



BRIEFING PAPER

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Access to Work scheme for people with disabilities

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Summary

Access to Work provides practical advice and support to disabled people and their employers to help them overcome work-related obstacles resulting from disability. Access to Work is delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through Jobcentre Plus.

An individual may be able to get Access to Work if their disability or health condition stops them from being able to do parts of their job and they are: in a paid job; self-employed; unemployed and about to start a job; unemployed and about to start a Work Trial; or unemployed and about to start a Work Experience placement through the Youth Contract (from 1st October 2012).¹

In 2013/14, funding of £108.0 million was spent on access to work, an increase on each of the previous four years.

¹ DWP, [Access to Work: statistics on recipients](#)

1. What is Access to Work

Access to Work provides practical advice and support to disabled people and their employers to help them overcome work-related obstacles resulting from disability. Access to Work was launched in June 1994 and is delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through Jobcentre Plus. Access to Work is available to those aged 16 years or over who live and work in Great Britain.

An individual may be able to get Access to Work if their disability or health condition stops them from being able to do parts of their job and they are: in a paid job; self-employed; unemployed and about to start a job; unemployed and about to start a Work Trial; or unemployed and about to start a Work Experience placement through the Youth Contract (from 1st October 2012).²

Access to Work will contribute to the additional employment costs resulting from disability that the employer would not normally be expected to cover. Access to Work will pay up to 100% of the approved costs of support for:

- Special aids and equipment
- Adaptations to premises and equipment
- Support workers
- Travel to work and travel within work
- Communication support at interview

Where employees have been in post for more than six weeks, employers are required to share the costs of special aids and equipment and adaptations to premises. The precise level of cost sharing is agreed between the employer and the Access to Work adviser.³ Ongoing awards tend to be granted for three years and are typically reviewed annually.⁴

Access to Work is a discretionary award; it is not a statutory benefit to which eligible people have a legal entitlement. Applicants have no right to a formal appeal against DWP's decisions on their eligibility or level of award.⁵ The programme is intended to provide a level of support above the "reasonable adjustments" which some employers are required to make by law.⁶ Larger employers are required to make a financial contribution to some types of Access to Work support for their employees.⁷

Access to Work also offers a Mental Health Support Service (delivered by Remploy) which supports individuals who are absent from work or finding it difficult to stay at work because of a mental health condition.⁸

² DWP, [Access to Work: statistics on recipients](#)

³ DWP, [Access to Work: statistics on recipients](#)

⁴ DWP, [Access to Work Overview](#)

⁵ DWP, [Access to Work guidance](#), version 24, para 631

⁶ [Equality Act 2010](#)

⁷ DWP/JCP, [Employers' Guide to Access to Work](#)

⁸ Further information on the Mental Health Support Service is available on the [Remploy website](#).

2. Changes to the scheme in 2015

In March 2015, the then Minister for Disabled People, Mark Harper announced that from 2015/16 a process of offering personal budgets for people with on-going awards for travel or support would begin to allow “users more freedom over how they use their awards”.⁹

The Minister also announced that a specialist team covering self-employment would be set up. From October 2015 eligibility for self-employed awards will be based on the Universal Credit rules. This will help “disabled people have a clear understanding of how they can be supported to maintain their business and continue in self-employment with the support of the scheme”.¹⁰

At March 2015, around 30% of Access to Work spending was on taxis for users with mobility problems, the Minister has said that starting in early 2015/16 the Government will look to pilot contracted services for customers “across our largest towns and cities” to ensure there is value for money and reliability for users.¹¹

In May 2015, the DWP released an equality analysis on the future of Access to Work. One of the options presented for saving money is to place a cap on the maximum value of support per user. The Government have suggested that placing lower average awards would allow them to support more customers.

In March 2015, the Government stated that, from October 2015 the scheme will provide awards up to a limit set at one and half times average salary – a limit of £40,800 per person at October 2015. This limit will be uprated annually in line with average salaries.¹² It has been estimated that if the level of award is capped at this rate, an additional 982 customers would be supported (at the average 2013/14 award of £3,045).

