

# Improving Access to Work

## Our recommendations

These recommendations have been put together by Deaf and Disabled people based on our experiences of recent problems with the scheme and addressing the issues highlighted in our research report *Barriers to Work*.



**STOP** CHANGES TO  
ACCESS TO WORK

# Recommendations

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## **1. Commit to an Access to Work programme that embodies the following principles and values:**

The aim of AtW must be to level the playing field for Deaf and Disabled people to get into, stay in and get on in the labour market. We are the experts in our access needs.

Support through AtW should focus on our abilities and enable us to fulfil our potential.

It should not:

- Place Deaf and Disabled people at financial risk
- Disadvantage Deaf and Disabled people in the work-place
- Impose inappropriate support
- Normalise inequality
- Subject Deaf and Disabled people to hostility and discriminatory attitudes

## **2. Place AtW at the heart of the government's strategy to increase the numbers of disabled people in work.**

“Improving Lives: the work, health and disability green paper” contains few mentions of Access to Work and yet its effectiveness at supporting Deaf and Disabled people to get into, stay in and get on in employment is well evidenced, while investment in the programme produces a return for the Treasury. Improvement and expansion of the Access to Work programme must be a central part of proposals to reduce the disability employment gap.

### **3. Equip AtW to enable Deaf and Disabled jobseekers to move into work**

- 3.1 Give an indicative support package to new customers at job application stage so they can reassure prospective employers of their ability to meet job requirements.
- 3.2 Revise rules which limit support to 52 weeks for Higher Level Permitted Work customers. There are no longer time limits for Higher Level Permitted Work under current ESA and Universal Credit regulations.
- 3.3 Expand the availability of AtW to Deaf and Disabled people gaining experience through volunteering and other forms of work experience beyond the current regulations which limit support to specific internships, trainee and placement initiatives. This could also benefit Deaf and Disabled people in self-employment who are prevented from opportunities to work to build their businesses by the viability model currently operated by AtW.

### **4. Improve job security and stability for Deaf and Disabled people in work through:**

- 4.1 Reduce target waiting times for agreement of new packages to four weeks maximum. Delays keep employers waiting unreasonably and put AtW customers' jobs at risk.
- 4.2 Reduce frequency of reassessments for those with lifelong or chronic conditions and stable employment. To avoid insecurity and instability, reassessments should only be triggered by a change in support needs or for conditions expected to change over time.
- 4.3 Increase the length of AtW awards, especially for self-employed workers, to allow stability in work and minimise the loss of productivity and risk of job losses caused by reassessments and incorrect awards.
- 4.4 Advisers should not reduce AtW awards when people under-use their budget the previous year for a reason unrelated to changing needs, for example sickness absence or hospital leave.
- 4.5 AtW should bear full financial responsibility for repair or replacing of equipment it provides for as long as the customer is eligible for support.

- 4.6 Increase the portability of AtW packages, especially for the self-employed, to allow them to take up employment opportunities without delay and to avoid barriers to taking up short term contract work where the wait time makes it unviable.
- 4.7 Review the system for providing and maintaining wheelchair equipment so that wheelchair users are not disadvantaged at work by unnecessarily lengthy and frustrating processes.

## **5. Introduce digital systems to improve delays, reduce inefficiencies and tackle fraud**

- 5.1 An online claims system for AtW would protect both customers and support staff from fraudulent activity and reduce the rate of delays due to missing forms.
- 5.2 Online payment processing would reduce delays and incidences of payments missing in the post.

## **6. Improve communication with new and existing customers and employers**

- 6.1 Notify customers three months before their award ends, and again one month before, to allow sufficient time for reapplying without interrupting their employment.
- 6.2 Respond to all call centre inquiries within 48 hours.
- 6.3 Inform customers in writing about any changes to AtW awards, eg changes to BSL pay rates, giving clear reasons for any changes.
- 6.4 Provide clear information on how to contest decisions and make complaints.
- 6.5 Bring back the named caseworker system and allow AtW customers to have direct contact with their caseworker at all stages of their award.
- 6.6 Systems to be established so that customers can communicate directly with AtW in ways that meet their access requirements including BSL, electronically, easy read format and face to face visits or via a third party if that best meets the customer's needs. Access needs to be recorded and respected by AtW staff at all times when making contact.

