Executive Summary:
- Access to Work is essential to Candoco Dance Company to continue to thrive as the UK’s leading company of disabled and non-disabled dancers – significantly increasing employment opportunities for disabled artists
- Support has been tailored to our dancers needs – and is effective in enabling them to do their job
- New processes for receiving support from Access to Work have become prohibitively lengthy, bureaucratic and ineffective
- These new processes will limit our employees ability to carry out their jobs, and our ability to employ artists that need support to work
- Overall the changes indicate a woeful lack of respect for employed individuals making a positive contribution to the job market and society

Introduction:
Candoco Dance Company is the leading contemporary dance company of disabled and non-disabled dancers. Our core company of 7 dancers tours extensively nationally and internationally, creating new productions with world-class choreographers. Alongside this we run learning and training projects, including regular inclusive dance classes for young people and inclusive workshops across the world. We are a registered charity in receipt of Arts Council National Portfolio funding. We are a significant employer of disabled artists and professionals.

In any company of dancers we would expect to have 2-3 dancers needing support from Access to Work. We work with them to administer the application and renewal process for Access to Work grants and payment claims. We currently have 2 disabled company dancers who are using the Access to Work scheme.

The Access to Work scheme has been an incredibly positive scheme for our employees and provides crucial support to enable our employees to carry out their work for Candoco, without it we would not be able to continue to employ disabled artists. Up until Autumn 2013 – we had a good experience of the scheme. Positive aspects included:
- Candoco as the employer being able to take the lead on applications, reducing the burden on individual employees and providing the broad context for support
- Named contacts at AtW developing a relationship with us and understanding the nature of our work, while being fully briefed on the AtW scheme
- Unified and efficient process for applying and claiming including generally prompt response and return on queries.

However as of Autumn 2013 following the restructure of the Access to Work department we have experienced a distinct decline in the quality of service and support offered by the scheme. The content of this evidence is in response to these recent changes that have made it:

- Lacking in transparency
- Overly bureaucratic and inefficient
- Time consuming
- Overly focused on a medical understanding of disability – as opposed to a
positive scheme supporting disabled people to be active members of the job market

In its current state we believe these issues can present a significant barrier to disabled workers in accessing the scheme.

The AtW application and assessment process, from the perspective of employees and employers:

1. New processes are causing considerable delays in obtaining a response or progressing an application. E.g. one of our new employees started her application to AtW over 16 weeks ago and is still being assessed and awaiting confirmation of whether support will be provided. We would estimate a 4-fold increase in our company’s administration support since March 2014 on Access to Work applications.

2. The new main contact centre front line service is causing significant delays to an individual being able to set up a new application or reapply, as an applicant has to register their call first and then await a call back from an Adviser. Various call back times are given, between 7–14 working days, yet these timelines are rarely fulfilled resulting in the applicant/employer needing to call again and repeat the process. This has caused our employees and us significant delays and we have experienced some 3 to 4 week waits to be assigned an Adviser or receive a call back. This set up continues to be an issue when the application assessment is in process.

3. Changes to the application process have resulted in reapplying applicants needing to submit previously supplied information anew. This information should already be on hand on the individual’s AtW profile. E.g. our employee was requested to resubmit the outline of their statement of needs for a support worker, and for evidence/a supporting statement from his GP.

4. Changes to the assessment of an application have resulted in prohibitive requests for information from both new and reapplying applicants (e.g. an hour by hour log of a support workers day, providing at least 3 quotes for a support workers estimated accommodation costs). This is an administrative challenge for the employee and employer – given the time available to the dancers to focus on administration is already limited and as a touring company and charity we have limited resources and are often responding to touring requests on relatively short notice and working with international partners that have particular timelines.

5. Furthermore – the additional information requests can be fragmented and unclear, with additional questions arising from answers already provided. They are not given any context so it is unclear ‘where’ in the process we are and the impetus for the questions - this causes further delay and work for the applicant. E.g. after supplying a support worker log with a breakdown of duties per day at the initial application stage, our employee was then asked at a later date to provide an outline of the time the support worker starts and finishes each day, they then received a 3rd separate request, some weeks later, to provide a breakdown of the support at hourly intervals.
6. Our employees have also considered some questions asked by assessors intrusive and offensive. E.g. requesting a medical opinion on why support is needed and whether surgery could be considered by the employee to alleviate their disability.

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:

7. We primarily apply for Support Worker costs including travel and accommodation, and travel to work costs for the employee when touring given that public transport may not be possible for them. Where these costs are agreed and fully covered by AtW– this support allows our employees to carry out their job and us to continue to employ disabled artists.

8. In line with above our experience at the payment claim stage, once an applicant has been approved for support has been a positive one. The payment claim set up is generally clear and straightforward to administer and reimbursement is often prompt.

9. In terms of help and advice offered by DWP/Access to Work; staff at the main contact centre are frequently unable to provide adequate information on an individual’s application or on the scheme in general. Information on applying/reapplying can be confusing and contrary. Unfortunately we have also experienced some rude and hostile behaviour from staff members – we have logged this with AtW. This causes increased workload, confusion and stress.

AtW’s effectiveness in terms of helping disabled people to: secure a job, stay in employment, and develop their careers:

10. Assistance from a support worker is essential for our disabled artists to be able to carry out their job with the company, in particular the extensive touring work that is our main function. This support enables them to work professionally as an artist.

11. A particular concern is the recent questioning of provision for a support worker to accompany a disabled person for our work overseas. There is now an indication that our employees should be able to manage with airline support and a ‘local’ support worker on arrival. Many of the functions of a support worker are personal – it is therefore vital that the employee fully trusts the individual supporting them. We are often in venues for 1-2 nights and so no relationship with a local support worker is possible. And furthermore given the access challenges we face with airlines in general, to rely on them for individualised support is unrealistic. This provision is fundamental to our artists being able to stay in employment and develop their careers, withdrawing it would have a detrimental impact to their employment prospects.

12. The new lengthy timeframes for applications make it difficult for us to plan and confirm activity that includes disabled people when the support provision is in question. The recent delays in an application being approved have meant that we have had to risk significant outlay of funds that we have no
guarantee of being reimbursed for, this impacts on the work that we are able to do and can impact on the employment opportunities we can offer.

13. Our experience and recent discussion with the many freelancers with which we work who are trying to access the scheme independently - indicates that the process is now prohibitive to an individual applicant who does not have the support of their employer in applying.

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

14. We are not aware of any additional marketing or promotion that DWP or Access to Work have done to raise awareness of the scheme or extended funding of the scheme. Our recent experiences are that the scheme has had reduced funding, expertise and effectiveness – and as a result has had the direct opposite of promoting or extending the scheme.

My Recommendations:
- Named contact / team with full knowledge of scheme and employee
- Initial assessment involves discussion with employer
- Employers of several disabled employees are able to administer the scheme on their behalf
- Codified set questions provided for the employee / employer at the start of the process so we can provide as much relevant information upfront and understand the full context of the application stages
- Scheme reflects social model of disability and employees are fully trained

7 July 2014