Written evidence submitted by Stuart Harrison (ATW0149)

1.0 Application and Assessment Processes:

1.1 I have been using Access to Work (AtW) on and off since 1990

1.2 In my experience, employers have very little understanding of AtW, especially HR departments and therefore it is best for assessments and applications to be carried out by AtW assessors where this is requested by the applicant.

1.3 When support and resources are allocated – people’s job performance improves considerably and they are able to make a very effective contribution to their work place or own businesses.

1.4 When I first started my teaching career – I had no idea about AtW but a friend told me that it could help. An assessor came to see me for about 30 minutes as a result I was issued with a small piece of equipment to attach to the telephone to help me when making telephone calls.

1.5 Looking back, that was an inappropriate use of AtW. What I should have had was the use of interpreters in staff meetings, professional training courses and even in the classroom. I will not go into detail here but suffice to say that AtW assessors really do need to take into account all possible ways that a person could enhance their work performances.

1.6 Application processes never ask how much we earn – but now we are getting letters asking us how much we earn. This is discrimination and should be abolished.

1.7 It is wrong that there are no appeals procedures with AtW; there should be grounds for appeals when an individual feels that the DWP have made errors in their calculations or misdiagnosed situations. I know of individuals who have taken their concerns to their local MPs who have intervened and reversed DWP decisions – this is an unnecessary waste of MPs time – there should be an appeals system in place.

2.0 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: Secure a job

2.1 Work Experience:
• **AtW MUST be available for volunteering** opportunities for people up to the age of 25 – this allows them to build up vital work ready skills.
• It allows them to build up credible CVs that will make them attractive to employers.
• AtW should also be available to young people on vocational training courses both at college and at the workplace.
• It should also be available for apprenticeships.

2.2 Interviewing & Recruiting staff:
• When every employer advertises a job, they should already have their interview dates in mind. This way they can preliminary book sign-language interpreters or other resources so that when they decide to invite disabled people for interviews, the interpreters/resources are already in place.
• If no disabled people are being interviewed, then the support can be cancelled without incurring penalties from agencies that provide the resources.

2.3 Salary/income related assessments:
• The DWP should not be passing judgment on a persons eligibility for AtW based on the amount of money they earn. Getting a job is wider than just the pay-packet.
• I agree that at the least a person should be on minimum wage but that is about as far as it should go.

3.0 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: Stay in employment:

3.1 Lunch-time access:
• Deaf people (an those with communication disabilities and other similar disabilities) should have AtW interpreters available for them during their lunch breaks even if their job activities do not require AtW support.
• All individuals enhance their chances of career progression and promotion by how well they integrate themselves into the ‘network’ of employment – listening to more experienced colleagues, finding out about opportunities for training or internal vacancies etc.
• This type of support should also be available for staff-related away days, social events organized by the employer etc. these experiences are essential for the work force and without this, disabled people cannot participate and develop.

4.0 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people
to: develop their careers

4.1 Professional Training:
AtW should be available for people who want to access vocational training even if it is for jobs that they are not currently employed in because they may have aspirations for career development elsewhere and therefore AtW should reflect this.

4.2 Allowances for those in senior management:
AtW need to accept and understand that senior management do not work regular 9-5 hours, they cannot be expected to restrict their AtW support in this way, they need to have the flexibility to book their own support that fits in with their work styles and commitments – they should not have their work-time and desires to create better opportunities for themselves and their employers by having their AtW restricted to impractical arrangements such as only employing salaried support workers on fixed times – what happens when a support worker goes sick? Who pays for the cover of a replacement support worker?
What happens when a manager needs to travel away from the workplace or even overseas – this cannot be covered by restricting support workers to 30 hours a week – this is just not practical?

AtW and the Self-Employed
The biggest problems with Access to Work that I have faced have been as a self-employed person. Here, I want to cover the previous points from this perspective

5.0 AtW application and assessment processes for the self-employed:

5.1 There is a great weakness in the system when it comes to decision-making by DWP staff:
- They lack the understanding of self-employment – everyone I speak to at DWP (so far) has never been self-employed.
- They lack the understanding that weekly networking is an essential part of working life for the self-employed and business owners – most business is acquired through networking and word of mouth. It is inappropriate when DWP assign an arbitrary amount of time (2 years) where they feel that networking is no longer necessary.
- This is most inappropriate – networking never ceases, it is the continual essence of generating sustainable incomes.
- I cannot network without AtW support –

5.2 DWP argues that it is not good value for money to support networking activity because the self-employed are not getting paid
when they are networking! – I am sure I do not have to explain to you how inappropriate that attitude is.

