**Evidence submission: Work & Pensions Committee (Assistive Technology)**

**18th January 2018**

**About DeafATW**

DeafATW is run by Darren Townsend-Handscomb, a Registered Qualified British Sign Language Interpreter, and Morgan Phillips, a professional complaints investigator, on a wholly voluntary basis. DeafATW supports Deaf and deafblind people who are experiencing difficulties or barriers with ATW, and supports those wanting to make complaints about their experience with ATW.

Our response focuses on the ‘assistive technology’ relevant to Deaf BSL users with ATW, i.e. remote interpreting, and the lack of assistive technology to mitigate the impact of capped awards.

We are happy for this response to be made public.

*What role can assistive technology play in removing barriers to work and helping disabled people stay in work?*

**1.   What is remote interpreting and when is it suitable?**

1.1 Remote interpreting is a term that is used with more than one meaning:

i)  Remote Interpreting Services (RIS). These are businesses that supply Video Relay Interpreting[[1]](#footnote-1), Video Relay Service[[2]](#footnote-2) and remote translation services provided by interpreters who are employed by the service itself. Services are usually billed per minute, similar to telephone bills.

ii)  Remote interpreting is used to describe where Deaf professionals use their own regular interpreters via a video link over the internet. These bookings are paid for at the standard hourly rate for face-to-face interpreting, which can save on paying an interpreter’s travel costs.

1.2 Remote Interpreting Services are useful in many situations such as participating in a short meeting, or making a telephone call to a hearing person.

1.3 However, for Deaf people in senior, specialist or professional roles Remote Interpreting Services have limited usefulness. This is because the interpreters employed by the service would be insufficiently familiar with the Deaf professional and the specific language associated with their role to be able to provide an effective interpreting service.

1.4 As an analogy, remote PA services very well suit some business people because having a different PA every time a customer contacts them is no barrier to their function.  However, for other kinds of professionals such as MPs, there is a significant need to have a PA who knows a great deal about the professional’s work, who is able to work very effectively in partnership together.

1.5 Online interpreting has limitations when compared with face-to-face interpreting. It is less effective at communicating the subtle non-verbal aspects of communication such as posture and subtle facial expressions, and contextual clues. For this reason it is not suitable in all circumstances.

1.6 Remote interpreting with a familiar interpreter is useful when there is an existing relationship between the interpreter and the Deaf professional, and the assignment takes place in another national or international location. For instance, a single business meeting in Hong Kong where it would not be cost effective to pay for an interpreter to travel such a distance to work.

**2. Remote interpreting and the ATW cap**

2.1 ATW have suggested that remote interpreting is one solution available for Deaf people whose awards are capped at a sum lower than the market cost of their work access needs.

2.2 DeafATW believes that there are some flaws in this view, based on fundamental failures to understand both the different kinds of remote interpreting, and the limitations of using online interpreting.

2.3 The vast majority, if not all, of the Deaf people whose ATW awards are or will be capped occupy senior, specialist or professional roles. They are BSL users who require a BSL interpreter to be alongside them for all or almost all of the working day to assist with meetings, conversations with colleagues, telephone calls, and translating between BSL and written English. These needs could not be met by an online Remote Interpreting Service, which cost significantly more than face-to-face interpreting (RIS is approximately £2.50 per minute/face-to-face interpreting is approximately £40 per hour).

2.4 Whilst some of these functions could be met by using one of their own regular interpreters remotely, this would only sometimes save on the cost of the interpreter travelling to the workplace, a cost that is in many cases already covered by the interpreter’s hourly rate.

2.5 In reality, using interpreting remotely is unlikely to be an effective option for those that rely on full time BSL support, and as a result, will have limited cost-saving potential for those affected by the ATW cap. It may, however, have potential benefits for ATW customers whose need for access to communication support is more sporadic.

2.6 At present, ATW users are not able to trial a range of services before a support package is agreed, and are not able to make changes to the support that they use on a trial basis during an existing award. ATW may claim that this is so, but the lived experience of those using ATW show otherwise. ATW needs to offer more flexibility to customers to trial new technological solutions that become available, without risking their existing support package.

**3. Concerns about the use of the phrase ‘*new technology*’ in relation to capped ATW users**

3.1 The term ‘new technology’ used by ATW in relation to the options available to capped Deaf ATW users belies the fact that there are no technological solutions that will enable Deaf ATW users to communicate in the workplace five days a week within the capped budget.

3.2 During the evidence hearing where the Minister responded to the committee’s question about the impact of the cap on Deaf BSL users, the Minister said:

"[users]... *are being helped to look at new technologies and different approaches to bring costs down* ..."

However ATW is not able to describe what those technologies are, other than remote interpreting, and cannot show that they enable Deaf people to have everyday communication in the workplace within a capped budget.

**4. Recommendation**

4.1 DeafATW suggests that the committee invite the Minister back to answer questions about the precise nature of the ‘new technology’ available to capped Deaf ATW users and how this will enable them to function effectively in the workplace within a capped budget.

1. Video Relay Service (VRS) - This is when two (or more) parties are in two separate locations connected remotely via a sign language interpreter in a third location; i.e. an interpreted phone call. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) - This is when all participants are in the same location and the sign language interpreter joins remotely; i.e. an interpreted face-to-face meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)