An offer of transitional protection will be made to all customers and their employers so that they have time “to adapt to the reduced award and explore alternative solutions”.¹³ This protection will remain in force until 1 April 2018, provided the claimants needs remain the same.¹⁴

The DWP have also suggested that a cross-government interpreters’ contract could be implemented to for BSL interpreters which would give users a choice between the open market and the Government’s provision.

⁹ [Access to Work :Written statement - HCWS372](#), 12 March 2014

¹⁰ DWP, [New measures to support more disabled people into work](#), 12 March 2015

¹¹ [Access to Work :Written statement - HCWS372](#), 12 March 2014

¹² [Access to Work :Written statement - HCWS372](#), 12 March 2014

¹³ DWP, [Equality analysis for the future of Access to Work](#), May 2015, p 13

¹⁴

3. Support workers for disabled people

Access to Work can pay for the cost of providing a Support Worker to help an individual do their job.

Concerns were raised in November 2013 about changes to Access to Work guidance which advised, “If a Support Worker is required full time, for example 30 hours or more a week, Access to Work will normally fund on the basis of an annual salary rather than an Agency worker employed on an hourly basis”.¹⁵ Specifically of concern was the impact on deaf people who use sign language interpreters. Opponents of the change, including charities Action on Hearing Loss and the British Deaf Association, argued that employing interpreters full-time rather than on a freelance basis would fail to provide the flexibility that deaf people need.¹⁶

The guidance had originally been amended in this way in June 2011.¹⁷ In response to a March 2014 Parliamentary Question on the issue, the Minister for Disabled People, Mike Penning, explained that “Existing policies on the cost effective funding of full time support workers are being enforced to ensure the programme remains available for new applicants.”¹⁸

In June 2014, Mike Penning announced that the 30 hour guidance would be suspended, “having listened to concerns about its practical effect”:¹⁹

In March 2015, the Government announced that they would be undertaking a market review with stakeholders of the BSL interpretation provision to “explore long term improvements in the market”. The Minister also announced that from April 2015 the 30 hour guidance would be removed.²⁰

In its equality analysis, the DWP have suggested that to avoid “uncontrolled growth in spend in this area, which would reduce the amount of Access to Work funding available for other types of support, more sophisticated mechanisms need to be employed. These could include:

- a High-value Awards /Support Worker Team to perform in-depth examination of high-value cases. This would improve customer service and reduce potential for fraud – The new Deaf and Visual Impairment teams could have this role;

¹⁵ [Access to Work Guidance, version 24](#) (current at 9 May 2014), para 366 (published in response to a Freedom of Information request)

¹⁶ See for example: Action on Hearing Loss press release, [We’re calling on Government to halt proposals that could push deaf people out of work](#), 26 November 2013;

¹⁷ [DWP response to Freedom of Information request](#), 27 May 2014, published on whatdotheyknow.com

¹⁸ [HC Deb 17 Mar 2014 c473W](#)

¹⁹ [HC Deb 10 Jun 2014 c45-6WS](#)

²⁰ [HC 17 Sept 2015 WQ10557](#)

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- direct contracting with support workers. This would allow us to control costs, ensure the quality of support workers and reduce fraud and error;
- greater employer responsibility to cost share, particularly for larger companies (although stakeholders have made strong representation that this would make disabled employees less attractive – particularly from Deaf stakeholders and other groups who use on-going support); and
- ensuring that employers are meeting their legal obligations to make reasonable adjustments;
- personal budgets, which would give customers an incentive to manage their allocations;
- blended solutions featuring more technology;
- capping awards.”

4. Statistics

The table below shows the total number of people benefitting from the Access to Work programme each year since 2007/08 and up to June 2015.

It shows the number of people who are “existing” customers in any one year (or part of the year) and the numbers of “new” customers who received help for the first time in the particular financial year (or part of the year). The total number of people helped between April 2007 and September 2015 was 129,930.²¹

Access to Work existing and new customers

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	Q1 & Q2 2015/16
Existing customers	20,730	22,480	20,760	20,670	22,850	24,720	22,870
New customers	16,540	13,330	10,020	10,830	12,710	12,090	5,750
Total	37,270	35,810	30,780	31,500	35,560	36,800	28,620

Source : DWP Access to Work Official Statistics , June 2015

There was a drop in the number of existing customers helped by the scheme in 2011/12 and 2012/13. The number of new customers also dropped in 2010/11 and 2011/12.

