1.1 Background: Breakthrough UK is a disabled people’s organisation based in Manchester. We take a barrier removal approach and a large focus of our work for the past 16 years has been around supporting disabled people into, and within, mainstream employment. Most - 90% currently - of our staff are disabled people and many of the disabled people we work with tell us how much they value support from a peer who understands the barriers to employment and independent living they face.

1.2 We think that the AtW scheme is potentially a great support to disabled people, but there remain significant barriers within its administration. Although the Government has made some improvements to the scope of the Access to Work scheme, we still find many bureaucratic problems with the way in which AtW is delivered, and marketing remains poor.

2.1 Publicity: Our experience is that the recent publicity drive has still not filtered through to the disabled people and employers we are working with. Historically we have found that disabled people and employers alike are largely ignorant of the scheme. This has not changed. For example, one of our Employment Brokers said that none of the disabled people she has started working with since January this year had heard of AtW.

2.2 Breakthrough staff members often comment that they only found out about AtW and understood the system themselves after they started to work for us. However, it is still a struggle at times even for our own employees to get the right support.

3.1 Accessibility: One major issue we have encountered is around the ease with which our clients can get an assessment in the first place. Over 60% of the disabled people we work in Manchester have learning difficulties and a major barrier they face with AtW is the application process. Application forms are not available in easy words – or if they are, we don’t know about it! Some advisors will do initial applications over the phone, but this is not consistent so it really depends on who the person gets through to at the contact centre. Our clients do not find the form easy to understand and fill in and all require assistance to complete it. The ongoing paperwork evidencing transport and
personal assistant/communication support is also very onerous for some people.

4.1 Consistency: We do not find that the AtW approach is consistent. “I have had no review in 18 months, but my colleague has had one”, said one employee. Decisions made by one advisor may be different from another. A Deaf person working for Breakthrough UK had an AtW review and it was deemed that the cost of his BSL interpreter support was too expensive and the hours should be cut. This had an impact on him as, since being assessed at the level of support he needed, his job had not changed, nor the level of support he required. Cutting his communication support hours would have had an impact on his ability to do his work effectively. His colleague on the same team, with the same level of support requirement, also had a review of his need, with no mention of cuts for him. We were able to resolve this for the employee in question fortunately. Others working in an organisation with no close colleagues using AtW funded support may have been unaware of this anomaly.

5.1 Delays: It took 10 weeks for one new member of staff to get an assessment. AtW said that her paperwork had gone missing (a frequently cited reason for delays affecting our clients too). Colleagues had to give her lifts, or Breakthrough paid for taxis. Other employers could be less understanding.

5.2 It is worth mentioning that we have set up a system at Breakthrough to avoid potential delays when refunding travel or other costs, so staff are not out of pocket. Our office staff pay all taxi invoices and these are then refunded directly from AtW. We have supported clients to set up similar systems with their employers to reimburse and streamline personal assistance costs.

6.1 Key words: we are concerned that AtW is not adopting a social model approach in its application process. For example, we have learned that people proving employment support – in their best efforts to support people to get the funding they need - have discovered that using words such as ‘vulnerable’ in the application makes it more likely that it will be accepted. For example: a learning disabled man applied for AtW funded taxis as he had a 5am start and found the journey on public transport extremely difficult. His application was declined. Another application was then put in which referred to the person as a ‘vulnerable adult’ and the application was accepted. We are very
uncomfortable with this apparent approach and feel that AtW applications should be taken on their merits, based on a full discussion with the person themselves about their requirements and the barriers they experience wherever possible.

7.1 Changes: One employee with an AtW personal advisor with whom she has been in regular contact about her support has not been given any information at all about the recent expansion to the scheme. She found out about these through Breakthrough’s Policy Officer and not AtW. It would be helpful if AtW advisors could keep their clients abreast of developments and changes to the scheme

8.1 Joined up support: A disabled person had to commute 4 hours each day on public transport because she was unaware that she could ask for help with travel. She was using equipment funded by AtW at the time, but no-one asked about her other requirements - her experience of the system was not joined up. She also reported that she did not even know that her equipment had been funded by AtW - she thought her employer had paid for it. This only came to light when she started working for us, put in an AtW application and discovered that her details were already on their system!

9.1 Lack of choice and control: A major concern we have at Breakthrough UK is that the equipment funded by AtW is not always agreed by the person who is going to be using it. Our starting point with any potential adjustment for our staff would always be to ask the person what they need, and then follow this up by checking that their access requirements are being met on an ongoing basis. We know of an employee who has £4.5K of unnecessary equipment sitting in a cupboard because she does not need it to do her job. She was not asked whether the equipment her assessor suggested would be appropriate before it was agreed and purchased. This is a basic and wasteful problem which we have encountered many times over the past 16 years, and which does not seem to be improving. We also encounter a lack of flexibility in the application process after a price is agreed - but nothing has yet been purchased - when an applicant then finds a piece of equipment or software that is more appropriate to them.

9.2 Related to this point, disabled employees we are in contact with complain that they do not always have a choice about how and what equipment is used. This can lead to situations where employers force staff to use access software
which the staff member does not feel helps them, and which actually slows down their productivity.

