Written evidence submitted by The Action Group (ATW0159)

The following feedback is being submitted on behalf of an Employment Support Worker (ESW) at Real Jobs, the supported employment service of The Action Group in Edinburgh, who has been in receipt of Access to Work (AtW) funding for over 12 months now. The evidence relates to the following relevant aspects which reflect her employment characteristics:

a. The AtW application and assessment processes, from the perspectives of employee:

i. About the application process:

1) Information initially given by the AtW team suggested that the process of application through to the receipt of a grant would be straightforward and that employer purchases for equipment as a reasonable adjustment would be reimbursed in full.

On her first call to AtW, she was advised that a member of the advice team would fill in the application over the phone. Once the application had been filled, it would be sent to the person’s home address to get it signed. Once the application was signed then it could be returned to AtW office via prepaid envelope. This all sounded fairly straightforward to follow.

The AtW team subsequently changed that advice by saying that only any purchases made in the first six weeks of employment were 100% claimable through AtW. Although the member of staff explained she would need more time to assess what additional equipment she might require, at no point did the Access to Work team explain this would mean that a full reimbursement for equipment would not be possible.

When the member of staff later contacted AtW they informed her that her employer would bear the cost because her second claim had exceeded the 6 week cut off. This timescale takes no account of the fact that the claimant needed time to work out what she actually needed to do the job in the first place.

2) What follows is an example of the communication issues experienced:

ESW: “Thank you for helping with the application form. Would it be ok if I report about the reasonable adjustments later?”

Member of AtW team: “yes that would be fine.”

ESW: “Would that be part of the same application form as the one we are working on just now?”
Member of AtW team: “Yes it will be and will not effect on the contribution side of the things.

3) However, when she later informed AtW about the proposed adjustments they asked her to commence a new application which created a lot of confusion.

At this stage it was indicated that the ESW’s employer would have to pay for all equipment which meant a number of calls were need to resolve this.

From her perspective, although this was later rectified it was a very time consuming and stressful process which delayed the purchase and implementation of the reasonable adjustments being put in place and made it harder for the ESW to get settled at their work place

ii. About the assessment process:

4) The assessment process was very straightforward and ultimately ensured that the member of staff would receive the recommendation report as soon as possible.

However, the stage of assessment is another important matter which deserves a review. Late assessment can potentially delay an employee getting settled in their work environment. In this ESW’s perspective the assessment could actually take place during the period of referencing and disclosure checks and the ordering of any required equipment could take place once these checks have been completed.

This could prevent delays and any anxiety an employee may confront after the start of their employment due to a potential lack of an accessible environment.

In making this recommendation, ESW understands that this raises a requirement of AtW and employer working collaboratively. If employers are supported during the recruitment of disabled candidates, things can go more smoothly in the employment of a disabled person.

5) However, ESW believes that as all individual needs are varied due to their disability, a planned collaborative support from AtW and provisional employer can make a huge difference in the employment of a disabled employee.

If AtW could start the assessment process much earlier it would ensure disabled employees were able to receive equipment and adjustments much faster.

b. The adequacy of ongoing support, both in terms of the aids, adaptations and the help and advice offered by DWP:

After the initial confusion over communication, the support provided by Access to Work was adequate and the adaptations and aids were provided,
which as recommended by the AtW team member who carried out initial assessment.

6) However, the continuity of aids and adaptation seems to come across as a challenge in the life of a disabled employee. In ESW’s perspective, it is still difficult to understand why AtW can or cannot pay for any equipment which may be established as a need during their employment. Is it an issue related to lack of funding or is it something else? She has heard about a number of events recently where AtW were promoting their services and explaining what they had to offer. However, as an existing client of AtW, she questions why she has not been informed about the latest developments and changes in the service.

7) Also, a colleague of the member of staff recently had issues with an accessible laptop which was originally funded by Access to Work – they confirmed that, despite it no longer working, they were not able to pay for another one. This means that this employee is currently working on equipment which they can no longer access due to their disability.

6) AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to;

i. Secure a job

8) The member of staff strongly believes that AtWis incredibly effective in helping disabled people to secure a job, both giving them the equipment and adjustments required to perform their role effectively as well as supporting employers to make meaningful changes in the workplace, ensuring that there is not additional work in employing someone with a disability.

If there were not organisations like AtW, it would be too easy for employers to avoid employing disabled people. The provision of equipment and other support from AtW is a great support for an employee to secure a job and an employer to have the opportunity to see a disabled person in practical sense away from the stigma associated with their disability.

ii. Stay in employment:

9) The payment of travel costs to work and during working hours have been really important in ensuring that the member of staff is able to perform her role. This is crucial for many jobs and should be continued. She believes that if she did not have taxi support of travel within work and expenses claim associated with it, she was going to struggle a lot with this particular aspect of her work. She also believes that it has helped to make her very independent.

She believes that she can self-plan her travel within work. The claim which has been negotiated and agreed for travel expenses of the taxies with AtW
has given her a great flexibility to travel to a distance of more than 5 – 7 miles within work.

10) ESW believes that she enjoys doing marketing within her work which is part of her job description. Travel within work has supported her tremendously to carry out this activity very effectively.

However, lack of consistent support in relation to the reasonable adjustments is an issue. In her opinion, this might have changed recently but has not been promoted well.

iii. Develop their careers:

11) ESW believes that she does not possess any knowledge that how AtW can support to a disabled employee to develop their careers. However as an existing client of AtW, it would be interesting to know about this.

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

12) Once again, ESW does not have knowledge and understanding in this regard. She would have appreciated AtW informing her about this.

As a AtW client, she believes it would not be appropriate to comment here without conducting research into this particular aspect.

12 June 2014