# Access to Work – a key scheme, but with room for improvement

## A look at the strengths and problems of the Access to Work scheme in Great Britain for blind and partially sighted people

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"Access to Work is a vital service and must be maintained – it puts individuals on a level playing field with sighted colleagues and allows them the opportunity to progress in an equitable manner."

(RNIB user survey respondent)

However, in a recent survey of blind and partially sighted users of the scheme, nearly four fifths had suggestions for improvements in its practical operation.

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## 1. Key messages and main recommendations

### Key messages

1.1 Only one in four registered blind or partially sighted people of working age is in paid employment, and this number is falling. This figure is even worse for people who are completely blind. Only around one in 10 people with poor functional vision is in paid employment [1].

1.2 RNIB welcomes the Government’s commitment to tackle the 'disability employment gap', that is, the difference between disabled people in work (48 per cent) and the general population (80 per cent). However, the employment gap for registered blind and partially sighted people is double that for people with other disabilities, and this gap is widening [1].

1.3 Access to Work (ATW) is an important scheme that can play a key role in fulfilling the Government’s pledge to halve the disability employment gap. At a time when Ministers have said that the scheme is set to be expanded, we thought it timely to bring together some of our recent survey findings.

1.4 Research shows that ATW is very much valued by blind and partially sighted people, many of whom say they would not be in work without it [2]. Nevertheless, they tell us that there are many practical problems in the operation of the scheme and inconsistencies in processes and outcomes. These will need to be addressed if ATW is to fulfil its potential.

1.5 Many blind and partially sighted people experience significant challenges in obtaining the equipment and support they need to start and retain employment. ATW call centre advisors appear ill-equipped to deal with sight-loss specific enquiries, and often do not refer blind and partially sighted customers to specialist advice or support when required.

1.6 There can be long delays between applying for ATW and the purchase or provision of equipment. With a new job, this can prevent people from starting work, and is frustrating for employers who want a new recruit to start as soon as possible.

1.7 In spite of support workers being one of the main enablers for disabled people in the workplace, and accounting for the biggest proportion of the ATW budget, little is provided in the way of support or advice to help applicants or employers recruit support workers. This needs to change.

1.8 The Government’s stated intention to expand ATW is very welcome, but increased numbers must be matched by correspondingly increased resources, so as not to exert downward pressure on individual awards, thereby limiting their usefulness.

1.9 RNIB would like to see a stakeholder forum established (along the lines of those which operate in the benefits field - for example, the Operational Stakeholder Engagement Forum) to facilitate a detailed and ongoing dialogue that can serve to improve the practical operation of the scheme. Membership of such a forum on the DWP side should reflect the diverse aspects of ATW operation, while that on the wider stakeholder side should represent a range of disabilities.

### Main recommendations

1.10 The Government intends to increase the numbers supported by ATW. It is essential that the **resources available** keep pace, or there will be downward pressure on individual awards.

1.11 Processes and procedures for **applying for ATW** should be clear, well-publicised and fully accessible, facilitated by appropriately trained staff; and the end-to-end process of application, assessment and design and implementation of a support package should be speeded up.

1.12. **Assessments for ATW** should be timely, holistic, and conducted by assessors with appropriate specialist knowledge and training – preferably holding or working towards mandatory qualifications related to assessment provision. Applicants should be informed as to what to expect from a work-based assessment commissioned by ATW, and feedback should be systematically collected from employees and employers on the quality of the assessment.

1.13 Clients’ **equipment needs** should be reviewed periodically and appropriate adjustments made promptly.

1.14 The central role of **support with travel**, to and within work, should be recognised and assessments should reflect individual circumstances.

1.15 There should be choice and flexibility in how the hours for a **support worker** are allocated and advice and assistance should be offered to help ATW applicants or employers recruit support workers.

1.16 ATW **awards** should be appropriate, adequate, reliable and with readily available contacts to sort out any problems.

1.17 The role of ATW in supporting **self-employment** should be revisited, to see if the right balance has been achieved between opening up opportunities and realistic assessment of a business’s prospects.

1.18 Short-term and temporary employment, work as a public representative and volunteering should all be **brought within the scope** of ATW.

1.19 A **regular stakeholder forum** should be established, to discuss and seek to resolve issues arising from the practical operation of ATW.

## 2. Introduction

2.1 This report presents the findings of a recent survey of blind and partially sighted people about Access to Work (ATW), carried out by RNIB in 2016. It brings together these findings with other evidence published by the Learning and Work Institute (LWI), Wales Council for the Blind (WCB) and RNIB. It presents a series of recommendations to improve the ATW scheme for blind and partially sighted people of working age.

2.2 Our main recommendations are summarised in section 1. This report describes the research that gave rise to them. Of the several studies informing this report, their findings are strikingly consistent. Detailed recommendations are contained in section 9.

### Overview

2.3 ATW provides practical and financial support for blind and partially sighted people in work (including self-employment) and those starting a new job. It also covers work experience placements and apprenticeships.

2.4 RNIB strongly supports the scheme, and recognises its value in enabling blind and partially sighted people of working age to become economically active and independent.

2.5 However, many blind and partially sighted people experience significant challenges in obtaining the equipment and support they need to start and retain employment. A new cap on the amount payable is also causing concern, when what is needed is a more ambitious approach to investing in the scheme.

### What we know

2.6 In order to find out the views of blind and partially sighted people, RNIB launched an online survey in September 2015, to gather the experiences of blind and partially sighted ATW applicants. The results of that survey are published here in section 4.

2.7 We also commissioned the LWI (at the time, the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion) to carry out a cost benefit analysis of the scheme, which demonstrated that the overall benefits of the ATW scheme to society clearly outweigh its costs [2].

2.8 In 2016, WCB, in collaboration with RNIB, published a report which found that that blind and partially sighted people in Wales face many challenges getting the support they need from the ATW scheme [3].

2.9 In 2015, RNIB carried out a survey called My Voice [4]. It provides a unique insight into the realities of life as a blind or partially sighted person in the UK today, and is the only survey of its kind. The findings are based on telephone interviews with over 1,200 participants from across the UK.

2.10 This report therefore seeks to draw together the evidence from our own ATW survey data, along with the findings of My Voice, the LWI report and the WCB report, to present a set of key recommendations for improving the scheme. It is hoped that the government will accept these recommendations, enabling many more blind and partially sighted people to benefit from the scheme, and thereby support the objective of halving the disability employment gap.

