



## Press Release

For immediate release

### **GRAEAE THEATRE COMPANY'S STATEMENT ON THE SCANDAL OF LORD FREUD'S COMMENTS ABOUT WAGES FOR DISABLED WORKERS**

Much has been said about Lord Freud's recent misplaced comments on the net worth of a disabled person to an employer and how the level of pay should reflect that.

Graeae's position is that the value of the employee is not linked to disability and that it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that their employment is meaningful to both parties. There should NEVER be a situation in which someone's value is lower than the minimum wage and this sentiment seems to have received cross-party support.

- **Assigning disabled people's NET worth to the direct financial impact they have on an organisation is reductive and at odds with the Government's drive to support disabled people to re-join the workforce.**
- **We don't think the government can claim to have removed barriers disabled people face in finding employment.**
- **Reforms to disability benefits have been detrimental to disabled people finding work rather than supporting them.**
- **Graeae is providing case studies and statistics to show the negative impact the changes are making to its employees and its charitable output.**

Lord Freud's, David Cameron's and Esther McVey's recent comments have all alluded to how in reality lives are changing in a positive way for disabled people. We are led to believe that the disability benefit reforms are 'looking after disabled people' and 'supporting people with disabilities' and 'helping disabled people overcome the many barriers they face in finding employment'.

That may have been the intention but unfortunately it is not the reality.

A number of schemes have been affected by Government cuts and policy changes. The three that most directly affect Graeae and its employees are: Disability Living Allowance, Independent Living Fund and Access to Work (ATW). Delays in processing claims, rejected claims and lost paperwork have resulted in un-claimable genuine

costs that are so substantial that they have meant individuals have been forced to move and Graeae has needed to cancel work.

**Jenny Sealey MBE, CEO of Graeae, explains how Access to Work has enabled her to operate professionally:**

‘Co-directing the London 2012 Paralympic Opening Ceremony was the most extraordinary experience. It would not have been possible without ATW providing a dedicated team of highly qualified sign language interpreters and access workers supporting me as a Deaf woman and supporting my cast of Deaf and disabled professional artists. The artistic narrative of the London Paralympic Opening Ceremony incorporated The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and when 67,000 people in the stadium sang along to *Spasticus Autisticus* it felt like the future held great things for Deaf and disabled people worldwide.’

**Despite the extraordinary success of the London Paralympics and its opening ceremony, Jenny has had her ATW support cut. Her ongoing interpreter support has been cut by 53% and claims for international projects have been cut by 100%. She responds:**

‘Two years on from the Paralympics and I am seriously in fear for my career. The severe cuts in my ATW provisions mean I simply cannot fulfil my job description as CEO / Artistic Director of Graeae.’

Jenny is just one of the eighty Deaf and disabled employees Graeae contracts every year and her story is far from unique.

- Graeae’s employees are facing delays in the processing of ATW applications of up to eight months - and counting.
- The company is currently awaiting decisions on 10 ATW applications, some of which date back to February 2014. It is also disputing a further 4 decisions.
- The activity for 8 of the outstanding 10 ATW applications has now happened and Graeae has had to incur the cost in the hope that it could be reclaimed.
- Graeae has had 4 applications rejected, despite them, on the face of it, falling under Access to Work’s criteria for permitted reclaimable expenditure. Some of these are under review.

On time & approved	Partial approval after work completed	Approval received after work completed	Rejected after work completed	On-going
3	1	11	4	10

## **Jenny highlights what this means for Graeae:**

‘Graeae is the UK’s flagship professional disabled led theatre company and has a growing international reputation. The very real danger is soon we will no longer be able to commit to our mission placing Deaf and disabled people centre stage.’

‘Decisions made now will have a huge impact. If this is allowed to continue we will have to cover all the costs related to meeting people’s access needs. Therefore, we would have to reduce our artistic programme by that same amount. Cuts to arts funding across the board mean we can’t feasibly find this money from elsewhere.’

‘I will lose my job, as will other members of our core staff and the company will become non-disabled led and will become disconnected from our core charitable objectives.’

## **Our message to people wanting to work with Graeae is this:**

‘Many people – interpreters, access workers and disabled people - are saying: “I’m really sorry that due to the changes to Access to Work it means that I’m a pain in the arse to employ”.

‘You are not. Graeae wouldn’t have achieved all that it has without the talent of its creative team or the access support team that surround them. You are not just a vital part of the company but core to why we do what we do.’

‘Whenever we offer employment to someone, it is because they are the right person for the job, regardless of their impairment, condition, disability or health. The Access to Work scheme should mean that support costs do not become a discriminating factor between disabled and non-disabled candidates. Our problem is that the changes to this scheme are actively removing employment opportunities for deaf and disabled people across the country.’

