
Able, ready to work and deaf

The real stories of deaf people across
Wales who despite everything can't find
work

ACTION ON
HEARING
LOSS
Cymru

Dr Tammy Boyce
for
Action on Hearing Loss Cymru
March 2015

Foreword

Action on Hearing Loss Cymru is the charity which helps people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose.

We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

We regularly hear anecdotal evidence of the grim outlook for deaf or hard of hearing people who are looking for work, or hoping to stay in their jobs. Yet we know that many deaf or hard of hearing people have valuable skills and are an asset to the Welsh economy and society.

This is why we commissioned Dr Tammy Boyce to carry out this research project; to get a clearer picture of some of the major obstacles faced by deaf people in work.

The findings will sit uncomfortably with people who believe in a fair and equal society.

The plain facts are that people who are deaf and hard of hearing are being excluded from the workplace and denied their right to work.

This report raises difficult questions about employer attitudes, how UK Government support packages work and how technology and communication support can be better used.

We intend this report to be used as evidence of the barriers that need to be overcome. It also contains suggestions from deaf and hard of hearing people of simple solutions that could be put in place. We are grateful to Dr Boyce, the people who took part in interviews and focus groups and the professionals who worked with us to gather this research. We are particularly grateful to Cardiff Deaf Centre for their support.

This report points to an urgent need for action from a range of agencies including UK and Welsh Governments, Department of Work and Pensions, Job Centres and employment agencies.

Action on Hearing Loss Cymru is looking forward to working with these partners to transform this situation – addressing this serious inequality and ensuring that people who are deaf and have hearing loss have the same access and opportunities to work as everyone else.

We hope we can count on your support.

Richard Williams

Director, Action on Hearing Loss Cymru

Executive Summary

Background

This report provides evidence of the issues facing people who are deaf or have hearing loss when in work or looking for work. It explores their experiences and the mechanisms to help them find and stay in employment.

People who are deaf/have hearing loss **experience discrimination and barriers at work and further difficulties when accessing support to help them find work**. Numerous reports, including those published by the government, have identified problems and suggested more proactive policies, programmes and legislation.

In **Wales**, the issues of disability and unemployment are significant issues. Wales has **more disabled people per capita** and more disabled people in Wales are unemployed compared to other parts of the UK. In Wales an estimated **4% of the working-age population wear hearing aids or are profoundly deaf/have severe hearing loss**.

Methods

This research uses **qualitative methods**. **Interviews and a focus group** explore the type of support received in and out of work, gaps in service provision and overall experiences at work and during the search for work. The sample is based on 28 participants, 15 interviews and a focus group with 13 participants. All focus group participants and 13 of the 15 interviewees are deaf or have hearing loss. Two managers of Specialist Employment Agencies, organisations which support disabled people to find work, were also interviewed. The interviews and focus group were analysed using an interpretive approach derived from the research questions and issues emerging from initial research.

Findings

People who are deaf/have hearing loss want a reasonable and realistic attitude towards their requests for support, they do not expect special treatment or highly expensive equipment: they **want support and advice and want it quickly so they can carry out the jobs they are paid to do or to apply for jobs**. Despite years of support from government programmes and equality legislation, **people who are deaf/ have hearing loss continue to experience difficulties at work and in the search for work**.

People who are deaf/have hearing loss want **direct, dependable and consistent support and information**. Participants wanted **direct support from an organisation with knowledge of the needs of people who are deaf/have hearing loss to find and stay in work and to train employers** to reduce their hesitations/worries about employing people who are deaf/have hearing loss.

People who are deaf/have hearing loss who are **in work experience different problems to those who are out of work** – solutions should reflect their differing needs.

Access to Work is the main government grant scheme supporting people whose health or disability affects their work. **More than a third of Access to Work's budget is spent on people with hearing loss.** When Access to Work provides good and timely support, it is **invaluable**; it means people can work. Numerous reports (from the Work and Pensions Committee, Action on Hearing Loss and related charities) have repeatedly identified the **need to improve support and awareness about sensory loss at Job Centres and Access to Work.** As a result of AtW's budget cuts and poor support, it is increasingly difficult for people who are deaf/have hearing loss to stay in work and look for work.

This research found numerous unnecessary barriers making it unnecessarily difficult for people who are deaf/have hearing loss to access support to stay in work or look for work. Many of the problems participants encountered are straightforward and could be easily addressed, such as the lack of accessible forms of communication. **Technology and advice is available yet people who are deaf/have hearing loss are left for weeks and sometimes months without a solution.** AtW assessors continue to have poor knowledge and understanding of sensory loss. In addition, the cuts to AtW's budget have made it increasing difficult and stressful for people who are deaf/have hearing loss to stay in work.

Specialist employment agencies and specialist disability employment advisors in Job Centres also provide substantial support to help people who are deaf/have hearing loss who are **unemployed**, offering face to face advice and support. However, unemployed participants faced numerous problems when accessing support from Job Centres, Access to Work and Specialist Employment Agencies. Participants consistently stated **Job Centre staff did not provide appropriate support specific to their hearing loss.** Numerous people gave examples of almost **total ignorance of the needs of people who are deaf/ have hearing loss amongst Job Centre staff.**

Many people who are deaf/have hearing loss are not aware of the support Specialist Employment Agencies provide to help find work. Only five of the 26 participants used a Specialist Employment Agency in their working careers. In the absence of this support, **many participants turned to charities, primarily Action on Hearing Loss, for information and support.**

Many participants still encounter employers who believe **hiring a person who is deaf/has hearing loss is overwhelming** and shared numerous experiences of employers reluctant to hire staff that are deaf or have hearing loss and one Specialist Employment Agency stated **employers will not 'take on' people who are deaf / have hearing loss because they do not know how to support them.** Many employers have poor deaf awareness, participants shared experiences of poor employment practice from organisations that should be more deaf aware, including government departments, the police and social care.

Employers have an **excessive preoccupation with health and safety concerns** and believe people who are deaf/have hearing loss are a **health and safety burden.**

The most glaring evidence that government programmes are not working well to support people who are deaf/have hearing loss is that they are **still regarded as expensive employees.**

Poor employment practice limits the type of jobs people who are deaf/have hearing loss apply for; **almost every participant told stories of missed promotions and jobs not applied for.**

There are **opportunities and actions the Welsh Government can take** to decrease the barriers in work and out of work that continue to exist for people who are deaf/have hearing loss and to provide a **fair society to all of its citizens, including those who are deaf/have hearing loss.**

Contents

Introduction	2
Method	3
Findings	5
Positive news	5
In Work: Continuing poor employment practice	5
Straightforward problems unaddressed.....	8
Preoccupation with health and safety.....	9
Overdependence on disability charities/organisations?	10
In work: Government support still performing poorly	11
The expense of employing people who are deaf/have hearing loss.....	11
Access to Work	12
No Flexibility.....	13
Unaware of needs and equipment.....	14
Deliberately reducing access?	15
Equality Legislation is not serving its purpose	17
Out of work: The search for support.....	17
Job Centres and SEA	18
AtW & those looking for work.....	20
The search for supportive employers.....	21
What good support looks like	22
Conclusions and Recommendations	22
Opportunities to lead in Wales	22
Address an avoidable & persistent problem.....	23
Better support for those out of work	23
Change AtW before it gets worse.....	24
Better more direct forms of support for those in and out of work.....	24
Moving forward.....	25

Introduction

This report provides evidence of the issues facing people who are deaf or have hearing loss when in work or looking for work. It explores their experiences and the mechanisms to help them find and stay in employment.