2.11 An earlier version of this report was sent initially to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for consideration and comment, before being shared more widely as part of the ongoing debate around the future of ATW. The first version (July 2016) fed into our periodic dialogue with DWP officials, but this was at a fairly general level and did not get to grips with the detail of our recommendations (see section 9) – hence our proposal for a regular stakeholder forum.

### What's happening now?

2.12 ATW provides support to around 5,000 people per year whose primary medical condition is classified as "difficulty with seeing". The scheme can be very effective at supporting blind and partially sighted people into work and to retain employment.

2.13 Yet disabled people and employers are often unaware of ATW, suggesting shortcomings in the scheme's promotion. This not only applies to the existence of the scheme, but also an understanding of what it can cover – for example, the fact that ATW can pay for transport to, from and within work may not always be understood. This could prevent some potential users from applying, even though they meet all the criteria and could use ATW to enable them to meet the transport needs of a job.

2.14 RNIB regularly receives reports from blind and partially sighted people pointing to problems with the assessment process and this is borne out by the evidence presented in this report.

2.15 ATW call centre advisers often appear ill-equipped to deal with disability-specific enquiries and frequently do not refer enquirers to specialist advice or support when required.

2.16 There can be long delays between applying for ATW and the purchase or provision of equipment. With a new job, this can prevent people from starting work and is frustrating for employers who want a new recruit to start as soon as possible.

2.17 Ambiguity and confusion exist around who the equipment grant is for - the applicant or the employer. Employees can feel excluded when equipment is purchased, as they often do not see a full copy of the assessment report and the employer is the recipient of the award. Once purchased, employers and employees are often unclear on ownership. We believe that equipment provided should unambiguously belong to the employee, being thus transferable to another employer if a person changes jobs.

2.18 We also believe that ATW should be available to disabled people in volunteering roles, as current and relevant work experience is one of the key factors in helping to secure employment for blind and partially sighted people.

2.19 Support with travel to and within work is an important factor in enabling blind and partially sighted people to take up employment and much of our evidence and some of our recommendations relate to this aspect of the scheme.

2.20 In spite of support workers being one of the main enablers for disabled people in the workplace, and accounting for the biggest proportion of the ATW budget, little is provided in the way of support or advice to help applicants or employers recruit support workers. This needs to change – especially given that, where the ATW user (rather than their employer or an agency) employs the support worker, legal responsibilities can be complex and onerous, with potentially serious consequences if things go wrong. High-quality advice and support is needed.

2.21 In October 2015, a new rationing measure was introduced: a cap at £40,800 per person per year – 1.5 times the mean average salary. For awards made or reviewed from 1 April 2016, this has been raised to £41,400. The cap applies to new awards (deferred until April 2018 for existing awards above cap level). It affects relatively few blind and partially sighted people, but still sits uneasily alongside the Government’s commitment to tackle the disability employment gap. We support those disability organisations calling for the cap on individual awards to be removed. If it stays, it should at the very least continue to be uprated annually, in line with movement in average earnings.

2.22 These and a number of further recommendations emerge from the evidence presented in this report. We hope that they will meet with a receptive response from Government.

2.23 The 2015 Conservative Manifesto, referring to disabled people, said:

“....the jobless rate for this group remains too high and, as part of our objective to achieve full employment, we will aim to halve the disability employment gap: we will transform policy, practice and public attitudes, so that hundreds of thousands more disabled people who can and want to be in work find employment”.

2.24 This is an ambitious statement and ATW should be part of achieving it.

2.25 As noted above, RNIB recently commissioned the (then) Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion to carry out a cost benefit analysis of ATW. The research identified the extent to which money invested by the Government in providing ATW support for blind and partially sighted people, and for disabled people in general, benefits the wider economy [2]. We summarise these findings in section 3 below.

2.26 The ATW scheme does not carry an open-ended commitment fully to meet demand. It operates within a financial envelope (although one that is theoretically flexible in response to demand). The Government says it wants to increase the numbers supported by ATW. It is essential that the resources available keep pace, or there will be downward pressure on individual awards.

2.27 We referred above to some of the criticisms that led us to our recommendations for improvement. On the other hand, some respondents had entirely positive experiences. But a very frequent response was strong endorsement of ATW combined with experience of practical difficulties and suggestions for improvement. In other words, this is a highly valued and important scheme, with a number of practical problems that need fixing.

## 3. The cost-benefit analysis

3.1 In 2015, RNIB commissioned the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion (now the Learning and Work Institute) to carry out a cost benefit analysis of the ATW scheme [2]. Specifically, the research identified the extent to which money invested by the Government in providing ATW support for blind and partially sighted people, and disabled people in general, benefits the wider economy. The findings are based on data and financial figures consistent with the government's own published information.

3.2 The report shows that the overall benefits of the ATW scheme to society clearly outweigh its costs [2].

3.3 Key findings include:

* The overall benefits of ATW to society outweigh its costs by a considerable margin, so ATW is a beneficial form of public spending.
* In the year 2013-14, ATW supported 35,450 people with disabilities. 14 per cent (5,120) of users were blind or partially sighted.
* Potential benefits for participants from ATW include reduced sickness, improved attendance, retained employment, development of working skills, increased income and better health and wellbeing.
* Gains for employers from ATW consist of improved productivity, lower employee turnover, a better understanding of the needs of disabled staff members and the increased wellbeing of staff.

3.4 A review of the literature also found that:

* Travel to work provides invaluable support to users, with both employers and employees stating that the travel to work strand is very necessary for the user to continue working. Research has found that travel to work would be the type of support least likely to continue without public funding.
* Support workers were equally valued by users and employers, both believing that they provided enormous value within the workplace.
* Aids and equipment were also viewed as important methods of support which contribute to improved performance at work.
* Alterations to premises were helpful in making the workplace more accessible for those with disabilities. However, they were often viewed as more of a luxury than a necessity, with both users and employers indicating that their loss would not lead users to not be in work.

### Findings in more detail

3.5 The review of the literature demonstrated that blind and partially sighted individuals, and indeed people with disabilities more generally, are far less likely to be in work than the general population.

3.6 Blind and partially sighted people face a whole range of barriers to work, not just their visual impairment (and any additional disabilities) but also anxiety and confidence, transport issues, employer attitudes and the need for specialist support.

3.7 ATW is designed to address at least some of these barriers. Previous evaluations provide evidence of a range of benefits from ATW to both disabled workers and employers.

3.8 The unit costs of ATW, whether per person helped, per person benefiting, or per award, vary by support received. For blind and partially sighted people, support workers and travel to work are the categories of support with the highest unit costs. (For medical conditions overall, support workers and adaptations to premises are the categories with the highest unit costs).

