



Chapter 5 Access to Work

Chapter Five – Access to Work

Introduction

1. The consultation recognised that Access to Work is one of our most popular and successful labour market programmes. Alongside an independent evaluation of the programme, we sought views on how it might be improved still further.

Current position

2. The Access to Work programme aims to reduce inequalities between disabled people and non-disabled people by removing practical barriers to work.
3. The four main elements of support available under Access to Work are:
 - specialist aids and equipment;
 - adaptations to premises and equipment;
 - support workers/communication support at interview; and
 - travel to work, which can include help with taxi fares.
4. The consultation recognised that Access to Work is recognised as having a range of strengths that enables the programme to provide support to disabled customers, these include:
 - tailored support – each support package is tailored to the specific requirements of each customer and their employer;
 - flexible support – the support packages are complementary to our other provision, able to adapt to changing circumstances and suitable for disabled people and/or jobs that require fluctuating or sporadic use of the support;
 - expert advice – for many employers the availability of expert advice on making workplace adjustments for their disabled staff represents the most valuable feature of the programme; and
 - no monetary upper limit on individual support packages.

5. However, there have been some concerns raised by customers and their representatives over the performance of Access to Work. Primarily these concerns have been in relation to frontline delivery, including the:
 - speed at which people are accepted to receive support;
 - speed at which support is delivered;
 - consistency of decision-making across the country; and
 - reach of the provision – i.e. awareness levels and can we help more people?
6. The consultation recognised that Jobcentre Plus was already implementing a series of positive incremental reforms to improve service delivery, including since late 2006, the appointment of a National Access to Work Delivery Manager. We believe that these reforms have already improved the speed, quality and consistency of service that people receive and we expect this to continue.

We asked:

Question 19 – If you have recent experience of our Access to Work provision, what aspects did you like the most and do you have any suggestions for improving the service?

Question 20 – What can we do to ensure Access to Work is used more effectively to meet the needs of individuals?

Question 21 – How would you try to better balance the need for consistency of decision-making in Access to Work across the country with benefits of local flexibility?

Question 22 – How can we more effectively focus Access to Work on adjustments/support beyond that which an employer should make as a reasonable adjustment under the Disability Discrimination Act?

Question 23 – Do you believe that we should increase employer contributions to Access to Work adjustments as long as the savings are reinvested in the programme?

Question 24 – Are there more innovative ways in which we could make better use of the private and third sectors in delivering Access to Work?

continued

You said:

There was overwhelming support for the Access to Work programme, with many examples of individual respondents saying it had transformed their lives.

While appreciating the support it gives, there were criticisms and suggestions on how it could be improved. Many felt the process for obtaining help was too lengthy and bureaucratic with suggestions to cut paperwork, allow employers or advocates to apply rather than the individual, and to allow application before employment started so assistance would be in place from day one. Many also wanted Access to Work to be extended to include voluntary work, work trials/ experience, job interviews and applications, and for those working less than 16 hours a week.

Other suggestions tended to be impairment specific, about specific equipment and needs of the particular impairment group. There was a concern that budgets meant the cheapest equipment, rather than the best or most appropriate equipment, for the individuals' needs was supplied, or the most appropriately qualified support.

The other major suggestion to improve the programme was to publicise it properly so that employers and the public are aware of it.

There was a general recognition of the need for better consistency across the country and local flexibility. Recognition of the contradictory nature of this made it difficult for respondents to come up with firm practical solutions. Suggestions to help this were for the production of best practice guidance and examples and a regional/district manager to oversee and ensure consistency, while managing and understanding local needs.

There was a feeling that the Department could work better with employers to promote and train them on what is a reasonable adjustment under the Disability Discrimination Act. The Department would be in the best position to collect examples of best practice and provide guidance material for employers. Other suggestions were for roadshows to employers around the country and for a dedicated staff resource to promote the programme to employers.

Specifically you said:

"The Access to Work scheme has been described by the British Chamber of Commerce as 'one of the best kept secrets in Government.' Funds for Access to Work should be increased with a view to providing more routes to employment for people with a learning disability, particularly given the Government policy of moving 1 million disabled people into work."

(Mencap)

continued

“DEAC continues to recommend that AtW be extended to disabled people participating in voluntary work, particularly as volunteering has been identified as an important route into employment for people with learning disabilities.”
(*Disability Employment Advisory Committee*)

“The new programme should value voluntary work or less than part-time work (less than 16 hours per week) as a valid outcome.”
(*RADAR*)

“Support should be provided to employers to understand what employer responsibility is under the DDA and what Access to Work will fund...DWP should recognise good employers as ‘champions’ in best practice.”
(*Mencap*)

“Access to Work could be improved by being more widely advertised, especially to disabled people and small and medium sized businesses. Reducing waiting times for assessments and provision and ensuring that Access to Work assessments are carried out before someone starts work so they can have the support, equipment or adjustments they need from day one which would also make it more effective.”
(*Scope*)