Disability and employment

Disability is a significant issue in Wales. One in five people in Wales is disabled.¹ Across the UK disabled people are more likely to be unemployed than those without disabilities:

- 77% of non-disabled people are in work compared to
- 47% of disabled people who are in work.²

However, this statistic masks the more severe issue of disability and unemployment in Wales: **more disabled people in Wales are unemployed compared to other parts of the UK.** Whereas 47% of the UK disabled population are in work, this figure drops to 38% in Wales.³

Being in work is important for everyone - in the last five years government programmes have emphasised the link between being in work and improved physical and mental health.⁴ A repercussion of lower employment rates is that people with disabilities have lower life satisfaction than non-disabled people. 38% of people with disabilities stated they had 'lower life satisfaction', almost twice the proportion of non-disabled people.⁵

Hearing Loss and un/employment

A deaf or hard of hearing person is **four times more likely to be unemployed** than a hearing person.⁶ Deafness results in £4 billion in lost earnings.⁷ In the USA multiple studies found the average wage for those with hearing loss is 25% less compared to those without.⁸

People who are deaf or have severe hearing loss face a number of additional barriers when in employment including; early retirement, limited opportunities for career progression, increased levels of sick-leave, loss of employment, and difficulties in regaining employment.⁹

Surveys of Action on Hearing Loss members in the UK repeatedly find poor employment practice at work is pervasive and that their members face numerous barriers to employment:

- 7/10 respondents said their hearing loss at times prevented them from fulfilling their potential at work;
- A similar proportion stated they felt isolated at work because of their hearing loss.¹⁰

For those not in work, discriminatory attitudes from employers is seen by deaf and hard of hearing people as the **main barrier to getting a job.**¹¹

The ageing workforce - hearing loss at work is increasing

The ageing workforce and rising retirement age means **more people will experience the onset of hearing loss in the workplace and when seeking work.** Since 2001 employment rates for those aged 50 and over has increased. Between 2001 and 2013 the employment

rate for 50-64 year-olds increased from 62 percent to 67 percent. The employment rate for people aged 65 and over doubled between 2001 and 2013, increasing from 5 to 10 percent.¹² The number of adults with hearing loss will continue to increase and by 2030 it is estimated that adult onset hearing loss will be in the **top 10 disease burdens in the UK**.¹³

The picture in Wales

In Wales an estimated **4% of the working-age population, 84,000 people, wear hearing aids or are profoundly deaf/have severe hearing loss**.¹⁴

The reasons why people who are deaf/have hearing loss have difficulties finding work is multifaceted. Previous research in Wales found:

- 59% of working age people believe their deafness makes it harder to find a job;
- Nearly half (45%) identified a lack of communication support as the main barrier to finding a job;
- Approximately two-fifths identified a lack of suitable jobs and the attitude of employers as a barrier to work.¹⁵

Government support

People who are deaf or have hearing loss can face systemic and institutional discrimination, suggesting that they cannot solve these problems themselves and require specialist support to help them find work.¹⁶ Access to Work (AtW) is the main government grant scheme supporting people whose health or disability affects their work.

More than a third of the AtW budget is spent on people with hearing loss, costing more than £31 million.¹⁷ Despite this level of financial support, numerous on-going problems with AtW have been identified. For example, despite the highest number of clients having hearing loss, AtW changed their first point of contact from email to telephone, instantly making it more difficult for the largest group of claimants to contact them.

Repeated research shows both employers and people who are deaf/with hearing loss are not aware of the support offered by AtW. In the most recent Action on Hearing Loss research almost half of respondents, 46%, were unaware of AtW.¹⁸

Both employers and potential employees find specialist employment programmes useful, for example, **Work Choice was found to reduce the 'risk' employers felt** of employing an individual with disabilities, health problems and impairments.¹⁹ However awareness of these programmes is low. Between 2011-2014 an estimated 100 people with a

Access to Work is a grant scheme available to employers and sole traders in the UK. AtW provides employees and employers with advice and support with extra costs which may arise because of employees' needs at work. Funding is used to purchase goods and services such as BSL translation. Generally employers are asked to pay towards the cost of the adjustments.

Work Choice is a voluntary programme to help people who are disabled to find and stay in work. The support offered is primarily training and development skills. Work Choice provides specialist employment support unmet by programmes like AtW.

hearing impairment found a job through Work Choice in Wales.²⁰ Work Choice has also attracted strong criticism for not helping the people it was created to help. In the past **Work Choice has not collected evidence on the number of disabled people they supported.** Only 42%, less than half of its referrals, are Disability Living Allowance claimants (more referrals came from those claiming Job Seekers' Allowance).²¹

Work Choice is delivered by Remploy, a Specialist Employment Agency. Numerous Specialist Employment Agencies (SEA), such as Remploy, provide substantial support to help people with disabilities find work, offering face to face advice and support. SEA have a key role in finding work, alongside specialist disability employment advisors (DEAs) in Job Centres. However, there is little research on the effectiveness of either of SEAs or DEAs in terms of providing support to people who are deaf or have hearing loss. Recent evidence found Remploy has struggled to find work for people with disabilities since its factories were forced to close in 2012.²² In 2014 the government was criticised by the Work and Pensions Select Committee for a shortage of DEAs.²³

Moving forward

What we know:

- Number of people who are deaf/have hearing loss is increasing.
- In Wales the number of disabled people out of work is higher compared to non-disabled population and compared to disabled people in other parts of the UK.
- Government programmes to help people who are deaf/have hearing loss to find suitable and 'good work' are under-performing.

This report explores the experience of people in Wales who are deaf / have hearing loss and their efforts to find work and stay in work and more specifically, examine the experiences of AtW and SEA in Wales.

Method

This research uses qualitative methods to explore the experiences of employment for people who are deaf / have hearing loss. Interviews and a focus group are used to explore the type of support they receive in and out of work, gaps in service provision and their overall experiences at work and in the search for work.

The sample

The research is a purposive sample of 15 interviews and one focus group of 13 participants. All focus group participants and 13 of the 15 interviewees are deaf / have hearing loss. Two managers of SEA, organisations which support disabled people to find work, were also interviewed. A minimum of six interviews were planned but more participants were included to gather a wider range of experiences. Sampling ended when saturation was achieved. Saturation occurs when researchers reflect on their findings and believe their research is rigorous and by analysing whether key information has been covered.²⁴ When no or few new points are emerging from new interviews, then saturation has been reached.²⁵

Participants were recruited from Action on Hearing Loss, Cardiff Deaf Centre and using snowballing techniques. Interviews were conducted by telephone or face-to-face and were held between December 2014 and January 2015. Interviews lasted between 7 and 120 minutes. An experienced interpreter attended the focus group.

The breakdown of participants is as follows (the SEA interviewees do not appear in following tables):

26 participants (13 Interviews + 1 Focus Group with 13 Participants)

Gender	
Women	11
Men	15
Hearing	
Deaf	17
Hearing Loss	8
Deafblind	1
Employment	
Employed	15
Unemployed	7
Not looking for work ²⁶	4

Professions/Type work	
Charity/ Arts	7
Construction/Factory	5
Clerical/Admin	2
Teaching	1
Age	
18-30	3
31-49	14
50-64	8
65+	1

23 participants required communication support of some type. The three who required no communication support were all recently diagnosed with milder forms of hearing loss.

Questions

Semi-structured interview guides were employed during the focus group and individual interviews. Guides were developed from a literature review and conversations with Action on Hearing Loss. The interview guides were used to ensure all relevant topics were covered in each interview and in the focus group. The interviewer discussed themes from the interview guide if participants did not freely talk about them.

Data Analysis

All interviews and the focus group were recorded (by agreement) and then transcribed for analysis. The interviews and focus group were coded and thematically analysed using an interpretive approach derived from the research questions and issues emerging from initial research.²⁷

'Participants' refers to the 13 focus group participants and 13 interviewees who are deaf/have hearing loss. Quotes from participants are identified by interview or focus group number.

Findings

Positive news

The qualitative research identified numerous problems facing people who are deaf/have hearing loss. But there was one factor that was not a problem: they **want to work** and work in **good jobs until retirement**.

Of the seven unemployed people interviewed, all were **keen, if not desperate, to work**.

‘I don’t want to be sat at home being lazy, I don’t want sympathy either, thinking poor thing, he’s deaf....it’s really frustrating.’ (FG1)

‘Not everybody wants to stay on the dole. We really do want to get off the dole.’ (Int11)

Like those without a disability, work provides a sense of identity, a feeling that one is making a valuable contribution to society and their local community.

‘Oh my goodness (work)’s given me so much, it really has. It’s given me a sense of identity, which has been really important. Pride in myself. The knowledge that I have something to give to people...which I didn’t have before. It’s meant I can be independent, buy my own house...everything I need, pay a pension, pay my taxes, live my life, have independence.’ (Int14)

If people who are deaf/have hearing loss want to work and stay in work – why do they have higher unemployment rates? If the problem does not lie with them, where does it lie?

