This paper has been developed by the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), the representative body for the employability sector, in response to the Work and Pensions Select Committee inquiry into employment support for disabled people: Access to Work (AtW).

1. Introduction: About ERSA

1.1 ERSA has over 140 members ranging from large multinational providers through to small specialist organisations and spans the private, public and voluntary sectors. ERSA’s response also includes views from providers and those accessing, on behalf of customers, the mental health aspect of AtW. This submission has been developed following consultation with ERSA’s membership. It does not address all of the points in the Committee’s inquiry but focuses on those that are of most relevance to the employability sector.

1.2 As part of its work to support those with disabilities, ERSA runs a Disability Employment Forum, which covers all areas of disability related to employability. The group’s recent work has included: forming a subgroup to look into ESA best practice; developing best practice for supporting those with disabilities and health conditions into work; considering the role of assessment and exploring the important issue of in-work support. These workstreams have therefore touched upon the role of AtW in supporting people with long term health conditions and disabilities. In addition, ERSA has carried out consultation with members specifically on AtW as part of its response to the government’s Health and Disability Employment Strategy, which was published at the end of 2013. ERSA’s response is available here. ERSA also responded to the government review on the future of specialist disability employment programmes following the Sayce Review in 2011.

1.3 ERSA and its members are committed to supporting the long term unemployed towards and into work and to support them to progress once there. Providers deliver government commissioned employment programmes, including the Work Programme, which offers mainstream support to long term unemployed jobseekers and the specialist disability employment programme, Work Choice.

Summary of ERSA key recommendations

This paper makes recommendations for measures to improve the delivery of access to Work from the perspective of the employability sector, the jobseeker and the employer. These are brought together in synopsis below:

* The AtW application and assessment processes, from the perspective of the employer and employee:

- ERSA recommends facilitating greater join up between AtW provider, the employee and the employer in designing and implementing the support offered through AtW for each individual. Better join up includes sharing documentation related to the assessment conclusion with employers and employees.

- Online AtW applications should be an addition to the application process, not a substitute for phone applications.
The effectiveness of AtW in supporting people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities:

- Support offered through the AtW mental health service is a vital service. Therefore it should be:
  - Extended beyond six months to respond to varied mental health conditions
  - Continued to be offered, with an increase in available resource

- A mechanism to track progress and sustainment for those accessing the WMHSS should be built into the current system

- Furthermore, to make AtW more effective:
  - Extend access to all AtW funding to include those currently on Work Choice provision
  - Ensure that AtW adequately funds support workers where needed
  - Introduce specific training for DWP advisers on disability and employment, particularly around mental health.
  - AtW should be combined with in-work support where appropriate.

AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to secure, sustain and progress in employment:

- Raise awareness of AtW through improved, targeted marketing to employers and employees. AtW could be incorporated into one of the strategic aims of the government’s flagship Disability Confident campaign.
- Actively promote AtW to people wishing to become self-employed or who are already self-employed. Marketing of this support service should be incorporated into a wider package of in-work support, available to the self-employed.

2. **Summary**

2.1 The AtW scheme is seen as a positive initiative by ERSA members and those whom they support. In fact the majority of ERSA members agree that the scheme should be further extended and better resourced, so that it can support more people more efficiently. Estimates suggest that for every £1 spent on AtW the exchequer recoups £1.48 in saved benefits, and the social and healthcare returns can be even higher.

2.2 ERSA supports recommendations made in the Sayce Review to expand the scope of AtW and increase resource for the scheme in order to generate savings further down the line in the form of benefits. It does however believe that the existing AtW scheme could be improved to support better jobseekers that are closer to the labour market and to support more effectively individuals through a more consistent package of support, which also includes better join up with employers. In particular ERSA is keen to see more new people supported through the scheme, and believes that greater emphasis should be put on raising awareness of the provision offered through AtW.

2.3 While positive about the scheme, ERSA members have also expressed some concern that the policy changes unveiled by the Chancellor in the 2013/14 budget will work to reduce the range of products and technology AtW currently funds for disabled workers. To some extent recent

---

1 Getting in, staying in and getting on, Liz Sayce, June 2011, p.7
commitments outlined in the government Disability and Health Employment Strategy dispel some of those concerns, however there continue to be concerns regarding the overall resource available, in particular for care workers and those with mental health needs and learning disabilities.

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

3.1 ERSA received mixed views from members about how easy the AtW assessment process is to use. They also noted that, for employers in particular, there was the potential to do more to provide better join up between employees and employers and the service available.

