About Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) group

As the largest organisation of blind and partially sighted people in the UK, RNIB is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

We are a membership organisation with over 10,000 members who are blind, partially sighted or the friends and family of people with sight loss and more than 80 per cent of our Board of Trustees are blind or partially sighted. We encourage them to be involved in our work and regularly consult with them on government policy and their ideas for change.

As a campaigning organisation of blind and partially sighted people, we fight for the rights of people with sight loss in each of the UK’s countries. Our priorities are to:

- Stop people losing their sight unnecessarily
- Support independent living for blind and partially sighted people
- Create a society that is inclusive of blind and partially sighted people's interests and needs.

We also provide expert knowledge to business and the public sector through consultancy on improving the accessibility of the built environment, technology, products and services.

Finally the RNIB Group comprises of, Action for Blind People, Cardiff Institute of the Blind, certain local societies and RNIB itself.

The RNIB group is presently, and historically, been a provider of Government funded employment support via Work Choice, NDDP. Workstep, Work Preparation Residential Training and Access to Work.

The significance of blind and partially sighted jobseekers

Blind and partially sighted population

There are almost 80,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK:

- England 66,945
- Scotland 8,061
- Wales 3,795
- Northern Ireland 1,400 (estimate only, based on average for rest of UK).
However, according to the government’s Labour Force Survey, around 190,000 people of working age in the UK have a self-reported “seeing difficulty”. This includes people whose sight loss would not be eligible for registration, but which is still of sufficient severity to affect their everyday lives. It also includes those who do not consider themselves as disabled.

In addition, data from 2009/10 shows around 4000 further people of working age are losing their sight and registering as blind or partially sighted each year.

**Household income**

People with sight loss of working age are more likely than those in the general population to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week. Within this group the scale of the difference varies across age groups.

Forty five per cent of working age blind and partially sighted people describe their financial situation as “just getting by” or worse.

**Employment**

Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people. Only one in three registered blind and partially sighted people of working age is in paid employment. They are nearly five times more likely than the general population to have had no paid work for five years.

For blind and partially sighted people, holding an educational qualification is a key enabler for obtaining employment. Educational attainment has a far stronger effect on the likelihood of being in employment for registered blind and partially sighted people compared to the general population. Those with a degree or higher qualification still only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general population.

**Introduction to response**

Whilst RNIB group broadly support the Access to Work (AtW) scheme there needs to be greater transparency around quality assurance of contracted assessment providers, and some impact measurement around customer satisfaction and job sustainability following ATW support.

We believe that blind and partially sighted people should be given greater power and opportunity to choose their employment support services from a pool of specialist providers, with specialist advice available as necessary.
RNIB group value the AtW service, and are keen supporters of its use in moving blind and partially sighted people to become economically active, and independent.

Considering this background information, this response to the Inquiry will include commentary on:

- The AtW application and assessment processes, from the perspectives of employees and employers;
- The adequacy of ongoing support, both in terms of the aids, adaptations and support workers provided through AtW, and the help and advice offered by DWP;
- AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to:
  1. Secure a job;
  2. Stay in employment; and
  3. Develop their careers; and
- The steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme

We will not be commenting on

- The effectiveness of AtW in supporting people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities

We are available to and would welcome the opportunity to expand on any points and provide further evidence to the select committee during the oral evidence sessions for this inquiry.

Responses to enquiry questions

1. The AtW application and assessment processes, from the perspectives of employees and employers

The current access to work application process, whereby an individual telephones the ATW business centre, and is called back at a later date, is ineffective, and dogged with delays and other problems. Blind and partially sighted people report that for example:

“The assessor didn’t understand my disability” - Steve from South West

“The adviser told me that I would be called back within 48 hours, but two weeks later I am still waiting” – Nigel, Devon
Often, we receive enquiries from employers, stating that they tried to apply to ATW for an employee, but were told that it must be the individual who applies, and that the ATW adviser was not prepared to discuss even “in principle” cases. Employers generally feel ostracised at the application stage, even when they are attempting to support blind and partially sighted people, in recruitment, or job retention.