## **Jenny Sealey concludes:**

‘At Graeae, we are in turmoil: There is more interest in the company locally and internationally than ever before. Our artistic and training programme remains ambitious but we face a real threat of such ambitions being unrealised because of ATW cuts of up to £125k. The impact of waiting to find out if costs are going to be covered means we are already having to cancel future plans. It makes it impossible to plan as you don’t know where you stand. We are seriously concerned about what the future holds.’

Contact the press team for more information or if you would like this information in alternative formats.

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## Editor's notes

This press release / statement is in response to:

**Lord Freud's comments:** 'You make a really good point about the disabled. There is a group where actually, as you say, they're not worth the full wage.'

**Lord Freud's response:** 'I care passionately about disabled people. I am proud to have played a full part in a government that is fully committed to helping disabled people overcome the many barriers they face in finding employment.'

**David Cameron's response:** 'Let me tell you: I don't need lectures from anyone about looking after disabled people. So I don't want to hear any more of that. We pay the minimum wage, we are reforming disability benefits, we want to help disabled people in our country, we want to help more of them into work. And instead of casting aspersions, why doesn't he get back to talking about the economy.'

**Esther McVey's response:** 'Everybody has the minimum wage. We have done a lot to support people with disabilities.'

### Access to Work

#### What is it?

The Department of Work and Pensions runs a scheme called [Access to Work](#). It is a pot of money which covers employees' access costs – it can pay for Sign Language Interpreters, Access Workers, adaptive equipment such as ergonomic chairs, screen-reading equipment and also transport costs if public transport is not an option.

Access to Work is provided where someone needs support or adaptations beyond the reasonable adjustments which an employer is legally obliged to provide under the Equality Act.

#### How does it affect Graeae?

Graeae supports employees and freelancers to make Access to Work applications and in any one year up to 150 applications might be made. Between 8-15% of Graeae's costs are reclaimed through Access to Work. It enables us to employ 80+ Deaf and disabled people every year. It is a great scheme, or it was, and it can be again.

#### What's wrong?

Over recent months the management of the scheme seems to have ground to a halt: applications aren't being followed up; the same information is being asked for repeatedly; we are finding out where applications have been accepted or rejected months after the event; staff members are facing up to 70% cuts, errors are being made and inappropriate questions are being asked.

## **What does it mean for the future?**

Up to £150k of Graeae's access costs are covered by Access to Work, without this money our mission could be in jeopardy. However, the knock on effect for recipients is even more significant: the system has become so unusable and is so demoralising that people are just going to stop applying. This, at a time when their other benefits are also under threat means that some of the people we work with are becoming disenfranchised, victimised and disinclined to enter work.

## **What needs to happen?**

Very little, actually. A trained, skilled, knowledgeable applicant response team and a commitment to protecting the funding for the scheme will bring the project back on track.

## **Independent Living Fund**

### **What is it?**

The [Independent Living Fund](#) (ILF) delivers financial support to disabled people so they can choose to live in their communities rather than in residential care. In June 2015 the government plans to close the fund, and redistribute the money amongst local authorities.

### **How does it affect Graeae?**

Many of our performers, workshop leaders and creative team rely on the ILF alongside Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to live and work independently. It enables them to live where they are most able to find work, socialise, and have a good quality of life. It enables them to be theatre professionals.

### **What's wrong?**

The ILF is facing closure, with the funds due to be redistributed amongst local authorities. Authorities are already facing 28% cuts in the period 2013-15 so many Deaf and disabled people don't hold out much hope for the money being ring-fenced or managed effectively.

Additionally, DLA is also facing closure, and is gradually being replaced by Personal Independence Payments (PIP). Those that have been asked to apply to PIP have been met with delays in processing of up to one year. Some have been without any benefits while these delays have occurred.

## **What does it mean for the future?**

Without this support, the people we work with would be much less able to have the freedom to enter work on their own terms. For those that lose their benefits there are institutions in which they can live, or they may be required to move back into the family home. The relative freedoms that ILF and DLA can bring have been hard fought over

decades. The dismantling of the system can take months but it will once again take decades to return things to how they once were.

### **What needs to happen?**

Following an initial overturning of the decision to close the ILF, the proposal has been passed a second time. Show your support for organisations such as [Disabled People Against Cuts](#), [Inclusion London](#) and more who are campaigning, lobbying, and compiling case studies. You can also [contact your member of parliament](#).

If PIP is truly the answer to DLA, the whole system of applying must change. Applications must be dealt with swiftly, intelligently and sensitively. For some people, applicants are only granted funding from the date approval is given, not backdated to when the application is made. Delays in processing are leaving applicants for weeks and months without support.

**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](http://www.graeae.org)