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**How Accessible is Access to Work for people with sight loss in Wales?**

**3 years on**



June 2019

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**Review of recommendations and additional recommendations**

**Introduction**

**New recommendation: We would like to see apprenticeships covered by the Access to Work scheme.**

**Theme 1: Contact with clients**

**That Access to Work reinstates the practice of assigning a named advisor for each client, with telephone access that bypasses the call centre. This would provide continuity and stability for the client.**

No progress has been made under this recommendation and this continues to be a concern for many users of the scheme.

**That Access to Work demonstrates more sensitivity and flexibility around contact arrangements and only closes a case in consultation with the client.**

There continues to be a problem with cases being closed without the client’s knowledge.

**New Recommendation: That there is better inter-departmental communication between the advisor and payments team so that decisions communicated to the client are upheld by both departments.**

**Theme 2: Provision of information**

**Information about Access to Work and available support:**

**That Access to Work considers better informing the public about what is available under the scheme so that an applicant is more confident to apply for support unaided.**

With fewer people with sight loss in employment, more needs to be done to raise awareness of the Access to Work scheme. There is a request for more information in the form of factsheets (such as support worker employment status interviewing, etc.). There was also a call for a helpline to provide general advice and guidance.

**Provision of information in accessible formats:**

**That advisors understand the need to promote independence, preserve dignity and ensure confidentiality with regard to completion of forms.**

Lack of complete accessibility remains a problem and clients are still reporting that they need assistance when completing claims.

**That Access to Work implements the production of accessible documents in line with their policy of capturing the preferred format of each client.**

Progress has been made in general but more needs to be done to promote awareness of it.

**New Recommendation: That forms are sent in MS Word format, as well as accessible PDF.**

**The move to online and digital information:**

**That digital exclusion is accounted for in plans to digitise the application and claims processes.**

Positive progress has been made under this recommendation. New claimants are now able to apply online, however, clients are still unable to process claim forms online. We recommend that a representative from Wales sits on the stakeholder group to review accessibility.

It was suggested that all information and forms be available online and that they are laid out consistently and concisely.

**Information to be provided by the client to Access to Work**

**New recommendation: That a Certificate of Visual Impairment is accepted as medical evidence at the stage of establishing eligibility.**

**New recommendation: That Access to Work should review their policy on obtaining medical evidence for renewals. It is unacceptable and insulting for disabled people to keep evidencing their health condition where there will be no improvement or recovery.**

**New recommendation: That an online management system is introduced where each client has the ability to access their data, upload claims and check progress of payments.**

For people who may require assistance, DWP may wish to consider providing online access through local job centres and libraries.

**Theme 3: Advisor skills and knowledge:**

**That Access to Work advisors receive specific vision impairment awareness training, to include knowledge of sight conditions and disability equality training, delivered by blind and partially sighted people themselves. This would provide positive role models and adopt the ‘nothing about us without us’ approach.**

There remains evidence that the training provided by Access to Work is not sufficient in relation to sight loss.

**New recommendation: Advisors should be encouraged to use their common sense when interviewing clients to avoid insensitive questioning.**

**Theme 4: Assessments:**

**That assessments should be offered as a matter of right and conducted by an individual who has a broad knowledge of sight loss, associated technologies and what is available in Wales. This will ensure that the client receives advice and recommendations that fully support their needs.**

Assessments are not being offered as a matter of right and there is strong evidence showing that many assessors do not understand sight loss or the full range of support available. We recommend that those assessors assigned to people with sight loss must undergo specific vision impairment awareness training and have the full knowledge of access technologies available.

**That where an assessment has been conducted it should form the basis for the subsequent package of support.**

This seems to be the normal state of affairs.

**That clients are able to offer suggestions and modifications to the final report without having to go through a formal appeals process.**

Unfortunately, it remains difficult for many to be able to make suggestions after the final report has been submitted.

**That the client’s equipment needs are reviewed periodically.**

There is no evidence to show is happening.

**New recommendation: That all assessments are carried out face-to-face at the client’s place of work and not over the telephone.**

**New recommendation: Solutions should be appropriate to the client and their role and not merely inexpensive.**

**New recommendation: Access to Work should reinstate a categorisation of skill sets so that people with sight loss are always assessed by someone who understands sight loss and the broad range of specialist equipment available.**

**New recommendation: Equipment is demonstrated during the assessment or prior to purchase so that clients can decide if the recommended equipment is the best solution for them.**

**Theme 5: Payments, reviews and personalised budgets**

**Impact of delays on payment**

**That a direct line of contact is established between the client and the claims team to increase communication and the speed of payments.**

Clients continue to report problems with processing claim forms such as forms returned due to minor errors leading to delays with payment. These problems could be resolved with a direct line of contact.

**That clients whose personal budgets exceed the cap are contacted well in advance to discuss solutions and receive support in adapting to the cut in the level of support.**

In 2016, the cap on personalised budget was £40,800. As of 1st April 2019, people will be able to claim up to £59,200. This is welcomed and should reduce the number of people who exceed the upper limit.

**Introduction of a float system of payment**

**New recommendation: That a float system is introduced to enable clients to pay for their support in a timely manner whilst awaiting money from Access to Work.**

**Flexibility of support worker hours, payments and recruitment:**

**That advisors must promote choice and flexibility in how the hours for a support worker are allocated.**

There are many examples highlighting inconsistency of support worker hours.

**That guidance on salary / payments for support workers are made available.**

Access to Work has not released any information in this regard.

**That advisors recognise the differing travel needs of individual clients, in relation to both their personal abilities and the requirements of their job. This includes implementing a more flexible approach for people with sight loss who are unable to drive motability vehicles.**

This remains varied.

**New recommendation: That advisors are more responsive to the changing needs of the client within the fare within work scheme. Allocating a budget would achieve greater flexibility for the client.**

**That Access to Work contacts people with sight loss giving them advanced notice of their claim period coming to an end.**

This is causing considerable concern and anxiety for many.

**New recommendation: That all clients are provided with 3 months advanced notification, in their preferred format, of their renewal date.**

**That Access to Work abandons the use of the tax threshold as a measure of eligibility for self employed applicants in favour of a more holistic assessment of a business’ viability.**

We have not received any new observations on this recommendation.

**That Access to Work promotes a better understanding amongst staff and clients around the scope and purpose of travel training.**

We have not received any new observations on this recommendation.

**Background**

The Access to Work scheme is available throughout the UK under the control of the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Access to Work is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people start or stay in work. It can provide practical and financial support if you have a disability or long term physical or mental health condition (see Appendix 1).

There are nearly 111,000 people in Wales living with sight loss[[1]](#footnote-1) and 17,000 registered blind or partially sighted. The number of people with sight loss is set to increase by 32% by 2030 and double by 2050.