- 6.7 Improve signposting, information and guidance to new customers and employers.
- 6.8 Customer service standards for AtW staff to ensure positive communications and reverse the trend of treating customers as burdens on the taxpayer.

## **7. Improve decision making in AtW through:**

- 7.1 Deaf and disability training for AtW staff should be delivered by Deaf and Disabled people's organisations and based upon the social model of disability.
- 7.2 Improve staff guidance on Minimum Needs to ensure that AtW packages fully meet all Deaf and Disabled people's employment support needs. Deaf and Disabled people should have choice and control over the support they need and should not have inadequate or unqualified support imposed on them.
- 7.3 Support needs of customers to be taken into account above arbitrary targets for time-limiting awards. There needs to be recognition of the value of ongoing support in enabling Deaf and Disabled people to stay in and get on in employment across all impairment groups including mental health support needs and neuro-diversity.
- 7.4 Advisors to be open to customer choice in meeting support needs rather than imposing a one size fits all approach through contracted services.
- 7.5 Review to be carried out into the interpretation of the 80/20% ratio with specific relation to the support needs of people with learning difficulties/disabilities in different job roles.
- 7.6 Improve transparency in decision making by consulting with Deaf and Disabled People's Organisations on all changes to staff guidance and communicating it with customers.
- 7.7 Improve staff training in decision making and interpretation of guidance to ensure consistency and reduce the need for complaints.
- 7.8 Have a clear standardised system for calculating support which is consistent and fair, to ensure full transparency and stop the discrepancies between awards.

## **8. Remove the cap which discriminates against Deaf and Disabled people with high support needs and in senior job roles.**

For as long as the cap/transitional cap is in place to ensure that:

- 8.1 Customers are contacted in good time before they reach the cap to avoid using assistance/support that they cannot then pay for.
- 8.2 One-off costs towards the cap are not counted – for example the cost for purchase of a wheelchair will significantly reduce the amount of support costs that are available within that year to the point of making employment unviable.

## **9. Review the current guidance on self-employment ‘business viability’**

- 9.1 Consult with Deaf and Disabled people about the barriers to self-employment presented by the current AtW guidance. Self-employment can have many benefits for Deaf and Disabled people due to increased flexibility, however the inflexibility of AtW guidance on self-employment prevent them from taking this up.
- 9.2 Review the current ‘business viability’ threshold of £5876.00 turnover which creates a barrier for Deaf and Disabled people in low paid and/or part-time self-employment.
- 9.3 Extend the start up period where the turn-over threshold is not applied. Currently this is set at 12 months but it often takes far longer for a business to be established, especially for Deaf and Disabled people who may require longer due to the additional barriers we face.
- 9.4 Ensure that the guidance takes sufficient account of periods of ill health/disability-related absence from work. This is a crucial factor that may affect, and repeatedly affect, Deaf and Disabled people in self-employment (especially if sole trading).

**10. Put Deaf and Disabled people back at the centre of the AtW process. Consult with StopChanges2AtW, and other user-led organisations of Deaf and Disabled people on any further revisions to AtW policies or operational changes to AtW processes.**

**11. Address the disproportionate impact of changes to AtW on Deaf/deaf, deafened and hard of hearing customers**

- 11.1 Ensure that where interpreting support is required, Deaf AtW customers are always supplied with fully qualified RSLI interpreters unless the customer agrees that a trainee SLI is fully able to meet their communication support needs.
- 11.2 Consult with and seek feedback from Deaf/deaf, deafened and hard of hearing customers on developments with specialist teams and the planned video relay service for BSL to ensure it is fully meeting their access requirements.
- 11.3 The use of new technologies should only be offered as a choice or as part of a mixed package not as a substitute for other types of support for cost saving reasons. They must fully meet access needs.
- 11.4 Do not introduce a Framework Agreement for interpreting services in AtW as this will undermine customers' choice and control and risk the sustainability of the interpreting profession. Consult with the National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) to ensure any future changes are feasible.

## Supported by

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