Written evidence submitted by People First England (ATW0011)

1. People First England is a new organisation set up to encourage political engagement and media representation from adults with learning disabilities. We have two employees, both with disabilities working in partnership to support each other and currently operate as a project of the Housing & Support Alliance before setting up as a charity or social enterprise. Obtaining the correct support from Access to Work (AtW) has been vital to our ability to move from benefits into work. Without being able to obtain the kind of support we had understood AtW would provide when planning our roles, the future of both our jobs and organisation is at risk. We have both experienced significant delays in AtW assessments and at the point of writing are still waiting for the process to be completed despite having applied in January 2014. Working together as a team with learning and physical disability has given us an insight into whether the support is working as it should for very different support needs.

2. Gary’s experience:-

3. AtW application/assessment processes:-
4. “Complicated. I don’t think all my needs were met and they didn’t have the equipment I needed. They were meant to show me equipment available to meet my needs but this didn't happen.”
5. AtW personnel came from London to check RBLI offices (Gary’s work programme provider) and told Gary to put everything he needed down on forms, but then many items on the list were refused. AtW works differently in different regions making it a time consuming process and confusing for those going through procedure. This also makes it more difficult for disabled people to provide peer support to each other to assist with the application process.

6. Ongoing support:-
7. None given from AtW.
8. Anna supports Gary 12 hours a week, she started work 6 March 2014 and as yet has not been paid! AtW did not provide any information about the process to pay a support worker.
9. Gary receives phone calls from his work programme provider RBLI to see how he is progressing in the work place.
10. As we work remotely Gary (supported by Anna) sourced and recommended two different offices. Neither of these offices can be used because they don’t allow internet connections. Support from AtW is securing appropriate office space was vital but not available.
11. **Effectiveness of AtW supporting people with mental health/ learning difficulties:-**

12. The hours of support allowed by AtW are not sufficient, especially as Gary’s job involves travelling to events across England. Travelling can be difficult and assistance with it is vital for Gary to be able to perform his job properly. There was no support provided by AtW to help Gary write an accurate job description for his support worker.

13. Overall Gary’s experience of AtW leads him to feel there is more emphasis for support given to people with physical disabilities and much more understanding required for people with MH/LD so their needs are met.

14. **Effectiveness of helping disabled people to secure a job/stay in employment/develop careers :-**

15. Without AtW Gary would not have been able to secure his job. Housing Support and Alliance and Kaliya support Gary greatly with regular update meetings, phone calls and email correspondence. However, this support has at times been put at risk by Kaliya’s own struggles in getting the correct support from AtW for herself and is not sufficient for Gary to do his job properly without his own support worker.

16. Both H&SA and RBLI monitor Gary’s employment.

17. People First England are expanding rapidly which should secure Gary’s employment for the foreseeable future. However, this is completely dependent on continuing AtW funding to support both Gary and his co-worker.

18. AtW funding is essential and needs to be recognised as this by current and future governments.

19. Gary says that AtW’s vision should encourage people with disabilities to travel and work abroad. There should be no restrictions or barriers to this type of employment.

20. **Kaliya’s experience:-**

21. **AtW application/assessment processes:-**

22. Due to concerns about delays in support or equipment arriving I applied to AtW two months before I was due to commence work. However, even having applied in early January, when I started in March much of the equipment recommended either hadn’t arrived, wasn’t available or arrived in a poor condition.

23. The assessment followed a particular structure which benefitted the assessment rather than the applicant. Some basics were considered such as seating, computer work etc. A custom made chair was recommended and ordered. Chairs or tables in the workplace for people who are less than 5’ tall are custom made – however, the
AtW process forces the person to fit the equipment not the equipment fit the person. This is particularly difficult when things are custom made and cannot be returned.

24. A custom desk chair was provided but arrived from the suppliers in a poor state which means it is dangerous to use. Despite it being for someone who is very unsteady on their feet a chair on wheels with no braking system was initially provided. A pneumatic break system has now been added, but the chair is still dangerous as the foot plate is bare, galvanised metal placed perfectly at a height to cause damage to shins and ankles. It is also a trip hazard and I have fallen due to catching my clothing on the bare metal footplate several times.

25. Unfortunately the chair is also causing additional problems – in the assessment a height adjustable table was discussed but decided against due to working from home in a very small flat. Although the chair can be set to the correct ergonomics for the user, it is then impossible to use as it is many inches higher than the table. To be able to reach the table the chair has to be at too low a height, which is causing increasing spinal problems.

