Written evidence submitted by the British Association for Supported Employment (ATW0214)

Introduction

The British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) is a national charity that promotes the principles and delivery of high quality supported employment services. With 180 organisations as members, BASE represents the specialist employment support sector. Our members are involved in securing and sustaining paid employment for people with a range of disabilities and disadvantages such as learning disabilities, mental health needs and autism conditions.

Context

The Access to Work (ATW) programme has been described as the Department for Work and Pension's “best-kept secret”. It funds a range of support mechanisms designed to help individuals with disabilities to secure and maintain employment. This can include travel to work, BSL interpretation, in-work support, and specialist equipment.

The programme was only available to people either employed over 16 hours/week or expected to be working over 16 hours/week within a year. In September 2013, the programme was extended to cover supported internships and traineeships. In December it was again extended to cover self-arranged work experience.

The latest statistics show that the programme supported over 31,000 people across Britain between April 2013 and December 2013. This is virtually the same as the period April 2009 to December 2009 showing little growth in use of the programme.

There has been an initiative to market the Access to Work programme to people with learning disabilities and/or mental health needs. The numbers of people with a learning disability accessing the programme has remained static but the number of people with a mental health condition has more than trebled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary health condition</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Numbers supported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning disabilities</td>
<td>April to December 2009</td>
<td>1610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April to December 2013</td>
<td>1590</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental health condition</td>
<td>April to December 2009</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April to December 2013</td>
<td>1090</td>
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The overall cost of the programme has reduced from £105m in 2010-11 to £99m in 2012-13. Applications will be handled centrally through three contact centres.

The number of awards granted has reduced from 41,010 in 2009 (April to December) to 38,260 in 2013 (April to December). The breakdown remains broadly the same though there has been a significant rise in the number of grants for support workers and a decrease in the number of grants for special aids and equipment.

Application and assessment process
There seem to persistent concerns about the application process, particularly in relation to the time taken to process applications. It is not possible to apply until employment has been secured and it is often critical that appropriate support is in place early to sustain the new job. We have mostly heard about the **long delays** in securing travel to work support but there are also issues relating to the funding of job coaches and the purchase of equipment.

The programme seems to be constantly being reorganised and three contact centres will deal with applications from across the country. There is widespread **concern that expertise is being lost**. The system is not personalised as it used to be - it is no longer possible to have a named contact person at AtW so individuals and their support workers are having to deal with multiple advisors, sometimes giving **inconsistent responses**.

“In the past customers would have had their own AtW advisor so if we had a problem eg a customer needing extra support we could contact the relevant advisor who was always helpful and did have some knowledge of the customer and their needs. Since the changes there does not seem to be a personal advisor.”

“We can phone up an advisor to see whether AtW support might be available. If I get told that it isn’t I might phone back 5 minutes later, speak to a different advisor, and get a different response.”

There seem to be widespread **problems in communications** between AtW advisors and customers. Applications are made by telephone and the customer now has to book a phone appointment for the initial application. It is difficult to get a convenient time for the customer if they are in full-time work and the AtW advisors only work between 9am and 5pm.

“The support worker contacted AtW for a customer relating to a new claim. The process has now changed in that AtW take the information and advise that they will be passing it on to an advisor who, in turn, will contact the customer within 5 days. They could not be more specific regarding the date or time that they would be calling back. This isn’t ideal as a) the customer is in work and b) the customer requires support when the call is received. Previously, the claim was processed during the initial; phone call and paperwork sent out to confirm everything that was discussed. This was much better as it meant that we could be there to support the customer with making the claim.”

Many jobseekers struggle with the stress of travelling by public transport because of mental health needs. Others live in rural communities where transport is simply unavailable. The jobseeker is often unable to fund alternative transport up front and it is important that the additional costs are reimbursed as soon as possible.

“A customer with mental health issues was unable to use public transport due to panic attacks. The job involved un-social hours. AtW were informed and the customer was told that contact would be made in 4 weeks. The forms were completed and returned. No further communication was received from AtW. The parent phoned and was told the forms had never been received and that a new claim would have to be made. New forms were completed and returned. AtW said that they couldn’t back track. The costs incurred with this delay were £498.00.”
We have heard numerous complaints that AtW payments are delayed and that it is difficult to contact someone at AtW to remedy the situation. It is often difficult to get through to contact centres. There are often issues in relation to the jobseeker giving consent for a support agency to act on their behalf.

“The referral process and paperwork is not disability friendly and the payment of Fares to Work for our customers has been delayed despite customers sending the paperwork and receipts on time. This often makes it difficult for customers to track. When I have tried ringing the telephone number for information it is often engaged.”

We have been told that assessments can take 6 weeks to organise. Where the cost of equipment has been quoted, the delays can mean that the equipment cost might have changed. A variation in the price will mean that approval has to be sought again, even if the equipment has reduced in price.

