Equal in Salford is one of three staff groups within Salford City Council formally recognised as a representative forum for workers who share a particular equality focus. We welcome members with long term illness or disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

There are currently 23 members of the group in a workforce of approximately 10,000. A range of disabilities and long-term health conditions are represented. Most of our members have had experience of the Access To Work process and many have had repeated experience over a period of many years.

- We recommend assessment should take place at an earlier stage.
- We recommend some changes to the application process.
- We recommend significant changes to the way Access To Work interacts with applicants and in levels of information, support and training for employers.
- We do not think the current eligibility criteria are compatible with the aims of the scheme.
- We believe the role of Access To Work in career development has been neglected.

Response to consultation queries

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

Our members struggle to understand the need to start the application process themselves and do not think any aspect of the application process is a good fit with local authority processes. Information from Access To Work itself is very basic on the gov.uk website and we do not consider that information fit for purpose. A number of supporting documents allowing applicants to see which items were excluded or the guidance used by decision makers were removed as part of the move to that site and this has removed transparency and basic information from the process. The information available does nothing to allay the fears/concerns of staff about timescales, complexity and stresses involved in the process. It guarantees that, from the start of the process, an applicant and indeed their employer, has many questions to which there is no answer until the process is underway. This is not reassuring and is a cause of avoidable anxiety for all as it instantly requires an applicant to start asking questions of others who often don’t have the answer but who offer to seek it. This is the start of an unnecessary number of people being involved in the implementation of applications.

Members expressed some concern about starting the process over the telephone. Advisers taking details often had little grasp of the fundamental issues faced by applicants and thus information recorded by those advisers onto the form subsequently sent to applicants was often incorrect. Furthermore, some members felt that a phone call was an inappropriate way to start any application as the nature of some peoples disabilities meant that many people would have problems instantly recalling or describing the consequences of their disabilities and in some cases people were being asked to think of the issues they had having never actually addressed those issues before. Provision of an electronic
application which an applicant could ponder and work on at their own speed was suggested as a ‘reasonable adjustment’. Provision of a detailed FAQ section to support this and telephone applications was also suggested.

5 There is no apparent support or training from Access To Work for public sector managers; HR or other staff e.g. IT support on how to support applicants through the process. Consequently, any internal information available re: Access To Work is never more than a rehash of what is already available and neither managers nor HR are in a position to adequately advise as problems arise.

6 The way work streams are divided in the public sector then means employees are often left negotiating by themselves past many different staff in many diverse teams such as their own manager and team; HR, finance and IT just to progress perhaps a single, low or no cost ‘reasonable adjustment’. The stress of this process is not an encouragement to pursue such things as needs change or new needs arise. The process and responsibility for purchase of equipment was identified as a very specific concern.

7 The time from application to implementation is inevitably extended by all of the above. We have examples of simple, low cost ‘reasonable adjustments’ which have taken 1 to 2 years from application to implementation as a consequence. Often this is caused in part believing incorrectly that applications can be made to Access To Work for items that have been excluded for some time. This comes back to training and marketing.

8 The public sector places much responsibility on managers in this process but there is little or no support for managers and this encourages a tendency to encourage applicants to co-ordinate the application process themselves. This is exhausting and demoralising for applicants who are often facing significant barriers to remaining in work. Faced with such barriers and having to navigate the Access To Work process we have members who have left employment rather than continue. Some staff have reported very negative attitudes from colleagues and managers who often query why a disabled person would want to work in the face of such issues.

9 There were some positive comments about assessors having a genuine understanding of the challenges for existing employees but others reported a sense of assessors trying to persuade them to try or accept equipment not necessarily geared to their needs simply because it existed and other people in similar circumstances had found it of use.

10 We note and agree with comments from Barbara Phillips, Executive Director of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA) that

11 “… I still can’t quite believe that the assessment of what a disabled person’s needs are – in terms of what technological and human support they will need to do the job - comes only after they have secured a job.
Surely it makes much more sense to do, at the very start, a complete and thorough assessment, not only of the person’s basic abilities and needs, but of ways to maximise their abilities and minimise their disabilities?".