5.3 I have been through two or three reviews with my AtW requirements when we have come to the end of our allocated entitled periods. But then I was very disturbed this year to get a letter from DWP asking me to tell them how much I actually earn as a self-employed person.

They explained that they had not collected enough information at the review. But there is no provision on the application/review forms that ask for salaries or incomes.

I have obliged and provided the information even though I do not agree that they should be asking for this information – you cannot value an individual’s entitlement to work against the amount of income they earn.

The scheme is ACCESS to work – enabling a person to carry out the work whether employed or self-employed.

5.4 I have contacted DWP asking them to tell me exactly what type of financial information they required from me to answer their questions. I sent them the information according to their request. I was then sent another letter asking for more information, but I was unsure what they were asking for, so I called again, but still unsure I contacted my accountants for their assistance.

My accountants telephoned DWP on my behalf and it is almost three weeks now we have not heard anything from DWP.

5.6 When the DWP ask for information – they don’t really know what they want – or they deliberately do not tell us what they want because they are trying to find as many reasons as possible to stop or deny someone from claiming their AtW entitlement.

5.7 It is wrong that there are no appeals procedures with AtW; there should be grounds for appeals when an individual feels that the DWP have made errors in their calculations or misdiagnosed situations. I know of individuals who have taken their concerns to their local MPs who have intervened and reversed DWP decisions – this is an unnecessary waste of MPs time – there should be an appeals system in place.

5.8 I recommend that Assessment and evolution of AtW for the self-employed is carried out by people who are experienced self-employed themselves, there are already groups and networks of disabled people who could effectively administer this for the DWP.

6.0 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled
people to:

. Set up their own business and be self-employed:

6.1 AtW should be available to allow disabled people to attend fairs and conventions where they can find out about business opportunities, franchising etc.

6.2 Many disabled people are turning to self employment because they cannot find work as employees due to access or health issues that are such that would not prevent them from working more flexibly as self-employed. [http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/radiate-network/previous-radiate-events/disabled-people-doing-it-themselves-self-employment-home](http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/radiate-network/previous-radiate-events/disabled-people-doing-it-themselves-self-employment-home)

6.3 There are many different part-time business opportunities available for people to earn extra money alongside their regular wage – the most common form of this is network marketing which creates billions of pounds a year to the economy. But I am finding that when disabled people in my team apply for AtW, they are being turned away because they are not working long enough hours or not earning enough. It is my opinion that this is discriminatory and AtW must not be allowed to continue making such decisions.

6.4 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to:

. Stay in self-employment:
  . AtW has to understand that the self-employed:
  . Do not earn a regular wage and therefore should not have their AtW denied or removed because of this
  . Do not get paid for every moment they are working on their business, they only get paid when they are working in their business – therefore when we say we are working 20+ hours a week, we might be working unpaid for 75% of that time and therefore should not be penalized or refused AtW because of that.

7.0 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to:

. Develop their self-employed careers:

7.1 AtW staff have to understand that the self-employed:

. May incorporate their businesses to Limited Companies – they may still be the only person working in that business, their roles at work have not changed, their support needs are still the same, they should not have AtW denied or reduced because of this.

. Have to attend regular networking and training events probably to a greater extent than people who are classed as employed.
These networking events and training events are paid for by the self-employed person as a business essential, therefore AtW should not be cutting the amount of hours given for this once a person has been in business for an arbitrary set amount of time set by the AtW.

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

8.1 I have found it very challenging to get access to work – I consider myself to be well educated with a higher degree and have senior management experience and deal with a wide range of people at all levels. I do have concerns for less able people who feel unable and inadequate to consider applying for Access to Work and then being able to cope and deal with challenging decisions made by the DWP.

8.2 The DWP make it very difficult for the ordinary disabled person to apply for AtW to give them the opportunity to contribute to the economy as employee or self-employed.

8.3 School leavers have no knowledge of the AtW scheme and this should be an essential part of educations exit strategies, helping young people to understand the resources available to them.

8.4 My impression has always been that the DWP would rather keep the scheme 'secret' to keep down the number of applications and expense on its budget; this is the most inappropriate ways of treating disabled people.

8.5 It is also very wrong that there are no appeals procedures with AtW; there should be grounds for appeals when an individual feels that the DWP have made errors in their calculations or misdiagnosed situations. I know of individuals who have taken their concerns to their local MPs who have intervened and reversed DWP decisions – this is an unnecessary waste of MPs time – there should be an appeals system in place.

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