RNIB’s research briefing ‘Key findings from Employment’[[2]](#footnote-2) stated that 66% of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are not in paid employment [2006], and that people with sight loss are nearly five times more likely to have been not in paid employment for five years or more that the general population [2009]. In addition, research has shown that 90% of employers believe that it would be impossible or difficult to employ someone with sight loss, presenting huge barriers to finding work[[3]](#footnote-3).

Today, “only one in four registered blind or partially-sighted people of working age is in paid employment, and this number is falling”[[4]](#footnote-4). In 2006, this number was 34%[[5]](#footnote-5). This highlights the fall and provides clear evidence that more needs to be done to reduce unemployment amongst people with sight loss in Wales and across the UK.

None of Access to Work’s functions are devolved to Wales. However, Welsh Government in its aspiration to increase the number of disabled people in employment could play a role in influencing change and improvement, as detailed within this report.

Welsh Government stated in their Employability Plan 2018 that too few disabled people are in work (around 45% of those of working age), and that they will work with partners to address the issues behind this, including employer attitudes, job design and working practices.

Welsh Government will work to increase the number of employers who place emphasis on creating workplaces that are inclusive and supportive environments for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions. Raising awareness of the Access to Work scheme is an important element of this and we welcome Welsh Government establishing appropriate ten-year targets to focus employer’s efforts to get more disabled people into employment.

Action 2 within the section Prosperous and Secure of the ‘Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living’ is to increase the take-up of Access to Work in Wales. Third sector organisations in Wales welcome Welsh Government’s commitment in “continuing to work actively with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and others through their employment support networks, and to ensure that the DWP’s Access to Work scheme is promoted and there is a significant raising of awareness with employers and individuals for how the scheme can help disabled people, those with mental health conditions and work-limiting health conditions to remain in, or to move into employment and increase the take-up of the scheme in Wales.”

Welsh Government “recognise there is more that we need to do in partnership to help and continue raising awareness of this scheme. Therefore, we [Welsh Government] will actively promote the scheme via the appropriate fora to ensure a higher uptake of the scheme in Wales. We will also continue to build on the opportunities from gaining additional support for internships, apprenticeships where feasible, for those individuals with disabilities[[6]](#footnote-6).”

In January 2016, Wales Council of the Blind and RNIB Cymru published a report on ‘How accessible is Access to Work in Wales’. It came to the attention of sight loss charities in Wales that people with sight loss who were receiving support through the Access to Work programme were having difficulties at the application stage, during their assessment or with the payment and review processes.

The report looked at 5 key themes: contact with clients; information; advisor skills and knowledge; assessments; and payments, reviews and personalised budgets. The report made a number of recommendations.

This report will look back over the past three years to identify any progress made and review the recommendations, as well as highlight new or on-going concerns.

**Purpose of this report**

This report will outline the problems that are being experienced by Access to Work applicants and recipients at the different stages of the process. The report will also reference the previous report, highlighting where changes have been made and where concerns remain 3 years on. This report will highlight the previous 5 themes that emerged from focus group discussion and case studies:

Theme 1 - contact with clients

Theme 2 - provision of information

Theme 3 - advisor skills and knowledge

Theme 4 - assessments; and

Theme 5 - payments, reviews and personalised budgets

These are addressed in turn and recommendations are given to address concerns arising.

**Context**

There have been a number of changes to the Access to Work scheme across the UK since 2011 including an increase in funding from the UK Government and working closer with stakeholders to improve the scheme. We hope that evidence detailed within this report will help improve the scheme for the benefit of people with sight loss.

**Method**

In October 2018, 16 people with sight loss from a range of employment backgrounds, third sector organisations and representation from Wales Rehabilitation Officers Forum (WROF) attended a meeting with Access to Work to share their experiences. The meeting, held by Wales Council of the Blind, was arranged following continuing concerns raised by people with sight loss, members of the Wales Vision Forum and WROF. We have also collected case studies / comments from an additional 25 blind and partially sighted users of the service in Wales [October 2018 – April 2019].

This report highlights the experiences of people with sight loss and gives recommendations for improved performance. This report references the original ‘How Accessible is Access to Work in Wales’[[7]](#footnote-7) and looks at what has been achieved and where improvements are still needed.

**Introduction**

There is overwhelming support from disabled people, employers and third sector organisations for the Access to Work programme in Wales and the support it provides.

“We all agree that we could not do our jobs without Access to Work. It enables equality in the work place and makes it possible for us to regard ourselves, and be regarded by others, as having an equal contribution to make.”

“When the system is set up and working, it has the potential to be very effective and efficient.”

“Over 14 years of using access to work I have achieved my goal of working full time, supporting my family in a fantastic job helping other people with a vision impairment. I would not be able to carry out my role without the support of Access to Work, the dedication of support workers, a volunteer and the vital access software and equipment provided by my employers.”

However, there are many barriers to work faced by blind and partially sighted people such as anxiety and confidence issues, transport and availability of suitable employment, as well as training, qualifications and opportunities. Three years on, Access to Work, a Government scheme that is meant to help people get and stay in work, continues to be for many yet another barrier to the workplace. There remains a culture of mistrust.

“We are not using the money dishonestly”.

“I was asked to provide a copy of my bus pass to prove that I was not driving. Don’t they believe me when I say I cant drive? I am blind!”

In addition to barriers created by Access to Work itself, employees and employers often remain unaware of the purpose, scope and impact of Access to Work.

“It is as though they have a shop with blacked out windows”[[8]](#footnote-8).

There is continued evidence of ambiguity and confusion around the services provided through Access to Work which may contribute to the reluctance of some employers to consider employing a person with sight loss. Three years ago we reported that these have been compounded by changes to the Access to Work programme structure, which include the centralisation of the advisors through the reduction of locations across the UK from 70 to just three. This resulted in a move towards telephone-based advice and initial assessment of need rather than personal face to face meetings and has caused delay and unnecessary worry for people with sight loss. Today, disabled people continue to report problems with centralisation, geography and language.

“[Previously] the service was much better, individually tailored and timely when administered regionally (Wales).”

Access to Work is failing to reassure employers that the scheme has a minimal effect on the employee’s ability to carry out their role. We hear of clients relying on the goodwill of employers in allowing additional time for equipment and other solutions to be available before they can carry out their jobs.

“I had an ATW assessment and was successful in having a laptop at home with access software to support my admin role. I also had a lighting assessment in a new workplace and on-going work to try to set me up in an office environment in a call centre role but I was unsuccessful in having suitable access software, so didn’t actually start work. I was paid in full for at least 4 months whilst the assessments were going on.”

“I experienced sudden sight loss in full time work. My employer was very accommodating and put me on Gardening Leave until my access issues were resolved. My employee had support from the ACE Project at Sight Cymru around accessible software that enabled me to access my computer system and database at work.”