The interviews and focus group revealed the key issue faced by employees in work was poor support from employers, problems with AtW and the additional stresses they face because of their deafness/hearing loss.

In Work: Continuing poor employment practice

‘I don’t feel optimistic for the future, every time I get a job now I worry it’s my last one... (Will) **anyone see what I can do rather than what I can’t do?**’ (Int9)

Despite years of support from government programmes and equality legislation, people who are deaf/ have hearing loss continue to experience difficulties at work – **ranging from ignorance to discrimination**.

The UK Government’s ‘Disability Confident’ campaign, launched in July 2013, aimed to increase understanding amongst employers and widen opportunities for disabled people. Close to two years later, it’s clear this programme has had little impact in Wales: employers’ attitudes are not shifting. Despite good legislation existing for more than twenty years, some **employers are still reluctant to hire staff that are deaf or have hearing loss**. One

Specialist Employment Agency openly admitted that **because employers do not know how to support people who are deaf/have hearing loss then;**

'They're likely not take those people on.' (Int3)

Participants suggested employers were not deaf aware and therefore reluctant to hire them. Many participants shared experiences of their **employers regarding** people who are deaf/with hearing loss as **a burden**.

'I challenged senior managers on how they saw me, as an experienced manager or as a deaf person who constantly challenged for better services and attitudes. It was never answered...I've experienced discrimination ...a lot of expectations of low ability and discrimination are still present.' (Int8)

'I know that in some organisations there is a **culture of anxiety** - if you have an impairment of some kind.' (Int14)

These findings reflect previous Action on Hearing Loss research which found the barriers people who are deaf/have hearing loss face are **imposed by advisers' and employers'** lack of deaf awareness.²⁸

The culture of an organisation has the most significant impact on the experience that someone who is deaf/has hearing loss has in the workplace.²⁹ Some people did have good experiences at work. Four of the 26 participants stated their current employers were supportive (a small number of other participants stated previous employers were supportive but were currently unemployed or had an unsupportive employer).

'My organisation always very, very supportive and they'd always do anything that, you know, to support me in whatever I need. Absolutely no problem with that. Some problems perhaps with other organisations I'm interacting with.' (Int14)

By far, participants shared more struggles than successes. When most employed participants told their employer about their hearing loss they were frustrated with their reactions.

'At one point I thought I was going to lose my job because (employers) wanted me to be assessed by Occupational Health to see if I could still do my job... this doesn't feel very much like helping me... they're trying to find ways of getting rid of me.' (Int5)

Potential deaf / hard of hearing employees are so worried about negative experiences that one participant even **worried a local audiology department might not hire him because of his hearing loss**.

'I found out about audiology, I thought I had a better chance because people would be deaf, hopefully the people they employ would have a better understanding.'³⁰

In a striking example of how widespread ignorance and discrimination is for people who are deaf/have hearing loss, **participants working in organisations that should be supportive – government departments, the police, charities – provided numerous examples of poor employment practice.** For one participant, a phone that worked in one government department was useless when they were transferred but their new employers, *the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)*, were reluctant to provide an alternative.

‘I try to explain to managers how much amplification I would require on the phone to understand what people are saying...my own phone that I brought with me is still in the bottom of the drawer waiting to connect, (DWP) will not connect it because they say it is not compatible with their system...The way I see it they can’t be bothered to be honest...I had to fight tooth and nail to get them to do even the basic things to be honest’.³¹

They went on to deny him AtW funding because he worked at the DWP. The participant said their current post at the **DWP was the worst job in terms of support for their hearing loss that they had in their 25 year civil service career.**

‘Since I now work for DWP I’m not longer entitled to Access to Work funding... because I work for the Department, that’s their excuse... because they’re part of DWP and I work for DWP, Access to Work funding was withdrawn.’

The DWP confirmed it has its own policies and procedures to support its disabled employees and therefore can choose not adhere to AtW. This practice appears not to be working in some situations. Action on Hearing Loss Cymru confirmed they were aware of additional cases of DWP employees in Wales not receiving adequate support. **That the DWP, the organisation that creates and implements policy to support disabled people is not supporting its own disabled staff is extremely worrying.**

Another participant who lost their hearing as a result of **working in the police stated they felt they dealt with his hearing loss ‘not very well’.**

‘I just think there’s **a lack of understanding**... there was no offer of help... all the assistance I got (was from) a disabled police officer’s forum on the internet.’³²

Other examples of organisations where people might expect a higher level of deaf awareness, also provided real problems for participants. One person **working in Social Care described the lack of support** they received from numerous managers over their career.

‘I would say employers over the years haven’t really understood the issues, have they bent over backwards to fit me in? Definitely not. Have they created a good working environment for me? No. Have they promoted my development? No. A lot of these were down to myself, taking a more proactive approach.’³³

Participants recounted numerous examples of poor employment practice, including slower career advancement and early retirement.³⁴

'It's like I hit a lower glass ceiling...because I'm deaf and I can't get past it. And that has happened to me a number times...I try to do one career and that doesn't quite work out so I...try another route and then I come across the same. And it's attitude ... they think she can't do this and she can't do that so she's not going to be able to manage people and she's not going to be able to...be persuasive and influence and so on.'(Int13)

That little has improved for people who are deaf / have hearing loss was evident in the comments by one participant who provided deaf awareness training to employers, stating the **problems are all well-known**.

'I go out to a lot of companies and organisations and I'm sick of the same thing happening over and over again. They say it's so difficult to communicate with deaf people but it's not, it's actually just common sense. A lot of people out there are quite ignorant, **if a person's deaf, they just panic**. I feel like I'm just repeating the same old thing, all the time.'³⁵

In light of the problems identified, participants were asked if they believed their working careers were **limited by their deafness/hearing loss**. Only two of the 26 participants³⁶ said their deafness/hearing loss did **not** limit the type of jobs they held or applied for. Instead, **almost every participant told stories of missed promotions and jobs not applied for**.

'If I didn't have hearing loss then I'd probably be in a completely different scenario, I could be in the engineering sector, I could be in the computing sector.' (Int2)

One participant who used mainstream employment agencies to find work and described how companies only saw his disability and not his skills.

'Companies loved my CV and experience but as soon as they found out about my hearing loss they didn't want to know...they didn't want to be seen with an inferior product I suppose.' (Int9)

Because so many employers and their structures failed to provide adequate support, for many participants, success at work depended on the support from individual colleagues.

'There is still a **reliance on certain individuals who are sympathetic** to our personal needs than the majority.' (Int8)

Straightforward problems unaddressed

Almost every participant experienced fairly simple technology problems that, in 2015, should not happen. Numerous participants discussed difficulties using telephones and attending meetings yet **technology and advice for these two problems are readily available and in many cases, easily solved**.³⁷

One SEA agreed that **some employers they worked with would not provide 'reasonable adjustments' either in work or during the interview process**. They outlined their experience of requesting support for a deaf client at the interview stage.

‘(We) asked for the questions to be passed in writing so that they could read the questions. They wouldn’t give it to them, to me that would have been a reasonable adjustment under those circumstances and the employer refused point blank, not in advance but on the day (read) the questions.’ (Int1)

The lack of support, provision of reasonable adjustments and at times, almost total absence of flexibility was a problem for all participants (in manual or skilled jobs), leaving many feeling that despite their best efforts, they **could not do their job to the best of their ability**.

‘**Although I needed communication support, I never, ever, I never got it...** it wasn’t my choice. I wanted support, I needed support and my employer said, you know, let us know what you need and we’ll do it. But because of the nature of the job it seemed too hard to work out how to organise it and I wasn’t in a position where I could say to my employer, no you can’t have a last minute meeting with me because I need to book communication support....It was hard work. It could have been made a lot easier if I’d had support. (Int13)

For those in work, many felt as though whether or not they stayed in work was **beyond their control** and up to those who supported them, regardless of their actual work performance.

‘I’ve never thought of not working. It’s now whether or not I can, if people can do things for me, whether or not I keep working...There’s obviously some things that you can do and there’s equipment that’s available that would help you do your job but it’s not happening...it’s like you’re always waiting to see what’s happening like your always relying on other people to do things.’(Int5)

One deaf participant working in an organisation that has policies stating interpreters should be used, still struggled to book interpreters. Having policies did not translate into actions.