“Access to Work is a scheme that enjoys an almost unprecedented level of support from across different sectors. It is certainly valued by those that benefit from it directly, and from businesses who are able to better support their employees through the scheme. It is consistently commended by disability organisations, who whilst recognising that there are always areas for potential improvement, also recognise the vital support that it can offer.”
(*Leonard Cheshire Disability*)

“A number of organisations have produced guidance for employers and businesses about DDA responsibilities. But whilst there is guidance and information available it might be worth the DWP investigating whether some of this information could be centrally collected and coordinated to produce an over-arching ‘toolkit’ that could offer clear advice to employers.”
(*Leonard Cheshire Disability*)

“RNID believes that the Access to Work (AtW) scheme is the most successful current intervention in allowing disabled people to gain and retain paid work, and would like to see greater investment in a programme that has been proved to be of net benefit to the UK economy...the AtW programme would benefit from adopting a more person-centred approach, where the provision of support follows the individual.”
(*RNID*)

continued

“RNID believes that there is a role here for the Office of Disability Issues to promote greater understanding of employers’ responsibilities and duties under existing legislation, as well as a role for the EHRC in issuing proceedings where employers have failed to meet them.”

(RNID)

“There is a deep sense of admiration for the principles enshrined within the Access to Work programme: its flexibility, its responsiveness to a client’s individual needs, its contribution to overcoming discrimination in the employment of disabled people and that its budget has expanded in response to identified need.”

(RNIB)

“RNIB has thus been seeking to widen the eligibility criteria of Access to Work to take in people with sight loss who are engaged in volunteering...RNIB recommends that the eligibility criteria be widened to include people doing at least 16 hours a week voluntary work for a minimum for six months. This desired widening of the eligibility criteria should also be applied to the employers providing 13 week placement or work trials opportunities through the JCP Local Employment Partnerships.”

(RNIB)

We asked:

Question 25 – Ministerial Government Departments are now directly funding Access to Work adjustments for their disabled staff. What are your views on other public sector organisations paying for such adjustments if any savings were reinvested in the programme?

You said:

The majority of responders do not believe that we should increase employer contributions to Access to Work funding and an even higher majority do not support taking away Access to Work funding from public sector organisations. While there is a degree of support for the principle, the overwhelming feeling is that any increased financial burden on employers will negatively impact on the employment of disabled people and will be used as an excuse by employers (indirectly) for not employing people.

The feeling was that if we do follow the route of increasing contributions from employers there would need to be tapering or flexible contribution levels depending either on the size or the turnover of the organisation. If Access to Work funding is going to be further withdrawn from public sector organisations, respondents felt money to provide the same level of support would have to be ring fenced, and they would still want Access to Work advice services to be available.

continued

There was support for the involvement of private and third sector organisations in delivering Access to Work, more specifically in carrying out assessments and in being able to be more responsive at a local level. However, this support was not unanimous with some respondents concerned about increasing involvement from profit making organisations.

There was strong support to promote Access to Work by building links with local organisations, such as Local Strategic Partnerships, Learning and Skills Councils, local disability forums, employers' forums etc.

Specifically you said:

“DEAC believes increased employer AtW contributions would act as a disincentive for most employers. Therefore research on the impact of the employment of disabled people in Ministerial Departments (who are no longer eligible for AtW) should be taken into consideration.”

(Disability Employment Advisory Committee)

“RADAR does not support the raising of the employer Access to Work contribution threshold beyond inflation. We believe that this may provide a disincentive to employing people with significant support needs or costs. Neither does RADAR support extending the removal of Access to Work funding to the wider public sector or large private sector employers.”

(RADAR)

“Third sector organisations acting as support agencies may be well placed to deliver assessments and source personal assistants, interpreters and emergency cover for disabled employees.”

(Scope)

“More work could be undertaken with local groups of disabled people and with Local Strategic Partnerships to promote Access to Work. There are also obvious links through regional Pathways to Work and NDDP contracts as well as through City Strategies to raise awareness amongst disabled people, employers and service providers alike. There are also opportunities to work with local business and Chambers of Commerce to educate employers about the programme.”

(RNID)

How the Government is taking this forward

7. The recently published Green Paper *No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility* announced that the Access to Work budget would be doubled. The budget will be steadily increased, (although the start date for the additional funding has yet to be confirmed) and will be £138m by 2013/2014.
8. This will enable us to expand the reach of the programme, enabling us to reassure employers, benefit claimants and people seeking help to retain their jobs, that support will be available to all those who need it. As well as helping more people, the extra resource also provides an opportunity to improve the way the Access to Work support is delivered.
9. In addition to the responses we received to this consultation, an independent evaluation of the programme is due to report by the end of this year, and we will use these findings and the responses we receive to the consultation questions about Access to Work in the recent Green Paper, *No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility*, to make sure the additional funding is spent in the most effective way. This will include a close look at the delivery of the provision to ensure that it is delivered in a personalised, flexible and timely way for our customers and employers.
10. The Green Paper also announced our intention to give disabled people the right to control their lives and provide them with the support they need to live independently. We will consider how the new right might improve the employment experiences of customers who use the specialist disability employment services, including Access to Work.