Written evidence submitted by Social Firms Scotland (ATW0207)

Introduction

1.0 Social Firms Scotland (SFS) is the national support agency for Social Firms. We are a membership organisation and have been representing and serving the interests of our members since we were constituted in 2000.

2.0 A Social Firm is a specific type of social enterprise; a business set up with the social mission of creating employment (also work experience, training and volunteering opportunities) for people who face barriers in the labour market.

3.0 Like all social enterprises, Social Firms generate income from the sales of goods and services and are businesses that trade for a social purpose. And, like all businesses, they need to make money. Social Firms reinvest any profit back into the business to further their social purpose.

4.0 Social Firms are distinct because they engage and support people who experience barriers to employment – in particular people with a disability, learning disability, mental health condition, substance abuse, a prison record, homeless issue and young people. Social Firms can operate in any market sector but they all provide a supportive and inclusive workplace where people are valued for their abilities, encouraged to participate and supported to achieve.

5.0 Social Firms Scotland supports and promotes the development of Social Firms throughout Scotland. We exist to grow the number, size and strength of Social Firms so that more employment and work experience opportunities are created for people furthest from the labour market.

6.0 We represent 100 organisations across Scotland; organisations who are either Social Firms or supportive of Social Firms development

7.0 SFS participates in a number of national and thematic groups committed to the delivery of Employability support services in Scotland including The third Sector Employability Forum (TSEF) which works to support the development of policy for the sector and feeds into the Scottish Employability Forum (SEF) which had a key role in increasing sustained employment and reducing the dependent population across Scotland
8.0 We welcome the opportunity to respond to the inquiry within the context of our work with Social Firms – many of whom, in turn, provide employment opportunities and support for people who could or do use Access to Work (AtW).

9.0 Whilst employment rates amongst those with disabilities had been found to increase in recent years, progress appears to be stalling with rates still considerably lower than the population at large only around 50% of all people with disabilities in employment. Rates for particular groups are significantly lower

- Learning disabilities (Enable Scotland estimate that only 5 per cent of adults who have learning disabilities in Scotland- one in twenty - is in any form of paid work)
- Mental health conditions (SAMH states research has uncovered that only 20% of people with serious and long term mental health problems are in paid employment, yet 80% want to work)
- Autism (Autism Initiatives state that only 12% of people on the spectrum have full-time jobs as opposed to 49% of people with general disabilities) re considerably lower (TSEF Working Group Paper, 2014)

10.0 It is now widely accepted that the majority of people with a disability want to work and contribute to society, but many face significant barriers to do so. Social Firms offer one solution to the current and likely more challenging prospect of moving disabled people into employment over the next few years & beyond. They offer an inclusive environment for individuals who need extra support and use AtW as just one of a number of ‘ingredients’ to providing this supportive and adapted environment

11.0 We have consulted extensively with our members to frame this response which reflects our members’ views and experiences of AtW. We have represented these varied views of our members (both the organisations/employers themselves, support workers and people with a disability who work in the business)

**Application and Assessment Process**

12.0 As the feedback shows below, there was a mixed response from our members. Some of their experiences were very positive, others, unfortunately less so. We recognise the aim of AtW to provide a consistent, knowledgeable and helpful service to all however whilst this does prove to be people’s experience in a significant number of cases, there is also a high proportion of people who are not getting a good service. Given this fund is about increasing equality it is disappointing that people do not experience an ‘equal’ service.

13.0 From employee point of view (or support worker in some cases)

- Application was simple, completed by telephone at a time to suit the applicant.
  Named advisor assigned, very helpful and talked through every step
• Simple enough to provide the information required for AtW, whole process very smooth and easy
• Advisor very helpful and friendly to deal with
• Assessment ran smoothly and equipment and transport support agreed on. When request submitted however, individual was asked to justify why 2 pieces of equipment were needed (braille display and note taking device). Individual had to choose between the two even though both were required for the job (they eventually used their own finance when they were able to, 2/3 years later to purchase the second piece of equipment). This was confusing and it seemed the decision was based on monetary criteria rather than the support actually needed
• Inaccessible (and can be impersonal) - often impossible to contact and do not return phone calls or respond to emails
• Help offered varied considerably
• Inconsistent knowledge and clarity of purpose from frontline staff
• Fragmented service across different jobcentres with differing levels of knowledge and understanding of disability and AtW
• It was commented that jobcentre staff can still sometimes lack understanding of autism and Aspergers and don’t always appreciate the difficulties people on the spectrum face when assessing them
• Many people have dual diagnosis and complex health support needs so are classed within more than one priority group. More work needs to be done to establish the needs and scale of needs of these individuals
• Questions asked in assessment that are not particularly relevant to self-employed people (eg length of working week)
• Assessments have been prematurely terminated because of the lack of a UTR. In another case the stipulation was that the applicant committed to apply for a UTR within 6 weeks of making their application
• Successful applications made whilst others have been rejected initially or offered limited support for essential the same service
• Confusion as to who can provide support to the person in receipt of AtW funding (conflicting information given as to whether they need to be registered or approved by DWP or whether they can be competent, qualified individuals as long as that individual is agreed by the person in receipt of the funding).

14.0 From employer point of view
• Application was simple, information required from the employer was straightforward, appropriate and acquired in convenient way.
• Jobcentre staff need to be more visible and approachable
• Lack of clarity over obligations to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ and when AtW would then provide support

Adequacy of ongoing support
15.0 We received no significant response to this question other than what has been included in our response elsewhere.