**Employee perspective**

3.2 Whilst members broadly felt that employee access to the scheme is well managed, there are still reported instances where this is not the case and a general concern that the application process is not consistent. In particular, ERSA members outlined that an individual’s experiences’ of the application process can vary significantly depending on the disability and support available. Some customers experience a relatively smooth process of application and award. However, other customers experience delays in the process which can have an impact on their ability to start or continue their employment. Members also commented on the level of information and support given to customers, reporting that some clients do not know who their AtW adviser is or how to contact them.

3.3 Where an employee is referred to an organisation for support, such as those who use a strategy coach following their workplace assessment, it is often the case that the coach must duplicate questions and processes already carried out through the assessment stage. This can be frustrating for the employee. ERSA recommends facilitating better data sharing arrangements, which would allow the referral organisations to access the customer’s workplace assessment.

3.4 In its Disability and Health Employment Strategy, the government outlined that it would like to explore online functionality for applications to AtW. While members were supportive of enabling individuals to have options of ways to apply to AtW, there were concerns that this should not be a substitute for other methods of application, such as via the telephone. Members commented that an individual, particularly those with mental health and learning disabilities, may be best supported via a telephone service.

**Employer perspective**

3.5 One of the main concerns raised by ESRA members is that often the manager of someone applying for AtW is unaware of the process, what has happened and how the referral came about. This can often lead to the manager/employer being disengaged in the process, and subsequently impact on the effectiveness of the support being offered to the individual. ERSA would therefore like to see greater join up between AtW, the employee and the employer, when designing and implementing the support offered through AtW for each individual.

3.6 In addition to employers not fully understanding the background to a case, on occasion members report that the employee is not informed of the outcome of their workplace assessment and is unaware of the next steps. ERSA feels this can create confusion for the employee at what can be a
stressful time. A possible solution to this could be the creation of one document shared with both employee and employer, detailing the outcome of the assessment. This could occur even if the assessment was originally carried out over the phone.

3.7 ERSA members firmly believe that the individual should have absolute control over the Access to Work process and that the overall priority of the scheme should be to meet the individual needs of the employee. However, ERSA also believes that clearer guidance should be produced about the role and responsibilities of the employer encompassing all aspects of the Access to Work application and implementation. As such, ERSA welcomes the fact that the Disability and Health Employment Strategy sets out that employers will in future be able to apply for support on an employee’s behalf. ERSA also believes that employers should have a role in the assessment and awarding process as this is likely to encourage better implementation of recommendations. The concern is that if the employer has no input to decisions regarding reasonable adjustments, questions might be asked as to whether the adjustment is always best designed to meet the requirements of the job. This may result in employers feeling beholden to pay for adjustments that are not necessary or reasonable for fear of legal action.

3.8 ERSA members also commented that there seems to be a general drive for employers to contribute to a greater extent, such as employers recruiting and employing their own support workers if more than 20 hours of support is required each week. Although members felt that this move towards employer contribution is positive, they noted that it may have an adverse effect on all stakeholders by placing significant pressure on budgets and capacity of the employer. This approach also has a detrimental effect on the support worker as they have no guarantee that they will be paid and secure in post.

3.9 Recommendations
- ERSA recommends facilitating greater join up between AtW, the employee and the employer in designing and implementing the support offered through AtW for each individual.
- ERSA would like to see one document produced and sent to both employer and employee following a work place assessment.
- ERSA would like to see data sharing arrangements to facilitate a more joined up approach with providers supporting customers through AtW.
- ERSA recommends that online AtW applications are an addition to the application process, and is not envisioned as a substitute for phone applications.

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

The importance of support workers

4.1 Members noted that the resource available through AtW to fund support workers was not always sufficient to meet demand. Specifically, it was noted that individuals who are on Work Choice are subject to several restrictions on what support they can access through AtW. Currently individuals cannot use AtW to resource a support worker for the purpose of job coaching, or counselling, similarly they cannot access the AtW mental health service. Because individuals cannot access funding for a support worker or job coach, once someone with a disability or a disability related benefit moves into employment, which can sometimes leave them in a vulnerable position, they can be disadvantaged. This may result in them being unable to retain their job. ERSA recommends
extending the AtW funding to include those currently on Work Choice provision when they are interviewing or talking part in permitted work.

