Witten evidence submitted by the Diocese of Liverpool

1. Key points:

- 8 stipendiary clergy/employees in the diocese receive Access to Work (AtW) support.
- AtW support for our clergy/other diocesan employees has a significant impact on the life of the diocese both in terms of the grant funding and also in terms of the range of expert advice available.
- The diocese of Liverpool is a not for profit registered charity who use a large number of volunteers. They spend a considerable sum on supporting volunteers with disabilities who are not eligible for any other form of grant funding and therefore very much benefit from the financial support for employed clergy with disabilities through AtW.
- Some issues with the application/assessment process have been identified.
- We have also had issues with people being refused financial support for essential adaptations and support; in addition to the financial burden this has created a great deal of stress and anxiety for all involved.

This submission will cover all areas of the terms of reference of the inquiry.

2. Context

The diocese of Liverpool covers an area of North West England from Liverpool to Wigan and from Southport to Widnes. It has c.250 parishes; urban, rural and town plus a wide variety of non parochial ministries in hospitals, prisons, schools, the Deaf community and many other contexts. This ministry is delivered by c. 200 stipendiary (paid) clergy and a huge number and variety of volunteers, both ordained and lay of all ages. They are supported by the staff of the diocesan headquarters, St James House. The parishes in the diocese include many of the most deprived areas in the UK and as a result it is not a wealthy diocese. The funding for the work of the diocese comes largely from the giving by the members of the congregations who, despite their relative poverty, often give very generously. However the relative poverty of this area means that the diocese operates on a shoestring budget constantly stretching its resources to maintain a "a sustainable, led and transforming Christian presence in every community in the diocese to enable all to act justly,
love mercy and walk humbly with God"
(http://www.liverpool.anglican.org/What-We-Do)

Among the stipendiary clergy and the St James House employees
are 8 people in receipt of Access to Work (AtW) support. These people
have a wide range of disabilities; including sensory impairments,
fibromyalgia, and learning disabilities. The support received includes
funding for the provision of BSL interpreters, advice and funding for
specialist equipment and advice and coaching on the management of
disability to enable someone to work.

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

Contrasting experience of the AtW application and assessment process
have been shared by those in receipt of AtW. For example someone who
applied and was initially assessed in 2005 found the process swift,
efficient and supportive as they felt it was actually the first time they had
been treated with dignity as a person with a disability; prior to that they
felt if they raised their support needs with potential and actual employers
they were often seen as a problem and a financial burden.

A more recent applicant had a very different experience:

“The initial process, from when I was told to contact AtW was very
slow, I made the phone call & then instead of hearing back in the 10
working days stated had to make 2 further phone calls before anyone
got in touch.

When they did get in touch I found the form a little daunting, it was
my first experience of describing myself as disabled & having to list
the ways I was affected was quite difficult.

I returned the form within 15 hours of receiving it & received a
bounceback saying that the sender was out of the office until the
middle of the following week (I think they sent it as the last thing that
they did before closing their computer down).

I rang her on the day that she returned & explained that I was about
to go on holiday & could the process be at least initiated before going
& was informed that she had 'hundreds of people in the process' & she
was initially a little hesitant about looking at my stuff, but I then
explained that I'd already been in the system for 4+ weeks & was still
getting nowhere, at which point she agreed to refer me that day.
Once referred I met with the assessor quickly (last thing I did before going on holiday).

I explained to the assessor that I was going on holiday for 3 weeks the next day, so if there was anything I needed to answer immediately it should be emailed.

Three quarters of the way through the holiday I received an email saying why had I not signed & returned the letters to AtW and if I didn't they would refuse my assessment & we'd have to start again. I replied saying that I was away & would deal with it on return, unless the forms could be emailed. As soon as I returned I sent in the form.

Once I had been assessed & met people all went well but my experience of the AtW process was that it was slow, cumbersome & difficult”

Another recent applicant says she found the process of applying for ATW stressful and humiliating but did not wish to relate further details.

3. 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;

Again experiences of the adequacy of ongoing support are varied. For example one person has found the ongoing support (funding) (until very recently) to be adequate in terms of enabling them to get on and do their job without having to worry about how they will cope in different situations and how they will fund the essential support. Others have found the advice provided to be invaluable; especially in terms of assessing the needs of a wide and varied range of people with disabilities and in providing up to date advice on technical adaptations.

However, it has also been experienced that some people have found AtW support and advice to be excellent for new applicants, but continuing support has not always been forthcoming. As one person said

“I have had help to work out the adaptations I need then feel I’ve been left to get on with it. I have only gone back when the technology does not work anymore or I have needed reassessment because working practices have changed”

4. The effectiveness of AtW in supporting people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities;
At least two of those supported by AtW in the diocese have conditions that would be classed as a learning disability and one of them has testified that AtW has been effective in enabling them to obtain the support and technical adaptations they need to continue in employment when working conditions have changed.

5. AtW’s **effectiveness** in terms of helping disabled people to:

1. Secure a job;
2. Stay in employment; and
3. Develop their careers

Most of those who shared their experiences of AtW feel it has, at least in the past, been very effective in terms of helping them to secure their job, stay in employment and develop their careers. One person said:

“Without AtW advice and funding I would not have been able to stay in my job when things changed”

Someone else said

“I’m not sure I’d be able to work without the advice supplied by AtW”

And finally someone said

“With the cost of my support needs I’m not sure I’d even be in employment without AtW funding; I certainly would not have had the opportunities to develop my career the way I have had without AtW funding”

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

The recent, but unpublicised, changes in AtW guidelines which have reduced the funding available (sometimes by 50% and on at least one occasion by 100%) have been a source of considerable stress and anxiety for all concerned. As a relatively poor not for profit organisation operating on a shoestring budget there is no leeway for unexpected and substantial expenditure previously covered by AtW. People have been prevented from doing their job by the need to contest AtW decisions and the time this takes up because of a very slow response rate from AtW advisors and the reconsideration panel.
In addition those who have previously received full support from AtW have been left feeling ashamed and guilty as if their disabilities are a burden on the diocese.

In summary; AtW support has hugely benefited the work of the diocese by enabling them to offer full employment opportunities to a range of people with disabilities and therefore gain enormously from their skills and experience.

20 June 2014