12 We echo these comments and note that all of our members who have used Access To Work have described either not knowing what was available to them until assessed; being pushed down a path of least resistance when it comes to the choices available, and, being asked by managers for, in effect, a shopping list of what they need.

13 We see this as a significant deficiency in the conduct of the assessment and the amount of information, support and training available with regard to the scheme for other staff involved in implementation and subsequent support.

- 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.

14 Applicants are often offered “training” or “support” at the point of application but this often amounts to little more than a day or so spent familiarising with specific IT products and then providing a telephone number to use if there are any further questions. Attempts to use that telephone support are often frustrated by employees being asked to make further applications so the support can be re-costed.

15 The role of support workers is often not fully understood by applicants but, more importantly, by employers, who often assume they can pick up almost anything that the employer does not otherwise know how to address. The provision of a support worker is therefore often a cause of tension and misunderstanding in an office environment which is not helpful to the confidence of disabled employees.

16 An issue was identified with reviews. Some members had been led to believe Access To Work could/should be asked to review provision on a regular basis but when they initiated this themselves they found it was refused on the basis there had been no change in their condition. This was again felt to be demoralising. The point was made that this also subscribed to the medical model of disability rather than the social model. Members needs often changed as they adapted to their disability but their working conditions frequently changed and thus so did their needs. This was not felt to be well understood by Access To Work staff.

17 Although none of our current members raised it specifically we were made aware by former group members, and note with concern, that provision of assistive technology remains job specific and often work-station specific so staff cannot easily be as agile as expected by an employer. The move to enterprise IT solutions within the public sector also means the deployment of assistive technology is often slowed by the lack of training and support for IT staff; a lack of knowledge of how to rapidly and best deploy and the inability to support any subsequent technical or practical issues.

18 We also note confusion amongst our members about whether they have ownership of such adjustments. For example, we have been aware of disputes between employer and
employee about whether specialist chairs can be taken by an employee to their next job or when they leave due to retirement, severance and so on. There is often no obvious consensus between departments as to how this should work. Again, information, training and support from Access To Work could fix this.

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

19 The group have no specific observations on this question.

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

  1. Secure a job;

20 Some members have experience of requesting ‘reasonable adjustments’ as part of recruitment and selection processes but none have described any experience of using Access To Work to secure those adjustments.

21 We note that whilst employers often ask whether applicants might require reasonable adjustments for the selection process there is rarely mention of the fact Access To Work could be used to provide some of that, and applicants are often scuppered by an inaccessible application process in the first place. Given the role of Disabled Employment Advisers it seems to us that it would be possible for DWP to insist that jobs advertised within job centres must provide an accessible application process.

22 It does not make sense to us that entitlement to specific benefits excludes a potential claimant from Access To Work. This does not fit with the alleged aims of the scheme at all.

  2. Stay in employment; and

23 Of those members who have used Access To Work the majority have used it as a means to stay in employment. It is potentially very effective and can be the critical factor in enabling this. However, the difficulties described above remain the issue.

  3. Develop their careers; and

24 We are unaware of any members who have been able to develop their careers through using Access To Work. Its use remains a defensive strategy to obtain a level playing field at the recruitment/selection stage or to remain in employment rather than a force for career advancement

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

25 Members noted that marketing of the scheme is not especially noticeable other than an increased perception that it is linked into the skills and work agenda. Members have a
strong perception that funding has been cut but little awareness that the number of excluded items have increased.

26 There is also a general impression given that the priority for the scheme is now to get people into work with the emphasis on keeping people in work switching very much to the employer rather than it being a joint effort. This has significantly undermined confidence in the scheme.

27 Marketing of the scheme is generally unimaginative and does not appear to especially involve organisations representing the disabled; social media or even employers. However, members are more concerned at the implementation of the scheme, subsequent training and support for employees and (of equal importance) those supporting the employee rather than its marketing.

28 As stated earlier there is a lack of detailed information about the implementation of the scheme. Existing information has been removed from web sites and so on. This leads to a lack of transparency but it also leaves applicants and their managers at the mercy of Access To Work advisers who can often unintentionally further muddy already murky waters.

20 June 2014