Written evidence submitted by the Papworth Trust (ATW0103)

About Papworth Trust

1. Papworth Trust is a disability charity and registered social landlord, whose aim is for disabled people to have equality, choice and independence. Papworth Trust helps over 20,000 people every year through a wide range of services including employment, vocational rehabilitation, housing and personal support.

2. Papworth Trust welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Select Committee Inquiry into Access to Work. In order to provide a balanced and informed response to the inquiry, Papworth Trust ran a survey on Access to Work and received nearly 100 responses from a mix of people who had been through the scheme themselves and employers who had supported staff through the process. We also carried out in-depth interviews with several people who had been through the process. We asked people about what they use Access to Work for, any difficulties they’ve encountered throughout the process and if their needs are being met. We have used our survey results and interviews to inform this response.

The Access to Work application

3. Papworth Trust received an overwhelmingly positive response to the support offered by Access to Work. Respondents highlighted the positive impact it has made on their life and the positive contribution they can make to society through being able to maintain employment.

“Without this support, I would really struggle to work”.

However, 1 in 5 responses said that they found applying for Access to Work difficult, and many others stated that although in general they found the process relatively easy, there were bits that they struggled with.

4. Our survey found that the application itself can cause difficulties for people if they are not able to use telephones. Many people with hearing and visual impairments had significant issues with the service as Access to Work was described as ‘telephone heavy’. In addition to this, some people found that Access to Work advisers are reluctant to use email as their main method of communication. Papworth Trust suggests that the Access to Work scheme looks at the accessibility of their service.

“Access to Work initially didn’t publish email addresses until I used the FOI Act to insist”

Upfront funding and the problems in prompt payments

5. Papworth Trust found that the payment process of Access to Work has caused significant difficulties for people. There have been examples of the employee being expected to fund the transportation or the equipment themselves and then be refunded by Access to Work at month end, monthly costs that can often reach up to £1,000. Papworth Trust recommends some form of upfront payment system is created to assist people when they are faced with high costs to stay in work.

Case study one: Chris

Chris successfully applied to Access to Work to contribute towards the daily cost of taxis to work. His application was successful, however when he tried to arrange this with the taxi company they refused to set up an account with Access to Work due to problems of prompt payment in the past. Chris was then expected to fund the cost of taxis, an average of £58 return per day, himself. This would mean Chris needing to spend over £1,000 every month from his salary to fund the costs of getting to work, whilst waiting for Access to Work to refund him. This made the prospect of getting to work unaffordable, until his employer stepped in to fund the upfront costs.
6. Other than the difficulty with payments, we found that many of our respondents found it uncomfortable and awkward having to converse with their employer regarding payment or equipment.

“I’m not happy that it’s been left up to me to explain to my employer why each piece is necessary, and why it costs so much. I’m also not happy that Access to Work offers no help at all to me in negotiating permission and funding for this stuff with my employer”.

This situation of a deadlock between employer and employee has resulted in a few people not being able to access the available support and therefore not receiving the support that would enable them to remain in employment.

“I think they ‘could’ have helped me stay in work if they’d been willing to help me get my employer to allow the support to be put in place”

Papworth Trust suggests that Access to Work advisers take more of a leading role in communicating with employers and encouraging them to be open to providing the support available.

Help and Advice offered by DWP

7. Papworth Trust found frustrations around the limited knowledge that Access to Work advisers have regarding disability. This is exacerbated by the fact that the advisers on the end of the phone are rarely the ones that go to face to face assessments.

Case Study two: Amanda

Amanda contacted Access to Work to find out whether they could source equipment to boost her hearing at work. She has a hearing impairment and experienced mixed help from assessors on their level of knowledge and expertise of what may or may not be helpful. In her first assessment, which was over the phone, she was asked to source the equipment herself, which was problematic as she had little knowledge about the types of equipment available. Her second assessment, which was face to face, was much more effective as they were able to suggest equipment that may be helpful. However when she subsequently changed jobs and assessors again, she found the new assessor to lack any knowledge or expertise about what may help her.
8. There are examples where Access to Work has been reluctant to fund certain journeys or support worker costs due to the comparison in the expense to the North East, where the Access to Work adviser hub is located. This discrepancy was shown when Chris (case study one) wanted to access in-work transport and the adviser was not aware of why public transport would not be suitable. One survey respondent also stated that they had to negotiate with Access to Work on justifying the hours of support needed. This was made difficult by the fact that support worker hourly rates in London and Surrey can be higher than those in the North East. Papworth Trust urges advisers to be more aware of these geographical differences.