3.9 ATW unit costs also vary by medical condition, being highest for people with a hearing impairment. Unit costs for blind and partially sighted people and those with cerebral palsy are also relatively high.

3.10 The cost benefit analysis compares the cost of the ATW programme, and that part which assists blind and partially sighted people, against the estimated employment and non-employment benefits that the programme generates. Some of these benefits would have occurred in the absence of the ATW support – this is known as deadweight and comes in two forms: employment deadweight, where the individual assisted would have been in work without the ATW support; and financial deadweight where the support would have been funded by employers or users themselves. By allowing for these two types of deadweight, the researchers can estimate the net employment impacts of ATW.

3.11 The monetary value of these employment benefits is estimated using assumptions for hourly pay and working hours. Non-employment wellbeing benefits are estimated using the Manchester New Economy model. The study estimates on the basis of the available evidence that the overall benefits of ATW to society outweigh its costs by a considerable margin, with ratios of these benefits to the costs of 3.86 for ATW as a whole and 2.48 for that part of the programme that assists blind and partially sighted individuals. This demonstrates that ATW is a beneficial form of public spending.

3.12 The study also calculated the fiscal impact of ATW comparing the costs of the programme against the estimated fiscal flow backs to the public purse in terms of additional tax revenues and reduced benefit expenditure. For ATW as a whole, over the period 2011-12 to 2013-14, the programme is estimated to have generated on average £1.14 in fiscal flow backs per £1 spent on the programme. The equivalent figure for that part of the programme assisting blind and partially sighted individuals is £0.72. It should be stressed that these narrow fiscal impact calculations are not the correct basis on which to determine whether a public programme represents good value for money. The basis for that decision is our wider cost benefit analysis figures which take account of all potential benefits to society against the programme’s costs.

### The number of ATW awards for blind and partially sighted people compared with other disabilities

3.13 DWP statistics cited in the study show that in the year 2013-14, ATW supported 35,450 people with disabilities. The programme was mainly utilised by people with sensory or physical difficulties. Individuals with hearing loss made up the largest single issue group of users, accounting for 16 per cent of the caseload (5,620) while 14 per cent of users were blind or partially sighted (5,120).

3.14 Some 24 per cent of ATW users had physical problems involving their arms, hands, legs, feet, back or neck (8,260). 12 per cent had dyslexia (4,270), while 6 per cent had progressive illnesses and a further 5 per cent had learning difficulties. 4 per cent of users had mental health conditions and 3 per cent had epilepsy. The remaining 16 per cent of users had a variety of other medical conditions which each accounted for 1 per cent or less of total users.

3.15 The most common types of support provided by ATW overall were support workers (14,850), closely followed by travel to work (13,120) and aids and equipment (5,470). ATW funds were also available for adaptations to vehicles (200) and work premises (40).

### Unit cost estimates for blind and partially sighted people

3.16 For blind and partially sighted people, provision of a support worker is by some margin the category of support with the highest unit costs, at around £10,000 per annum for the three financial years 2011-12 to 2013-14. Next most costly in these three financial years are travel to work support at around £4,000 per person helped; and special aids and equipment at around £3,000 per person helped. The overall unit costs across all types of support for blind and partially sighted individuals helped during this period are around £4,500 for 2011-12 to 2013-14.

**Total amount of awards by element type granted during 2013/14 to individuals whose primary medical condition is "difficulty in seeing":**

Figures are for Great Britain

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Element Type** | **Total cost of awards (£)** |
| Adaptation to premises | 300 |
| Adaptation to vehicles | 300 |
| Communication support at interview | 0 |
| Miscellaneous | 10,200 |
| Miscellaneous with cost share | 4,600 |
| Travel in work | 463,400 |
| Special aids and equipment | 1,890,100 |
| Support worker | 11,647,800 |
| Travel to work | 8,889,900 |
| ATW assessment | 295,200 |
| **Total** | **23,201,600** |

### To conclude

3.17 Blind and partially sighted people of working age, disabled workers in general, employers and society at large stand to gain much from the ATW scheme.

3.18 We go on now to consider the experiences of blind and partially sighted ATW users, and how the practical operation of the scheme might be improved.

## 4. The ATW users’ survey

4.1 In September 2015, RNIB launched an online survey seeking to gather the experiences of blind and partially sighted ATW applicants. Between September and Christmas (when the survey closed) we received 155 responses.

4.2 Of these respondents, 110 (71 per cent) were blind (severely sight impaired) and 45 (29 per cent) were partially sighted (sight impaired).

4.3 Just over a fifth of our respondents had other disabilities in addition to visual impairment. (Proportions and percentages from this point onwards are of those answering a particular question.)

4.4 Most of our respondents (72 per cent) were aged between 31-60, with the largest group (32 per cent) aged 41-50. There was also a substantial group (23 per cent) aged 18-30, but only a few respondents (5 per cent) aged over 60.

4.5 Regarding gender, 60 per cent of our respondents were female and 40 per cent male.

4.6 There was a good geographical spread, with 20 or more respondents from each of London, South East England and the West Midlands; and over 10 from each of the East, North West and South West of England, and Scotland. The rest were from the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, North East England and Wales.

4.7 Regarding employment status, 84 per cent of respondents were employed, 13 per cent self-employed and the remainder not employed (but had been ATW users).

4.8 The range of occupations was considerable. There were advice workers, NHS staff, sales representatives, nursery nurses, teachers, trainers, people working in assistive technology, a mechanical engineer, a Government scientist and a variety of management, clerical and administrative roles – there was even an ATW assessor.

4.9 We asked respondents how they had found out about ATW. There was a strong tendency for their having been informed by RNIB or another organisation, national or local, in the visual impairment field – unsurprisingly, as the very fact that they were involved in the survey indicates a connection with this network. Other sources mentioned included employers, jobcentres, colleges, the internet and friends and family.

4.10 Just over two thirds of our respondents had been using ATW for more than four years.

4.11 Most respondents (70 per cent) were receiving regular ATW support. Of the rest, the main reason given for not receiving regular support was that it was a one-off award (which would often be for assistive technology).

4.12 Of those respondents receiving regular ATW support, the great majority of awards (90 per cent) ranged between a monthly value of £100 and £3,400. The largest group (35 per cent) fell into the £100 to £500 range, with 28 per cent having an award above £1,000 but only one case with a monthly value that would have been capped under the new rules.

4.13 We asked respondents **what their ATW award paid for**. Easily the largest specific categories were:

* support workers (49 per cent)
* travel to work (56 per cent)
* travel within work (19 per cent).