We would like to see the Access to Work scheme supporting disabled people undertaking apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are an important stepping stone for disabled people getting into employment and it would give very negative signals if people were falling at the first hurdle and being discouraged due to a lack of support.

**Recommendations**

**New recommendation: We would like to see apprenticeships covered by the Access to Work scheme.**

**Theme 1 - contact with clients**

**Dignity and respect**

“Everyone should be treated with respect without prejudice and in a more positive manner. The process of applying for Access to Work is stressful, frustrating and difficult at times. By working together this process could be made effective and amicable for all.”

Individuals considered that a positive aspect of Access to Work’s approach was that it “exists to support individual disabled people in employment, and is focused on that individual's support requirements, not on the employer.”

However, experiences of first contact with Access to Work remain variable.

“I contacted the call centre and spoke to the rudest person ever, which led me to complain to DWP. I have since received two apologies.”

“My latest experience with Access to Work has been a pretty bad one but the relationship has always been difficult, a constant battle from start to finish.”

“You get stressed, trying to explain your reasons for needing support.”

Ongoing treatment from Access to Work advisors can be perceived as disrespectful.

“I have been spoken to in a rude, abrupt and aggressive manner on more than one occasion. Made to feel as if I am in the wrong. I have been accused of forging my own signature and sending in a photocopy.”

“Letter of apology for absolutely shocking experience. My first 11 months in post using Access to Work totally unacceptable.”

**Communicating with client**

People with sight loss felt that there is a poor level of communication from Access to Work.

“Lack of communication.”

“Unrealistic expectations – I expected one thing but got another.”

“My advisor does not respond to emails. I have complained - system needs to change.”

“There was a language barrier and I found it difficult to explain my needs. There was a lack of understanding of sight loss.”

“I applied to Access to Work three times. The second time I was awarded travel to work but I was not informed. Communication between Access to Work and the client (us) is a real issue.”

“Access to Work can only contact me in work now. They called me three times in two weeks while I was off sick, in order to conduct a review. I explained my circumstances but the calls continued and in the end I felt obliged to take a call and do the review”.

Furthermore, there continues to be a perceived lack of consistency as people with sight loss feel they are not dealing with the same advisor each time who would be able to build up a rapport and understanding of their disability.

Three years ago, we recommended that “Access to Work reinstates the practice of assigning a named advisor for each client… this would provide continuity and stability for the client.”

Formerly, having a named advisor who would handle your case throughout was beneficial because this consistency made the service person-centred where the advisor builds a rich understanding of the individual’s needs. The report published in January 2016, stated that this has now been lost and the lack of understanding around sensory loss can give the impression of insensitivity to an individual’s situation.

“Access to Work need to go back to how we had it before!”

“The service was much better, individually tailored and timely when administered regionally (Wales).”

“Are case notes being recorded and shared amongst departments? Having a named advisor would resolve these issues.”

“Advisors are ‘automaton like’.”

**Delays in agreeing support**

Delays to the service seem to be a problem for many. Delays to getting support in place can put considerably pressure on the relationship between employee and employer which could lead to someone being forced to leave the job. Citizens Advice report that disabled people are almost three times more likely to leave their job in any given year[[9]](#footnote-9).

“Claimants waiting for support could possibly lose their job and be in financial hardship. This nearly happened to me, as the two-week deadline was to fall while the officer was away, adding further delays. Naturally my case was rejected and dropped, was told to re appeal if I wanted to.”

“Access to Work took 3 months to put assistance in place for my 6-month contract.”

“Recently moved, provided with 3 quotations for taxi fare, as requested. I have waited 3 months so far for approval.”

“If these delays continue I will have to go on the sick.”

“Delays in getting back to you after initial point of contact.”

“Overall I find the Access to Work process frustrating to go through. When attempting to make a claim you usually end up phoning them then having someone phone you back. Thus means that you are reliant on them phoning you when you are not busy and have the information in front of you, which is unlikely.”

“I requested access software as I knew what I wanted. Three months on, nothing has been sorted at all.”

**Welsh language support**

People who’s first language is Welsh are being disadvantaged as the initial point of contact is with an advisor outside of Access to Work. We suspect that the lack of in-house Welsh language is creating additional delays.

“Spoke to someone in Welsh – provided them with change of address and 3 quotes as previously requested – advisor did not work for Access to Work which they only explained after I had given personal details. They informed me that they would pass details on to Access to Work advisor and that they would call me back. This took 6 weeks. During the delay I had to pay out of my own pocket, saving receipts and hoping that Access to Work would back pay.”

**“A shop with blacked out windows”.**

There is a sense of Access to Work holding their cards close to their chest in not being transparent about what could be available to the client.

“I contacted Access to Work to make an application. I was called back and when the call handler processed the claim they only dealt with the travel element. I thought that my Access to Work advisor would ring back about the support required for accessing my computer. After a couple of weeks, I enquired as to why no one had contacted me. They informed me that a new claim would need to be made. I then had an IT assessment and I am waiting for my employer to purchase and organise the training. It would have helped if the call handler had explained what needed to be done and processed the two parts of the claim at the same time.”

There remain suggestions that the pervasive attitude reflects rather more ‘efficiency’ and ‘cost effectiveness’ than customer focus:

“I was made to feel that I was spending the advisor’s own money.”

“I was contacted by Access to Work and asked to reduce my support workers hours!”

Access to Work confirmed that there is no upper limit on the number of support worker hours a person can claim. However,

“I have received Access to Work for 14 years. I have recently been told that I cannot receive full-time support, why? My role has not changed nor has my disability! This just feels like a cost cutting exercise. This will have a huge impact on my role.”

**Internal communication**

Many clients have reported confusion between departments such as the contact centre and payment teams. More needs to be done so that customers are getting the right advice and a clear and consistent message.

“The processes in place do not appear to be very robust. I can phone one day and receive one piece of information and then the next day be told the total opposite. For example, on following up on a claim that had been submitted I was told it had been received but the next day I phoned and was told it had not been received. When I advised that I had previously been notified of receipt the staff member advised she did not have access to the payments screen so it was possible it had been received.”

“Communication between different departments i.e. when a person is off sick other staff can continue with claims / issues. This has not happened. I was told that it was unclear what the issue was therefore not getting a result. I was told that the person may be in next day, and when I contacted ATW they weren't. AGAIN issues not being dealt with.”

“I have a case officer at Access to Work, who I understand was following the ridiculously flawed new criteria and protocol. But when I reached out to her for further assistance, as she was my case handler, she was on leave (which in itself is fine) but there was an entire two week period where my case would NOT be assisted by anybody else as there was no second person allowed to pick up any case. What would happen if someone is off for longer?”

Lack of communication between the advisor and payments team is evident and can result in delays when processing claims. This creates additional financial hardship as the employee may need to find money to pay for their support in the interim. This is unacceptable and many clients suggested the use of a float system where clients are paid in advance to avoid such delays in payment to their support worker.