4.2 Members report they have experienced a number of situations where support workers have been recommended for AtW customers, however, the rate chargeable for this support has been set at such a level that it has been difficult, and in many situations impossible, to recruit and employ an appropriately experienced and qualified worker within the limitations of that funding. This can result in the individual, who is in need of support, being left without a vital service, or with a worker who is not of the correct standard to deliver to their needs or leaves the employer picking up the cost of the additional funding required. ERSA believes that where an assessment finds that a support worker is needed by an individual, appropriate resource which takes into the level of support and amount of availability of support locally should be provided.

The importance of DWP knowledge and expertise

4.3 Members agreed that whilst the majority of DWP staff are very knowledgeable, this is by no means consistent. The result of this inconsistency can be a disparity between the funding awarded to two people with similar levels / types of barriers, both doing the same job. Members believe this is due to the assessor’s/advisors level of knowledge of the disability and the appropriate support required. ERSA recommends a review of staff training, including management level training to ensure the relevant staff are knowledgeable of all AtW policies and procedures.

In-work support

4.4 Where in-work support is offered, members outlined concerns related to a lack of ‘bench marking’; with some commenting that poor in-work support is worse than none. ERSA believes that in-work support should meet a certain criteria and that adequate funding should be available to ensure that the appropriate quality of in-work support can be funded. Where poor support is offered, it can result in the individual and employer becoming disillusioned with the process and risks the entire AtW service being blamed for isolated bad practice. Processes for recommending companies to provide in-work support should always be transparent and evidence based. ERSA believes it may be appropriate to consider mechanisms to allow consumer choice in this process.

4.5 Members outlined that AtW support may benefit from exploring more innovative approaches to in-work support. While job coaching is often the right choice for an individual, it is not the only in-work support service available and AtW should look to incorporate greater innovation around alternative in-work support provision. This could include exploring options of group or e-based alternatives and providing a greater level of choice for the individual.

Mental Health specifically:

4.6 Evidence suggests that one in four people in the UK will suffer from a mental health condition during their lifetime, it is crucial that appropriate support is available meet their needs. ERSA understands that work can often be a positive factor for someone with a mental health condition; however it can also be a contributing factor if appropriate support is not available. Therefore ERSA believes that the support offered through the Workplace Mental Health Support Service (WMHSS) is a vital amenity and should be continue to be offered. ERSA also believes that the current resource,
allocated to the WMHSS provision, is not sufficient to meet the needs of employees and jobseekers in the UK.

4.7 Given the often complex and multiple barriers which face those with mental health, ERSA believes that training to support these individual’s needs is paramount in delivering a good service. This will ensure that the reasonable adjustments provided would be delivered by the most appropriate method. The expected unit cost of assessment for jobseekers with mental health support needs will need to take into account the resource intensive nature of the assessment, given many customers present with multiple health needs which will require a breadth of expertise to assess accurately. ERSA believes that all staff should be appropriately trained and that call centre staff should be specifically trained on disability and employment, and particularly around mental health.

4.8 ERSA believes that, given the often vulnerable nature of individuals accessing the WMHSS, greater flexibility should be built into some of the processes in order to best meet the needs of these individuals. Members have specifically highlighted the initial application as one area where there should be more flexibility by:
- Removing the 24 hour time limit which an individual has to get back in touch with the provider once they have received a call back.
- Removing the restrictions on an employment provider, advocacy group or employer making the initial call on the individual’s behalf.

4.9 Members also stated that it is crucial that a mechanism is built into the system to track progress and sustainment for those accessing the WMHSS. Currently only the individual can interact directly with the service, it can be very difficult for providers to track progress and ensure that support will be available within an appropriate timeframe. This also makes the service difficult to market to employers for their staff, as they find it inflexible and cannot track progress for their employees.

4.10 Members have reported that 51% of people using the service in 2013 reported another disability or health condition. Because the WMHSS is operated separately from the standard AtW offer, people must apply for multiple packages of support. ERSA therefore recommends that this process is simplified to better reflect the varied nature of mental health conditions. This could include exploring the option of extending the six month time limit for support without having to resubmit for two consecutive packages of support.

4.11 Recommendations
- ERSA recommends extending the AtW funding to include those currently on Work Choice provision, when they are interviewing or talking part in permitted work.
- The quality of DWP adviser knowledge of AtW could be improved by introducing specific training modules for advisers and their managers. Call centre staff should be specifically trained on disability and employment, and particularly around mental health.
- ERSA believes that where an assessment finds that a support worker is needed by an individual, appropriate resource, which takes into the level of support and amount of availability of support locally, should be provided.
- Processes for recommending companies to provide in-work support should always be transparent and evidence based. ERSA believes it may be appropriate to consider mechanisms to allow consumer choice in this process.
- AtW should look to incorporate greater innovation around alternative in-work support provision.
ERSA believes that the support offered through the AtW Workplace Mental Health Support Service (WMHSS) is a vital service and should be continue to be offered, with increased resource.