4.14 Other continuous or regular costs, including special aids or equipment (grouped together as a single category) scored 24 per cent.

4.15 Responses to the question, **What do you see as the main advantages of ATW?** strongly reflected the importance of the scheme in helping blind and partially sighted people to enter and stay in work:

“I get support with taxi fares to and from work. I could not have taken this job without that as it is not accessible on public transport. I have also received funding for accessible technology and software scripting. I don't think my employer could have covered the costs of this”.

“Without the support I receive from ATW, it would not be possible for me to work so I can in turn contribute back to society”.

“It covers the cost of adapting equipment in order to do a job, a cost most employers are put off by [when considering] employing a disabled person”.

“Keeping my job as a teacher! It enabled me to be assessed by an expert so that I could have the best equipment to enable me to continue to do my job and the funding was there to help my employer”.

“It allows me to try to earn a living and, being self-employed, I am able to start earning money without having someone to employ me first”.

“They support with taxi costs when public transport isn't viable, they fund vital equipment such as screen readers and refreshable Braille displays which are often very expensive. The scheme is vital for me to be able to do my job”.

4.16 We asked our respondents how easy or difficult they found it to apply for ATW support.

4.17 There was a spread of experiences, with around two fifths finding the process difficult or very difficult and the rest easy, very easy or neither easy nor difficult.

4.18 Positive comments included:

“I have had no problems so far and all my dealings with ATW have been conducted very well”.

“When I first applied, ATW would not do anything by e-mail which was my best form of communication. This has now changed and they are much more open to feedback”.

“I needed support to apply but the application was easy”.

4.19 Conversely, comments from those who found it difficult or very difficult included:

“The process of phoning to make the initial application is straightforward but completing the forms over the phone with their employee and then having it assessed by their assessor is fraught with stress. Although I did my best to explain the help I was asking for and why, the assessor clearly had no specialist training or particular insight into the everyday challenges of being visually impaired”.

“I had a start date and I was not allowed to apply because I was told I had to apply when I was in work. This would have been no use to me because it takes weeks for ATW claims to be set up”.

“Over the last couple of years it has changed a lot and much harder – getting accessible forms, trying to telephone them, now only speaking to a call centre”.

“ATW is inherently inefficient and inaccessible. When you ring them up to create a claim for anything, whether it’s travel to work or accessible equipment, you are immediately told that someone will ring you back within five to seven working days and this often doesn’t happen. To get anything moving you need to ring them up every day and be persistent”.

“Refusal by DWP to provide anything in Braille”.

“Sometimes people can't find a fixed term or permanent position and temporary work is used to fill this gap. However, some temp jobs can be a week or two weeks and Access to Work will not allow candidates to use ATW for short-term contracts. This is barrier to employment for blind and partially sighted people”.

4.20 Delays, inaccessible documentation and lack of understanding of visual impairment were all mentioned frequently. There also seemed to be a frequent perception that applying for ATW was now more problematic than it once was, often because of the call centre system:

“It used to be a really straightforward process until my most recent renewal. I used to have the contact details of a designated member of staff but all that has changed. I now need to call a national customer services line and I do not have the contact details of a designated worker any more. This does cause problems when I just need to ask a simple question as the people on the end of the helpline can only answer basic questions. I also used to have the telephone number of the finance department in case support worker costs were taking a long time to be paid, but again, this has now stopped and I have to phone the helpline. Everything about the process is more difficult than it used to be”.

So clearly experiences varied greatly.

4.21 As regards the initial application, in September 2016 the DWP launched an online digital application service, with the intention of creating a faster and more efficient process. This is in its early stages, but we shall follow its progress with great interest.

4.22 As regards understanding of visual impairment, ATW adviser teams have recently moved away from a geographical model and have been re-grouped into “disability focus teams”, one of which is a specialist visual impairment team. According to DWP information on the on the application process, once the ATW application has been made, the case should be allocated to an adviser in the relevant disability focus team. However, a number of blind and partially sighted applicants have told us that, in their experience, this does not happen. So we are unclear as to whether this procedure is being phased in gradually and if so, what is the timetable and current geographical spread.

4.23 We also asked **how easy or difficult was the assessment process**?

4.24 This time, around 30 per cent found the process difficult or very difficult and the rest easy, very easy or neither easy nor difficult.

4.25 Positive comments included:

“Very good service from ATW”.

“My assessors were very good and if anything offered more equipment than I needed”.

“This was a very straightforward process and the equipment arrived promptly”.

4.26 Comments from those who found it difficult or very difficult included:

“They ask for up-to-date evidence which has already been provided to them. They re-assess you yearly, but clearly with the attempt to reduce the support they give you rather than increasing it”.

“There were numerous phone calls and no one seemed to know about the case all the way through”.

“The assessment process took a couple of months, in spite of me starting work. This caused difficulty with my employer. I was requested to have a one-to-one assessment to discuss the best equipment for my situation. This was not necessary as I already knew what equipment I would need and this appeared to take additional time for no benefit”.

“Completely no understanding of deafblind people – given unsuitable equipment, arguments about interpreters....” (See also ref. 5.)

“They didn't understand my eye condition. They were happy to sign off on getting me equipment, which they felt would help. But they challenged me frequently about travel – they told me to catch a bus”.

“The assessment process used to be relatively painless, but in the last few years it has become very stressful and frustrating. You get different outcomes for the same support request, depending on which adviser takes your case. They now keep telling you how you're using taxpayers' money”.

4.27 Delays and lack of understanding of visual impairment were again mentioned frequently. And again, there was often a perception that ATW was more problematic than it used to be, including a sense that money was being spent more reluctantly.

4.28 An individual ATW user could have mixed experiences:

“The first assessor I had was awful – really rude, didn't appreciate that a larger monitor would be better for my sight condition. The second assessor was lovely and had the same vision as me. The third assessor was lovely too, but said that my employer had to maintain upkeep of the equipment. Trying to get anything and any help out of an employer is awful. Our kit should also be ours for when we move jobs – especially with the new cap being brought in”.

4.29 Respondents were asked **if their ATW support had changed over time**.

4.30 This produced a mixed picture. Just over half had experienced changes and just under half had not.

4.31 Changes were for a variety of reasons. Some simply reflected changing need due to changing circumstances, such as deteriorating sight, or a change of job.

4.32 However, in other cases, a support package had been reduced on review without any apparent reduction in need. For example:

“They have refused to pay for a support worker even though they did so at the start”.