The DWP have attributed these drops to operational changes that were implemented in 2010.

The profile of people helped by the scheme has also been changing, in 2010/11, the largest group of people helped were those with back or neck problems. More recently, individuals with Mental Health conditions have seen the largest increase in numbers supported, following the introduction of a new Mental Health Support System (MHSS) that has been delivered by Remploy. Statistics show 1,630 people with a mental health condition were supported by the scheme in 2014/15 – an increase of over 200% on 2010/11. However, it should be noted that the MHSS is only available to individuals who meet the following criteria:²²

- Be in permanent or temporary employment (attending work or signed off sick)
- Have a mental health condition (diagnosed or undiagnosed) that has resulted in workplace absence, or is causing difficulties to remain at work.
- An application to MHSS is subject to a decision by Access to Work

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²¹ Department of Work and Pensions, [Access to Work Official Statistics](#), January 2016, Annex A

²² Remploy, [Workplace Mental Health Support Service](#) – accessed 21 December 2015

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Number of people helped by primary medical condition

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	Change	% change
						between '10 & '15	between '10 & '15
Missing/Unknown	10	10	20	10	10	0	0%
Arms or hands	2,180	1,590	1,560	1,720	1,610	-570	-26%
Legs or feet	2,580	2,140	2,320	2,690	2,610	30	1%
Back or neck	5,720	3,740	3,530	4,240	4,510	-1,210	-21%
Stomach, liver, kidney or digestion	120	100	100	110	130	10	8%
Heart, blood, blood pressure or circulation	280	230	240	270	240	-40	-14%
Chest or breathing	150	120	140	170	180	30	20%
Skin conditions and severe disfigurement	20	20	20	20	20	0	0%
Difficulty in hearing	5,320	4,990	5,290	5,650	5,570	250	5%
Difficulty in seeing	5,320	4,840	4,890	5,140	5,230	-90	-2%
Difficulty in speaking	90	70	70	90	90	0	0%
Learning disability	1,730	1,550	1,550	1,770	2,020	290	17%
Progressive illness	2,290	2,000	1,920	2,020	1,960	-330	-14%
Dyslexia	3,200	3,340	3,530	4,290	4,560	1,360	43%
Epilepsy	1,140	1,040	1,100	1,180	1,160	20	2%
Diabetes	220	180	180	180	160	-60	-27%
Mental health condition	540	700	910	1,410	1,630	1,090	202%
Cerebral Palsy	490	460	450	480	530	40	8%
Spina Bifida	130	110	110	100	110	-20	-15%
Other	4,280	3,570	3,570	4,040	4,500	220	5%
Total	35,810	30,780	31,500	35,560	36,800	990	3%

Source: DWP, Access to Work Statistics, January 2016

In 2013/14, funding of £108.0 million was spent on access to work, an increase on each of the previous four years: ²³

Access to Work programme spend in Great Britain

	£ million
2009/10	98.0
2010/11	105.5
2011/12	98.3
2012/13	99.0
2013/14	108.0

Source: HC Deb 11 Jun 2014 c169w & 30 October 2014 21195

The average Access to Work award is around £3,000 per annum. However, approximately 200 people with high level awards account for more than 10% of the budget. ²⁴

At March 2015, the highest award was approximately £120,000 per annum and historically some have exceeded £200,000 per annum.

The DWP have estimated that by capping the individual award (as discussed in section 2) the government will save £3 million per annum by 2018. The government intends to use the saved money to expand the scheme. It's estimated that, £3 million would be enough to fund 1,000 average users on the Access to Work Scheme or 3,000 places on the Mental Health Support Service. ²⁵

²³ [HC Deb 11 Jun 2014 c169W and HC Deb 30 October 2014 \[21195\]](#)

²⁴ [Access to Work :Written statement - HCWS372](#), 12 March 2014

²⁵ [Access to Work :Written statement - HCWS372](#), 12 March 2014

5. Previously announced changes

5.1 Review of disability employment support by Liz Sayce in 2011

The Coalition Government commissioned an independent review of the employment support given to disabled people from Liz Sayce, Chief Executive of RADAR, in December 2010.²⁶ The report was published in June 2011 and covered the whole range of disability support programmes available including Access to Work (principally discussed in section 4.2).²⁷

The report made a wide range of recommendations on all aspects of employment support for disabled people and highlighted the positive impacts of the Access to Work scheme:²⁸

Access to Work should be transformed from being “the best kept secret in Government” to being a recognised passport to successful employment, doubling the number of people helped. Government should improve equity of access, use innovation to create efficiencies, remove unnecessary waste and mobilise the power of peer support.