26. I was provided with a lightweight laptop from AtW as part of my job includes travel to events where computer work is needed. The laptop provided is a Windows Surface Pro 2 – a particularly expensive computer said to be ‘future proof’ by the advisor. To be able to use the laptop in a safe, ergonomic fashion at home a case and stand were recommended by the advisor. Unfortunately months on from this assessment the laptop is still impossible to use at home because the stand the assessor specified was for an iPad and did not fit the Surface Pro 2. Although assessors are being told to tell clients that the Surface Pro 2 is ‘future proof’ (a nonsense) it seems no-one has pointed out that there is not a case/stand readily available to fit this particular laptop making it un-usuable and at higher risk of being broken.

27. AtW provided a very helpful telephone and Bluetooth headset as I cannot use a phone normally without causing further damage to my joints. However, the only phone point in the flat was nowhere near the desk area. After multiple dislocations and accidents it became obvious that the phone had been installed in a manner impossible for me to use (as the headset will not operate without a button on the phone being pressed to answer/dial) and at our own cost we had to install an additional phone point to make the equipment possible to use.

28. Dragon dictation software was also provided at a cost of approx. £400 – this was despite my explaining to the assessor that the problems with my voice caused by having EDS mean it is impossible to get any consistent voice pattern. I had requested some limited PA support for the occasions I need help with typing things up but Dragon was the solution, despite my explanation that I had tried to use the software
before and been unable to. The assessor explained this was because they were supposed to provide equipment to solve problems, not PA support.

29. Ongoing support:-

30. PA hours to provide support when working away, and a very small amount of PA hours to help when working from home were requested when I initially applied to AtW. This is a separate process from the equipment assessment but both were requested at the same time. I was informed by my advisor that the new AtW regulations limited any PA support to a maximum of 20% of hours worked. This seemed to contradict the official guidance but when I queried this with the PA assessor my email was not responded to. Our admin support worker Mariana has spent many hours chasing equipment and trying to find out what has happened to the PA support request. At the time of writing we are waiting for further response as the advisor informed Mariana there had not been any request for PA support. This is despite it being the same advisor who had acknowledged and replied to my emails requesting PA support and insisting that there was a 20% limit. I had asked for 6 hours per week of PA support which I could ‘bank’ and then use for work events when I need to travel. This 6 hours is considerably above the 20% limit as I only work 16 hours a week. There are very strict regulations governing what a social care package can be used for and what AtW support can be used for. I need assistance with things like opening doors, or obtaining food when away. AtW class these as social care needs and refuse PA support, even if that lack of PA support means being unable to attend work events. Social care packages do not cover work requirements. It is a typical bureaucratic catch 22 which ultimately damages the disabled person who is trying to work – the disabled person is unable to get the support they need as the responsibility is simply passed back and forth between two departments.

31. Effectiveness of helping disabled people to secure a job/stay in employment/develop careers :-

32. If the AtW process worked properly to support disabled people’s needs it would be much more creative and holistic instead of forcing disabled people to fit within the framework of needs AtW is prepared to consider.

33. Ultimately, attempting to deal with the problems with AtW meant I could not get my job done, so it came to a decision – try and do my job, or try and battle AtW to get the support needed. At the time of writing I have given up hoping for AtW to grant the appropriate support hours which means I will have to try and persuade volunteers to provide that support, completely inappropriate in a professional
environment and causing additional risks both to continued employment and my own safety.

34. Although AtW funds the cost of the equipment it recommends and any potential PA hours it permits, the full outlay costs are borne by the employer as they have to pay for everything and then claim back the money from AtW. This claim cannot be made until all the equipment has been received and claim finalised. This is completely prohibitive for anyone self-employed and for us as a new, small organisation with a very limited budget is causing cash flow problems as we had not known this before applying to AtW. Waiting months, with no idea when many thousands of pounds will be refunded is off-putting to small employers and yet another government imposed barrier to disabled people’s full participation in employment. It would seem sensible to fully support the employment of disabled people by small businesses by ensuring there is no delay between purchasing equipment for their new employee and the cost of that equipment being re-funded by AtW. Although it is really positive that AtW covers the full support costs for smaller businesses, the business having to make the initial outlay and then wait potentially many months for it to be refunded is a major problem, and more small employers could be encouraged to hire disabled people if this were not the case.

35. AtW is often described as ‘the government’s best kept secret’ I would support that description, but also add that until AtW functions with the kind of flexibility required by a scheme to support the huge variety of needs disabled people it may as well remain a secret.

5 June 2014