“A year ago, my ATW support was reduced from full-time to four days, although my responsibilities and workload had not altered. If anything the workload had gradually increased over the six years I have been doing this job. The hours were not reinstated in spite of going to appeal.” [That is, requesting a reconsideration, which users sometimes refer to as an appeal. Unlike social security benefits, ATW does not have a formal appeal process.]

“I have had the hours for driver support reduced from about six or seven per week, eight or so years ago, down to five and now four.... it feels as if advisers are more restricted on budget and are asking more questions about how much support you really need and can it be reduced further”.

“Hours of support worker [are to] be dramatically cut. Some tech suggestions made instead, not all beneficial”.

“No longer pay for transport to work”.

4.33 Reduction of support without a corresponding lessening of need is something which we feel should be watched carefully as the numbers supported by ATW increase. Greater numbers, even if accompanied by increased funding overall, could result in stretched finances that impact to the detriment of individual users. We very much welcome increased numbers, but the finance must keep pace.

4.34 Those respondents whose award had been reviewed one or more times were asked: **if your ATW has been reviewed one or more times, would you like to make any comments about this process?**

4.35 Comments made included both positive and negative perceptions (although the latter were markedly more frequent):

“A very easy process and they are always happy to discuss issues I'm having in the workplace and to see and explore whether ATW may be able to provide any further assistance”.

“There were no real problems with the re-assessment”.

“That was difficult. I was made to feel as though I was trying to claim something I shouldn't have when all I want to do is earn a living”.

“Each time they consider it to be a new claim which makes it extremely protracted. I have been visually impaired for 14 years and have used ATW for this time; why do I have to go through my sight loss details every time? My condition is exactly the same as when I informed them 14 years ago”.

“It has got harder and harder and the same questions which I have been answering for over 20 years”.

4.36 Repeat requests for information already held by ATW were mentioned several times.

4.37 Again, some respondents had experienced both positive and negative aspects of the process:

“Generally, the process is necessary. It is a chance to work out whether any new support is necessary and check the support in place is still what is required. I have largely self-reviewed or gone through the various strands of my support with somebody by phone and signed the resulting letter. The only problem is that it adds another layer of admin. which no other self-employed person has to complete and can get in the way of just trying to gain more work”.

4.38 We asked our respondents if they had any **experience of transferring their ATW support package between jobs**.

4.39 Almost a third of them had done so and there had been a wide range of experiences, the word “seamless” occurring more than once, but others reporting a disjointed and stressful process:

“This was pretty seamless as most of my details were on their system, so I just had to decide how many hours I needed, supply my job description and had another assessment”.

“I have moved to a number of different roles and have always found this a relatively straightforward process. I have only been required to complete a form detailing the changes etc. This is crucial, as in my line of work it is necessary to move regularly to new roles to gain experience and progression. ATW gives the flexibility to do so, which has resulted in my quickly gaining the experience I need to advance my career”.

“In my experience every time I have had a new job this has triggered a completely new ATW application – transfer of existing support never seemed to be an option”.

“It is like you have never claimed before, starting from scratch with no recognition of previous applications”.

“It couldn't be done. I ended up having new assessments done. Even my travel to work couldn't be changed over. It then took five months to get my support in place for my new job”.

4.40 Clearly, there is scope here for best practice to be extended more widely.

4.41 We asked our respondents, **What would be the effect on you, and your employment, if you did not have your ATW award? Or if it was a smaller amount?**

4.42 As we might have expected, a powerful and recurrent theme was the crucial role of ATW in helping blind and partially sighted people to remain in work:

“I wouldn't be able to work as I couldn't afford the transport costs to my work place”.

“I couldn't work. I'd be on benefits and very depressed. I love working. I love my job”.

“My award was reduced from full-time support to four days a week. If support was removed I would be unable to do my job and therefore unemployed (along with my support worker)”.

“The equipment I have been awarded by ATW is invaluable. I would not be able to work without it”.

“I would not be able to afford the taxi fares to get me into work. I would therefore lose my job, and have to resort to claiming Employment and Support Allowance and Housing Benefit for fear of being left homeless. The equipment ATW has paid for is vital for me to complete my job. Without it, I would need more one-to-one assistance”.

“I could not have returned to work without the grant. My then employer was reluctant to support me following my sight loss as he felt it was too difficult. He would not have met the cost of the equipment and I would most likely have lost my job”.

“I couldn't do my job because without the support worker, I cannot use the tools that cannot be made accessible. I would also not be able to afford buying the expensive equipment and configuration costs it takes to have the electronic Braille and screen reader”.

“My employer would struggle to cover the costs of employing me, particularly with travel to work and travel in work. I feel if it was taken away or reduced I would at best have my working hours reduced, or at worst would lose my job altogether”.

“My business would have to be wound up”.

And so on, with over 100 comments along these lines.

4.43 We asked our respondents if they had any **suggestions for improving ATW**.

4.44 There was no shortage of ideas, 119 of them replying that they did indeed have suggestions. There were certain recurrent themes:

Accessible communications –

“They insist in using the post to send out letters rather than e-mail. They insist that declaration forms should be by post. There is no reason why they can't be scanned or faxed these days, or e-mailed”.

“The forms for reclaiming expenses are PDF and so not accessible”.

“It is difficult to use ATW forms, and I would find it easier to complete electronically”.

“ATW should communicate by email or other accessible means”.

“The travel to work claim form is not accessible and has to be posted – a web-based alternative or at least the possibility to submit a claim by e-mail would be great”.

The need generally to speed things up –

“I feel that time is important – it seems to take an age for things to be sorted and this impacts on my job”.

“I think the process of reimbursement for travel takes a lot longer than ideal - It can take almost a month for payment to be made”.

“Braille correspondence which comes quickly, including notifications of payments which are made to my bank account. Quick response to phone calls, that is not days or weeks”.

“Delays in handling applications could be improved. Obviously things have to be checked and verified, but waiting weeks stretching into months is not really acceptable”.

“On at least four occasions in the last year, my taxi company has not been paid, sometimes for up to four months, and they have told me that they will suspend my account unless payment is received promptly”.

“The system for making travel claims is ridiculous. I take taxis off the rank as this is the quickest and easiest way for me. I then have to send in all the receipts, fully itemised. It takes me about two hours every month to put this together. I don't see why I can't just have a budget as for other aspects of social care”.

The unpopularity of call centres and preference for named advisers –

“I always have to explain myself multiple times because I end up speaking to multiple call centres”.

“A named permanent adviser so that they are aware of your case and situation. This might help with the delays experienced. A system of local contacts would be particularly helpful such as through the jobcentre”.

