf people and not applied retrospectively.

Helping disabled people to secure a job, stay in employment and develop their careers

- AtW make it clear that deaf young people can use AtW for support in interviews.
- AtW be extended to all work experience placements to support deaf young people in their first steps into the workforce.

Steps taken to extend AtW, including marketing and funding

- The Department for Work and Pensions do more to promote AtW among younger disabled people, encouraging them to make use of AtW, with closer liaison with school career services, apprenticeship schemes and local authority specialist education support services for deaf children to ensure that deaf young people are aware of this scheme.
- AtW to be more involved in transition planning before deaf young people leave education. For example, this might include AtW being explicitly considered when in reviews of deaf young people's Education, Health and Care Plan.
- Additional funding is needed to ensure that all those who need support through AtW receive it.