



Press Release

For immediate release

New *Access to Work* rules will make the arts less diverse at every level.

The reforms will terminate the careers of many emerging Deaf and disabled artists and create a glass ceiling for established professionals.

Graeae has spoken publicly in the past regarding the recent changes to the Access to Work scheme and how they have been affecting how the company operates and plans for the future.

In late 2014 a Select Committee looked into the changes that were occurring in the scheme and how it was failing applicants. You can find their report [here](#). At Graeae, we broadly agreed with the Select Committee's findings. Therefore we read with interest when The Minister for Disabled People released a statement on 12 March 2015 proposing changes based on the committee's findings.

Sadly, the proposed package of reform falls far short of expectations. The proposals hit Graeae, a disabled-led theatre company, hard. In essence, it will make it significantly more difficult to govern effectively and meet our charitable objectives. Furthermore, it will rule out the arts as a profession for hundreds of disabled people.

To clarify, we welcome many of the changes proposed by the Minister:

- Improving access to the Access to Work scheme for those not able to use the phone
- Better operation of the scheme and better customer service
- Clear guidance with greater transparency on policies shared with the public
- A return to flexible personal budgets, giving greater autonomy to applicants
- Raising the profile of the Mental Health Support Service
- Striving towards a "Disability Confident Britain"

Unfortunately, some of the other changes could seriously undermine the impact of the above improvements.

A personal budget limit of £40,800

We understand the appeal of capping the amount one person can claim a year; but the logic doesn't stand up and will cause major problems for Deaf and disabled people.

- Deaf and disabled people are being encouraged off benefits and into work. The message is strong: "If you can work, you should be doing".
- This means that in the future more people who require a higher level of support will be in the workplace
- It means that Deaf and disabled people will be working longer hours
- The arbitrary limit of being able to claim support equal to 1.5 times the average salary completely underestimates the value that Deaf and disabled employees bring to the workforce
- A £1 investment in the Access to Work scheme brings at least £1.50 back into the economy, this is even higher for those with higher level needs who might have been relying on a larger package of benefits if not working. Setting a limit on support doesn't make good financial sense
- Employers will not be able to cover the (up to) £60,000 funding gap per employee
- It effectively establishes a glass ceiling for (particularly) Deaf employees and will keep them from management or leadership roles in the workplace

New rules for self employed workers

There is a need to ensure that earned income from people registered as self employed is appropriately taxed and accounted for. However, the latest changes don't work with the creative industries:

- Under an agreement with Equity, ITC, UKTheatre and HMRC, employers must treat all work by performers and stage managers as Self Employed for income tax and NI purposes
- Half of performers earn less than £5,000 per year from their craft
- Half of theatre directors also earn less than £5,000 per year
- The threshold for contributing towards National Insurance is £8,000 per year
- The new rules for eligibility for the Access to Work scheme mean that after the first year you need to prove that you are paying National Insurance

These new rules do not allow the flexibility needed in order to pursue a career in the creative sector. They mean that hundreds of people will be dissuaded from entering the workplace and will mean that employers won't employ Deaf and disabled artists. If performers will need to prove their Self Employment business is profitable before getting a job, in order to get their access costs reclaimed, employers may be forced to employ a non-disabled worker instead. This will not make a "Disability Confident Britain".

There are other concerning things in the statement, such as the use of interpreter agencies and licensed taxi companies. In the past, this has added unnecessary expense, and reduced the flexibility of choice, but we will monitor how this element of the proposal is administered.

Contacts

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Quotes

'After 18 months of campaigning, I am so disappointed that the DWP have still not levelled the playing field for Deaf and disabled people in the workplace. I'm determined to continue the battle to enable people to set their aspirations high and be ambitious.' **Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director and CEO, Graeae**

'By introducing arbitrary caps and narrowing down choice for Deaf and disabled people, the DWP are penalising those who are already contributing to the economy. Spending hours on the phone to prove your eligibility is still an incredibly tough process to go through as each new application is assigned to a different adviser. With the same information given, different decisions are made. The heart of the matter doesn't lie in using rhetoric to appease the masses. Put simply, it's the dignity and empathy awarded to every Deaf and disabled citizen to have the right to full access to work.' **Amit Sharma, Associate Director, Graeae**

'As Graeae's main point of contact for Access to Work I welcome the Minister's plans to provide more clarity on the decision-making process, particularly for self employed people. This, I hope, will remove some of the administrative burden currently caused to us by lengthy communications with advisers. It will also mean we are able to plan more effectively, armed with improved knowledge about whether individuals are eligible for support.

Since January 2015 we have noticed improvements in the operational running of the scheme, with applications being dealt with more quickly and efficiently. However, we are still experiencing delays and it still very much feels like 'pot luck' with advisers, whose approach is far from consistent from case to case. This can be unnerving and stressful for us and our Deaf and disabled employees. I am disappointed to see that the Minister makes no reference to training for Access to Work staff, particularly in disability awareness, as recommended by the Select Committee. In my day-to-day interactions with the service, this still feels like something which is sorely needed.' **Helen Jackson-Lyall, Access and Production Coordinator, Graeae**

Editor's notes

About Graeae

Graeae is a force for change in world-class theatre - breaking down barriers, challenging preconceptions and boldly placing Deaf and disabled artists centre stage. Artistically led by Jenny Sealey, Graeae's signature characteristic is the compelling creative integration of sign language and audio description, which engages brilliantly with both disabled and non-disabled audiences. Championing accessibility and providing a platform for new generations of artists, Graeae leads the way in pioneering, trail-blazing theatre. Graeae won the Promotion of Diversity Award at the TMA Theatre Awards UK 2012. www.graeae.org

Access information

Please contact Richard Matthews on richard@graeae.org or call 020 7613 6906 if you would like this press release in alternative forms.