As a user-led Disabled People’s Organisation (DPO) Equal Lives have been working with disabled people and their groups since 1996. We have had many successes over the years, including the co-development of one of the biggest direct payment support services in the country and we have also run a range of successful community engagement projects over the years.

Equal Lives is an employer of disabled people, runs several projects to get disabled people into work and is a conduit for the voice of a large number of individuals and organisations in Norfolk and Suffolk. The responses to your questions have come from a broad range of these varied stakeholders.

**Organisationally our main concerns are that;**

Access to Work (ATW) removes barriers in the job market to disabled people being tax payers and active citizens.

Cuts to ATW are threatening the progress that has been made in this area. Changes and cuts to ATW have already meant that it is harder for disabled people to get jobs.

Ministers promised that the savings made in closing Remploy and putting disabled people on to the job market in the middle of a deep recession would be reinvested in ATW. The cuts and changes made already make nonsense of this promise.

How can employers be expected to invest their own money in buying equipment for disabled people to access work when they are ‘on probation’? – equipment can be very expensive for employers to purchase for employees who may not pass their probationary period.

This doesn’t follow the social model of disability.

It violates the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

On top of austerity – cuts and changes to benefits which disproportionately affect disabled people - the changes and cuts to ATW compound this discrimination.
Comments from our users;

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<th>The <strong>AtW application and assessment processes</strong> from the perspectives of employees and employers;</th>
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‘I am unhappy with the way they communicate with me and the lack of it and not knowing what is going to happen with my support in the workplace. There is a lot of miscommunication going on with AtW and it seems they are not able to understand my needs. Why can’t AtW give me the same support I currently have? Why the change?’

(Matt)

‘The review process has been lengthy and the staff do not seem to treat people as individuals. Applying for extra support was difficult, because I had to re-refer myself and was passed from one person to another several times and I don’t think they understand what it is like to be a disabled person at work. Improvements could be made by having one dedicated adviser throughout the application process, assessors who know about disability and will listen and recognize that you are the expert on your disability. The claims process could be less bureaucratic and there could be fewer forms to complete.’

(Simon)

‘Access to work assessor - I made my original application to access to work and it was returned on 5 December 2013, unfortunately in my case I was not contacted by my assessor therefore, after two weeks I made contact with access to work via phone. I was told that there had been a delay due to Christmas post and I should be contacted next week.

At the beginning of the next working week I had not been contacted, so I contacted access to work again to find out what was going on. I was given the same reason for the delay. I told them, this was unacceptable as I needed the support as soon as possible to carry out my work. At this point I asked for the contact details of my assessor and subsequently tried to make contact with him.
Over the next week I was unable to get through to him on the number I was given it just went straight to voicemail. At this point I took advice from my line manager and a colleague who had been through this process. Whereby, we escalated the situation to a senior manager at access to work.

I was promised, that I would be contacted within the next week by my assessor and that this would be dealt with urgently. Yet again, no contact was made and I was still working without any support from access to work.

Fortunately, between myself and my line manager some support was put in place e.g. voice recognition software at my employer’s expense so that I could carry out some of my job.

I then got in contact again, with the senior manager from access to work I had been speaking to and told him this was having a detrimental effect on my ability to work and I needed an urgent resolution to this issue. Due to annual leave and Christmas delays a new access to work assessor had been allocated to me and did not make contact until January 6th.

At this point, I made my assessor aware of the delays and the effect it was having on my ability to work. We discussed in detail the support I needed and she concluded that I would need a one-to-one on-site assessment. She subsequently referred me to an access to work third-party assessor (capita).

On-site assessors report - After having my assessment on 8 January, I did not hear anything from access to work for nearly 2 weeks. Therefore I contacted my access to work advisor via email on 15 January to get a progress report and she hadn't yet received the assessment from capita. At this point she informed me she was going on leave for the next week but her colleagues would keep me updated.

This did not happen, as a result I inform my line manager and head of human resources to escalate this issue at a higher level within access to work so that I could get the support I needed.