The report made 16 recommendations as regards Access to Work.²⁹ These included that the Department for Work and Pensions should in the longer term “significantly expand funding for Access to Work;” this might be done by “releasing money from other parts of its current budget to invest in the programme and recognise the benefit savings it generates.”

More immediately it called on the Department to greatly increase the visibility of the programme, simplify some of the procedures and encourage greater peer support. It should centralise the budget on disability support for employees of central government departments, who are not eligible to apply for Access to Work, and provide an example of best practice to employers elsewhere.

5.2 Government changes in 2012 & 2013

On 7 March 2012, Maria Miller MP, the then Minister for Disabled People, announced the Government was accepting all the recommendations of the Sayce Review’s including those on Access to Work.³⁰ She also announced the allocation of an extra £15 million to Access to Work over the spending period.

On 9 July 2012, the Department set out plans to launch a targeted marketing campaign aimed at addressing many of the recommendations in the Sayce report including focusing on regions, such as Wales, where Access to Work is not widely used; targeting

²⁶ [HC Deb 2 December 2010 c89-90WS](#)

²⁷ Liz Sayce *Getting in, staying in and getting on: Disability employment support fit for the future*, DWP, June 2011, Cm 8081, [section 4.2](#)

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ See [pages 18 to 22](#) of the report for a detailed list of the recommendations

³⁰ [HC Deb 7 March c63-6WS](#)

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those with mental health conditions and those aged 16 to 24 including those undertaking voluntary work under a Youth Contract. The Department also appointed an expert advisory panel to report on further actions that were needed to implement the recommendations.³¹

Further enhancements to the Access to Work scheme, based on the work of this expert panel, were announced on 19 November 2012 by the then Minister for Disabled People. These included streamlining the application process for individuals who already have a good understanding of their needs, making it easier to transfer equipment between employers, providing better help with travel to work options, improving peer-support, reducing the cost burden on small businesses, and extending the scheme to business start-up schemes.³²

In January 2013, Lord Freud, Minister for Welfare Reform, explained what steps the Department had taken to increase awareness of the scheme:³³

[...] Over the past three months we have achieved high profile coverage in a variety of national media, including the BBC "See Hear" programme, Radio 4's "You and Yours" (a programme on Access to Work) and a feature in the Sun newspaper. To promote Access to Work with employers we have produced a guide for employers and publicised the product through established social media accounts owned by our and other government departments.

This was supplemented with focused Access to Work pieces in e-mail bulletins and online magazines aimed at employers. We have also delivered a series of awareness sessions to employers and employer groups, including large national retailers, events for SMEs and cross-government employment and disability groups.

[...] As part of the marketing activities to target young disabled people we have launched an online marketing campaign aimed at young disabled people in the transition from education to employment with online marketing and banners on key relevant sites, including Reed recruitment. This is supported by working with specialist recruitment agencies delivering direct mailings to specialist teachers, young graduates and universities.

Esther McVey announced the government's response to the final set proposals from the expert panel in July 2013.³⁴ The DWP will extend the remit of the Access to Work advisers to offer up-front payments to their customers who need an Access to Work award in advance in order to take up (or remain in work) and to offer more flexible Access to Work packages than currently. In addition £2 million from the Access to Work budget will be set aside to help those seeking eventual full-time employment to access opportunities such as traineeships or internships. Similarly individuals will be supported if they arrange their own Work Trials.

³¹ [HC Deb 9 July 2012 c59-62WS](#)

³² [HC Deb 19 November 2012 c23-26WS](#)

³³ [HL Deb 23 Jan 2013 Vol 742 c214-5WA](#)

³⁴ [HC Deb 16 July 2013 c94WS](#)

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