As reported in the Equality and Human Rights Commission report ‘Is Wales Fairer’, “the small overall shift toward higher-pay occupations is not benefiting disabled people; in fact, the number of disabled people in low-pay occupations has increased.” Therefore, if disabled people are to be able to retain employment there needs to be no additional financial pressure put on them as a result of administrative delays.

A client has reported considerable problems with the processing of their claim forms with Incorrect information was being relayed and passed through Access to Work’s different departments. Access to Work insisted that the mileage driven by their support worker be added to the form despite the client repeatedly explaining that their employer pays the mileage and that the client does not intend to claim it through the Access to Work scheme. Never the less the Access to Work payments team deducted the mileage cost off the overall claim, leaving the employee to make up the shortfall owed to their driver. This was challenged successfully but it took several months to resolve. There was clear confusion between the advisor and payments team.

“It has been a very stressful, upsetting and horrendous time. I am seriously considering whether or not to reapply for ATW which I have to do in a couple of weeks time, as I am not fully confident that things will improve.”

The client submitted a claim form for the first two-week period of a new job but was not aware that the claim had not been processed. The claim for additional hours was rejected and remained unsettled some two months later.

“My advisor made the decision to award additional support for the two-week period but the payments department overturned the advisor’s decision.”

This put unnecessary pressure on the client and created problems that could have been so easily avoided.

“Following policy is getting in the way of common sense and what is best for us to succeed.”

**Recommendations:**

**That Access to Work reinstates the practice of assigning a named advisor for each client, with telephone access that bypasses the call centre. This would provide continuity and stability for the client.**

No progress has been made under this recommendation and this continues to be a concern for many users of the scheme.

**That Access to Work demonstrates more sensitivity and flexibility around contact arrangements and only closes a case in consultation with the client.**

There continues to be a problem with cases being closed without the client’s knowledge.

**New Recommendation: That there is better inter-departmental communication between the advisor and payments team so that decisions communicated to the client are upheld by both departments.**

**Theme 2 – Provision of information**

Concerns about information are fourfold: information about Access to Work and available support; information provided to the client in accessible formats; online application process; and information to be provided by the client to Access to Work.

**Information about Access to Work and available support**

It remains the case that “there are strong feelings that the availability of support is a well hidden secret.” As discussed in the background above Welsh Government could play a part in raising awareness of the scheme overall. In addition to this, it is essential that Access to Work keep clients informed of changes to procedures and processes. This includes forms and paperwork that are currently being changed without sufficient notice and not laid out in a consistent style.

“The pitfalls I have experienced over the years have been when Access to Work offices were closed and no one was informed. The impact was long delays in payments as post was diverted. Also paperwork was being returned because someone had decided to change the information needed, without informing me. However instead of telling us beforehand we only know when the payments stop and forms are returned requesting information and changing the form. It would help to have standardised forms for everyone and notice when they need to be changed. Recently we were told that we had to sign in blue ink rather than black ink.”

“I feel that information needs to be communicated clearly between Access to Work and its clients, (us), about the process of claiming and renewing, and what will happen next. Maybe a frequently asked questions page on their website would help here? I did look recently, and this all seemed to be aimed at new clients, rather than renewals.”

“Access to Work changed what details are required on a claim form, without informing me, resulting in my claim forms being returned.”

**Provision of information in accessible formats**

We understand that a survey will be circulated soon to gather customer experiences of Access to Work process form start to finish. We would like to see this circulated to all users of Access to Work in their preferred format and method of communication.

Clients are not always aware of what is available in relation to accessible forms, etc.

“I send my claim form in plain text format, which has been accepted without question.”

This seems to be an exception but is another example where an advisor has put the client’s needs ahead of protocol.

The group asked if paperwork could be sent out in MS Word format, as PDF versions were not accessible. Over the past three years there has been an improvement in relation to the production of accessible documents. This corresponds to the recommendation in our earlier report “that Access to Work implements the production of accessible documents in line with their policy of capturing the preferred format of each client.” However, these are not always sent out and this raises the question as to whether an individual’s preferred format is recorded and acted upon.

“I have never received a letter in large print despite informing Access to Work of my preferred format.”

Clients are still reporting that they are having to compromise their privacy and independence in order to get some forms completed.

“Some elements of the process are reliant on paper forms being filled in. A person who has difficulty with dexterity may not be able to do this meaning that they would be dependent on finding someone to do it for them. This takes away their independence.”

“Unfortunately, my last claim in 2017 was highly problematic for me to do independently. Many of the necessary documents that needed to be completed were in PDF format. This made it very challenging for me to complete this as PDF documents are not easy to edit. I needed help in particular to complete the log.”

**The move to online and digital information**

Access to Work informed the group that they had experienced difficulties with processing payments. They are going through a digital transformation to enable claims to be completed online and paid digitally.

“There is clearly a need for an accessible on-line system.”

“I would personally enjoy a more online experience for claim renewals, as well as making a new claim, which is currently online, and for electronic versions of documents to be available. I know printed materials need to be sent out for us to sign, however electronic versions should also be available, with an agreed password to protect sensitive information.”

The introduction of a digital on-line platform to process claim forms and payments is welcomed. However, the system needs to be accessible to all. The group offered to provide feedback on accessibility and ease of use when the digital transformation is complete. Access to Work confirmed that accessibility testing would be carried out prior to the system going live. The report of 2016 recommended that digital exclusion is accounted for in the plans to digitise the application and claims process. We welcome progress in this regard.

We understand that a stakeholder group will be set up to review accessibility of online and accessible forms. Access to Work welcomes feedback and there will also be an opportunity to do this via the website. Access to Work confirmed that the on-line system will meet accessibility requirements – Government Digital Service.

Online applications will only be available for new applications, at present.

“This is my first job since graduating from University, directed to on-line application form, difficulty knowing what to ask for with on-line form as this is new to me. I didn’t find the form that accessible and had to ask for help from my family.”

“RNIB helped me initially, on line, but somehow this application was lost.”

“I reapplied twice and had to explain to the call handler, who was very helpful, but I was stressed!”

**Information to be provided by the client to Access to Work.**

Access to Work should be mindful that the information requested of the client may be inaccessible in itself to the client (such as taxi receipts, etc.) and that this poses difficulties with submission.

“I found it an issue that I needed to scan documents to provide evidence rather than find another format that I could access. Although I had obtained necessary price quotes for some things via email I needed to print these before scanning them again for use. Subsequently, I needed quite a lot of help in the end to achieve this.”

The provision of medical evidence runs counter to the social model of disability. Be that as it may, obtaining and supplying medical evidence adds a significant delay to the process of obtaining support; GPs often feel it is beyond their remit to write letters of support concerning the impact of the clients condition on their work capability; GPs will give the bare medical evidence but often at a price. Also, why should clients be asked to provide evidence again when their condition is never likely to improve? There should be a culture more of trust than suspicion.