Our head of HR contacted access to work on the 22nd and they refused to speak to her as she did not have permission to discuss my case. As a result I
phoned access to work to get to the bottom of these ongoing issues, at this point I was told a letter had been sent out confirming the support I had been awarded.

It was at this point, I made it clear that I was extremely unhappy with the delays caused by access to work and the amount of time I was spending sorting out during work hours and in my own time. The call centre operative said to me “this is a work issue therefore it is important” I was incredibly frustrated and pointed out the delays were caused by access to work and a number of work hours and personal time was spent sorting out, which is taking me away from the job I was employed to do at Equal Lives. I asked, if they could send me a copy of the letter via email so that I could see the outcome of the decision, I was told their emails were not currently working so she couldn’t do that.

In addition, I asked if the call centre operative could note that I give permission for equalise head of HR to discuss my case in trying to resolve this issue. I was told quite firmly that they only nominate third parties when people are deaf or learning disabled. I reiterated again that the amount of time I’ve spent on these issues was having a detrimental effect on my work and therefore I have escalated it to my HR Department to resolve on my behalf and eventually she logged my permission.

(Tom)

‘You really need someone who is experienced in the process to help you.’

(David)

‘The letter outlined the support I was going to receive detailing equipment, services and training. These letters can sometimes be sizeable documents so I would recommend taking your time to read them and make sure everything is correct. I noticed on mine that my height had been incorrectly stated 6’7” instead of 5’7”, which would have a bearing on equipment such as an ergonomic chair.’

(Tom)

‘The process I used 20 years ago to set up Access to Work was through the Disability Employment Advisor at the local job centre. Now, I call a call centre, then speak to an assessor and then get assessed. It is not very
efficient now. I knew about this programme when I first applied and it was set up prior to starting my current job 13 years ago. The support I receive consists of equipment and payment towards significant adaptations to the car. Without this support, I could not work.’

(Brian)

‘From my personal experience, I wouldn’t use a company to manage Access to work. If possible, I would rather have support to do it myself. Only I know how much support I need. An outside company doesn’t see me every day and only goes by what they are told.’

(Debbie)

There is a great deal of work to do with employers and employing disabled people. They need to know more about;

- Who is meant by disabled people
- Reasonable adjustments – what are they and some examples
- General attitude - disabled people offer valued contributions across the employment structure

It is easy (if you don’t know about ATW) to rule out jobs because you perceive you can’t do them- whereas knowing about the scheme and what it can provide can open up your opportunities.

At the moment there are a lot of concerns about the support from Access to Work in the future, especially the 30 hour rule. Were worried that the great colleagues we work with won’t be able to fulfil their responsibilities in light of these proposals.

(Penny)

There are a lot of difficulties in getting appropriate support for people who are deaf, particularly around interpreters. There seems to be some return to asking a manager or someone, what the disabled person needs, instead of asking the disabled person.

(Michelle)
In general I find using the scheme easy, although I would prefer to have an adviser that deals with my case all the time, rather than one person for general issues, someone else who does my reviews etc.

It would be great if ATW advisers had lived experience of working as a disabled person, as often they don’t know why or what a piece of equipment enables you to do.

Some advisers are good at asking what a piece of equipment does, and if you give them a real scenario of when you would use that piece of equipment they understand better the reasons behind why you are requesting it.

However other advisers are not so good at asking these probing questions.

(Penny)

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;

‘Initially, the support I received included a computer with Lunar magnification, speech and a text to speech scanner. I now receive more support 19 years on, such as a support worker, Braille note and Braille display on my PC with JAWS (software which reads what is on my screen to me). Without this support, I would be unable to do my job.’

(Anne)

‘Access to Work provides equipment for me at work. This made my working life a little bit easier, but it doesn’t always keep up with changes in my needs.’

