Written evidence submitted by N G Nicholson (ATW0290)

From the perspective of a support worker.

1.0. AtW application and assessment process
1.1. The application and assessment process are lengthy, unwieldy and not fit for purpose. Applicants are made to jump through a series of hoops by people who have little or no understanding of the particular conditions disabled people experience. This is evidenced by the move away from dedicated contacts who were aware of the applicants’ history and able to make real time decisions enabling disabled people to continue working and living in a meaningful and productive way.

2.0. The adequacy of ongoing support and the help and advice offered by DWP
2.1. The accuracy and adequacy of support and the help and advice offered by DWP varies depending on the person with whom the applicant has contact. Often contradictory decisions are made around ongoing support and the level of advice available is poor.
2.2. The person for whom I work as a support worker is still waiting on a decision to a request placed at the end of April to enable her to attend an event on May 1st. I write this at the end of June. Similar requests made through May are still awaiting responses.
2.3. The introduction of form DP222JP 12/11 changes the responsibility of the Support Worker to that of a gatekeeper. Given that I am work for an agency, the implications for me – and ramifications – of non-compliance are concerning. I automatically become culpable for any mistakes the person I work for might unwittingly commit. I am supporting someone for whom form-filling and word-finding difficulties sometimes go hand in hand.
2.4. The supporting guidance for the above form is contradictory and therefore confusing.

3.0. Secure a job
3.1. Delays in payment mean that as a disabled entrepreneur, the person for whom I work as a Support Worker is at significant risk of losing her business.
3.2. As an agency worker who is aware of a previous hourly rate, I now face the newly introduced rate for any new clients – National Minimum Wage, despite moves to introduce a living wage and shaming employers that do not offer it. The skills required to support someone are worth significantly higher rates of pay.
3.3. At this point in my life, due to widespread unemployment and the lack of availability of appropriate jobs to suit my skills set, I find myself taking this role just to stay off benefits. I have not been paid for 10 weeks and as a result have had to defer my mortgage payments and all other standing orders because the system at AtW is so slow. After ten weeks, I can finally be paid for my time, but am unable to claim for expenses and mileage.
3.4. I have to fight to claim mileage, when a significant part of my role is driving the person I support to appointments and meetings. Where mileage is paid, it is at the
paltry rate of 26p per mile. This is at enormous variance with the HMRC recommended 46p per mile for the first 10,000 miles.

3.5. Had the person whom I support needed significant physical aids and adaptations, these would no doubt have been provided without question.

3.6. The role of Support Worker in enabling a disabled person with hidden and fluctuating conditions to function at a strategic level has, in my experience, been reduced to the lowest possible low. Left without support, she would simply be reduced to claiming disability related benefits.

4.0. Stay in employment

4.1. The person I support is at risk of not being able to stay in employment for two specific reasons.

4.2. Firstly, due to a lack of understanding of the contribution of disabled entrepreneurs in terms of Inclusive Economic Growth and the wider contribution they make to the overall economy there is insufficient flexibility within the service to enable them to stay in employment.

4.3. For a disabled person with hidden and fluctuating conditions, self employment is the ideal option as they are not in a job with fixed hours and can work when they have optimum energy levels. This makes international working possible in particular. If the person – as is the case with the person whom I support – is working with organisations overseas, she is able to Skype when she has the energy and this could well be outside the standard 9 – 5 working day.

4.4. Secondly, the role of Support Worker is absolutely key in enabling the person I support to stay in employment. Without it, she would not be able to function at the level needed to succeed as a disabled entrepreneur.

4.5. The delays in decision making, implementing decisions and making payment all serve to jeopardise the ability of disabled people in staying in employment.

5.0. Develop their careers

5.1. As so little is understood by AtW about the complexities of working as a disabled entrepreneur, I see little – if any – strategic support to enable them to develop their careers.

5.2. The time that could be taken to develop careers and professional development is often interrupted with diktats specific to the day to day management of the award itself.

6.0. In conclusion, as a former business manager and now Support Worker, the current system is not fit for purpose.

6.1. Advisors have been replaced by automata who barely understand the system themselves.

6.2. Self generated response times are not adhered to.

6.3. Urgent requests are ignored. Inconsistencies in decision making, inaccuracies in advice, time delays in making payments and sanctions imposed would not be conducive to business survival in the ‘real’ world.
6.4. The service has completely infantilised applicants. Disabled people are being treated like recalcitrant children who are threatened with suspension of their allowance if they do not toe the ever changing line.

6.5. Permission to travel has to be sought from several ‘parents’ in advance, yet decisions are delayed beyond the date for which permission has been sought.

6.6. Unrealistic levels of pay for Support Workers result in difficulties in recruiting and training the right level of person and result in retention issues – especially when payment takes such a ridiculous length of time.

6.7. In terms of the direction AtW will take in the future, I sincerely expect that the recommendations of the inquiry take into account the voices of disabled people from all areas of the community and that improvements in the service are carried out in a timely yet considered manner.

27 June 2014