Importantly, most people with sight loss who have received a Certificate of Visual Impairment (CVI) from a qualified Ophthalmologist rightly feel that this provides sufficient evidence. The Ophthalmologist is the best person to provide medical evidence. However, a number of people suggest that the Rehabilitation Officer for the Visually Impaired (ROVI) is the person to provide an opinion as to how the employees sight loss affects their ability to work.

“I received a letter that stated that I needed to ask my GP for a letter that clearly states the reasons why your condition affects your ability to travel by public transport, drive and walk. The situation was that my GP, who does not know me personally, and in fact I have sporadically seen a handful of times for unrelated matters to my sight loss, refused to write me a letter addressing these reasons as, and I quote:

“I don’t live with you, I don’t know how you cope day to day with your vision. I am willing to put into writing evidence of your eye conditions along with your CVI, but I cannot risk my credibility as I have no understanding of how you are outside of this practice”.

“Getting medical evidence from my GP delayed my application by six weeks. I have a CVI, why can’t this be used? Surely, this would end unnecessary delay.”

“A Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) is a legal document stating that you are vision impaired and should be treated as such because a Consultant is the only person able to sign the form. My doctor would have no knowledge about my vision impairment.”

In terms of the application process, there is a lack of consistency between the types of evidence required from person to person.

“I was asked for a letter from my GP, costing me £30 and delaying my application, whilst a colleague of mine was not asked for one.”

The group would like to see the Certificate of Visual Impairment accepted as medical evidence. This could greatly speed up the process for those who have a CVI. We have been informed that Access to Work are looking into this and hope to update their policy.

“The medical evidence required is an absolute farce. My GP refused to sign the form due to a blanket ban on the signing of forms at the surgery. They will only allow patients to request evidence from their medical records and pay £10 for it. Consequently, I had to write to the stroke specialist who agreed to sign the form. I am still waiting for him to return the form because he is away on holiday. I do not agree with this method of proving your type of disability. It’s undignified, causes unnecessary angst and is time-consuming, not to mention costly for people who are asked to pay admin fees”.

“There was a delay in getting medical evidence from my GP. For six weeks I had no acknowledgment of support.”

“I was given two weeks to get medical evidence from my GP. It took six weeks! My application was closed. I have been in work for three months and I have no support in place.

“I was given 2 weeks to provide medical evidence but it can take over three weeks to get an appointment at my GP surgery and therefore had to book an emergency appointment for this, plus taking away a vital and crucial appointment from another member of the public. That is morally unacceptable.”

“As someone who is registered Severe Sight Impaired, that has a Certificate of Visual Impairment (CVI) plus support from Rehabilitation Officers for Visual Impairment (ROVI) who are in the ultimately perfect position professionally to address these reasons were not considered sufficient enough evidence. What was I supposed to do? I was basically asked to prove why my blindness stops me from driving! Really?”

**Recommendations:**

**Information about Access to Work and available support:**

**That Access to Work considers better informing the public about what is available under the scheme so that an applicant is more confident to apply for support unaided.**

With fewer people with sight loss in employment, more needs to be done to raise awareness of the Access to Work scheme. There is a request for more information in the form of factsheets (such as support worker employment status interviewing, etc.). There was also a call for a helpline to provide general advice and guidance.

**Provision of information in accessible formats:**

**That advisors understand the need to promote independence, preserve dignity and ensure confidentiality with regard to completion of forms.**

Lack of complete accessibility remains a problem and clients are still reporting that they need assistance when completing claims.

**That Access to Work implements the production of accessible documents in line with their policy of capturing the preferred format of each client.**

Progress has been made in general but more needs to be done to promote awareness of it.

**New Recommendation: That forms are sent in MS Word format, as well as accessible PDF.**

**The move to online and digital information:**

**That digital exclusion is accounted for in plans to digitise the application and claims processes.**

Positive progress has been made under this recommendation. New claimants are now able to apply online, however, clients are still unable to process claim forms online. We recommend that a representative from Wales sits on the stakeholder group to review accessibility.

It was suggested that all information and forms be available online and that they are laid out consistently and concisely.

**Information to be provided by the client to Access to Work**

**New recommendation: That a Certificate of Visual Impairment is accepted as medical evidence at the stage of establishing eligibility.**

**New recommendation: That Access to Work should review their policy on obtaining medical evidence for renewals. It is unacceptable and insulting for disabled people to keep evidencing their health condition where there will be no improvement or recovery.**

**New recommendation: That an online management system is introduced where each client has the ability to access their data, upload claims and check progress of payments.**

For people who may require assistance, DWP may wish to consider providing online access through local job centres and libraries.

**Theme 3 – Advisor skills and knowledge**

**Empathy**

The meeting and case studies continues to show a lack of empathy and understanding from Access to Work advisors. DWP provide their staff with a two-day workshop on disability awareness training. However, despite this, knowledge continues to be largely reported as poor and there is no evidence that this training sufficiently covers sight loss including sight conditions.

“Empathy and understanding of my sight loss and condition remains a major concern for me”.

“Lack of understanding about disability and requirements.”

“It is degrading to keep explaining and proving my sight condition all the time and to people who I just don’t think get it”

One client reported that the assessor, knowing they had significant sight loss and lived a few miles from where they worked, asked the following questions as part of their initial assessment:

“Why can’t you drive a car?”

“Why can’t you ride a bike?”

“Why can’t you walk to work?”

These appear to be standard questions asked by advisors but if the advisor understood sight loss these questions would not have been asked.

“This policy has to change…”

“The advisor was aggressive with their questioning – the advisor knew I had sight loss but continued asking standard questions – have some thought!”

Access to Work is invaluable and, for many, enables people with sight loss to remain in work and fulfill their role. However, many continue to feel that they are not treated with dignity and made to feel guilty.

“The advisor did not understand my sight condition and could not grasp that I had a complex job which involved extensive travel within it. I was left to feel like I didn’t fit in the box where they wanted to put people with sight loss.”

“I feel that advisors struggle to understand that people with sight loss can achieve our goals!”

“I felt pressured by Access to Work to reduce the support that I received, even though it was working for me and enabling me to fulfill my role”.

“My advisor was eating during our conversation. This is unprofessional and hindered my ability to get my issues across.”

**Inconsistency of advisors**

Many people are reporting that their experience is dependent on the advisor, which is the luck of the draw. All advisors should have the skill-set and training to handle enquiries.

“I do feel concerned about speaking to Access to Work, particularly as my renewal is still on-going, as I feel based on other people’s interactions, that **the outcome can depend on who I speak to**. This makes me feel unsure of the process, what will happen regarding my claim, and of course the issue of when it comes to organising support for off-site work, what the process will be regards this also.”