‘I’ve told them that (an interpreter) should be booked, I’ve told them 8-10 times. If there’s a meeting you need to book an interpreter... (there was) deaf awareness training for all the staff, it was beneficial but one of the managers didn’t attend.’ (FG12)

Preoccupation with health and safety

Numerous participants stated employers regard people who are deaf/have hearing loss as a **health and safety burden**. For participants who had worked for over 10-15 years, they stated current health and safety regulations were limiting their work in stark contrast to years ago.

‘I qualified years ago as a baker, you couldn’t do that job now because I can’t hear the alarms going off, timers on the ovens.’³⁸

SEA stated it was common for **employers to be excessively ‘concerned’ with health and safety issues when hiring people who are deaf/have hearing loss**. They provided an example of the work they convinced a reluctant employer to hire an employee.

‘The pager was purchased through Access to Work funding, so the employer didn’t have to meet any costs and that’s a nice example of reasonable adjustment in work for somebody. Simply wearing a badge and the pager that links to the fire alarm to cover the health and safety.’ (Int1)

People who are deaf/have hearing loss face **particular problems in manual jobs** and in the construction industry with regards to health and safety. The Construction Skills Certificate Scheme (CSCS) provides ‘proof that individuals working on construction sites have the required training and qualifications for the type of work they carry out’.³⁹ Two participants passed the CSCS test and held a certificate yet **employers still did not accept they would be safe on a building site.**

‘I show (CSCS card) to people and they say, no, it’s too risky. I’ve got the card to prove that I’ve passed health and safety assessments but they still won’t offer me the job even though I’ve got this evidence to show that I’m allowed to do that job.’(FG12)

All four participants who worked in construction shared difficulties of employers not trusting they could do their jobs because of their hearing loss and that they ‘couldn’t find jobs’ anywhere’ (Int11, FG2).

One of the SEA **agreed it was difficult to place people who are deaf/have hearing loss in construction.**

‘They have to be able to see and understand the direct benefits which we do demonstrate to them, so it is harder but it is achievable.’ (Int3)

Overdependence on disability charities/organisations?

If employers remain so poorly informed about deaf awareness, what role do disability charities/organisations have? **Disability organisations should be leading examples of employing people with disabilities** and many organisations such as Action on Hearing Loss provide good quality employment opportunities for people who are deaf/have hearing loss. However, disability organisations/charities **should not be the only organisations employing people with disabilities.** Participants spoke of working in disability organisations because of poor opportunities elsewhere.

‘My journey has gone from management to the police to the voluntary sector, the more disabled I’ve become the more I’ve moved towards the sector I’m in now. It feels like this is the only sector that might give me a bit of a chance.’⁴⁰

One deaf participant, a former civil servant, moved into the disabled charity field reluctantly;

‘You don’t want to but you have to.’ (FG3)

One of the key reasons participants moved to disability organisations was that they could be guaranteed that these organisations would know about AtW and its processes and would be more willing to adapt and make reasonable adjustments.

‘(Disability organisation) were very on board with understanding Access to Work and making sure that I could book communication support.’ (Int13)

In work: Government support still performing poorly

Despite numerous government programmes created to remove the effect of disability from the job market, participants provided countless examples of their frustrations with these programmes, stating it was **difficult to access the correct type of support** and sometimes **difficult to access any support**. The most glaring evidence that government programmes are not working well to support people who are deaf/have hearing loss is that they are **still regarded as expensive employees**.

Types of communication support typically funded by AtW:

- British Sign Language interpreter
- Speech-to-text reporter (palantypist)
- Lip speaker or note taker

The expense of employing people who are deaf/have hearing loss

One SEA interviewee stated they repeatedly informed the **Welsh Government that employers are not hiring people who are deaf/have hearing loss because they ‘can’t afford to pay for it’**. (Int3)

‘In order to support people through apprenticeships or traineeships or whatever, there needs to be an element of support funding provided which is specialised. I’ve been speaking to providers who deliver those programmes and all they say to me is they **can’t afford to contract with you to provide that specialist employability support because there isn’t enough money in the system to do it.**’ (Int3)

The other SEA interviewed agreed that the costs associated with hiring a person who is deaf/has hearing loss are so high and in addition, there was **‘no incentive’ to find them employment for people who are deaf/have hearing loss** as they were not properly funded to help find them work.

‘(We) might break even, left with £50-100 to cover costs not associated with translator – means (we) might lose money if support people who are deaf.’ (Int1)

This SEA went on to state it was more difficult to recruit people who are deaf compared to those with hearing loss, thus further restricting the job market for people who are deaf.

(It’s) much easier and cheaper (to employ someone with hearing loss) and not so frightening for an employer. **For an employer to take somebody on who is profoundly deaf is a huge thing.**’ (Int1)

Participants were well aware of the additional costs employers would face if they were hired.

‘Deaf people are expensive, we’re expensive to employ.’ (Int14)

Government programmes such as AtW were created to remove the barrier of costs, to reduce the likelihood that employers would regard people who are deaf/have hearing loss as ‘expensive’ – this evidence suggests AtW is not fulfilling its role.

Access to Work

The aim of AtW is to provide support for those with disabilities, including profound hearing loss, to find and stay in work.⁴¹ When **AtW provides good and timely support, it is invaluable**; it means people can work *and* stay in work. One participant with hearing loss who received over ten years of support from AtW said it was **the reason she was able to stay in work**.

‘I couldn’t have done it without Access to Work.’ (Int14)

Another participant described how six hours of communication support helped her back to work after six months of sick leave and vastly improved her working life.

‘Now I’ve got a communicator there to support me. Before I didn’t have anyone supporting me, now I enjoy working... it was just marvellous, suddenly I was able to understand what was going on at work.’⁴²

However this story does not end well as after six months her AtW funded hours were suddenly cut.

‘But (AtW) have cut (communication support) hours...it made such a difference, I was so much happier, I was able to do an assessment for the first time, previously it was always given to someone else cause they felt I couldn’t do it because I was deaf...I **was gutted**.’

It was more common for participants to relate stories about their frustrations with AtW rather than positive stories. Two participants said AtW was ‘getting worse’ (FG8, Int14) and another said ‘it’s a bit of a mess’. (Int1)

One of the main problems participants outlined is **AtW assessors’ poor knowledge and understanding of sensory loss**. Most participants in the focus group and many interviewees felt **pressure to prove** to AtW assessors (and Job Centres) that they are deaf/have hearing loss. One deaf participant, deaf for his entire life, was told to prove his deafness at the Job Centre. Assessors commonly **confused the ability of people to speak with being able to hear**.

‘**They didn’t believe I was deaf**, I said yes I am deaf, I need an interpreter, I can’t communicate here. I had to get my audiologist involved...I can speak well but that

doesn't matter, I need an interpreter cause it's important information I need to understand everything.' (FG11)

Other participants shared experiences of assessors not believing support is needed. One interviewee described the process as 'demeaning':

'It got down to more detailed things like 'can't one of your colleagues sign for you?' Or 'can't someone else in the meeting sign for you?' Or 'isn't there a note-taker?' 'Can't you look at the notes that people are making?' I said 'I can't do that, I can't just sit and read over the note-taker's notes.'...The attitude was appalling... It was horrible and it was almost **as if (Access to Work) were trying to catch me out and to make out I was lying.** And it was so **very stressful.**' (Int15)

No Flexibility

AtW's lack of flexibility has been identified as a problem for people who are deaf/have hearing loss.⁴³ This lack of flexibility is inconvenient and affects the capability of people who are deaf/have hearing loss to perform their jobs.

'Two years ago when I asked for an interpreter for an interview they would get back to you by the end of the day. When you ring them now and say I've got a job interview tomorrow or in two days' time you're not guaranteed they will get back to you, **you're in limbo.**' (FG11)

In addition, AtW requires employees to precisely estimate the number of hours they will need an interpreter. Many participants found it extremely difficult to estimate the number of hours they would need in the upcoming three or six months.

'(Assessor) would question me in great detail as to what support I would need. How many meetings, and what kind...I said, I can't say... The nature of my work is that I

Still the 'Best Kept Secret'

For a programme that began twenty-one years ago, AtW is still poorly understood by both of the groups who the service is aimed at: people with disabilities and employers. Four years after AtW was first described *in its own review* (Sayce Review) as the Government's 'best kept secret' AtW continues to be poorly known. One of the SEA suggested the government's attitude towards AtW was deliberate:

'(the government) don't want people to find out, that's why it's the best kept secret.' (Int1)

All focus group participants know about AtW as well as 12 interviewees, only 3 had not heard of or aware of AtW. One of the main ways people heard about AtW was through charities, who have an important role supporting people who are deaf/have hearing loss.