RNIB group believe is that there is a link between the quality of advice given by ATW telephone advisers, and assessment providers, and the level of support offered by ATW. Good quality support is based upon a good quality initial contact and assessment.

RNIB group of charities continue to receive regular reports from blind and partially sighted people pointing to shortcomings in this application and assessment process.

An example of this is, where one particular applicant was told by ATW on the phone that her “Visual impairment was an inconvenience to their computer systems” as she required alternative formats. The ATW team then sent this comment in writing to her.

“We are no longer able to provide alternative formats and so all information is sent in printed font size 10.”

Therefore, there was no access for this individual as no email, braille, audio, or large print was available.

Blind and partially sighted people are also expected to fill in paper forms. Even if these forms are sent electronically, they have to be printed and handwritten. One blind person returned a form that she had completed electronically, printed out and then signed, but this was sent back and she was told that she has to complete it manually. The client mentioned to us that she feels that the advisors “think that you are being awkward” when you ask for an alternative format rather than it being a necessity.

With regard to assessments of blind and partially sighted people, RNIB believes that a more specialised assessment is required. The issues around blindness are often more complex and technical than most other disabilities, and therefore fundamentally, the generalist commissioned service, that DWP has procured, provides a poor service to blind and partially sighted people. Increasingly, employers are contacting RNIB group, as they have “lost faith in the speed and quality” of the access to work assessment service. Interestingly, they are prepared to pay for this professional service.

A clear example of this is explained in the following comments from Julie:

“I found (assessing organisation) very generic - they cover a wide spectrum of disabilities yet claim to be specialists in them all. If so, then why did it take 2
assessments and a formal complaint to (assessing organisation) to get the equipment I needed."

In summary, the ATW application and assessment process for blind and partially sighted can be improved by ensuring that the service is easily accessible; that advisers are trained well; that they understand visual impairment and its impact on employment; that the whole process and documentation is accessible, and that the assessing organisation and their staff are qualified and experienced to assess blind and partially sighted people.

2 The adequacy of ongoing support, both in terms of the aids, adaptations and support workers provided through AtW, and the help and advice offered by DWP;

As previously mentioned in this response, RNIB group of charities is a true supporter of Access to Work, and recognises the excellent impact this has on helping blind and partially sighted to obtain, and retain employment.

Interestingly, this is also the general feeling amongst blind and partially sighted beneficiaries of the scheme.

“Access to work is an excellent scheme, and I would not have been able to do my job without it” John, London

Paul, a visually impaired teacher has received computer equipment, and transport support to and from work. He stated,

“if it wasn’t for access to work, I would’ve had to leave my job, and heaven knows where I would have been now”

Additionally, Naomi, based in Kent, but who travels across the country in her role, needed travel support to and from work. She lives in a rural area, and only needs to get to her base, and from there her employer arranges transport during work. This support is invaluable in many cases, and particularly for Naomi.

RNIB is aware that ongoing support for blind and partially sighted people can appear to be expensive. However, access to work is to overcome barriers to employment, as a result of disability. A sighted person living in a rural area, or where public transport is infrequent, would have the option of driving to and from work. Many people who are visually impaired do not have this opportunity, and rely on taxis or support worker drivers. This is not a luxury, but a necessity, and is a little more expensive, solely due to blind and some partially sighted people not being able to drive.
Whereas we agree that blind and partially sighted people living in conurbation areas, with reliable public transport options, should consider travelling independently, it is critical that the ATW financial support for taxis and support worker driver continues. This will ensure blind and partially sighted people are not disadvantaged when compared to sighted peers, and are able to travel safely and conveniently in the most cost-effective way available.

To quote a ministerial statement from 2012: “I wish to make it clear that there will be no withdrawal of taxi support for individuals for whom this is the most appropriate and independent travel option” - this promise should remain.

RNIB would suggest that there are ongoing reviews of the ATW service and that more robust, transparent and reliable data is collected and disseminated. This would be the basis for continual improvement of the service, and RNIB group of charities would be more than happy to help shape and support any initiative around this.

3 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to secure a job; stay in employment and develop their careers;

RNIB believes that once the initial contact with the access to work services is made, and the sometimes inaccessible application process is mastered, the effectiveness of the service is generally good. Access to work does not intrinsically help someone obtain employment, but is a method by which blind and partially sighted people and their employers are aided to overcome disability barriers in the workplace.