“My experience with Access to Work, I’m afraid, has been a very mixed bag. When I first applied, in 2014, I found the process quite confusing and frustrating. I received on multiple occasions a phone call from the same case handler asking me the same questions that they had asked the week before and which they had already received the information to. I found this highly frustrating as it held up my claim despite the information having been provided.”

Whilst ongoing training for staff is welcomed, more emphasis needs to be placed on condition-specific training to ensure a better understanding of the particular barriers faced by people with various kinds of sight condition. The training needs to include knowledge of different sight conditions and the types of support appropriate to each. This will help to make the advisor more understanding of each client’s individual requirements.

**Recommendations:**

**That Access to Work advisors receive specific vision impairment awareness training, to include knowledge of sight conditions and disability equality training, delivered by blind and partially sighted people themselves. This would provide positive role models and adopt the ‘nothing about us without us’ approach.**

There remains evidence that the training provided by Access to Work is not sufficient in relation to sight loss.

**New recommendation: Advisors should be encouraged to use their common sense when interviewing clients to avoid insensitive questioning.**

**Theme 4 - Assessments**

We have received a number of positive experiences in relation to technical assessments. However, this is determined by the experience of the assessor with many people feeling that it is the “luck of the draw”.

It is important that the assessor understands that the client is often well informed about the type of support they need. What should ensue is a discussion between the assessor and the client on the full range of the support available and to arrive at an informed decision as to the most suitable products and services. There will be instances where the client knows very little or, on the other hand, will know exactly what they need but the important thing remains that a discussion takes place that serves the needs of the employee in the workplace.

“My assessor recorded different equipment to what was requested. The resulting confusion meant that it took 11 months for my equipment to arrive. This resulted in me leaving that position to work in another department.”

Where clients don’t know what is available it is the role of the assessor to advise them. There is a call for Access to Work to return to banding assessors by skill set. Assessors should have the skill-set and knowledge to assess people with sight loss and there is overwhelming evidence of an inconsistent service in this regard.

We would like to understand the level of training offered to assessors, as well as their experience and knowledge of sight loss and the range of access technologies available.

Assessors who have direct knowledge of sight loss and the impact it has on everyday life can bring significant added value to the client, employer and Access to Work.

For example, one client used to catch the bus to work but became most anxious on the walk from the bus station to their office due to increased traffic volume and road crossings, leaving the client exhausted. The assessor identified this and instigated fares to work.

“The taxi has greatly reduced my stress.”

Assessors who are aware of local support such as a Rehabilitation Officer for the Visually Impaired (ROVI), Low Vision Service Wales accredited practitioner or third sector partner also brings added value.

“My assessor told me about a ROVI. The ROVI provided me with skills and tips that enabled me to feel more confident to talk about my sight with colleagues.”

However, a lack of knowledge of the impact of sight loss can have a negative effect on the quality of the assessment and the overall outcome.

“I started job in November 2017. Access to Work equipment assessment done incorrectly. As a result had some of the equipment in March (that's four months without equipment) making my job twice as hard, putting me under undue stress and anxiety. The rest in Sept 2018, that is exactly ten months before I got all of the equipment.”

“My first assessor admitted to having no knowledge of sight loss or equipment and resources to empower people within their role. I asked for an experienced assessor – the assessor was then able to assess my need. I only knew what to ask for due to long standing experience of using assessors.”

Some members of the group felt that they were being offered inexpensive solutions and not the best solution to meet their sight condition and employment needs. This is false economy.

“My assessor was great and understood my needs. However, the assessor was provided with out-of-date information about my role. He provided me with a mono mouse but I know there are better products available.”

“I have had a right battle with ATW to get them to refer back to workplace assessor for alternative equipment. Although they have provided alternatives, as I have never seen the devices they recommended it is difficult to say whether or not they are suitable.”

Several members of the group felt that face-to-face assessments achieved a better outcome than those completed over the phone. We believe all assessments should be carried out at the employee’s place of work.

“Both assessors wanted to undertake assessment remotely and not face-to-face with no prior knowledge of my needs, workplace or circumstances.”

“The assessor suggested a solution that was not accessible. They had very limited knowledge of sight and hearing loss. I felt that solutions were offered as they were cheap and that there was a cost saving approach to the assessment and not what was best for me.”

“I waited six months for my equipment for a one-year long contract. The paperwork sat with an advisor for four months.”

We understand that there is no measure on turnaround time at present. However, it should be 20 days. More awareness is needed that once Access to Work has made a decision, the employer is responsible for ordering the equipment.

We received an instance where it seems as if the third party assessor was pressurising the client to meet their own targets.

“I recently underwent an assessment due to deterioration in my sight and hearing. I was asked what my availability was over a two-week period but nothing happened. I was then asked to provide further dates over another two-week period. I was then offered a date that I told them I wasn’t available on. I was then questioned as to why I was taking annual leave during a referral period! When I threatened to complain to Access to Work a date was immediately arranged with the assessor.”

**Recommendations:**

**That assessments should be offered as a matter of right and conducted by an individual who has a broad knowledge of sight loss, associated technologies and what is available in Wales. This will ensure that the client receives advice and recommendations that fully support their needs.**

Assessments are not being offered as a matter of right and there is strong evidence showing that many assessors do not understand sight loss or the full range of support available. We recommend that those assessors assigned to people with sight loss must undergo specific vision impairment awareness training and have the full knowledge of access technologies available.

**That where an assessment has been conducted it should form the basis for the subsequent package of support.**

This seems to be the normal state of affairs.

**That clients are able to offer suggestions and modifications to the final report without having to go through a formal appeals process.**

Unfortunately, it remains difficult for many to be able to make suggestions after the final report has been submitted.

**That the client’s equipment needs are reviewed periodically.**

There is no evidence to show is happening.

**New recommendation: That all assessments are carried out face-to-face at the client’s place of work and not over the telephone.**

**New recommendation: Solutions should be appropriate to the client and their role and not merely inexpensive.**

**New recommendation: Access to Work should reinstate a categorisation of skill sets so that people with sight loss are always assessed by someone who understands sight loss and the broad range of specialist equipment available.**

**New recommendation: Equipment is demonstrated during the assessment or prior to purchase so that client’s can decide if the recommended equipment is the best solution for them.**

**Theme 5 – Payments, reviews and personalised budgets**

“I thought they were supposed to assist my working life not make it horrendously complicated and stressful.”

Concerns around the processes involving payments and reviews are arguably the biggest area of concern for blind and partially sighted people in employment.

**Impact of delays on payment**

The group highlighted the anxiety clients experience when completing claim forms. There are instances of forms being rejected and returned due to minor errors resulting in delayed payments. There is also no consistency regarding the reasons for returning the forms. The group was informed that 90% of fully completed claims are usually processed within 24 hours. However, they can take up to 10 days. Access to Work is looking at processing claim forms quicker.

“Claim forms are returned for the simplest of reasons. This dismissive behavior subsequently means that a person does not get paid.”