Little has changed since Action on Hearing Loss Cymru surveyed more than 200 employers in 2011 and asked 'Can you tell me what types of services and / or resources you think might be funded through Access to Work grants?' Demonstrating they had little idea of what ATW offered, 80% answered 'Don't know'.

could be asked to do anything, at any time... But they wanted me to predict... and to be really precise, which was **very stressful. It caused me a lot of stress.**' (Int14)

This issue is related to AtW's "30-hour rule" which states that a deaf or disabled person needing more than 30-hours-a-week support should recruit their own salaried support worker (or AtW will fund an award for an hourly rate equivalent to a £30,000 salary). British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters charge substantial fees and as a result, this rule has caused particular problems for deaf people who use BSL-interpreters. DWP announced in May 2014 that the 30-hour rule would be suspended while it carried out a three-month review, however, almost a year later, the review has yet to report.⁴⁴

Similar to those without hearing loss, a number of participants became self-employed/freelance when they were made redundant or struggled to find full-time paid work. All three participants who were **self-employed/freelance or tried to work freelance, found their hearing loss was a strong impediment.** AtW was particularly unhelpful in supporting the flexible needs of those working as self-employed/freelance.

'It's a lot harder to network with people when you're deaf so...I've been asked to go along to (networking events) before but I won't just because I know I'm going to have such a hard time following conversations and talking to people...I don't really want to sort of go along, and start talking to somebody and then **feel like an idiot because I can't understand what they're saying to me.**' (Int13)

Another participant who tried to work as a self-employed builder struggled because they did not have technology to answer the telephone. They approached AtW and their local social services for help to purchase equipment (accessible answering machine) that cost below £100 but were rejected by both, told both there was no funds to purchase such equipment and then told it was too expensive.

'(Builders) who can't talk to people on the phone tend not to get the work because (customers) always want to talk the builder.'⁴⁵

Unaware of needs and equipment

Participants repeatedly stated AtW assessors are unaware of the specific barriers in relation to hearing loss and also unaware of the technology and support available to remove these barriers. As new technology constantly emerges, people who are deaf/have hearing loss **cannot depend on AtW assessors knowing what equipment is available or how it functions.** One of the **SEA's interviewed agreed** that AtW assessors do not always have the correct knowledge to provide the best information.

'You need to make sure that the piece of equipment you're going to authorise for that person is the most appropriate, don't just go for the cheapest or what you just think is right. You need to have a level of understanding and I don't know if that is the case now.' (Int3)

Because assessors can be unaware of the technology available, **participants turned to charities**, such as Action on Hearing Loss, for this information. One participant, given poor

information from AtW turned to Action on Hearing Loss and did her own research to find the technology best suited for her needs.

‘I went to (AtW) knowing what I wanted. I was a member of RNID (previous name of Action on Hearing Loss), you could go and see what kind of equipment they had, I went to local group to try (equipment) out and I thought that looks good.’ (Int15)

In a related point, a few participants reported AtW assessors were unaware of how the equipment functioned and could not provide assistance with how it should work, leaving the employee without communication support and **unable to communicate with their clients and colleagues and causing unnecessary stress over a number of months.**

‘I explained that I was not sure how (Minicom) works in an office or how to use one, so I asked for someone to come and do this with me...I have a textphone but am not able to use it...In this day and age how can a IT provider not know about textphones? Or never been asked for one? Or do not know how to get it to work in an office environment?’ (Int5)

Deliberately reducing access?

In the first two quarters of 2014-15 AtW provided support for 4,690 workers with hearing loss in the UK.⁴⁶ **Since 2007-08 ‘difficulty in hearing’ is the first or second highest number of claims for AtW.** As such, the cost of providing communication support for people who are deaf/have hearing loss accounts for 34% of the entire AtW budget, costing over £31 million.⁴⁷ However, despite the high numbers of people they support who are deaf/ have hearing loss, in the last year **AtW changed its first point of contact from email to telephone**, raising the question – **are AtW discriminating against its highest number of claimants?**

‘I had an email to say that they would be getting in contact with me to arrange a work based assessment. The assessor phoned to speak to me when they knew that I cannot use a phone and the whole reason for the assessment was due to my hearing loss.’ (Int5)

One of SEA agreed changes to **AtW were making it more difficult for people with hearing loss/are deaf to access support.**

‘I think the changes they’ve made could, and this is my own personal thing now, the **changes could be problematic for an individual who wants to use the call centre facilities**, it’s not that straightforward any more. They tried to streamline it but I think it’s probably added a level of complexity.’ (Int3)

Budget cuts to AtW are also having real impacts on people who are deaf/have hearing loss. Participants gave numerous examples of AtW reducing the number of funded interpreter hours even though the employees’ jobs did not change. One participant had the number of funded **interpreter hours reduced despite their work hours increasing.**

‘(AtW) said we’re going to reduce the hours and I said hold on a minute, why? Because I’m going from part-time to full-time. Again, I had to prove the need and record why I needed an interpreter and provide evidence...To be fair, they did agree to the budget and increase the hours but you have to **constantly provide evidence to prove your need.**’⁴⁸

The cuts mean there has been a constant period of change in the last few years, making it confusing and **stressful for those who depend on AtW to stay in work or look for jobs.** Many people stated they simply **didn’t know who to contact now that local AtW centres had been closed.**

‘Over two years AtW has changed a lot...I emailed last Friday...and it’s bounced back saying email isn’t recognised and I don’t know how to get in touch with.’(FG3)

‘(AtW) is awful now. It is really awful. Not good at all. It was wonderful until last year, for me... there was an office in Cardiff whom I dealt with and I had a support person there who knew me; we’d met several times and she knew my work and what I needed. And it was very, very flexible and it left it mostly up to me to book and to use what I wanted. That was absolutely fine and then... everything has changed.’ (Int14)

Another repercussion of the cuts is that people are left waiting after they have made requests and are not told when they will receive and answer from AtW.

‘I didn’t know who to contact, who to phone, there’s no information out there...You get something back saying they will respond in 48 hours, they *never* do, *never* do.’ (FG6)

Requests for help from AtW could take months to complete – participants told of **waiting between two and five months** for assessments and then requests for equipment and waiting for months for payments.

‘It’s the uncertainty all the time.’ (FG11)

Only two participants stated they had no troubles with AtW but both admitted they had not been in contact with AtW for over nine years.

In December 2014 the Work and Pensions Select Committee released a report into AtW highlighting the problems deaf people experienced when seeking support through the scheme, specifically stating that reductions to BSL support have had a substantial detrimental effects on deaf people.⁴⁹ In the same month, Action on Hearing Loss and a number of charities met with the DWP⁵⁰ to explain their problems with AtW and raised specific concerns about AtW including:

- Lack of support at interviews;
- Providing two BSL interpreters to cover some assignments;
- The length of time taken to confirm an award offer;
- Putting in place an interim award.

The findings from participants in Wales corroborates the deteriorating support offered by AtW in other parts of the UK. **The reduction in services and support offered by AtW is having serious effects on the working lives of people who are deaf/have hearing loss in Wales. As a result of AtW's budget cuts and poor support, it is increasingly difficult for people who are deaf/have hearing loss to stay in work.**

Equality Legislation is not serving its purpose

The Equality Act 2010 should provide protection against discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for people who are disabled – however the reality is that this legislation is much less effective than anticipated. On the whole, participants stated that Equality Act 2010 has had little impact on their day-to-day lives. Many participants dismissed the Equality Act, stating it is 'ignored' (FG7) and 'it's worth nothing'. (FG6)

'A lot of stuff that's come out of the Equality Act, for example, has **degenerated into tick box exercises**...Say (employers) don't give a deaf person a job: they'll make sure they've got that paper trail that gives ten reasons why that person didn't get the job and of course none of those reasons can be because they're deaf, when actually really it's because they're deaf they didn't get the job.' (Int13)

For most participants, as legislation was not enforced, it was dismissed as 'toothless'.