(Daisy)

‘The support I received from Access to Work included equipment, support workers and taxi fares. Receiving this support enabled me to do my job on an equal basis with my colleagues’

(George)

‘The support I receive consists of interpreters and equipment. This support makes a very big difference to me, as I am deaf and I require an interpreter for training and at meetings.’
AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to:

- Secure a job
- Stay in employment
- Develop their careers

‘Setting up Access to Work was very easy. Somebody came to my place of work and saw me doing my job and made suggestions of ways and things that could help me. I received Access to Work for six years between 2001 and 2007 while I was working as a Biomedical Scientist in London. Until someone in Social Services told me about Access to Work, I didn’t know anything about it. The one concern I had was how much I would have to contribute financially. I received help with equipment (a more comfortable chair, better lighting and software). I was also offered a support worker. Access to Work also paid for transport for me to get to work for the last four years I worked. The support I received took away the worry of wondering how I would get to work and made carrying out my job much easier. Quite honestly, it made the difference between me going to work or not. Having worked for nearly 20 years doing something I really enjoyed, the help and support I received kept me working for an extra six years.’

(John)

‘I have JAWS software, so I can access my computer and I have transport to work. My family no longer have to worry about me getting to work. My support worker drives me around at work and takes notes and reads documents that are not in electronic format. Regardless of the slow procedure and the inconsistency of the staff at the call centre, I wouldn’t be without Access to Work.’

(Simon)

‘The support I receive is a support worker, travel to work, computer software and the training to use the software. Being able to work has had a major impact on my confidence, independence and self-esteem.’
We are a disabled people’s organisation running a project on Access to Work. We have found that many employers were unwilling to engage with us – even when we offered free support because they were ‘too busy’ or ‘didn’t employ disabled people’. Often employers used the common excuse ‘our building is old and wheelchairs can’t get in’.

Without access to work I would be unable to have the job I do and be part of society. There were a number of difficulties with this scheme that I experienced firstly, it is not well known I only became aware of it since working for equal lives and secondly, the process wasn't as straightforward and a streamlined as it could be. Lots of time repeating myself to various departments. Most important part of this process to me is that I'm the best person to know what equipment and services are best to help me access work.

The Access to Work Scheme gives me the support I need to remain in full time employment, and allows me the flexibility and tools I need to do the job effectively and efficiently.

There is a lack of support for volunteers, which itself can be a major step to getting into paid employment. However there is no way that volunteers can access the equipment/adaptations they need, as this is not currently an area that is funded.

The steps taken so far by DWP to extend AtW, including its marketing and
Prior to starting work with Equal Lives my knowledge of the access to work scheme was minimal I had only heard it referred to on one or two occasions but I really didn't know the extent of the scheme.

(Tom)

‘Speaking as an employer I still think that access to work is little known and not marketed particularly effectively. We work exclusively with disabled people and many of our users have not heard about Access to Work until we mention it. There are definitely very good reasons to keep and promote Access to Work – but our users tell us that there is certainly room for improvement!’

(Mark)

Equal Lives maintains a list of case studies on Access to Work which we publish on our website... http://www.equallives.org.uk/get-involved/activities/access-work/written-case-studies/

More about our organisation

Equal Lives is one of the largest disabled people’s organisations in the country. Its membership includes 52 full member groups, all of whom are user-led and over 500 individual disabled members. Our membership covers the range of different impairment groups including physical and sensory impairment, learning difficulties and mental health.

We believe having an impairment is a normal part of being human. Disability results from people with impairments being discriminated against because of physical and social barriers and attitudes.

We consider a disabled person to be anyone who feels they face such barriers. This includes people of all ages with physical or sensory impairments, learning difficulties and mental ill health.

Our mission is to challenge and break down disabling barriers so people experience equality, dignity and independence, in Norfolk and beyond. We run campaigns and support our membership through a small development grant
programme, information, and training and by uniting member’s voices to try and create change. Equal Lives also runs services to support people to live more independently and to access advice and advocacy, including mental health advocacy.

Over 9,000 disabled and older people were supported by Equal Lives last year.

Our organisational aims include:

- To unite people of all ages who face disabling barriers and to promote our collective voice
- To increase awareness of disabling barriers and to influence society to remove them
- To enable people to understand their choices, to protect their rights and to achieve their personal goals

20 June 2014