“My support worker is often paid late, even when their fortnightly claim form is sent recorded delivery.”

“I have asked ATW to agree back pay because the process is taking so long, but so far have received nothing to confirm this.”

“I wish they would make their mind up to what colour pen we need to use to sign claim forms – blue or black?”

“Call handlers don’t always know what the codes on the form mean, i.e. bank details missing. Call handlers should all be able to help resolve these problems.”

Being able to clarify these codes on the telephone would reduce delays. Also, minor errors or omissions, such as a missing sort code, could easily be corrected by the advisor as they would normally have this information to hand. This would reduce unnecessary delays.

“I was told to make out a new form instead of Access to Work doing this. Once I had done this, I was then told it’s incorrect and so no money was released to pay support driver/aid. This has happened repeatedly over the last ten months. I have had to pay support driver/aid myself to retain his services. I travel all over the region, cannot drive and would lose my job without support. Then I had a 4-way conference call and I was told issues would be sorted out - no such luck. The next month I was told that all my support aid hours had been used up and no further payments would be released.”

**Introduction of a float system of payment**

There are a large number of concerns raised in relation to payments and many customers would like to see support workers paid in advance (float system) as this would reduce anxiety around support workers leaving.

“We are having constant issues with submission of the claim forms to Access to Work. It appears our claims are frequently lost and we are having to submit more than once. This clearly takes up more of our time and causes delays in settlement of claims. When the payment is being made to a third party (taxi providers) we then have to deal with complaints and follow-ups on non-payment. We have had one taxi company who refused to provide a quotation for Access to Work purposes due to late/non payment”.

The group discussed local taxi firms withdrawing contracts with a number of employers due to invoices not being paid due to delayed payments from Access to Work. This has more of an impact on smaller local taxi firms where cash flow may be more crucial than for larger city-centre firms. Many clients use smaller firms due to the geography of Wales.

**Flexibility of support worker hours, payments and recruitment**

The group reported different rates of pay for support workers. We understand that Access to Work is reviewing rates of pay. The group would like to see specific help and advice offered in relation to support workers and for support workers.

More support is needed on employing or working with support workers in relation to contacts, employment advice and pensions, as well as what happens when a support worker is on sick leave or on leave. Clients are receiving mixed messages.

Also support is needed from Access to Work when finding a temporary support worker. Support Workers cannot be forced to take leave concurrently with the Access to Work recipient, so there will be times when the support worker is absent but the Access to Work recipient is in work without support. Theoretically, Access to Work can provide extra cover when that happens, but, in reality, recruiting occasional support on an ad hoc basis is very difficult. We suggest a more flexible pot of money to enable employers to offer extra hours to another staff member, if appropriate, or to recruit a temporary support worker.

“Finding your own support worker is not always easy. It would be good if there was a pool of support workers that we could choose from, similar to the provision provided by Universities as part of the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)”.

“The support workers should also undergo specific training in sight loss.”

“Because I use Support Worker Drivers it is very difficult to get a direct comparison with employment agencies so trying to get meaningful quotes is very difficult.”

“Getting taxi quotes was not a problem. However, obtaining a quote for a support worker / driver was a problem as I was unaware of any similar role and could not find like-for-like quotes.”

“I had a support worker since June 2018, filled in the consent form so that a nominated person in work could deal with Access to Work payments. They have not reimbursed my employer for any of the claims submitted since last June. They then returned the forms to me and not, as requested, my employer. Access to Work admitted an error in their documentation resulting in a refusal to pay. They promised to resolve this but have done the same thing again on the most recent claim. They don’t read the content of the email that is in front of them and they don’t listen to what is being said during the telephone call.”

“One of my Support Worker/Drivers informed me that she was leaving. After advertising for several weeks, interviewing five people who turned the job down partly due to financial reasons, I applied to Access to Work to increase the wages to attract another Support Worker. I was told to look online for examples of rates of pay for the job. The problem I had was the role is nonstandard several agencies would not give a quote. Others said that you had to have two people to cover sickness and holidays. This made it very difficult to get quotes for the role and to take into account that they are self-employed.”

“I applied to extend my Support Worker’s hours to cover for a five-day course outside my area a couple of months in advance. Fortunately, the course was cancelled as I never had confirmation that I could have extra hours for the Support Worker. The delay means that you are unable to fully commit to training organised by your employer and causes unnecessary stress.”

“One of my concerns is that I have only been allowed four days a week support and I have a volunteer helping on the fifth day. What happens when my volunteer retires?”

“We must be able to choose our Support Workers and to manage them ourselves.”

Some jobs have a large element of travelling time which eats into hours that might be needed for other kinds of support. For example, if there is no public transport to your place of work, your Support Worker's time is used up in driving to and from home, or vice versa. This should be taken into account when the number of support hours is agreed and should be taken from the Travel to Work fund. We believe that this is not happening.

Subsequently, there needs to be more flexibility with agreeing budgets for travel within work when clients have jobs that have varying travel requirements.

“I am self-employed and have fares within work. My taxi journeys are sporadic and spontaneous due to the nature of my work. Advisors are not recognising this and I would recommend a more flexible approach.”

“I was asked for three taxi quotes for twelve different routes – this is ridiculous, I have a job to do without chasing thirty-six quotes! I am relying on my family to get me to work, I am so lucky that I have an understanding employer.”

**Renewal of support**

People with sight loss are reporting that they are not informed of their renewal date. Access to Work has informed us that it is up to the client to know their renewal date. For many people with sight loss this is not an easy task.

“Ridiculous that every three years I have to prove I am still disabled: my condition will not get better.”

“Access to Work do not send reminders in the post anymore. As a result, I applied too late for the renewal of my package. I have yet to go through a description of the support allocated to me for the last three years. The last one was bad enough”.

“I received no correspondence to inform me that my claim was coming to an end and to re-apply and have the relevant information ready for the renewal process.”

“Lastly the renewal process is stressful as it feels like you are having to again prove that you need what you need in the same job as before with the same condition. This raises anxiety and stress levels, which for some people affects their coordination and muscle spasms in a negative way.”

“I had to do a renewal but I didn’t realise the date. The advisor sent forms a week later than expected, paperwork not accessible to screen reader – there is an accessible form that was not sent out – doctors will take 15 days to complete form. Support hours form needs to be more accessible – never got accessible versions of forms. Asked for extension due to delays with explanation of need, etc. Advisor closed file and told client to reapply – client can not do job properly as they are concerned that support worker hours could be reduced. I don’t know if they will back pay hours for support worker.”

“The first point is having sufficient warning when the application needs to be renewed as it is far too easy to go past the renewal date and the implications are that you will have no money to pay support workers.”

“Once decisions have been made about the amount of support that can be awarded, they are very hard to challenge or request more hours.”