'Legislation can take us so far, rest of answer is quite difficult...People are good at making nice looking statements and don't like being challenged in depth about them.' (Int8)

Almost all older participants agreed the Disability Discrimination Act had a more significant impact on their lives.

'The Disability Discrimination Act had a big effect and that was really important. I think that's made a big, big impact on employment of deaf people...Before then employers could discriminate; they could say, no we don't want you because you're deaf...It was not the whole answer... absolutely not the whole answer...with the Equality Act I'm not so sure. I think that's weakened things...it's diluting the strength that was with the Disability Discrimination Act. Because, **with the DDA there was a real focus on disability.**' (Int14)

Out of work: The search for support

'I need that little bit of help and there's just nothing there for me.' (Int11)

Previous Action on Hearing Loss research found adults of working age felt **their deafness/hearing loss made it harder to find work.**⁵¹ Job Centres, AtW and SEA should provide specialist support to help people who are deaf/have hearing loss find jobs however unemployed participants listed numerous problems with all three organisations.

Job Centres and SEA

Coalition government policies have substantially reduced the level of services offered at Job Centres, including services offered to people who are deaf/have hearing loss. Participants consistently stated **Job Centre staff did not provide appropriate support specific to their hearing loss**. All of the seven unemployed participants stated Job Centres were unhelpful and most staff they encountered were very poor informed on how to provide services for those who are deaf/have hearing loss.

‘A lot of Job Centres aren’t deaf aware...15 years ago the person at the Job Centre could (use British Sign Language) but that person left and now there’s nobody in the Job Centre who could sign. It was so much easier then. It was so much easier to get a job because you could communicate.’ (FG7)

Numerous people gave examples of **almost total ignorance of the needs of people who are deaf/ have hearing loss amongst Job Centre staff**.

‘Lots of people call it the Joke Centre and I can see why. They couldn’t meet any access needs at all. I would ask to have meetings in a private room because I need to be in a quiet room and I would turn up and they said no room available...My problem is background noise stops me hearing the person in front of me, so they start yelling... Their general knowledge about sensory loss was really poor.’ (Int9)

One participant living with hearing loss since he was three, and now wearing double hearing aids, had an extremely poor experience at his local Job Centre.

‘It’s the way they treat you...They said...here’s a job you can apply for...in a telephone in a call centre. Honest to God!...That’s the type of thing you’ve got to put up with (at the Job Centre)... absolutely none of them have any idea of what problems you have. They’re not trained...they don’t understand at all.’(Int11)

A participant who worked in the health field described the poor support she and one of her clients received at the Job Centre.

‘I had a client who was deaf and there was a problem with her benefits and we went down to the Job Centre together and explained it and they said you had to use the phone. So I explained we can’t use the phone because we’re both hearing impaired and we’re not able to use those phones. They didn’t know what to do with us.’ (Int5)

This lack of deaf awareness and flexibility was common for all participants at Job Centres. Participants provided numerous stories of **being told to use telephones or meet with advisors in large rooms where they could not hear what was being said**, despite requesting private rooms and accessible forms of communication. One of the SEA interviewees agreed that provision in Job Centres was poor and **suggested SEAs should be depended on more, because of their specialist knowledge**.

‘There should be more joint working with specialist providers...(Job Centre) staff have been cut, they’re meeting targets like we’re meeting targets, so were up against it.’ (Int1)

However **few participants knew about the support offered by SEA**. Only five of the 26 participants discussed using SEA in their working careers. Of the few who used SEA, two found their services satisfactory.

‘I have been into (SEA). That was about the benefits side of things rather than about actual access but their advisers seemed really good so I think if I needed more detailed help about access in the future, I’d go back...really understanding but ultimately not able to help me.’ (Int13)

The other three participants who accessed support from SEA were **disappointed with the support they received**, suggesting perhaps they had more awareness of the needs of physical rather than sensory disabilities.

‘I used (SEA) before, they kept ringing me and I told them I can’t talk on the phone. I asked them to email or send a text but they wouldn’t, they kept on ringing, they kept on ringing.’ (FG8)

‘People say deaf people can’t do this or that, if you try and choose jobs, it feels like discrimination....it’ll be noisy with hearing aids, (SEA) said that to me, ASDA is noisy, it’s not suitable for people with hearing aids.’ (FG11)

That some SEAs could be better prepared to support clients who are deaf/have hearing loss was evident in one SEA interview. This **SEA received few referrals from people who are deaf/have hearing loss and suggested the reason was because they do not want to work**. The lack of insight and knowledge could affect the services and support provided.

‘If you’re profoundly deaf you’re probably more likely to get onto the highest sickness benefits so you may not then, financially, have the pressure to go and seek employment, if you’re on high DLA and the ESA support group....**Maybe part of the deaf community sits at home and doesn’t show any interest in work.**’ (Int1)

One of the SEA’s interviewed provided support to a substantial number of people who are deaf/have hearing loss in Wales. The other SEA did not support many clients who are deaf/have hearing loss and admitted ‘we don’t market our services to the deaf community’. This **specialist support is crucial for those looking for work and those looking for inclusive/specialist training**. Although only a few numbers of participants were involved in training, of the unemployed participants who sought out training courses to improve their skills – those with support from a SEA were able to complete the course whilst those unsupported by SEA struggled to finish or did not complete training courses due to lack of support from the teachers/training centres.

Both SEA stated they had a particular role to play in helping people improve their confidence and apply for work.

‘We will work with them to develop their confidence and on the flip side we work with the employers so they understand the benefits that person will bring to their organisation.’ (Int3)

‘If somebody says I don’t want to tell anybody (about their hearing loss) then we’ll say ‘how can we support you and how can they support you?’...We ask the right kind of questions. The Job Centre may only have 20 minutes with an individual where we have more than 2 or 3 hrs.’ (Int1)

This struggle to develop confidence is common for those who have unsuccessfully applied for numerous jobs over a number of years.

‘At the moment my confidence with it is shot... absolutely shot.’ (Int11)

AtW & those looking for work

If Job Centres and SEAs are offering poor support to those looking for work, does ATW fill the void? Unfortunately, no. Participants’ experiences of ATW reflect previous Action on Hearing Loss reports which describe **barriers to accessing services in both Job Centres and in AtW**.⁵² Similar to those in work, AtW is not responding to emails within the 48 hours it claims it will respond within. One participant was left waiting for six days without a response.

‘(AtW) are useless, absolutely useless...they have no understanding at all about deafness.’(Int11)

Not knowing when AtW will respond makes planning for interviews very difficult. If it takes days or weeks for AtW to respond, **people cannot, for example, attend interviews**. One of the SEA interviewed stated **AtW have a limited budget to support those looking for work** and explained this reflected AtW’s priorities.

‘Problem is **things are more readily available in work then before they are in work...** if you need equipment, additional support, it’s very difficult getting it from AtW or from the government pre-work...**We don’t have a massive budget for paying up front before somebody goes into work.**’ (Int1)

For those depending on AtW, there are **numerous problems with the transition between unemployment and employment**. One participant received AtW in their first year of work but in the second year it was taken away, resulting in them leaving their job.

‘They responded you can’t have AtW because you are claiming benefits and you are working under 16 hours. At that point I just felt lost...That was one of the reasons that I eventually left the job and quit. Because I really loved (job) but **I couldn’t get the support through AtW, I just couldn’t carry on.**’ (FG10)

In addition to the problem of working part-time is the issue of volunteering. Volunteering is often regarded as a positive step in the transition from unemployment to work however, as

AtW is not available to those who volunteer, unemployed people who are deaf/have hearing loss are not encouraged to volunteer. The opportunities to gain work experience through voluntary work is very difficult for people who are deaf/have hearing loss because of the lack of support available.

The search for supportive employers

Participants who were unemployed reflected findings from employed participants – they also stated **employers' lack of deaf awareness was one of the main difficulties in finding work.** People who are deaf/ have hearing loss have additional worries when looking for work – **not only are they looking for work, they are also looking for work where they will find managers and colleagues who will be supportive.** One deaf participant shared his worries:

'I'm worried if I get a job what the manager's attitude is going to be like and how can I find someone with a good attitude.' (FG11)

Another participant was reluctant to apply for jobs that required use of the telephone as they weren't sure the employer would support them.

