Written evidence submitted by Prospects Services

1. Background

1.1 Prospects is a leading education, employment and training services company, working nationally and internationally. We estimate we help more than one million people each year, through a range of high quality services. We are one of the first and largest new public sector mutuals, with shares owned by managers and staff.

1.2 Our services include:

- Careers services for adults and young people, including the face-to-face element of the National Careers Service in four regions (Greater London, West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber and Bristol) and careers advisory services for young people in fourteen local authority areas.

- Advice and guidance for offenders in Greater London and Yorkshire and Humber, delivering the “in custody offer” covering twelve prisons.

- Youth Justice Service in Gloucestershire.

- A range of sizeable European Social Fund (ESF) funded programmes, mainly for young people.

- The Work Programme, the government's major initiative to help long term unemployed people back to work (Prime contractor in the South West and a major subcontractor London).

- Work Choice programme for LDD adults and Jobcentre Plus Support contracts in two regions.

- Ofsted Early Years Inspection Services in the Midlands and North of England.

- Youth Contract, targeted support for NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) young people in the West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber and two contracts across Greater London.


- A range of education consultancy and school improvement services.

1.3 We are recognised for our expertise in event management, recruitment, community regeneration and educational resources. Gabbitas, the independent education consultancy, is part of the Prospects Group.

2. Summary
2.1 Our advisers experience of Access to Work (AtW) is mostly positive.

2.2 The AtW application and assessment process can sometimes be slow and this potentially hinders both employment and retention.

2.3 “Pre-awards” identifying AtW funding eligibility would be useful.

2.4 Support to get a job, stay in it and develop a career is generally good once up and running.

2.5 We are aware of more information and publicity about AtW being made available online but clients and employers remain largely unaware of the scheme.

3. Our experience of AtW

3.1 The AtW application and assessment processes, from the perspectives of employees and employers:

- The AtW process is too slow from the start of application to any award being made. One recent award to a client Prospects was working with took three months to come through. In the meantime the client had left his job. Response deadlines are not always adhered to, requiring us to chase up. Staff give the impression they are struggling with workload following a reduction in the number of centres.

- Employers can be left feeling they are being promised adjustments will be funded and employ someone on this basis only to find that any promised funding is slow to materialise.

- Part of the problem arises where AtW applications are only made when a job has been offered. A “pre-award” would provide a job applicant with details of the type of award they qualify for. These details would provide a potential employer with greater certainty that a candidate would in fact qualify for AtW support, and for what type of support.

- One of our advisers observed:

  “My experience of AtW has been mostly positive. I helped to secure AtW funding for an “Emove chair” for work. Both client and employer made a contribution but the vast majority was paid by AtW without issue. I also support my client collate and send taxi invoices with the AtW claim form monthly. I believe this amount is usually paid within 10 days of receipt.”

3.2 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:
We have been advised by AtW staff that they cannot fund support workers for Work Choice participants. If this could be offered it would improve the effectiveness of Work Choice interventions.

In one instance we had an issue with equipment being supplied, however no instructions were provided on how to use it and AtW were not able to offer any reasonable solution.

Taxis to work are an excellent idea and this does open up a market for those who are unable to use public transport.

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

- Support in providing taxis for those with learning disability has been good. Wider support for those with less visible mental health issues seems to be more limited, especially where clients lack medical reports to back up conditions such as social anxiety.

3.4 AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: 1. Secure a job; 2. Stay in employment; and 3. Develop their careers;

- Support is generally good once up and running. AtW could be more effective at helping people secure a job if it was known the client would be eligible for funding in advance of employment offers.

- Eligibility for funding where a person works less than 16 hours a week would be good as this builds confidence, and is more likely to lead to sustainable employment and increased working hours in the longer term.

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

- In the last year or so we have noticed more information has been made available on the internet referring to AtW. There does not seem to have been any local or national media coverage in newspapers or on radio and television. Most clients and employers seem to still be unaware of such a scheme and the benefits this brings not only to the employee but to their organisation as well.

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