

Press and public affairs briefing: Access to Work

1. Purpose

This briefing provides a brief background on the use of the Access to Work (AtW) scheme by people with arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions. It includes our current policy asks and a media Q&A.

2. Policy asksⁱ

- The Department of Work and Pensions should undertake immediate and ongoing promotion of Access to Work to target people with musculoskeletal conditions and employers.
- The Access to Work scheme should be supported by a greater than real terms increase in funding.

3. What is Access to Work?

Access to Work (AtW) is a grant scheme provided by the Department of Work and Pensions designed to help people with a disability, health or mental health condition to work.¹ The grant can be used to pay for practical support to enable people to start working, stay in work, move into self-employment or start a business.

The types of support that the grant can be used for include things that enable people with musculoskeletal conditions to work, such as: special equipment, adaptations to equipment, transport fares for people unable to use public transport, the cost of moving equipment if people change location or job; and disability awareness training for colleagues.

The amount of grant that people receive is dependent on individual circumstances. In 2009/10 the average cost/award per person of Access to Work was around £2,600.² There are upper limits on the annual amount of the grant:

- Awarded on or after 1 April 2017: £42,100;
- Awarded between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017: £41,400;
- Awarded before 1 October 2015: no limit.

Grants are reviewed annually. Grants for equipment can be reclaimed as soon as these are authorised and purchased. Travel costs must be paid upfront and reclaimed from AtW.

4. Eligibility and application process

To be eligible for an AtW grant, people must:

- be aged 16 or over;
- have a disability, health condition or mental health condition that affects their ability to work (this must have lasted for a year, or be likely to last at least a year);
- have a paid job, be self-employed, have a job interview, be starting a job, work trial or work experience (voluntary work does not count as eligibility);
- have to pay work-related costs, for example special equipment or travel costs because of their disability or health condition.

People who receive some other forms of financial support (e.g. Employment and Support Allowance) may not qualify for AtW. AtW is available in England, Scotland and Wales. A

ⁱ These asks were included in the 'Working with arthritis' report (July 2016) and restated in Arthritis Research UK's response to the Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper (February 2017).

separate system operates in Northern Ireland (Access to Work (NI)).³ Applications for AtW can be made on-line or by contacting the scheme.

5. Costs to employers

Access to Work will consider paying grants of up to 100% for:

- self-employed people;
- people who have been working for less than six weeks when they first apply for Access to Work;
- the Mental Health Support Service;
- support workers;
- additional travel to work and travel in work costs;
- communication support at interviews.

In other circumstances, employers are also asked to contribute. When cost sharing between the employer and AtW applies, AtW will refund up to 80% of the approved costs between a threshold and £10,000. Any balance above £10,000 will normally be met by AtW.

The amount of the threshold is determined by the number of employees the employer has:

Number of employees	Amount of threshold
0-49	Nil
50-249	£500
Over 250	£1000

6. How many people with musculoskeletal conditions use Access to Work?

In the 2015/16 financial year 36,470 people used Access to Work scheme. Of these, 8,360 people (23% of the total) used the scheme due to problems with their ‘arms and hands’, ‘legs or feet’ or ‘back and neck’ - descriptions likely to relate to musculoskeletal conditions.⁴ These figures have been similar since 2012/3 (See Annex A for a longer timeline and additional data).

7. Policy commitments on Access to Work

- In the November 2015 Spending Review the Government committed to ‘a real terms increase in spending on Access to Work, providing specialist IT equipment, or support workers, to help a further 25,000 disabled people each year remain in work’.⁵
- In October 2016, Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper stated ‘Last year Access to Work invested around £100 million to support over 36,000 disabled people. Additional funding announced in 2015 will mean that we will be helping over 60,000 people per year by the end of the Parliament. It has also seen a new focus to respond to those with hidden impairments like mental health conditions and learning disabilities.’^{6,ii}
- In response to a Parliamentary Questions on 24 April 2017 Penny Mordaunt, Minister of State (Department for Work and Pensions) stated ‘After the election period we intend to undertake further marketing and promotion of the Access to Work programme. This includes working with stakeholders and partners and employer associations to raise awareness through communications to their customers and ensuring advisers who work with potential customers, including Jobcentre Plus, health professionals and advisory groups, have the information and tools to act as advocates. This includes work with

ii A commitment to increase funding for the Access to Work Mental Health Support Service was also included (Para 77).

organisations which support or have an interest in people with musculoskeletal conditions, such as the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, the British Association of Occupational Therapists, a number of Arthritis support organisations, health professionals, advisory groups and various employer associations'.⁷

8. Additional reviews and views

In 2011, Liz Sayce OBE led an independent review on disability employment support. This reported 'overwhelming support' for Access to Work, however, it dubbed the scheme the 'Government's best-kept secret' noting that 'Access to Work has been rationed by lack of publicity. It is a matter of accident whether an individual or employer has heard of it'.⁸

In 2014, the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee Work held an inquiry on employment support for disabled people, which focused on Access to Work.⁹ The Committee's report highlighted that 'the evidence strongly suggests that Access to Work currently supports only a minority of disabled people who might benefit from the programme' and also that 'a substantial increase in the number of people Access to Work helps is likely to require a broadly commensurate increase in the available funding'.¹⁰ It made a series of detailed recommendations to improve Access to Work.