'Most of the jobs included using the phone so that put me off completely.' (Int2)

As such, many participants were **hesitant to state on applications or CVs that they were deaf or had hearing loss.**

'I'm not comfortable saying I'm deaf on a CV. For example I play for Wales for their football team and when I put on my CV I say I'm part of coaching rather than I play for them because...I'm more comfortable saying I'm not deaf and when I come to the interview then I tell them.'⁵³

'I never had an interview when I told them that I'm hard of hearing. Absolutely never, in sixteen years...**I haven't had one interview when I've told people I'm deaf.**' (Int11)

However, the corollary of not stating one is deaf or has hearing loss is that some participants do not request communication support during the interview process - which can **limit the type of jobs they apply for.**

'Participant: I'm more likely to get an interview now because they might not know about my hearing loss unless I requested communications support.

Interviewer: Would you request communication support?

Participant: I do and I don't. I've had so many bad experiences with communication support that I started to try to not use it but by and large that was disastrous.' (Int9)

Another participant searched for an 'understanding' employer who was willing to give them a chance.

‘What I need... is somebody who, how can I put it? **Gives me a chance to prove that I can do the work.**’ (Int11)

What good support looks like

One deaf participant stated that the solutions to improve employment conditions for people who are deaf/have hearing loss were not difficult to identify.

‘**Deafness is a huge barrier in many ways and it doesn’t have to be.** That’s what’s so frustrating about it...when you’ve got Access to Work provision in place, when you’ve got people with the right attitude, when you’ve got people who work as a team and who are supportive, you can do really well in that environment.’(Int13)

Participants consistently stated they wanted **direct, dependable and consistent support and information.** As such, some participants wanted a **programme or post to directly support people with sensory loss to find and stay in work and train employers** to reduce their hesitations/worries about employing people who are deaf/have hearing loss.

‘(We) need to employ someone to support deaf people. (I’m) **hoping they will employ an advisor for deaf people,** a specific advisor for deaf people, there’s nothing in South Wales.’(FG6)

‘**A proper training programme...** for some reason organisations don’t do these things anymore...they all like campaigning.’(Int11)

As information is inconsistent and difficult to come by, people look for information themselves online and **many participants turned to charities, primarily Action on Hearing Loss, for good support and information.**

‘Because of Action on Hearing Loss I’ve learned quite a bit and I know that I can (also) talk to my local hearing aid department at hospital.’(Int10)

Action on Hearing Loss provided consistent and reliable information and support.

‘I’ve contacted (Action on Hearing Loss) when I was worried about my situation in work and **they were very helpful** there and give me some contacts and emails because I wanted to know under the discrimination (legislation), where did I stand? So I needed to know a bit about that as I did **feel a bit discriminated against.**’ (Int5)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Opportunities to lead in Wales

As the DWP is responsible for policies associated with employment and disabilities, there is a limit to the influence and actions the Welsh government can take in relation to un/employment for people who are deaf/have hearing loss. Nonetheless, **there are actions**

the Welsh Government can take to decrease the barriers in work and out of work that continue to exist for people who are deaf/have hearing loss.

Address an avoidable & persistent problem

This research confirms previous research reports which state the main numerous barriers to finding work and keeping people who are deaf/have hearing loss in work are employers' attitudes and poor provision of support and information. This research confirms that people who are deaf/have hearing loss experience discrimination and barriers from managers and colleagues at work as well as difficulties accessing support in Job Centres and from Access to Work. **The answer is not more research but lies with creating proactive government policies, programmes and legislation.**

Future programmes should include both:

- **'in-work' support** to individual employers to build their capacity to support disabled employees;
- **'out of work' support** to engage with employers and local labour markets to source and secure job opportunities.

That the very people (AtW and Job Centres) who are supposed to be aware of the needs of people who are deaf/ have hearing loss provide poor quality support and services - that could be labelled as discrimination - demonstrates there is **still a long way to go before equal employment opportunities are available to people who are deaf/have hearing loss.** At the end of 2014 the Work and Pensions Committee found DWP staff had displayed "unacceptable lack of disability awareness" and called for staff to be given additional training.⁵⁴ This research confirms poor practice and concurs additional training for Job Centre and AtW staff is necessary.

Better support for those out of work

Better support is needed for those who are looking for work. In 2015 it is **simply not good enough that so many participants continue to receive such poor support at Job Centres** and, at times, experienced discriminatory attitudes from its staff. Better and consistent training (i.e. not one-off) about the needs of those with sensory impairment could improve these attitudes.

There is room to improve the **support from Specialist Employment Agencies.** Too few people who are deaf/have hearing loss are aware of their specialist support. In addition, there is room for their **specialist support to improve in terms of being more aware of the needs of those with sensory loss.**

In addition, one of the SEA interviewees pointed to a policy they would like to see in Wales.

'England has an 'internship' targeted at people who have a disability who are not quite ready for a mainstream programme. Participants are offered a traineeship or an apprenticeship to work for six months to provide experiences in different employer premises. There is no equivalent in Wales.' (Int3)

This type of internship programme could provide substantial support to people looking for work and also improve employers' deaf awareness.

Change AtW before it gets worse

Many people who are deaf/have hearing loss are struggling to stay in work due to cuts to AtW's budget. As this is not a devolved policy, any changes to AtW policy need to be achieved at a national, UK level. Nonetheless, it is of value to state that **problems with AtW identified in UK-wide research consistently occur in Wales.**

Firstly, numerous communication problems **continue to impede the abilities** of people who are deaf/have hearing loss to best carry out their work on a day to day basis. That the **first point of contact for AtW is now via the telephone** is very problematic. Forcing people who are deaf/have hearing loss to use a telephone for communication, when many of them are contacting AtW for equipment such as accessible telephones, is **illogical**. This is **an unnecessary barrier** and makes it more difficult for people who are deaf/have hearing loss to access support from AtW.

In addition, the **length of time AtW** takes to both respond to requests and make decisions **seriously impedes people who are deaf/have hearing loss** and their ability to best carry out their work. Again, this is **another unnecessary barrier**.

Lastly, AtW's **lack of flexibility** regarding the type and amount of support they provide is **another unnecessary barrier** for people who are deaf/have hearing loss and also compromises their ability to adequately perform their work. People who are deaf/have hearing loss want a **reasonable and realistic attitude** towards their requests for support, they **do not expect special treatment** or highly expensive equipment. They **want good quality support and advice and want it quickly so they can carry out the jobs they are paid to do or to apply for jobs.**

Programmes and processes at Job Centres and AtW need to improve and adequately reflect the needs of people who are deaf/have hearing loss; this means having staff who understand British Sign Language, take seriously requests for private rooms and having email contact.

Better more direct forms of support for those in and out of work

These findings and solutions are not a surprise. Numerous reports (from the Work and Pensions Committee, Action on Hearing Loss and related charities) have repeatedly identified the need to improve support and awareness about sensory loss at Job Centres and AtW. This report confirms Job Centres and AtW should improve the support they provide for people who are deaf/have hearing loss. Additionally, this report finds SEA also need to improve their awareness of and support for people who are deaf/have hearing loss. To this end, **charities such as Action on Hearing Loss could work more closely with SEA to improve the support and information they offer.**

In addition, additional levels of support (from SEA or Action on Hearing Loss) are required for employers in manual jobs such as the construction industry.

Too many participants still have too many experiences of employers believing recruiting a person who is deaf/has hearing loss is daunting. Efforts should be made to demonstrate and explain to employers that hiring employers who are deaf/have hearing loss is not 'just a problem', that health and safety is not an impossible problem. This could be done by **more direct efforts, such as working with potential employers, creating case studies online and profiling supportive employers.**

Moving forward

Who's responsible for explaining why employing people who are deaf/have hearing loss is not a burden and could be good for business? If it is up to the government yet they are not doing so, is it the responsibility of charities? Or Specialist Employment Agencies? What is clear is that **there is vast room for improvement in supporting people who are deaf/have hearing loss in the work place and in their search for work.**

There are opportunities for Wales to lead the UK in providing better support for people who are deaf/have hearing loss to find and stay in work. **There are interventions, many inexpensive, that could happen and make Wales a leader in providing a fair and sustainable society to all of its citizens, including those who are deaf/have hearing loss.**

1 http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_242963.pdf

2 Labour Force Survey 2010 Q4

3 DWP (2014) *Disability facts and figures* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-facts-and-figures/disability-facts-and-figures#fnref:5>

4 E.g. Black C, Frost D (2011) *Health at work – an independent review of sickness absence*. DWP. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181060/health-at-work.pdf

5 http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_272294.pdf

6 RNID (2007) *Opportunity Blocked: The employment experiences of deaf and hard of hearing people*.

7 Archbold S, Lamb B, O'Neill C, Atkins J (2014) *The real cost of adult hearing loss: Reducing its impact by increasing access to the latest hearing technologies*. Ear Foundation.

