Access to Work is based on the right principles – it is disabled people’s experience that they can be included in mainstream work if the barriers they face associated with their impairments are addressed, and Access to Work funding enables this to be done because it is personalised to their individual circumstances. The rest of employment support funding fails to achieve this to the same degree, and should be re-designed to be based on similar principles to Access to Work.

However, particular weaknesses of Access to Work are:–

1. Historically disabled people and disabled people’s organisations have not been involved in working with government in designing and delivering employment support for disabled people generally, including Access to Work, so this results in a system which does not meet disabled people’s needs as well as it might;

2. In order to attempt to protect the public purse, the system is bureaucratic, expensive in people costs (civil servants and assessors), and inexpert (it is disabled people’s experience that neither the civil servants nor the assessors add good value because of their lack of expert disability knowledge);

3. The current contracting out of the assessment process to one organisation in any area has doubtful benefits for disabled people. In one area we are aware that the named contractor subcontracts the work to another organisation, who themselves further subcontracts it. This must be more costly to the taxpayer and less transparent than a direct engagement with a named assessor. This process offers no means for assessors to offer their services directly to disabled people and their employers in competition, allowing people to choose assessors with the best specialisms and at competitive rates. In any case there is a significant level of complaints about the quality or value of assessments delivered by the current process;

4. The process of informing disabled people and their employers about what is available in terms of particular equipment or
support that might be useful for disabled workers is opaque and almost non-existent. There is no public place where disabled people and their employers can see what is potentially on offer in the market. Theoretically the sourcing of such facilities is up to the disabled person and/or their employer after an assessment has been undertaken. We are led to believe that an assessor should only identify the generic equipment/support needed. However it is our experience that assessors often go on to find several specific quotes for each item. We feel concerned about them doing this if they are not supposed to do it, and are concerned about the independence of the assessor from the suppliers they recommend. Furthermore the practice of these quotes coming from the assessors is opaque and other suppliers are excluded from being able to compete on price and quality. A result of this is that the cost of these items recommended can be both extraordinarily expensive and not fit for purpose. For instance support workers are offered in assessments at £80 per hour, yet without any quality assurance. This happens because the process of offering the range of equipment and support available in the market is not facilitated in a way that allows public competition, and the providers who are able to get assessors to recommend them know that £80 per hour is a rate they can get away with within the current process. My organisation is confident we could deliver better support workers at half that price, if we had a route to market. The current process is massively wasteful of Access to Work funds;

5. Awareness of Access to Work remains low, and only 30,000 of disabled people currently receive it out of over 3 million disabled people who are in work, whilst for instance 429,000 disabled people lost their job last year, some of which could have been prevented by Access to Work interventions;

6. The process can take much too long, resulting in disabled people being in jeopardy of losing their jobs, and indeed actually losing them in some cases before Access to Work help can be implemented;

7. Sometimes the “rules” about the terms on which the Access to Work support is made available are in conflict with the needs of the disabled person in their job;
8. Often what disabled people and their employers are looking for in the first instance is some expert advice about support for the disabled person, which might be solved quicker, cheaper and more effectively than through the Access to Work offer.

We would humbly like to suggest some thoughts about a radical solution :-

1. Access to Work is about dealing with the costs of support in excess of an employer’s obligations for reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. So a national phone and email advice service available to disabled people and employers about reasonable adjustments, ideally delivered by disabled people’s organisations, would be a good triage for Access to Work funding, helping lots of situations with simpler solutions that don’t need that funding but that would be meeting government aims to support disabled people at work;

2. A public website run by DWP (or appropriately outsourced) would list the full range of interventions, equipment and ongoing support that have proved valuable in the past through Access to Work – an “Amazon” of support. This would transparently indicate the types of support available and the costs from the suppliers, and also include details about the availability of specialist assessors and their costs. This would provide disabled people, employers, and their advisers with direct public access to what might be available, and to their suppliers. This would enable employers to get the support the disabled person needed to meet their reasonable adjustment obligations, and Access to Work funding would only need to be called upon for the interventions that went beyond that obligation;

3. When an Access to Work funding application was appropriate, the application could be made online via that website or an associated one. If the disabled person and employer agreed on what was needed without specialist assessment, or was done via the employer’s own resources, no external assessment need be undertaken. The sign-off by both disabled person and employer would provide public accountability that the assistance was needed. They could specify the supplier(s) they wanted, because they would have been able to have conversations with the supplier(s) using the contact details available on the website, before the application was made;
4. If the disabled person and/or the employer felt that an external assessment would be helpful, they could identify an assessor off the website, and then the initial Access to Work application would be to pay for that assessment;

5. A named civil servant would then review the application and use of public funds, negotiating with the disabled person and/or employer as appropriate. This would be the first and last time the DWP’s resources would have been directly called on in the application process. A positive decision could be initially given by email or phone so that it could be implemented quickly;

Such an approach would put the disabled person, and where appropriate their employer, at the heart of the process. The transparency of what was available would be both informative and effective at giving value for money through allowing suppliers to compete on quality, service and price. And the bureaucracy would be streamlined and simple to negotiate.

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