Adequacy of ongoing support

We have heard of problems with ongoing support through AtW. This can relate to funding being withdrawn and difficulties in transferring support to a new job.

“Our customer with mental health issues has been in work for 18 months and received AtW for travel support as his employment is in a very remote area. He received a letter to say that his AtW would continue and be reviewed in 2015. In May this year AtW support suddenly stopped with no explanation. The parent is taking up the issue with their local MP.”

“A customer with sight impairment commenced employment. She had received AtW support in her previous employment and was familiar with the process. She phoned AtW to apply and was told that she would have to wait up to 4 weeks before the forms would be sent out. The support agency purchased the equipment so that she could start work. AtW eventually gave approval.”

We have received consistent feedback to say that claims and assessments have been delayed, payments are late and that paperwork goes missing. We would be interested to know the extent of delayed payments as this has the potential to cause real hardship for customers. A number of people have told us that their claims have been escalated following contact with AtW but that this escalation has made no difference.

“LS had an AtW agreement in place for taxi travel to work as his Aspergers means if he drives himself to take public transport into the very busy city centre he uses up so much mental and emotional energy he is severely impacted at work. He was a retention referral to us and as he went off sick from work due to the depression which is a symptom of his Aspergers (and issues in the workplace that I believe are all related to his condition particularly with interaction with his line manager), we requested an in work assessment, which was agreed and paid for by AtW, completed on 28th April and received by him on 19th May. In this time, the person who was looking after his agreement has left and we have been chasing AtW to ask what they will agree to pay for in response to the report. This has been escalated 4 times now, twice to team leader (which should have a response that day) and we still have not got an answer. Due to the delay, the customer has gone from full pay to half pay. We have an HR/dept manager Skype meeting this Friday which is the final deadline for a decision on whether he will accept their proposal to
return to work, but as this relies on what AtW will fund we are in a catch 22 position. The stress of not sticking to the time frames given with each escalation eg 48 hours to respond, is having such a detrimental effect that I am now extremely concerned that even if the support is provided, it is too late to rescue the situation and he will be forced to leave.”

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

There seems to be a lack of clarity and consistency on what support can be offered. Some areas seem to allow job coaching support for people working on permitted work while others don’t.

It is very unclear what the requirements are for job coaching support to be funded for people on work experience placements or on Supported Internships. Many people have told us that AtW advisor guidance suggests that documentary evidence of a potential job outcome is required. There is no mention of this requirement in the guidance for people arranging their own work experience. Further education colleges have said that the application process is overly bureaucratic and that evidence of a job outcome is required for individuals undertaking Supported Internships.

There is a lack of clarity about how long AtW support can be funded for. We have heard of work experience job coaching support being limited to 8 weeks, 15 weeks, 26 weeks and 52 weeks.

We believe that very few further education colleges have been able to use Access to Work to fund job coaching on Supported Internships. Some have been told that documentary evidence of a future job outcome is required. Others have been told that the support will be time limited rather than cover the full length of the internship placement. This seems to be contrary to the policy decision in this area and shows a total misunderstanding of the nature of the placement. Internships are used to stretch skill levels over the length of each placement and so job coaching is constantly needed to support this aim.

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

AtW has a very limited role in helping to secure employment. Its main role should be to ensure that employment is sustained by providing the tailored support and specialist equipment needed by the customer.

It is clear that applications are taking much longer under the new system than they did previously. The service is far less personalised and the lack of a named AtW advisor means that it is a much more difficult process to deal with claims and any problems. This is having a knock-on effect on arranging work experience, work trials, interviews and job starts. The result is that it is threatening the job prospects of individuals and frustrating customers, support agencies and employers.
“I initially phoned AtW with the customer on 08.04.2014 for jobcoaching to support a paid job that should have started on 28.04.2014. The customer was not called back within 7 days. As support worker, I made lots of follow up calls. Eventually the AtW advisor phoned me on 21.05.2014. He had apparently tried to contact the customer on 19.05.2014. The AtW advisor agreed to take details from me and I sent the support plan etc across. The advisor sent email confirmation approving the funding and sent letters out to the customer and employer. The customer started work with jobcoaching support on 02.06.2014 – over four weeks later then originally planned!”

“I phoned AtW with a customer on 07.05.2014 for jobcoaching to support a 2 week work trial due to start on 19.05.2014. Despite lots of follow up calls this customer has not received a call from AtW. On the 11.06.2014, I asked AtW to contact me instead of the customer in the hope that when they finally call this would speed up the process. They have not yet called either the client or me. As a result the Work Trial is delayed indefinitely and I have had to regularly contact the employer to apologise and update - fortunately at the moment they are keeping the Work Trial open but I am not sure for how much longer.”

Marketing of the programme

Marketing of the programme generally remains at a low level. Currently, there are no leaflets aimed at employers or jobseekers. Some guides were issued in the past, including in easy-read format, but these are no longer current. The gov.uk website is also particularly difficult to navigate when seeking information about AtW and other supports.

20 June 2014