

Access to Work

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Access to Work is one of our most popular and successful labour market programmes. However, we are not complacent about Access to Work and have commissioned an independent evaluation to look at its delivery. Alongside this evaluation we are using this consultation to seek your views on some key Access to Work issues.

Current position

1. The Access to Work programme aims to reduce inequalities between disabled people and non-disabled people by removing practical barriers to work. In 2006/07 we spent around £60 million on Access to Work support, helping over 24,000 disabled people to take up and/or remain in employment by providing funding for one-off and ongoing workplace adjustments. Additionally, we estimate a further 16,000 people are continuing to directly benefit from support provided in the previous two years under the Special Aids and Equipment element.
2. The four main elements of support are as follows:
 - Specialist Aids and Equipment;
 - Adaptations to Premises and Equipment;
 - Support Workers/Communication Support at Interview; and
 - Travel to Work, which can include help with taxi fares.
3. Unlike in the other areas of this consultation document, where there is an extensive evidence base pointing to the need for significant change, we do not consider that there is a clear case for major changes to Access to Work. We do believe however that there is scope to improve it further, and we have already set in hand additional work to identify ways in which we can do this.
4. Access to Work is currently managed through Jobcentre Plus which is responsible for agreeing an individually tailored support package for every customer. To do this they:
 - determine eligibility for support from the programme;
 - agree with the customer what support can be provided;
 - contract locally for individually tailored support designed to overcome disability-related barriers to finding, entering and staying in work;
 - negotiate with the employer for financial contributions above current required levels;
 - arrange for providers to be paid, either direct or through another company;
 - provide information and advice to disabled people and their employers, carers and other representatives; and
 - undertake follow-up action, including a formal review process, to determine whether the support originally agreed is still appropriate.

5. The actual support and/or adjustments are procured directly from the external public, private and voluntary sectors, by or on behalf of, the customer. So the management of the programme is held with Jobcentre Plus whilst the front-line delivery of adjustments is contracted out on a case-by-case basis to the public, private and voluntary sectors.
6. Strengths of Access to Work that are frequently highlighted by disabled people and their representatives and groups such as the Disability Employment Advisory Committee (DEAC) include:
 - tailored support – each support package is tailored to the specific requirements of each customer and their employer;
 - flexible support – the support packages are complementary to our other provision, able to adapt to changing circumstances and suitable for disabled people and/or jobs that require fluctuating or sporadic use of the support;
 - expert advice – for many employers the availability of expert advice on making workplace adjustments for their disabled staff represents the most valuable feature of the programme; and
 - no monetary upper limit on individual support packages.
7. However, against these real positives, there have been some concerns raised by customers and their representatives over the performance of Access to Work. Primarily these concerns have been in relation to frontline delivery, including the:
 - speed at which people are accepted to receive support;
 - speed at which support is delivered;
 - consistency of decision-making across the country; and
 - reach of the provision – i.e. awareness levels and can we help more people?
8. Jobcentre Plus is implementing a series of positive incremental reforms to improve service delivery, including since late 2006, the appointment of a National Access to Work Delivery Manager. We believe that these reforms have already improved the speed, quality and consistency of service that people receive and we expect this to continue.



9. In order to get a better view of how widespread concerns on performance are, how valid they are, and, if valid, how to address them, we have decided to combine two main approaches:
 - firstly, in recognition that we need to strengthen the evidence-base on Access to Work we recently commissioned an external research organisation to conduct a thorough evaluation of the programme's delivery. We expect to receive interim findings in the Spring of 2008; and
 - secondly, we want to take the opportunity of this consultation to ask for views about Access to Work from a wide range of stakeholders, including disabled people, Access to Work recipients and employers.
10. The evaluation report and the responses to this consultation will help determine the future delivery methods for this provision. The following section covers some of the key issues, describes what is already being done and offers some options on what could be done to help inform your answers to the questions at the end of this chapter. Please note that these are initial thoughts rather than firm proposals and they are being raised at this early stage to gather your opinions.

Customer experience

Speed of delivery


11. Until recently Access to Work had two key delivery benchmarks. These were a) for an individual to be informed whether they were eligible for support within 10 working days of applying for the provision; and b) for first help support to be in place within 60 working days of receiving the customer's signed application.
12. Over the last year Jobcentre Plus has made a concerted effort to improve its performance against these targets and during the last quarter of 2006/07 the first of these benchmarks was reached in 99.6% of cases and the second benchmark was attained in over 92% of cases.