Effectiveness of AtW supporting people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities

16.0 Whilst there is a general understanding about physical adaptions/equipment, AtW does not always extend as effectively or flexibly to other support mechanisms. Potential support provided to people with mental health conditions may require other more occasional or ad-hoc support to gain/maintain employment (rather than physical adaptions) that fit with what can be a fluctuating condition.

17.0 Our members reported instances where there seemed to be a need to justify a person with a learning disability receiving any kind of support in the first place.

18.0 Additionally for people with learning disabilities, Support workers find themselves repeatedly having to explain the nature and type of support offered, particularly in relation to self-employment

AtW’s effectiveness in helping disabled people to – secure a job, stay in employment and development their careers

19.0 The range of practical solutions funded by AtW, particularly since this has been widened-out was welcomed by our members (individuals and employers), allowing for a less restricted and more meaningful use of the scheme

20.0 It was commented that jobcentre staff can still sometimes lack understanding autism and Aspergers and don’t appreciate the difficulties that people on the spectrum face

21.0 Type of support does not always seem to extend beyond helping people secure employment (rather than remain in employment or develop their career)

22.0 Support for taxis works well – bills sent monthly to individuals home, form completed, signed by individual and employer and submitted to AtW for payment

23.0 General feeling is that AtW is only of use once a person is in or close to employment. Our members support some individuals who are not as close to the labour market as this. A re-occurring comment was that AtW could still be incredibly useful for these individuals if they were involved in a real work environment, gaining practical skills and experience that would have a direct and positive impact in moving them closer to and into employment.
24.0 Success of AtW almost exclusively for people in employment – not self-employment. DWP are comfortable and practiced at funding specialist equipment/travel but since the scheme has been extended to the self-employed there is a serious lack of understanding of the needs of a self-employment person with a disability (eg call centre staff still question the applicant if they will be receiving minimum wage, irrelevant to the self-employed).

Steps taken by DWP to extend AtW (including marketing and funding)

25.0 The overwhelming feeling from our members (the organisations themselves and the individuals with disabilities who they support within the business) is that more still could be done to inform clients and employers about the scheme. Feedback as follows

- More people could benefit from the different aspects of the scheme but have never heard of it, therefore limiting their work (and life) chances
- More could be done with employers so they are able to provide basic information about the scheme to their staff
- DEA’s need to tell people what support is out there for them (incl AtW) to support their return to or maintenance of work
- Local authorities and a number of third sector employers have good AtW knowledge but SMEs do not

Other comments

26.0 From recipients

- I think the scheme is great and if I ever needed it again, it’s good to know there is something there to help
- Had my taxis to work and external meetings not been funded, I would not have been able to continue my employment as walking so far and using public transport was simply not possible for me. It was also essential to my wellbeing at the time.
- Overall I am happy with AtW, but when discussing equipment, I did think there was more focus on not spending too much money on an individual rather than assessing the equipment required to fulfil employment

27.0 There can still be a stigma to disclosing a disability (including mental health condition) at work. This works directly against individuals who might benefit from the AtW programme who feel they could be disadvantaged if they reveal their condition. Whilst things are improving (slowly), more education and awareness raising still needs to be done to combat this discrimination (outwith the scope of this inquiry we realise).

28.0 AtW offers a great benefit to people with a disability seeking to become self-employed but it is administered by people with limited experience of the distinctions between employment and self-employment.
29.0 AtW programme very limited – small number of people gain employment through adoptions and support workers. Unfortunately a whole lot of money is spent on the periphery of these adoptions and not enough getting the majority of disabled people into sustainable employment - this is the real problem we need to focus on.

Recommendations

30.0 Based on the feedback that we have received, we would suggest the following

- Further awareness of the programme by employees and employers is still needed as well as by the provider community.
- The third and social enterprise sector work extensively with disabled people however it was concerning that within our responses there were still a lack of knowledge about the programme from some of these organisations. We would suggest increased marketing of the scheme through national third/social enterprise sector representative organisations (eg NCVO, SCVO, Social Enterprise UK and Scotland)
- Important to promote the scheme more extensively through doctor’s surgeries, social work, citizens advice centres
- Enable people with complex support needs (for example autism) to engage and influence the AtW process and in particular the support it can provide for people with these needs
- Continue to use AtW to provide a ‘transition’ programme for individuals to allow them to gain work experience/skills in an environment conducive to their future development but allow more flexibility in the criteria for this and how it can be used.
- Continue to allow a support worker to be funded through AtW. However AtW in-work support not at right intellectual level – support staff only paid at national minimum wage so not so high level
- Consider offering support to people at job application stage through to employment/retention
- Accept carer/advocate input and support to the application/assessment process
- Further training for staff to ensure a consistent service both in terms of knowledge, approach, how the programme is applied and how applicants are assessed (including self-employment)
- More training for frontline staff specifically on issues relevant to self-employed people seeking support from A2W to continue their self-employment
- Many people have dual diagnosis and complex health support needs so are classed within more than one priority group. More work needs to be done to establish the needs and scale of needs of these individuals

Conclusion
31.0 SFS and our members recognise AtW as an important programme that makes a real difference to disabled people in their (working) lives. However there is clear evidence of gaps in the provision/service from our feedback on the terms of reference of this inquiry. There are key areas of improvement required particularly around promotion of AtW, consistency of application and assessment process, knowledge of staff and a more flexible approach that could be adopted to realise the true value of the programme.

20 June 2014