“I was contacted for an annual check up of my claim. The staff member was very efficient and concise and knew exactly what was needed. The information was logged and any information that was provided to me was very understandable and useful.”

**Recommendations:**

**Impact of delays on payment**

**That a direct line of contact is established between the client and the claims team to increase communication and the speed of payments.**

Clients continue to report problems with processing claim forms such as forms returned due to minor errors leading to delays with payment. These problems could be resolved with a direct line of contact.

**That clients whose personal budgets exceed the cap are contacted well in advance to discuss solutions and receive support in adapting to the cut in the level of support.**

In 2016, the cap on personalised budget was £40,800. As of 1st April 2019, people will be able to claim up to £59,200. This is welcomed and should reduce the number of people who exceed the upper limit.

**Introduction of a float system of payment**

**New recommendation: That a float system is introduced to enable clients to pay for their support in a timely manner whilst awaiting money from Access to Work.**

**Flexibility of support worker hours, payments and recruitment:**

**That advisors must promote choice and flexibility in how the hours for a support worker are allocated.**

There are many examples highlighting inconsistency of support worker hours.

**That guidance on salary / payments for support workers are made available.**

Access to Work has not released any information in this regard.

**That advisors recognise the differing travel needs of individual clients, in relation to both their personal abilities and the requirements of their job. This includes implementing a more flexible approach for people with sight loss who are unable to drive motability vehicles.**

This remains varied.

**New recommendation: That advisors are more responsive to the changing needs of the client within the fare within work scheme. Allocating a budget would achieve greater flexibility for the client.**

**That Access to Work contacts people with sight loss giving them advanced notice of their claim period coming to an end.**

This is causing considerable concern and anxiety for many.

**New recommendation: That all clients are provided with 3 months advanced notification, in their preferred format, of their renewal date.**

**That Access to Work abandons the use of the tax threshold as a measure of eligibility for self employed applicants in favour of a more holistic assessment of a business’ viability.**

We have not received any new observations on this recommendation.

**That Access to Work promotes a better understanding amongst staff and clients around the scope and purpose of travel training.**

We have not received any new observations on this recommendation.

**Conclusion**

Access to Work is a vital scheme, valued by people with disabilities and their employers. However, employees and employers often remain unaware of the purpose, scope and impact of Access to Work. People with sight loss in Wales continue to report concerns in relation to empathy and understanding of their sight condition; delays in receiving support and with payments; the provision of medical evidence; the renewal process; assessors lack of specialist knowledge of sight loss and the full range of access technologies available; and inflexibility of support worker hours. These challenges have increased since centralisation of the scheme in 2011, as previously reported.

This report highlights difficulties experienced by people with sight loss who use the service and offers solutions through the recommendations given. It is hoped that these will be seriously considered by Access to Work and that they will contribute to improving the employability of people with sight loss in Wales.

**Appendix 1: The process**

(Source information [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

**Overview**

If you’re disabled or have a physical or mental health condition that makes it hard for you to do your job, you can:

* talk to your employer about changes they must make in your workplace
* get extra help from Access to Work, including mental health support

**Talk to your employer about changes they must make in your workplace**

Your employer must make certain changes (known as ‘reasonable adjustments’) to make sure you’re not substantially disadvantaged when doing your job. These could include changing your working hours or providing equipment to help you do your job.

You should talk to your employer about reasonable adjustments before you apply for Access to Work.

**Get help from Access to Work**

If the help you need at work is not covered by your employer making reasonable adjustments, you may be able to get help from Access to Work.

You need to have a paid job, or be about to start or return to one.

You’ll be offered support based on your needs, which may include a grant to help cover the costs of practical support in the workplace.

An Access to Work grant can pay for:

* special equipment, adaptations or support worker services to help you do things like answer the phone or go to meetings
* help getting to and from work

You might not get a grant if you already get certain benefits.

The money does not have to be paid back and will not affect your other benefits.

**Applying for access to Work**

You can apply for Access to Work online at <https://www.get-disability-work-support.service.gov.uk/apply> or by telephone on 0800 121 7479 or by textphone on 0800 121 7579. Before you apply you can check if you are eligible at <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/eligibility>. However, if you have a disability or health condition that makes it hard for you to do parts of your job or get to and from work you will be eligible.

When applying you will need to provide:

* your workplace address and postcode
* the name of a workplace contact who can authorise your Access to Work payments
* your workplace contact’s email address or work phone number
* your unique tax reference number (if you’re self-employed)

You’ll also need to explain:

* how your condition affects you at work or getting to work
* what help you’re already getting
* what else could help you

It will help your application if you’ve spoken to your employer about reasonable adjustments before you apply for Access to Work.

You can call the Access to Work number to ask for alternative formats, such as braille, large print or audio CD.

**After you've applied**

Once you’ve applied, an Access to Work adviser will contact you to discuss what help you could get.

An adviser may also contact your employer to discuss how Access to Work can support you. They will not contact your employer until they’ve agreed this with you first.

An assessor may visit your workplace to assess your needs.

You may get an offer of support, which could include a grant. If it does, you’ll be told how much you’ll get and for how long.

**Renew**

If your Access to Work grant is ending soon, you need to apply to renew it. You can apply up to 12 weeks before the date it ends.

You will need to check that you’re still eligible before you apply.

You can apply online or by phone.

You’ll need to provide your:

* name
* address
* date of birth
* unique reference number (if you know it)

After you apply, an Access to Work adviser will contact you. They may request further information about your condition. They’ll also contact your employer. If you’re offered a new grant, you’ll be told how much you’ll get and for how long.

**Report a change of circumstances**

If you’re getting support from Access to Work you need to report changes to:

* your disability or health condition (physical or mental)
* your home or work address - if you get travel to work support
* your employer, job role or working pattern

You’ll also need to tell Access to Work if your contact details change. For example, if you get a new phone number.

**Appendix 3: References**

RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool

Saunders, Alex; Keil, Sue; and White, Andy, RNIB [February 2015]

‘Beyond the Stereotypes – Blind and partially sighted people and work, RNIB [2004]

Employment Status and Sight Loss, RNIB [2017]

‘Key findings from Employment Research, RNIB [2006]

Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living

How Accessible is Access to Work in Wales? Wales Council of the Blind and RNIB Cymru [January 2016]

Working Age Group Project - report on the online consultation, Retina UK [December 2018]

Welsh Government Employability Plan [2018]

Access to Work <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

This report was written by Owen Williams and Richard Bowers, Wales Council of the Blind.

The following organisations contributed to the meeting with Access to Work, as well as providing case studies:

Wales Council of the Blind; RNIB Cymru; Sight Cymru; Guide Dogs Cymru; Vision Support; Welsh Rehabilitation Officers Forum.

We would like to thank the numerous individuals who attended the meeting with Access to Work and those with sight loss who submitted personal experiences.

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1. RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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4. Employment Status and Sight Loss, RNIB [2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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