13. The process of putting support in place can involve a range of factors outside Jobcentre Plus' control (e.g. the time it can take for architects and builders to complete an adjustment to premises varies). We therefore believe these figures represent a good success story overall. However, we also believe there is room for improvement and in recognition of this, Jobcentre Plus introduced new, more challenging benchmarks for getting support in place earlier this year.
14. The new benchmarks in 2007/08 are broken down by elements and also the benchmark is for the support package to be in place. It measures the total customer experience rather than just when they get their first piece of kit.

Access to Work element	Working days	% support in place
Communication Support at Interview	5	90
Travel to Work	20	85
Support Workers	30	85
Special Aids and Equipment	40	75
Adaptations to Premises and Equipment	60	70
Miscellaneous	25	85

Consistency of decision-making – national standards and flexibility

15. Access to Work faces a fine balancing act between applying national standards of provision and allowing for a good degree of local flexibility, and tailoring for individual needs.
16. We strongly believe in the benefits of local flexibility, particularly as we are dealing with a unique set of circumstances for every support decision. A particular strength of the programme is that each and every adjustment made is specific to the individual requiring support and their employer/employment circumstances.

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17. The programme's flexibility has also, in some parts of the country, led to positive innovations such as the development of quick access to short periods of assistance for people with fluctuating mental health conditions who don't require ongoing WORKSTEP support.
 18. However, we also recognise a need to ensure there is a strong degree of consistency across the country and that the type of support an individual may receive is not dependent on where they happen to live. We would welcome your views on how best to balance the need for national standards whilst allowing for local flexibility.

Reaching more customers

19. The Access to Work budget has increased from £15m in 1997/98 to a projected £66m for 2007/08. We believe that there is still scope to help more people. Part of ensuring that we can do this will mean maximising the returns on our current spending.

Employer contributions

20. Access to Work funds could help more people if we increased the current level of employer contributions. We might also want to encourage the largest employers to pay the entire cost of some or all of the workplace adjustments of their staff.
21. Employers currently pay a minimum of the first £300 plus 20% of the approved costs between £300 and £10,000 of implementing Special Aids and Equipment and Adaptations to Premises and Equipment adjustments where the employee has been in the job for at least six weeks. Access to Work pays for 100% of all approved costs for self-employed people.



22. Cost sharing was introduced in 1996. However the £300 level has remained unchanged resulting in a real terms erosion by inflation. This is despite a growing acceptance by employers of their moral and legal (Disability Discrimination Act) obligations to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people. If we were to increase the employer contribution it would enable us to invest the additional money to support more disabled people. We would welcome your views on whether the employer contribution should increase to allow us to help even greater numbers of people with the given budget.

Public sector use of Access to Work

23. In line with the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit Report 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' (2005), the Government decided that from October 2006 all Ministerial Government Departments would fund the disability adjustments required by their staff from their general running costs rather than using Access to Work funds. Managers and staff working in these Departments continue to use the expertise of the Access to Work Business Centres to determine appropriate adjustments.
24. This step was taken in the belief that the public sector must strive to be exemplar employers of disabled people and that Ministerial Government Departments should therefore take direct responsibility for funding workplace disability adjustments for their staff. Any money 'saved' from Access to Work expenditure by the move has been reinvested to help others on the programme.
25. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit Report 'Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People' (2005) recommends that we should consider extending this change to all central government departments and the wider public sector. As part of the Access to Work evaluation we will look at the funding change for Ministerial Government Departments before considering any further extension. We would at this early stage welcome your views on this issue which we will consider alongside the evaluation evidence.

Summary

26. Alongside an external independent evaluation, we want to use responses to questions on Access to Work to explore ways in which we can further improve the service – whilst retaining the successful features of the current programme.

Consultation Questions

No.	Question
19	If you have recent experience of our Access to Work provision, what aspects did you like the most and do you have any suggestions for improving the service?
20	What can we do to ensure Access to Work is used more effectively to meet the needs of individuals?
21	How would you try to better balance the need for consistency of decision-making in Access to Work across the country with benefits of local flexibility?
22	How can we more effectively focus Access to Work on adjustments/support beyond that which an employer should make as a reasonable adjustment under the Disability Discrimination Act?
23	Do you believe that we should increase employer contributions to Access to Work adjustments as long as the savings are reinvested in the programme?
24	Are there more innovative ways in which we could make better use of the private and third sectors in delivering Access to Work?
25	Ministerial Government Departments are now directly funding Access to Work adjustments for their disabled staff. What are your views on other public sector organisations paying for such adjustments if any savings were reinvested in the programme?