We would like to see Access to Work play a greater role in facilitating an open, constructive and productive relationship between employer and employee.

Some employers, have been rebuked when attempting to apply to ATW to support their employee, yet when the employee has managed to negotiate the application process, ultimately the solutions are implemented effectively.

Overall, it appears that the impact of the scheme, once negotiated is very effective at supporting blind and partially sighted people into work.

The one negative element that overrides all others is that of delay. This relates to the return of telephone calls at the application stage; the assessment process; and the authorisation of support.

One example of a number is Darren, in the south of England.

“I started to apply for access to work nine days before my job commenced. I have now been in work for two weeks and my application has still not been processed. I have discussed my situation twice now with my advisor, but have still not received a
reply. My employer is getting very impatient, as I need a driver to get to appointments. I am really worried, two weeks into my new job, that my employer may dismiss me”

Job retention support from Access to Work, is also generally felt to be positive. A recent contact by national employer told us that support they received from access to work was excellent, and enabled them to retain a blind and partially sighted person.

Another employee remarked: “I have had two experiences of access to work both were very good in helping me to keep my job, by providing me with a CCTV magnifier. - Gill

There is a need to resolve the ambiguity around who the equipment grant is for - the applicant or the employer. Disabled employees can feel disenfranchised from the process of procurement, once their application and assessment is completed, as they often don't see a full copy of the assessment report, and the employer is the recipient of the award. RNIB believes that the equipment and support purchased via Access to Work, should belong to the client, and be "portable" to another employer, if the blind or partially sighted person changes jobs. Currently, neither employers nor employees seem clear on ownership.

RNIB, despite asking around 50 beneficiaries of access to work, have been unable to uncover any examples of where the service has helped in progression or career development.

4 The steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme

RNIB is delighted that access to work has been extended to work experience placements and apprenticeships. Current and relevant work experience is one of the key factors in helping to secure employment for blind and partially sighted people. Historically, this has been impossible for some blind or partially sighted people, as they, or their prospective host employers, simply did not know what equipment was required, or did not have the funds to justify purchase, for a short term placement.

“It's great, having just left school, now I have my magnification software, I can do a work placement, just like my mate Julie” – blind youngster from the Midlands.

ATW should also be extended to support volunteering, which is recognised as a route into work for long-term unemployed people.

Unfortunately, again the announcement of this work experience extension seems somewhat guarded, and low-key. This seems to be in line with the scheme’s overall marketing activity, and the opinion is that access to work is still the Department’s “best kept secret”.
We are aware that some marketing of the scheme did take place in Wales, but we are not sure if there has been any impact.

**Recommendations**

RNIB group has been lobbying ATW for the following improvements to uphold the quality of ATW Service and make the following recommendations:

1. DWP should provide applicants with a clear and detailed statement of the ATW service, so that a client and their employer know what to expect from the assessment process and any subsequent report.

2. There should be a clear process for systematically collecting feedback from customers on the quality of the assessment and any subsequent report, measured against the statement of service.

3. When procuring assessment services, DWP should use quality benchmarks, and these should be monitored, transparent, and available for scrutiny.

4. ATW should carry out evaluations of their service to measure the long-term impact of the service towards supporting job retention and career progression, segmented by disability.

5. Assessment providers should be required to keep client details in order for them to carry out their own evaluation.

6. Individual assessors should hold or be working towards mandatory qualifications related to assessment provision, e.g. IAG and/or vocational rehabilitation along with either qualifications or a minimum number of years’ experience in dealing with a particular disability.

7. ATW should be extended to support volunteering.

8. Funding for the additional cost of taxis or support worker driver to and from, and during work should continue.

9. Consideration should be given to increased marketing of the scheme and perhaps systematic notification of the service to disabled people e.g. at the point of National Insurance Card Allocation.

10. In November 2012, Esther McVey MP, then Minister for Disabled People, issued a written statement outlining measures to strengthen and improve the Access to Work scheme. RNIB would like to see all the proposals outlined in the ministerial statement to be upheld.

19 June 2014