ERSA therefore recommends that this process is simplified to better reflect the varied nature of mental health conditions. This could include exploring the option of extending beyond the 6 month time limit of support without having to resubmit for two consecutive packages of support.

A mechanism to track progress and sustenance for those accessing the WMHSS should be built into the current system.

5 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job; stay in employment; and develop their careers

Greater awareness:

5.1 Members report that while the in-work support is effective, they noticed a trend in referrals when individuals are facing disciplinary procedures and feel that greater benefit could be achieved if more individuals disclosed their support needs earlier and so could be encouraged to apply at an earlier stage. ERSA believes that AtW, which has been commonly referred to as DWP’s ‘best kept secret’ since its introduction in 1994, would benefit from increased awareness from both an employer and employee perspective. This could be incorporated as part of the government’s flagship Disability Confident Campaign. Often employees and employers are not aware of support needs and commonly mistake a learning disability like dyslexia as a problem with motivation or commitment to a job. It is only when the disciplinary procedure has run its course that an employee may reveal a support need and request help via accessing AtW. By this time relations between employee and their manager may be strained.

AtW and self-employment:

5.2 Overall members felt that the inclusion of AtW for the self-employed have had a positive impact on the success of individuals and their business, which brings obvious economic benefits. However, they also raised some concerns that often individuals who wished to become self-employed were offered job coaching but not necessarily other self-employment specific support. AtW funded support, such as coaching, would be more effective if it was combined with self-employment specific support that enabled stability and growth; such as expanding their market etc.

The impact of AtW in supporting people to stay in work:

5.3 Members have reported overwhelmingly that AtW has been beneficially in helping to ensure people sustain and thrive in work. ESRA strongly believes that AtW should continue to be offered to all those who could benefit from this support and be adequately resourced to do so. Benefits of AtW outlined by our members include:

- Empowering individuals to manage their disabilities and find ways to continue and progress within work
- Building manager’s awareness of hidden disabilities that employees may have, with the aim that they can proactively support their employees
- Retaining the expertise and experience of longer serving members of staff
- Reducing staff turnover and so decreasing costs to employers recruiting and training new employees.
• Employee satisfaction; making employment conditions more suitable and enabling, or, if in the wrong role, giving individuals the confidence to recognise this, communicate their strengths and transfer to a more suitable role.

• Increased employee awareness of all disabilities, including hidden disabilities, with the intention of developing more effective support networks amongst colleagues.

The current scope for AtW funding:

5.4 Members reported the scope of AtW is probably sufficient, however a key concern being that that not enough people know about it. It was felt that more people could benefit from this type of support if it were more pro-actively promoted.

5.5 Members have also raised the possibility that AtW should be better aligned with specialist employment provision. In particular members have outlined that jobseekers with mental health conditions and learning disabilities would benefit from understanding the level of support they would be entitled to through AtW. This approach could remove barriers and raise aspirations amongst jobseekers, by enabling them to feel confident in applying for roles, knowing that they would be adequately supported from the outset.

5.6 If individuals have the ability to trial the range of adaptive equipment and aids available to them through AtW, enabling to be better informed about the right support for them, this would help to raise aspirations and reassure jobseekers that employment can offer them a suitable environment to work in.

5.7 Recommendations
• AtW should be better promoted to employers and employees to in order to raise awareness of its existence and purpose. This could be incorporated into one of the strategic aims of the government’s flagship Disability Confident Campaign.

• AtW should be better promoted to people wishing to become self-employed, or already self-employed. Marketing of this support service should be incorporated into a wider package of in-work support, available to the self-employed.

6 The steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding

6.1 ERSA recognises the steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and funding of the scheme and is broadly supportive of the future AtW policy proposals outlined in the government’s disability and health employment strategy. However, ERSA and its members strongly believe that more can be done to raise awareness of the scheme, particularly amongst employers, employees, intermediaries, jobseekers and health professionals.

7 Conclusion

7.1 AtW has already been a success, having made a huge difference to both employees and to employers. However, more remains to be done. In order for to AtW to make the full impact it is capable of, there should be increased knowledge and specialisms amongst DWP assessors, as well as greater general awareness of such support available amongst employers, as well as employees. The delivery model is working; however if it could be designed in a more coordinated way, with information sharing process in place, this would not only seek to improve delivery, but also increase awareness of when and how to use this support most appropriately and effectively.