Written evidence submitted by SPECTRUM Centre for Independent Living (ATW0231)

1. SPECTRUM Centre for Independent Living (formerly Southampton Centre for Independent Living) is one of the largest Disabled People's User Led Organisations in the country. Over 80% of our employees are Disabled People and so we have regular dealings with Access to Work, as well as supporting our service users to access Access to Work funding.

2. Access to Work is a valuable scheme which has allowed many Disabled People to access employment throughout the years. However in our experience, far too many people experience issues with Access to Work, particularly in relation to the assessment and review process.

Assessment

3. There is a huge variation in the skills and expertise of the assessors that Access to Work uses. Many assessors seem to have experience in assessing people with physical impairments but appear to lack understanding of the needs of people with visual impairments or people with mental health issues.

4. Assessors often focus purely on equipment e.g. dictaphones, rather than the need for support workers. It appears they are reluctant to recommend an ongoing expense, rather than an one off expense that won't require reviewing or any ongoing financial commitment. Some people we support say that assessors come to the assessment with a predetermined idea of what they are going to recommend and do not adequately listen to the needs of the employee, who often knows exact what they need.

5. There is also inconsistency in what information the assessors provide to people. We know of one example where the applicant was told they could not apply for Access to Work till they had been in employment for 6 weeks. In another case, a person was told the applicant could only apply for a support worker to work for 20% of their working hours. There was no explanation as to why the limit was 20% or any written policy to
back up this assertion.

6. Indeed, one of our service users had to submit Freedom of Information requests to the Department of Work and Pensions in order to access policies around how Access to Work decisions were made. This information should surely be made available on the website.

7. From employer's perspective, the delays and time consuming burden of the assessment process in applying for Access To Work support results in there being little incentive on employers in employing Disabled People. The over bearing questions and probing often suggest DWP suspect employees are trying to fiddle the system, until proved innocent.

8. Whilst some delays in assessment are inevitable, there should be understanding that employers need employees to perform from day one and when Disabled employees are unable to perform to their maximum capabilities due to delays in providing support, it makes it more likely that employers will avoid employing Disabled People in future.

Reviews

9. Whilst we have some positive experiences where reviews have been done efficiently and effectively, some of our workers have experienced difficulties during the review process. Most of these problems relate to unrealistic expectations of review staff as to how quickly employees can respond. One of our workers was told that because they had not responded to an email within 72 hours, their case had been closed and they would have to start a whole new application process. There was no reference to the 72 hour deadline on the original email nor any explanation as to why such a tight deadline was necessary. In other cases, not as extreme, there seems to be a lack of awareness from Access to Work staff, that employees have a job to do, and can't drop everything just to deal with matters related to their Access to Work package.

Ongoing Support
10. Almost all our workers find Access to Work funding invaluable whether that is having the appropriate equipment or a support worker. It gives them confidence to do their job and operate on an equal basis to their coworkers. When issues arise at short notice e.g. a dramatic change in impairment, it is our limited experience that Access to Work responded fairly promptly. In one example, a member of staff was suddenly unable to drive due to a seizure, and Access to Work approved additional funding for a driver.

Mental Health Issues

11. There seems to be a lack of awareness of what support employees with mental health issues might require. One worker who experienced panic attacks on public transport could not receive funding for a support worker to accompany them. They also couldn't access psychological support related to their job, because it was deemed a 'health' issue.

Cognitive impairments

12. It is often very difficult for service users with cognitive impairments to get Access to Work to acknowledge the need for support. People who have conditions like dyspraxia, ADHD etc are often rejected for support at the initial assessment stage. This medical model approach is disempowering and it impacts on the service user's well being and risks the sustainability of employment.

Securing Employment

13. As we all know, when you begin a new job, you are eager to make a good impression, build positive relationships with your employer and learn the job as quickly as possible. Access to Work fail to understand the importance of this initial period. One of our senior managers failed his probationary period in a previous job, as Access to Work still hadn't agreed the necessary funding.
14. More than once at SPECTRUM, we have had to provide some limited interim funding so that the new staff can at least start the induction programme whilst waiting for Access to Work funding to be agreed.

15. One of our service users has lost 4 job offers due to Access to Work not working quickly enough to negotiate the funding. It was going to be a large support package involving multiple agencies but if the government are truly committed to getting Disabled People into work, these are the types of barriers they need to work on.

Marketing

16. The recent Disability Positive initiative is to be welcomed however some of the bureaucratic barriers that we have identified earlier in our response, need to be dealt with, otherwise the government is setting Disabled People up to fail. Clearer guidance on the whole customer journey is needed. Consistent guidance on how funding is agreed should be widely available. There needs to be greater engagement with third sector organisations, particularly user led organisations, as well as small and medium sized businesses who often find Access to Work burdensome and inflexible.

Conclusion

17. SPECTRUM fully supports the Access to Work scheme. It has enabled many Disabled People to get into employment however it has the potential to do so much more. By reacting quicker to new applications, by understanding the needs of ALL Disabled People regardless of their impairment, and by working more cooperatively with employers and other funding bodies, Access to Work could be an exemplar in how to support Disabled People in employment.

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