People First (Self Advocacy) is an organisation run and led by people with learning difficulties campaigning for equal rights. We give information, training and advice to our members, third sector, private and public organisations.

Initial comments:

1. We are currently using Access to Work support to input into this inquiry about Access to Work.
2. People First had to fight to get support from Access to Work 13 years ago and the DWP still don’t fully understand what supporters that work with people with learning difficulties do or the complex needs of people with learning difficulties.

The Access to Work (AtW) application and assessment processes, from the perspectives of employees and employers;

Case Study 1 (as an employer):

1. Access to Work staff don’t understand how complex learning difficulties are. The questions that they ask are not suitable to cover the issues or support needs that people with learning difficulties need. For example they don’t understand why people with learning difficulties would need full time support.

2. Supporting people with learning difficulties is not a personal assistants job, the person that is employed needs many more skills than that. Some people might think that supporting people with learning difficulties is easy, but it is actually one of the hardest jobs to do needing a wide range of skills, because the supporter needs the knowledge to give the information needed, they can advise but cannot take the final decision. This is why supporters need a higher salary than perhaps a personal assistant. People are not used to it in a job role, preparing the information, but without having the power to make the decision.

3. Another thing is that Access to Work staff start to talk to supporters instead of people with learning difficulties.

4. Phone interviews don’t work for people with learning difficulties.

5. Often they lose your Access to Work history, so then reviews happen far too often because they can’t find paper work to back it up.

6. Supporters need to understand how Access to Work works before they can support someone to apply for it.
7. Access to Work staff use jargon words, they don’t understand what putting things into Easy Read means, which should be an obligation under the Equality Act and making a reasonable adjustment.

**Case Study 2 (as a user of AtW):**
1. The forms weren’t easy to understand, so you need support to fill in the forms.

2. My DLA got stopped when I got a job and started using Access to Work, it shocks me that support services all working under the DWP are not able to work together to get the right outcome for people with learning difficulties.

3. Also they assume that because you have been in a job for a long time your support needs will become less, but actually your support needs change and you can start doing new things with your supporter which you didn’t have time to do before. When you start a job, you need support to learn about the job, the longer you are in a job the more you are asked to do, therefore the support that you need becomes more difficult and complex, it is about prioritising your time with your supporter.

**Case Study 3 (as a user of AtW):**
1. When I got a new job within the organisation that I work for, I received a very strange email from Access to Work asking whether I was able to do that job. This was threatening because it is not their job to question my ability to do the job, that is the job of my employer. If you are applying for Access to Work in the first place then they should be assessing how much support you need to do the job, assuming from the beginning that you can do the job.

2. Access to Work is not used to people with learning difficulties running and controlling an organisation, therefore they do not have the ability to make adjustments to deal with that. Most of the time I don’t understand what they are asking me and all of the forms are inaccessible.

**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**

1. **General comments:** The DWP need support and training from people with learning difficulties in terms of the questions that they ask. Currently the questions are not appropriate for people with learning difficulties, but this is because there has been no input from people with learning difficulties when designing Access to Work.
2. More from Case Study 3: Whenever they call it feels threatening, like they are always trying to take away your support. Like the questions are there to catch you out.

3. DWP wide problem of not providing accessible information for people known to have a learning difficulty. Because the DWP does not provide information to us in a format that is accessible to us, that tells us that the DWP is not meeting its duties under the Equality Act.

4. More from Case Study 1 (as an employer): When people have been interviewed by People First for support jobs, a lot of potential employees have thought that it is a personal assistant job, which it is not. Therefore the quality of applicants that we get is low and is directly related to the low salary. As well as this the DWP needs to understand that the skill base and therefore the salary for someone supporting a person with learning difficulties in an admin role is very different to someone supporting a director.

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

5. With the right supporter and sufficient hours support Access to Work is very effective in enabling people with learning difficulties to work.

6. However there are issues within Access to Work itself that are outlined in the two sections above which form barriers to people with learning difficulties working and being able to make good use of Access to Work.

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

7. Secure a job; there isn’t support to get a job, purely to do the job. This is not good enough. Access to Work should be working with schools and looking at support issues depending on the careers young people want. People are told from a young age that they won’t work rather than encouraging young people into work and explaining the benefits of Access to Work. More work needs to be done with employers so that they can understand how effective support can be when employing people with learning difficulties. This is obviously not being done as there are still only 1 out of 10 people with learning difficulties in employment (Mencap 2014).

8. More work needs to be done with Job Schemes, as the people that work in these schemes don’t understand Access to Work and a person’s support needs.

9. Stay in employment; Issues outlines in the first two sections cover difficulties once a person actually uses Access to Work.
10. **Develop their careers:** there is no support for this as a person takes on new responsibilities or goes for a new job there is no support and there are questions around whether you are capable. Also again applying for a new job without support is very difficult and therefore people cannot move forward they stay where they are.

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

11. Marketing should be done:

12. In schools: to encourage children from a young age that with the right support they can do anything. Also supporting children to become aware of their support needs.

13. With service providers: to support ‘supporters’ to understand their role.

14. In Employment Schemes: so that there is a clear understanding that a person with support can do a wide range of jobs and not just stacking shelves at a supermarket.

15. With Self-Advocacy Groups and supporters within the SA groups, so that they understand what real support is and how a supporter should allow people with learning difficulties to have control.

16. **Extending Access to Work:**

17. People should have a supporter there to help people find work and go through the application process, helping people to put into words their support needs in a job. They will need support from the set go.

18. Other comments:
   Information should be publish about how many people with learning difficulties are employed and paying tax and NI – more statistics are needed about employers employing people with learning difficulties and the types of jobs that people are doing.

19. A skills audit of staff within Access to Work, do they have the skills to support people with learning difficulties. This should be done in combination with training given by third sector organisations around the wide range of support needs of people with learning difficulties.

20 June 2014