1. We welcome the Committee’s inquiry to consider the Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) Access to Work (AtW) programme. We appreciate the opportunity to take part in this.

2. We submit this written evidence as Co-Chairs of the Disabled Staff Network (DSN) at The University of Manchester, on behalf of the members of the DSN.

3. The DSN is an independent and self-determining group within the University, established and supported by the University’s Equality & Diversity (E&D, www.manchester.ac.uk/connect/jobs/equality-diversity/) Team. Patrick Johnson is Head of E&D, and Catherine Prescott is an E&D Advisor who has helped us prepare this written evidence. The DSN exists to promote disability equality and to represent the views and interests of disabled members of staff in all roles at the University (academic, academic-related, teaching, research, management, professional, administrative, technical, estates-related, services-related, etc.) and at all levels.

4. The DSN maintains strong links with the University’s Disability Support Office (DSO, www.dso.manchester.ac.uk), which provides support and advice to disabled students and disabled members of staff. Elaine Shillcock is Head of the DSO, and Emma Woodward is the Staff Disability Adviser who helps members of staff with their AtW applications and setting up support.

5. We use the terms “disability” and “disabled” in their widest possible senses, and leave it to individual members of staff to identify themselves as being disabled.

6. We have asked all members of the DSN to provide their experiences and opinions on the points that the Committee is particularly interested in for this inquiry. We present below the responses we have received from our colleagues, while ensuring anonymity of the respondents. Please note that the views expressed are those of individual members of staff, and we do not attempt to represent the official position of the University in any way.

Executive Summary

- AtW makes disabled people employable! If employers knew about the support available from AtW, then disabled people would be more likely to secure the jobs they deserve. AtW enables disabled employees to fulfil the requirements of their job and remain in work. Without the support that AtW provides, many disabled people simply could not work. However, there are aspects of AtW that raise concern and require improvement.
- DWP must do more to publicise and promote AtW and the support available, and inform employers and employees of the programme.
- DWP needs to streamline the AtW application process, and make it clearer for employees and employers. It should not be necessary for employees to restart the application process afresh when they move to a new job for the same employer.
- All applications for AtW support, whether new or additional, must be responded to in a timely way. Approvals need to be issued as much in advance of the support being required as possible, so that the support is in place when it’s needed. Delays cause unnecessary anxiety and stress.
- DWP needs to ensure that AtW staff receive training on disability equality and awareness, and understand that disabled people are the best to judge the support they require. AtW staff must treat every “customer” with courtesy and sensitivity. Anything less is unacceptable.
Each AtW applicant should be assigned a named adviser and the applicant should be provided with the adviser’s telephone number and email address to allow direct communication. DWP must ensure that AtW advisers are fully trained and informed of all the options available to support “customers”. They must be able to offer pertinent advice.

Better systems for AtW to pay for support costs need to be introduced by DWP, including providers being paid directly. Claiming support costs retrospectively from AtW is too slow and often overburdens employees and employers. These frustrations deter too many employees from utilising the support they are eligible for.

The effectiveness of the support funded by AtW must override the considerations of cost.

Moodswings (www.moodswings.org.uk) is an award-winning charity based in Manchester that supports people with mental health conditions, set up and run by Tom McAlpine OBE and Linda Wilson since 1999. Moodswings have a proven track record at providing bespoke support to students and staff at our University, helping them to manage their mood and mental health and enabling them to continue studying and working. This support was funded by AtW, but DWP recently decided that support for mental health conditions can only be provided by Remploy. The quality and effectiveness of the support from Moodswings cannot be matched by Remploy. DWP needs to reconsider this decision, and avoid discriminating against people with mental health conditions just to save money. All disabled people, including those with mental health conditions, should be assured the dignity and freedom to choose and control how they are supported.

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

7. **Enquiries.** Individual colleagues usually have to source all their own information about AtW and reach out for themselves. Line-managers who contact the DSO regarding their disabled staff are informed about AtW. Line managers then advise their staff to contact AtW to apply for support.

8. **The application process** is problematic, complex, lengthy and slow. There is an initial two-stage assessment process which is frustrating as colleagues end up having to go over most things twice.

9. **Responding to applications and approval time.** One colleague applied for AtW, and even after 6 weeks had received no reply. Upon enquiry found it had remained in the inbox and no action had been taken. Approval was given the day before going on fieldwork, leaving insufficient time to arrange the support required. Another colleague put an application in about 10 weeks before a conference and approval was given two working days before. This colleague sent several emails 3 weeks prior but was ignored.

10. **Lack of understanding and knowledge of advisers.** Colleagues suggest a lack of “trust” surrounding requests, noting AtW staff who lack knowledge and compassion and speak to them with a threatening and belittling attitude. In several cases inappropriate or inadequate assistive technologies were offered. New technologies are welcome however they have to be functional options. Assessments of support, or additional support, for a mental health condition(s) should be carried out by those with training and expertise. It is not appropriate for AtW staff to ask applicants questions like “what is wrong with you?” or “why aren’t you ok now?” or “do you know that what you’re asking for will cost £XXXX?”

11. **Reapplication when moving positions in the same University.** A colleague had to reapply to AtW from the beginning for her transport support to continue when on secondment. This included a fresh application and a doctor’s letter (at a cost to her). This is a secondment and this process will have to
be repeated in less than a year when her position changes again. This wastes time and money for all concerned.

12. **Difficulties contacting AtW advisers about applications.** Colleagues have highlighted incidences where they have found it difficult to contact an adviser by telephone in good time. Advisers do not have voicemail or email, in one case this almost resulted in support being stopped. A named adviser for each application would ensure confidentiality and make contact and follow up easier. All advisers should have clear contact details and voicemail.