“Please make the administration and calls more interconnected and if possible assign the claimant one contact in the process”.

“It would be good if only one person was in charge of your application from start to finish”.

“Get rid of the call centre idea. When you ring up you should speak to an ATW person”.

The lack of specialist knowledge –

“The assessor needs more expert insight into the conditions they are assessing and how these affect the applicant”.

“Training in the difficulties faced by people with various disabilities in how they impact on work. Training in the assistive technology available so that advisers have greater understanding of the difference it can make to being able to do a job but also an understanding of its limitations: it does not replace a pair of eyes in the office!”

“A bit more awareness of disabilities for the advisers would be a good thing, so they have a bit more of an understanding of people with a number of disabilities.... In terms of a visual impairment, it's important for them to know that this condition is on a spectrum, and what helps one person with a sight loss in a working environment, may not help someone else, so it's important they aware of this situation”.

“They should have deafblind awareness training”.

The need for better publicity –

“ATW need to promote their service better to employers – there are still a lot of employers who have no idea this support exists and if they did they may be more inclined to recruit disabled members of staff”.

“Greater awareness and promotion of the scheme amongst employers and the public. And key decision makers such as MPs”.

“Advertise it more widely so employers and disabled people know about it. Tell disabled children about it when in school”.

The perception that there is downward pressure on awards –

“Stop reviewing applicants with degenerative conditions with a view to reducing their support”.

“It should be a demand led service, with a budget expanded to accommodate growing numbers of disabled people using the scheme”.

“More empathy and less having the client feeling that it's more about them saving cash”.

Inconsistency –

“Some folk having an awful experience while others almost getting more than they needed, it's crucial to provide a consistent service from area to area, as this would be fairer for all”.

“I found that sometimes I was given the wrong information but didn't know it was the wrong information at the time and later there was conflicting information between different people I spoke to”.

“There has to be a better and more consistent way which doesn't depend on who you get as an adviser”.

“Consistent – I want to know where I stand and what to expect”.

Portability –

“Support packages should be portable”.

“Allowing equipment to be transferable if suitable for a new role. This will surely save thousands of pounds”.

“The basic equipment should stay with the person when they change jobs. That would save a lot of time and delays”.

“I am left without any doubt that it is near impossible for someone with a visual impairment to change jobs without undergoing a great deal of stress whilst they undergo this process and spend months feeling insecure about keeping their job and feeling that they are not able to successfully do their job as they are left helpless without support for months on end”.

The scope of ATW –

“ATW should be extended to short term contracts and make it easier to transfer if a person had to change between temp jobs if they haven't been able to find a fixed term or permanent one”.

“It is not clear whether ATW is available to elected representatives, Councillors, Assembly Members, MPs, MSPs and MEPs. Clarification and a clear policy on this would be good”.

“Make it available for [all] part-time jobs”.

“I'd like to see it extended to cover structured volunteering roles”.

Appropriately respectful treatment –

“Not feeling like you are a charity case”.

“Ensure that those dealing with enquiries are patient and listen to what they are being told about equipment and technology that might make a difference in the workplace”.

“Make sure the people who are talking you through your application are polite and respectful. Not always the case”.

“Please treat us with a bit more respect. We are not trying to take anything that's not ours. We simply want to earn a living and make a contribution to society”.

4.45 These themes and suggestions are reflected in our list of recommendations set out broadly in section 1 above and in detail in section 9 below.

## 5. ATW in Wales

(We are grateful to Wales Council of the Blind for writing the source report and recommendations on which this section is based and for their support in collating the views of blind and partially sighted people in Wales.)

5.1 There are around 106,000 blind and partially sighted people in Wales.

5.2 Across the UK, almost three quarters of working age blind and partially sighted people are not in work and there is no reason to suppose that figure is any better in Wales. ATW is potentially an important part of the solution.

5.3 In 2015, it came to the attention of RNIB Cymru and Wales Council of the Blind (WCB) that blind and partially sighted people who were receiving support through ATW were having difficulties – in applying, with their assessment or in the level of support they were assessed to be entitled to.

5.4 A focus group was held by RNIB Cymru and WCB following concerns raised at the Wales Vision Forum (a visual impairment sector discussion and planning group) and by individuals who provided additional case studies. Further groups were convened with the assistance of Sight Cymru (June 2015), Musicians in Focus (August 2015) and WCB’s Regional Groups (throughout 2015).

5.5 Many ATW recipients reported that they had experienced difficulties with the system, citing issues with assessors and people they spoke to within the contact centres who were not only uninterested, but also unaware of the need to provide information in an accessible format, or of the right to privacy (asking the client to find somebody to help them fill out forms).

5.6 Prior to the restructuring of ATW it was considered by blind and partially sighted people in Wales and the organisations that serve them to be a very good service. It was felt that the Wales-based advisers had a deep knowledge and understanding of sight conditions as well as the challenges of the local transport infrastructure and what that means to blind and partially sighted people. Now, however, feedback suggests a very different service. ATW users with a visual impairment are reporting inconsistency, complexity, lack of information and guidance and regret at losing the single named adviser.

5.7 There seems to have been a change in the manner in which clients are being treated. Within the sessions, clients related stories of having been told how much an assessment cost and asked whether or not they thought they needed one. This sort of behaviour and lack of awareness seems to be widespread within the system and too often means that those attempting to access it are left feeling embarrassed and a burden.

5.8 The knowledge required by assessors to ensure that the client has the right support and access to the best technology for their condition seems to be lacking and there is little awareness of the geography of Wales, required when understanding how someone will travel to work.

5.9 Five themes came out of the focus groups, concerning: contact with clients; information; adviser skills and knowledge; assessments; and payments, reviews and personalised budgets.

### Contact with clients

5.10 Concerns here are three-fold: information about ATW and available support; information provided to the client in accessible formats; and the move to online digital information.

5.11 In the ATW customer journey, all clients contact the call centre in the first instance. A series of screening questions are asked to ascertain need and, if eligible, they are told that they will be assigned an adviser, who will then contact the client. The adviser may offer a technical assessment as well as setting up a personalised budget for support.

5.12 Experiences of first contact with ATW have been variable and there is a perceived lack of consistency, as clients find they are not dealing with the same adviser each time and are unable to build up a rapport and understanding of their disability.

5.13 Clients are also reporting inflexibility around contact arrangements:

“Miss two calls and have to start new claim – the phone calls were at inappropriate times. If I was able to choose the times myself it would have been a lot better”.

5.14 There are suggestions that the pervasive attitude reflects “efficiency” and “cost effectiveness” rather more than customer focus.