“The outcome is very satisfactory. It tends to be the journey to that outcome that can be difficult”

Ongoing support

9. Papworth Trust found that there were mixed messages regarding the ongoing support received from Access to Work. For many people, it was frustrating that if they change jobs, they have to undergo the whole process again and are signposted to a new adviser. In situations where a person has multiple jobs, they are given an adviser per job. Papworth Trust suggests a more sensible way forward is for a person to remain with the same adviser, where possible, throughout their Access to Work time frame. It is also very important to note that generally where used, Access to Work is essential to a disabled person’s ability to stay in work.

“Access to Work has proved flexible and essential sustaining my employment and developing my career. I have changed roles and Access to Work support has been pivotal to my securing these roles and succeeding in them”

10. The survey respondents were also mixed on whether ‘annual reviews’ are a positive thing. For some respondents, it was very frustrating when they knew their condition would not get any better to be reassessed and go through the worry and stress again. For some people it was also an issue that due to work circumstances, need for a support worker would vary and there would be no guarantee that the need the following year would be the same as the previous. However, other people found it a positive thing and appreciated the ongoing support that Access to Work offered.

Effectiveness in terms of helping people to: secure a job, stay in employment, develop their careers

11. Almost everyone who took part in Papwoth Trust’s survey had made a successful application to Access to Work and there was an overwhelming consensus that the support offered by Access to Work was significant support to their ability to secure work, stay in employment and develop their careers. The ability to easily access transport has allowed people to give their “best self at work”. Two thirds of respondents had used Access to Work for equipment and the comments on the positive impact of the service shows that all areas of support have been essential in maintaining work for disabled people.

“It [Access to Work] completely changed my life for the better. Got me back in employment. Gave me a self-esteem boost so I also went back to studying”

12. The majority of people also said that the support had a positive impact on their wellbeing, with any negatives coming from the barriers of the application process itself.

Marketing and funding
13. Papworth Trust found that where people has benefitted from the Access to Work scheme, they had often found out about it through informal sources or word of mouth such as friends or colleagues rather than an advertising scheme by Access to Work. There were also comments that employment advisers and employers aren’t aware of the scheme which we find worrying because it benefits them to be aware of what help and support is available to them. In addition, if employers have increased awareness of the support available then they may be more willing to fund the equipment and this will deter the problems that are happening that were noted earlier.

**Overall, Access to Work is vital**

“Without Access to Work I wouldn’t have been able to be able to get there or do my job properly. It’s been an amazing help”

14. Papworth Trust believes Access to Work is a vital service – when the scheme works, it works really well and is of real benefit to disabled people. It is important to make sure that the scheme is working as well as possible and there is great room for improvement. Previous research by Papworth Trust has shown that there is a ‘postcode lottery’ as the administration of the scheme is not consistent across the country. We have seen significant variances in what is approved and what is turned down by differing Access to Work offices. This disparity is echoed by who is allowed to contact Access to Work offices. Some offices allow support providers and employers to make contact, others insist that it must be the individual applicant. Therefore we welcome changes announced in Department for Work and Pensions’ Disability Employment Strategy (December 2013) which will give employers the ability to apply for Access to Work on the behalf of their employees, thus simplifying the process and mitigating some of the worries stated earlier in this response.

15. Several of our survey respondents highlighted the difficulties that they had with the length of the process and stated that it could take up a lot of time and be particularly stressful. At present, the scheme only provides support to someone once they have started a job. This can mean that when a disabled person is offered a job, that offer is put at risk and possibly withdrawn due to their inability to start until the necessary adjustments have been funded. Papworth Trust therefore welcomed the announcement in the Disability Employment Strategy which will see greater clarity at an early stage in the recruitment process thus reassuring employees and employers about what help and support is available to them from the outset.

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