The Government published a full response to the Committee in September 2015, including the statement that 'our reforms are intended to place the scheme [Access to Work] on a strong financial and operational footing, enabling it to better meet the needs of a wider spectrum of people and employers'.¹¹

9. Case study

"At first my employers thought I was taking the mick with the amount of time I had off work after I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. I got my consultant and nurse specialist to write to my employer explaining my condition. My employer was pretty good after that. I also contacted Access to Work and got equipment to help me including voice-activated software for the computer. My employer also reduced my hours at my request in order to help with fatigue and pain."

Beverley worked in data input.¹²

10. Q&A

- **Qu: Are small employers aware of Access to Work?**
- Ans: The Sayce review (2011) highlighted that Access to Work was under-used by people working in small businesses (who probably need it most), by those with mental health problems and learning disabilities.
- **Qu: Why should the Government provide extra financial support so that people with disability or health problems can work?**
- Ans: Access to Work helps to meet the extra costs faced by people with a disability or health condition. Without this support, people would be less likely to find work, or to continue working.
- **Qu: How many more people with arthritis or musculoskeletal conditions could be supported by Access to work?**

- Ans: We don't know the total number of people with arthritis that could be supported. However, the Government's aim in 2016 was that Access to Work would support over 60,000 people every year, and we also know that since 2007, around a quarter of people using the scheme report problems with their arms, hands, legs, feet, back or neck. On the same proportion that would mean 15,000 people with arthritis could be helped every year – a massive increase on the current figure of 8,360.
- **Qu: Why don't more people with arthritis use Access to Work?**
- Ans: Some people simply don't know about it. For others, it seems likely that they are reluctant to apply – we know that people with arthritis may not consider themselves as disabled or entitled to financial support.
- **Qu: What do people with arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions use Access to Work for?**
- Ans: People with arthritis often experience pain and limits to their mobility and dexterity. They may use Access to Work to pay for travel to work (if they can't use public transport); for modifications to their work station (voice activated software for people who have difficulty using a keyboard); and in some case for people to support them in work (e.g. people to carry heavy or bulky equipment such as camera equipment).
- [From Jan 2017 press briefing on work]:

<p>What if you own a small business? If you only have three staff and one of them can't guarantee whether they'll be able to get out of the bed in the morning, how can you be expected to run your business properly?</p>	<p>We totally understand that this may be difficult for employers running small businesses.</p> <p>However, many people with arthritis have told us that small changes can enable them to continue work. These changes can be such things as flexible working hours, or the ability to work from home.</p> <p>Government schemes like Access to Work, which provide grants and support for adaptations in work and help on travel costs, can make a big difference for employers and employees.</p>
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Annex A: Official Statistics on Access to Work

Data extracted from Department of Work and Pensions (July 2016) Access to Work: Official Statistics.¹³

Executive summary (page 2)

- 36,470 individuals were helped by Access to Work in the 2015/16 financial year (1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016).
- 36,780 individuals were helped by Access to Work in the 2014/15 financial year (1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015).

Table 2 (page 14) – Numbers helped each financial year, by primary medical condition

Primary Medical Condition	Year								
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
(a) Arms or hands	1,510	2,000	2,360	2,180	1,590	1,560	1,720	1,620	1,470
(b) Legs or feet	1,570	2,110	2,570	2,590	2,140	2,320	2,690	2,610	2,610
(c) Back or neck	4,570	5,820	7,070	5,720	3,740	3,530	4,240	4,510	4,280
Total of (a-c)	7,650	9,930	12,000	10,490	7,470	7,410	8,650	8,740	8,360
(d) All conditions	27,720	32,130	37,270	35,810	30,780	31,500	35,560	36,780	36,470
(a-c) as % of all conditions (d)	27.60	30.91	32.20	29.29	24.27	23.52	24.33	23.76	22.92

References

- 1 Access to work information on-line at <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview>
- 2 Liz Sayce (June 2011). Getting in, staying in and getting on. Disability employment support fit for the future.
- 3 Access to Work (NI) information on-line at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work>
- 4 Department of Work and Pensions (July 2016) Access to Work: Official Statistics On-line at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/538443/access-to-work-statistics-march-2016.pdf
- 5 HM Treasury (2015). Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015
- 6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/work-health-and-disability-improving-lives> (Para 159)
- 7 On-line at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2017-04-24/71804/>
- 8 Liz Sayce (June 2011). Getting in, staying in and getting on. Disability employment support fit for the future.
- 9 House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (November 2014). Improving Access to Work for disabled people. On-line at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/access-to-work/>
- 10 House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (November 2014). Improving Access to Work for disabled people. Conclusions and recommendations Paragraph 2.
- 11 House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (September 2015). Improving Access to Work for disabled people: Government response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2014–15.
- 12 Arthritis Research UK (2016). Working with arthritis.
- 13 On-line at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/538443/access-to-work-statistics-march-2016.pdf