### Information

5.15 People are reporting that it is difficult to find clear, concise guidance and the lack of clarity can put people off the application process. This is disempowering:

“I wasn’t even told there was such a thing [as a technical assessment] even though I knew my colleague had had one”.

“There needs to be an easier process to make applications for ATW. More transparency on the services and support they can provide, to assist people to know what to ask for”.

5.16 Applicants are also finding that they increasingly need third party intervention to support them through the assessment and claim processes:

“It’s so soul-destroying having to beg for something that you shouldn’t be begging for. I want to work, but I can’t get this service without help from an advocate”.

5.17 Service providers have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments to goods and services to make them accessible to disabled people. In the case of blind and partially sighted people, this includes access to information in a format that suits them.

5.18 Therefore, at the initial point of contact, every effort should be made by ATW to determine the client’s required format and to issue all correspondence accordingly. ATW users participating in the focus groups reported that their chosen format was being recorded at the first point of contact, but none had actually received information in that format.

### Adviser skills and knowledge

5.19 Focus Group members noted a lack of empathy and understanding from advisers. ATW has stated that:

“Disability awareness forms an integral part of our Adviser Training Route…. Advisers have mentors who are identified and appointed based on their knowledge of disability and awareness presentations have been sourced from RNIB”.

5.20 However, despite this, knowledge is largely reported as being poor and there appears to be a lack of training specifically around visual impairment and sight conditions. One client’s adviser documented his eye condition as “nysthemus” instead of nystagmus, which indicated a lack of knowledge of the field.

“Previously you could hear empathy in their voices. There was understanding. Now I feel like an inconvenience”.

“I was asked ‘are you still blind?’”

5.21 Formerly, having a named adviser who would handle your case throughout was beneficial because this consistency made the service person-centred, where the adviser builds a rich understanding of the individual’s needs. This has now been lost and the lack of understanding around sensory loss can give the impression of insensitivity to an individual’s situation. One client was asked by their adviser “what would a normal person do?”

5.22 While ongoing training for staff is welcomed, more emphasis needs to be placed on condition-specific training to ensure a better understanding of the particular barriers faced by people with various kinds of sight condition. The training needs to include knowledge of different sight conditions and the types of support appropriate to each. This will help to make the adviser more understanding of each client’s individual requirements and avoid a culture of “one size fits all”.

### Assessments

5.23 ATW has reported that “around 43 visual impairment assessments were undertaken in 2014-15 in Wales”. This, according to WCB’s figures, is a significant decline since the service was modernised, suggesting that ATW is aiming to cut costs by avoiding paying for external assessors. This is a short-sighted measure, because a properly conducted one-to-one assessment would ensure the best solutions are purchased, thereby minimising waste and maximising the individual’s ability to deliver their role effectively in the workplace.

5.24 Before the reorganisation, assessors were Wales-based, which gave them a strong knowledge of geography and additional services unique to Wales.

5.25 One example is the Low Vision Aids Assessment developed by Low Vision Service Wales, which can provide individuals with a range of magnifiers that could help them in the workplace as well as at home.

5.26 Also, the rehabilitation service in Wales is very strong and can support clients with mobility training, which will in turn boost their confidence and ability to operate safely within the workplace.

5.27 Furthermore, the third sector in Wales offers a wide range of services such as welfare benefits advice and advocacy, information and communications technology training, emotional support and transcription into Braille and other formats.

5.28 ATW assessors ought to be aware of this spectrum of support, so that they are able to signpost the client to additional services that can improve their employability and help them to retain employment.

5.29 Three main areas of concern were raised in the focus groups regarding assessments: technical assessments, travel and the employment of a support worker.

### Payments, reviews and personalised budgets

5.30 Focus group participants reported delays in payments and processing of claim forms, both as new and existing applicants. This creates additional anxiety for those who pay their support worker or taxi fares from their own salaries and can result in personal cash-flow problems.

5.31 Existing clients would benefit from a direct line to the claims team, rather than having to experience further delays by having to go through the contact centre team.

5.32 These delays create an obstacle to working as flexibly as the client’s job may, from time to time, demand. However, some people commented that for them the payment process has improved.

5.33 It is encouraging that people are continuing to remain in employment and are re-applying for support from ATW. However, this is not necessarily a smooth process, as ATW no longer contacts an individual to inform them of when their review date is due. This has left some clients in a position of being unable to pay for support because they were unaware that their award period had expired.

5.34 Moreover, this can put a further burden on the employer if they are asked to pay for support in the interim and further reinforce the opinion held by many employers that blind and partially sighted people are difficult or impossible to employ.

5.35 There also appears to be a culture of reviewing cases in order to save money. Support worker hours are therefore regularly kept under review – but it is equally important to review equipment provided to ensure that it is still relevant and up to date. With advancements in technology, more accessible – and sometimes cheaper – solutions can be found that empower the individual to work more independently within their role. This will be more readily achieved by having regular reviews and ensuring that the assessor keeps up-to-date with the full range of solutions available.

5.36 As detailed in section 2, in October 2015 a cap on individual awards was introduced. We strongly suggest that existing recipients of budgets above the cap are not only notified of the new limit and its implementation date, but that that they are supported through this change. Where there is a significant drop in the client’s award, it is essential that the specialist understanding and knowledge of an assessor is made available, so that an appropriate solution is found where possible. Solutions may exist with emerging technologies but ATW must be mindful that these may not be an effective substitute for a sighted support worker.

### Conclusions from the Wales research

5.37 ATW is a valued and vital scheme for people with disabilities and their employers.

5.38 Blind and partially sighted people in Wales, however, are experiencing an extra set of challenges in accessing information about the scheme and with the assessment and claims processes. These challenges have increased since the centralisation of the scheme, which has removed the availability of skilled assessors who are based within Wales.

5.39 The DWP needs to address the concerns raised by the focus groups to ensure that ATW is accessible for those who need it. If they do not, there is a chance that the cost benefits of the programme will be substantially lost and Wales, where the economy needs this vital injection and support for clients with sensory loss, will be harder hit than most of the rest of the UK.

## 6. The My Voice survey

6.1 **My Voice 2015** is an RNIB survey of over 1,200 registered blind and partially sighted adults [4]. This initiative has given the sight loss sector a much-needed update on the realities of life as a blind or partially sighted person.

6.2 The sample was weighted to be representative of the population of people that are registered as blind or partially sighted across the UK.

6.3 The study found that only one in four blind and partially sighted people of working age were in employment. Of these, half (38 people out of 76) were receiving help from ATW. Although our sample size here is limited, the results are nevertheless interesting.