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:

13. **Poor knowledge and incorrect advice from AtW advisers.** Most colleagues, who have support funded by AtW, have no direct communication with AtW regarding support, aids, adjustments or offer of any further help or advice. It is also felt DWP offers little help and advice. One colleague was given the wrong help line number by an adviser, twice. Another, when asking a question about a change of circumstances form was told “I have no idea – it’s up to you what you do – I’ve got no idea what happens.” Why do the DWP put people on a helpline that are not able to help or advise? On another occasion, on seeking travel support another colleague was asked “can’t you ask someone at work to give you a lift”!

14. **Delays in payments.** A number of colleagues have experienced long delays in receiving payments in some cases 4 months. In one case the costs of support represented 56% of a colleague’s salary, and the delay caused severe financial hardship and it made going to work unaffordable. Local taxi firms refuse to open accounts as AtW take too long to pay invoices. Hold ups with claim forms being sent out from AtW also cause delays.

15. **Complex payment processes that are difficult to understand.** Colleagues state that the systems related to claiming AtW payments seem unnecessarily complex with employers paying providers then seeking repayment from AtW. They suggest that it would seem more efficient for AtW to pay providers directly.

16. **Inappropriate support being offered to save money.** Colleagues state that there seems to be a constant wish amongst advisers to cut payments for applicants or to get them to use less expensive but less suitable options. Colleagues are concerned that the dominant ethos of AtW is becoming to cut services rather than support employees. In some cases technological solutions are not appropriate.

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

17. **Restricting choice of service provider.** At the time that experiences and opinions were sought for this evidence, The University of Manchester was able to use Moodswings to support staff and students with mental health conditions. AtW have now restricted individuals to receiving support through Remploy only. Many staff receiving support from Moodswings have provided detailed accounts of how Moodswings have helped them, and feel it is only the face-to-face and tailored support that Moodswings provides that has been responsible for helping them to remain in work. Responses from two colleagues reflect the concerns raised:

“I am writing to express my dismay at the proposed changes in Access to Work which will mean that people with mental health difficulties at The University of Manchester can no longer choose where they access support. I have received tremendous help from face to face contact with staff at
Moodswings, in Manchester, and feel that this has been fundamental in keeping me in work, improved my mental health and benefited my home life. I found their approach very effective and empowering. Their help came at just the right time as I felt increasingly unable to cope and was considering taking sick leave without any clear idea as to how I would resolve my problems to enable me to return to work. I believe that the Remploy approach of time limited distance support would not have been as effective with my complex problems. I feel strongly that people with mental health difficulties should continue to be able to choose where they access support just as those with physical or visual impairments can.”

“I am currently receiving support from Moodswings at the University of Manchester under the Access to Work scheme. It was very important to me to have the choice to be able to access a provider of such support who was based at my place of work and who have knowledge of my job role. It means I can arrange face to face meetings at a time and place that is most suitable to me and least intrusive to my day to day work. Face to face support is I believe very important and much more useful and successful than distance support which I do not believe I would find helpful. For example, distance support would require me to be working away from the office whilst I spoke to a service provider on the phone as I would not be comfortable doing this from my office where colleagues or students could easily overhear. Whereas visiting Moodswings means I can talk in private within my workplace.”

18. Dr Peter Oliver, a physician in the University’s Occupational Health service, also raises concerns:

“I have received many positive comments about Moodswings from my patients [members of staff at the University with mental health conditions]. I have also been in touch with Dr Susan Robson and she concurs with this. We would both be very sorry if the facility to have University staff supported by Moodswings was no longer available in future and doubt if Remploy could provide the same level of expertise.”

19. **Colleagues feel very strongly that this decision should be reviewed.** The ability to choose appropriate mental health support is vital in ensuring that it is effective – just like physical disabilities, mental health problems are wide-ranging and the support given must be relevant and targeted to suit the individual in order for it to be worthwhile. It is not value for money if the service doesn’t work, and colleagues feel that this restriction is discriminatory in itself.

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

20. **Issues with AtW preventing support being accessed.** Adaptations and support are essential to keeping people in work. Colleagues felt fortunate that support is available to help them remain in work. However a large number do not access the support as the process of dealing with AtW is frustrating and too costly for colleagues to pay up-front.

21. **The support that’s funded through AtW helps people remain in employment and develop their careers.** AtW is a wonderful programme and without it many colleagues could not work at all. Support from AtW allows disabled academics to participate in all aspects of academia with their non-disabled colleagues – attending research seminars and conferences, and being able to hear what is being said. The support provided to disabled academics for their research overseas – such as telephone calls, interpretation and transcription support – is invaluable and would not be possible without it.
22. Recruitment committees need to know more about what support can be offered through AtW. People in senior management need to know about AtW. Colleagues suspect that job search committees worry about how they can cover the cost of support needs. Some colleagues try to mention AtW at some point in the interview process in an attempt to alleviate these worries but it’s not always possible, especially in situations where the panel are terrified of breaking equality and diversity laws.

23. Access to Moodswings through AtW helps maintain employment and develop careers. Many colleagues felt that had it not been for Moodswings they would have lost their careers. Moodswings’ detailed knowledge of job roles and work environments provides the specific support required.

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

24. Nothing is known about extensions to AtW. The majority of comments have concerned the cut back and restrictions of services having a negative impact on work and health.

25. We hope the evidence above will contribute usefully to your inquiry. We look forward to receiving your report.

20 July 2014