<http://www.earfoundation.org.uk/research/current-research/the-real-cost-of-adult-hearing-loss>

8 Hogan M (2013) Hearing Loss Linked to Unemployment, Lower Income *Hearing Journal* 66(2).

http://journals.lww.com/thehearingjournal/Fulltext/2013/02001/Hearing_Loss_Linked_to_Unemployment,_Lower_Income.2.aspx; Jung D, Bhattacharyya N (2012) Association of hearing loss with decreased employment and income among adults in the United States *Ann Otol Rhinol Laryngol*.

121(12):771-5; Stam M, Kostense PJ, Festen JM, Kramer SE (2013) The relationship between hearing status and the participation in different categories of work: demographics *Work*. 46(2):207-19.

9 Tye-Murray et al (2009) Professionals with hearing loss: maintaining that competitive edge *Ear and Hearing*. 30(4):475-84; Kramer et al (2006) Occupational performance comparing normally-hearing

and hearing-impaired employees using the Amsterdam Checklist for Hearing and Work *International Journal of Audiology*. 45(9): 503-12; Link Centre (2005) *Hidden Lives. The psychological and social impact of becoming deafened in adult life*. Link Centre: Eastbourne; Jennings and Shaw (2008)

Impact of hearing loss in the workplace: raising questions about partnerships with professionals. *Work*. 30(3): 289-95; Matthews L (2011) *Unlimited Potential: A research report into hearing loss in the workplace*. Action on Hearing Loss; Arrowsmith L (2014) *Hidden Disadvantage*. Action on Hearing Loss; Harris J, Bamford C (2001) The uphill struggle: services for deaf and hard of hearing people - issues of equality, participation and access *Disability & Society*. 16(7): 969-979.

10 Arrowsmith L (2014) *Hidden Disadvantage*. Action on Hearing Loss.

11 RNID (2007) *Opportunity Blocked: The employment experiences of deaf and hard of hearing people*. Action on Hearing Loss.

-
- 12 DWP (2013) *Older Workers Statistical Information Booklet 2013*
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264899/older-workers-statistical-information-booklet-2013.pdf
- 13 Mathers CD, Loncar D (2005) *Updated projections of global mortality and burden of disease, 2002-2030: data sources, methods and results*. The World Health Organisation.
- 14 Action on Hearing Loss <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/about-us/wales.aspx>
- 15 Action on Hearing Loss Wales (2009) *Open to All*
- 16 Matthews L (2011) *Unlimited Potential: A research report into hearing loss in the workplace*. Action on Hearing Loss.
- 17 Ashely J (2015) Refusing people hearing aids – a parable for Britain’s short-term health policy. *The Guardian*. 9 February.
- 18 Arrowsmith L (2014) *Hidden Disadvantage*. Action on Hearing Loss.
- 19 Shaw Trust (2013) *Making Work a Real Choice*. http://www.shaw-trust.org.uk/media/269442/work_choice_report_final_.pdf
- 20 Work Choice statistics: Number of starts, referrals and job outcomes (2015)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/work-choice-statistics-number-of-starts-and-referrals--2>
- 21 Trotter R (2013) *Work in progress: Rethinking employment support for disabled people*. Action on Hearing Loss, Mencap, Mind, RNIB, Scope.
https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/Work_in_Progress_DCC_report_JuL_13.pdf
- 22 E.g. White A (2013) The Remploy factories have closed, but the pain continues. *The New Statesman*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/05/remploy-factories-have-closed-pain-continues>
- 23 Fox N (2014) What are Remploy workers doing now? <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29843567>
- 24 Morse JM, Barrett M, Mayan M, Olson K, Spiers J (2002) Verification Strategies for Establishing Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. Vol 1(2): 13-22.
- 25 Morse JM (2000) *Determining Sample Size*. *Qualitative Health Research*. 10(1): 3-5.
- 26 Either on sick leave, retired or parents waiting for children to age before finding work.
- 27 Spencer J, Ritchie L (1994) Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In: A. Bryman R.G. Burgess. *Analysing qualitative data*. London: Routledge.
- 28 Matthews L (2011) *Unlimited Potential: A research report into hearing loss in the workplace*. Action on Hearing Loss; Action on Hearing Loss Wales (2009) *Open to All*; RNID (2007) *Opportunity Blocked: The employment experiences of deaf and hard of hearing people*; Arrowsmith L (2014) *Hidden Disadvantage*. Action on Hearing Loss.
- 29 Matthews L (2011) *Unlimited Potential: A research report into hearing loss in the workplace*. Action on Hearing Loss.
- 30 Not identified to protect anonymity.
- 31 Not identified to protect anonymity. The following two interviewees are also not identified.
- 32 Not identified to protect anonymity.
- 33 Not identified to protect anonymity.
- 34 Helvik A, Krokstad S, Tambs K (2013) Hearing loss and risk of early retirement. The HUNT study. *Eur J Public Health*. 23(4):617-22 ; Fischer ME, Cruickshanks KJ, Pinto A, Klein BE, Klein R, Dalton DS (2014) Hearing impairment and retirement. *J Am Acad Audiol*. 25(2):164-70; Matthews L (2011) *Unlimited Potential: A research report into hearing loss in the workplace*. Action on Hearing Loss
- 35 Not identified to protect anonymity.
- 36 Both with newly diagnosed minor hearing loss.
- 37 E.g. see <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/shop/telecommunication.aspx> for advice on telephones or advice to civil servants on holding meetings with people who are deaf/have hearing loss http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/disawarenessguides_no1_tcm6-

2208.pdf or

http://www.scha.org/files/documents/tips_for_communicating_with_deaf_and_hard.pdf

38 Not identified to protect anonymity.

39 <http://www.cscs.uk.com/about/>

40 Not identified to protect anonymity.

41 AtW is a grant scheme available to employers and sole traders in the UK. The funding is designed to provide help for people whose health or disability affects the way they do their job. Access to Work provides employees and employers with advice, and support with extra costs which may arise because of employees' needs at work, and can be used to purchase a variety of goods and services. Generally, employers are asked to pay towards the cost of the adjustments, and the amount varies depending on how long the individual has been with the company. AtW pay the remaining amount.

42 Not identified to protect anonymity.

43 Action on Hearing Loss (2014) Access to Work Policy Statement

44 Pring J (2014) Access to Work crisis: DWP faces legal action over secret guidance

<http://disabilitynewsservice.com/2014/12/access-work-crisis-dwp-faces-legal-action-secret-guidance/>

45 Not identified to protect anonymity

46 Access to Work – Official Statistics (2011) DWP.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/396151/access-to-work-jan-2015.pdf

47 Archbold S, Lamb B, O'Neill C, Atkins J (ND) *The Real Cost of Adult Hearing Loss: reducing its impact by increasing access to the latest hearing technologies*. Ear Foundation.

<http://www.earfoundation.org.uk/research/current-research/the-real-cost-of-adult-hearing-loss>

48 Not identified to protect anonymity

49 Work and Pensions Committee (2014) Second Report: Improving Access to Work for disabled people <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmworpen/481/48102.htm>

50 <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/news-and-events/all-regions/news/working-in-partnership-to-improve-access-to-work.aspx>

51 Action on Hearing Loss Wales (2009) *Open to All*; Matthews L (2011) *Unlimited Potential: A research report into hearing loss in the workplace*. Action on Hearing Loss, RNID (2007) *Opportunity Blocked: The employment experiences of deaf and hard of hearing people*; Arrowsmith L (2014) *Hidden Disadvantage*. Action on Hearing Loss.

52 Action on Hearing Loss Wales (2009) *Open to All*

53 Not identified to protect anonymity

54 Work and Pensions Committee (2014) Second Report: Improving Access to Work for disabled people <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmworpen/481/48102.htm>