10.1 Communication: Communication problems are rife and these have a serious impact on disabled people’s employment. Information sharing in particular is very poor and we often find that messages are not passed on. For example, one of our Employment Brokers said:

10.2 “There has been an issue with one of my clients with his access to work taxi constantly picking him up late. I tried to ring the number I had used in the past but kept getting the answer machine. Leaving messages is not a brilliant option being out and about so I tried a different number. The new number put me through to a call centre where I expressed my concerns and I was told they would pass my message on and an advisor would get back to me within 5-7 days. Near to the 7 days I was contacted and was asked to get three quotes and send them to him. I did this and got no reply. I tried several occasions to contact this new advisor but just kept getting his answer machine.

10.3 While all this was going on the taxi company were still turning up late and my client was still ringing and asking if I had sorted things out as he was late for work nearly every day. I tried to email the advisor and still got no reply. A few weeks later still trying to get hold of him via phone and got no luck.

10.4 So I re-sent the email again… and still no luck… SO I phoned the initial phone number I had contacted to be told somebody would get back to me within 5-7 days. The advisor finally got back to me and we have now nearly resolved the problem.”

10.5 We have also been informed that new AtW claims will be considered dead after 72 hours if DWP staff have not been able to make contact with claimants. Recently one of our client’s applications was closed due to a breakdown in communication, in conjunction with the new guidelines from AtW on response times.

10.6 Our Employment Brokers have also reported that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get an allocated nominated worker – or to get hold of the nominated worker if the person has one. This has resulted in frequent needs to renegotiate and justify previously agreed levels of support. These
changes have happened alongside a downsizing of AtW area offices and a change in roles for many local Disability Employment Advisors.

11.1 **Peer Support.** We would like to conclude with some positive examples of how peer support from other disabled people can work with the Access to Work scheme. We have piloted this approach at Breakthrough and found it to be a very helpful intervention, especially for people with mental health conditions and learning disabled people who may require a more flexible approach to managing their working life. Breakthrough peer supporters worked with people to identify the workplace barriers they were facing and how they could be resolved. Applications to AtW were then submitted to purchase hours of support (from another disabled person) or equipment. The three case studies below illustrate this.

11.2 **Peer Support Case Study 1:** Sarah had been involved in a road traffic accident and, as a result, she had experienced periods of depression and had become extremely anxious. Prior to her accident she had also experienced depression and felt she could not work in stressful, pressurised situations.

11.3 She was then recruited into a role supporting disabled people who had little or no work experience or who had not worked for several years. Sarah was confident when working with her clients, but found it very hard to keep up with the paperwork which was a key part of her role. She also found it difficult to respond quickly to changing priorities (e.g. clients/employers cancelling meetings, lack of employer positive response on occasions etc.) She became unwell and felt unable to continue in the role, despite the good work that she did when she was well.

11.4 **Intervention:** Following her return from a period of sickness, Sarah was introduced to a peer supporter. They built up a rapport and discussed triggers in work that made her feel uncomfortable. The time spent with the peer supporter increased her confidence and it was agreed that an application to AtW for a support worker should be made, building on the success of the support that she had received. The peer supporter drew up a list of situations that had resulted in Sarah becoming stressed and worked out a series of actions that reduced the stressful situations. The difference to Sarah was very positive.
11.5 **Action:** As a result, an application was made to AtW for a support worker for 7hrs each week, to support her with completion of paperwork and to talk through situations that led to feelings of stress or panic.

11.6 **Impact:** Following the introduction of regular support chats, Sarah started working far more effectively, both with her clients and when doing her paperwork. This enabled her to feel more positive and proactive and improved her work life balance.

11.7 **Peer Support Case Study 2:** Kamal has learning difficulties and works as a general store assistant. He had a meeting with the store manager who explained that, due to the current financial situation and loss of business throughout the chain, Kamal’s hours may need to be cut. The manager also said that Kamal was at possible risk of redundancy. The manager had to make staff cuts and Kamal - in his manager’s view - was not able to perform to the same level as some of his colleagues.

11.8 **Intervention:** A Breakthrough peer supporter met with Kamal and the store manager. The peer supporter looked with him at what could be put in place to minimise the potential risk of job loss for Kamal and to support him in meetings to understand the implications of matters discussed.

11.9 **Action:** The peer supporter then spent some time with Kamal and the store manager, to gain an understanding of his requirements in the workplace. The manager wanted all staff to be multifunctioning in the store roles and Kamal could perform some tasks to the required standard, but not all. An AtW application for a support worker was completed and an award for 10 hrs support made.

11.10 **Impact:** Following the introduction of regular support chats, Kamal is now working to a much higher level of understanding of his role and his potential to be retained in the job following his new skills has increased considerably.

11.12 **Peer Support Case Study 3:** Jasmine has dyslexia and found that her manager sometimes didn’t understand why her reports and data input were not written as expected.

11.13 **Intervention:** A Breakthrough staff member who also had dyslexia had a meeting with Jasmine to show her the software that he had on his computer, which had been sourced through an AtW application. Jasmine had not heard
of Access to Work so information was shared both to her and to her line manager. Jasmine had the opportunity to use the software during the session and found it beneficial. She thought that similar software might meet her access requirements.

11.14 **Action**: An application to AtW was completed and a date set for an adviser to come and meet her and her manager at work.

11.15 **Impact**: Jasmine’s employer agreed to meet the employer cost for buying the software. Jasmine now feels an equal part of the team and her work rate has improved in terms of content and accuracy. She feels the support from both Breakthrough and AtW has had a very positive impact on her working life.

12.1 We hope these brief points have been useful and add something to your Inquiry. Thank you for the opportunity to respond. We would be very happy to expand on any of the points raised. For more information, please contact:

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