6.4 Respondents receiving help from ATW were more likely to say they had received adjustment for their visual impairment from their employer than those not in receipt of such support. 38 per cent of those not receiving ATW support said that they felt that their employer had made no adjustments for their sight loss compared to 10 per cent of those in receipt.

6.5 People in receipt of ATW support were also more likely to receive aids and equipment in relation to their sight loss. 74 per cent of participants with ATW support received aids or equipment compared to 22 per cent of others.

6.6 The My Voice survey also asked participants how satisfied they were with the support they received at work in relation to their visual impairment (this related to all support received and was not necessarily restricted to ATW). Of those people that received help from ATW, 74 per cent were “very” or “quite” satisfied with the support which they had in employment. However, 13 per cent of that group were “very” or “quite” dissatisfied with the support they received in their job role in relation to their visual impairment.

### Follow-up interviews

6.7 In order to gain more in-depth information and develop individual case studies, the researchers re-contacted all My Voice participants to ask if they would take part in a further qualitative interview. 47 of these interviews were conducted. They were shaped by the participants and a wide variety of topics were discussed. Some participants discussed their experiences of employment, and there was both positive and negative feedback with regards to the ATW programme.

6.8 Some participants gave very positive feedback, saying that ATW was crucial to help them to stay in employment, by providing the equipment and transport support they needed.

“Access to Work was brilliant in giving me help to stay in work. They provided me with a big screen and paid for my taxis to and from work”.

6.9 Some participants felt that they would simply be unable to get to and from work without the support provided from ATW. For example, when we asked a participant what they would recommend to help someone losing their sight they replied:

“Definitely Access to Work. Because I think that’s probably the big stumbling block for people, just the ability to get there and get back and not being able to do that on their own”.

6.10 One participant commented that although they did not need ATW at the moment, it was reassuring to know that this support was there should they need it in the future. This is important, because for many people, sight does gradually change over time. For example, the My Voice survey found that around half of people registered as blind were at an earlier stage registered as partially sighted.

“I know about Access to Work and who to contact should the time come when I need some support at work”.

6.11 Unfortunately, some participants had considerably less positive experiences. Negative feedback tended to centre on difficulties in applying for ATW. In one instance, a registered blind person described an initial contact with ATW that made them feel like a burden on the “public purse” to the extent that they stopped trying to apply for the support for which they were eligible.

“Last year I tried to access Access to Work... I went through all the application procedure over the phone.... and then they had the nerve to say ‘do you really need to take money from the public purse?’”

6.12 Another respondent described a very positive experience of receiving help from ATW, but commented that the process of knowing how to get that support was very difficult.

“I found it really difficult to find out about Access to Work, I didn’t know who to contact or what I could ask for. I wish that it could have been easier.... and definitely think that there should be some assistance in finding things out”.

6.13 Due to a process that can be complex, actually receiving ATW can take a long time for those recently experiencing sight loss.

“It was an awfully long way to go to get something that was essential for me to get to work.... just knowing about it, just finding out about it was really difficult.... it takes you quite a bit to find these things out”.

6.14 Other evidence suggests that the attitudes of some employers can limit the benefits that the scheme is trying to provide. The My Voice survey asked participants whether, in the last 12 months, they felt that they had been treated unfairly by others because they were blind or partially sighted. 47 per cent of people of working age felt that they had been. Of these, almost a tenth (11 out of 124 people) felt that they had been treated unfairly by an employer. In the ATW group, five of the 38 recipients felt that they had been treated unfairly by an employer. In the further interviews, one of our participants commented:

“I feel that my employers let me down badly, and they were not supportive at all. RNIB and Access to Work were both willing to help”.

6.15 Attitudes of the general public can also be a barrier. The My Voice survey found that 55 per cent of people of working age felt that they “always”, “frequently” or “sometimes” experience negative attitudes from the general public because they are blind or partially sighted.

6.16 Some of the further interviews suggested that the attitudes of the general public can be a particular barrier for those working in the retail or service sectors who have to interact with customers frequently. One participant commented:

“Even though you’re just as good as everyone else they [customers] think they’re not going to get.... you know.... as good a service”.

6.17 In summary – evidence from the My Voice survey confirms the themes from the other research described in this report: ATW is a much valued scheme that nevertheless has specific aspects that are problematic and in need of attention.

## 7. Eighteen ATW users’ stories

In section 4 above, we discussed the responses to our online survey of ATW users. The idea for the survey arose from the individual accounts of their experiences that blind and partially sighted ATW users were already sending to us, either spontaneously or as a result of a request from us for information.

We reproduce some of those accounts below. Some have been shortened slightly for reasons of space, and some names have been changed (respondents were offered the choice of real name or pseudonym). They give a vivid impression of obstacles, opportunities and issues. They helped inform the design of the user survey, but are interesting in their own right.

### User story 1: Mr. Arnold

Mr. Arnold is partially sighted and works as a care assistant.

He says that he finds the process of having his taxi journeys covered for work very frustrating. It is a long-winded process and only original invoices for taxis (submitted by post) will be accepted. He says that there are then delays with the processing of payment (up to three or four weeks) and he finds himself being chased up by the taxi company.

However, he says that he finds ATW as a whole a positive service.

This is a brief but instructive message, in that it reflects a combination of experiences that we often encounter: a general appreciation of the positive role of ATW, alongside problems with the detailed functioning of the scheme.

### User story 2: Mr. Ogle

Mr. Ogle, from the East of Scotland, had a better experience regarding taxis. He wrote to us as follows:

"Here is my story of using ATW.

I have glaucoma and in July 2012 I lost my driving licence. I wasn’t entirely surprised to fail, as the DVLA criteria had been subtly changed. Anyway, it relieved a lot of stress caused by driving [but] left a problem, since I was a part time janitor at a chemical plant and there was no bus route on the road that passed the plant, which was about three miles or so from home. I could get to about a mile away, but the remainder was on foot, or my wife could take me in the car sometimes, but this was no proper solution.

Winter was approaching. I heard of the ATW scheme and after looking it up online was able to contact the appropriate authority for an application form. Basically the application process was very simple, and since my method of travel was going to be by taxi, all that I had to do was supply three quotations over the phone. In fact I was allowed to make a three-year contract with the taxi firm, from home to work without using the bus for any part of the journey, and that meant that I would receive monthly invoices which I and my boss would authorise on the monthly claim form. I never had to put my hand in my pocket either as top-up.

This came to an end as I was approaching my 65th. birthday, when by sheer chance the chemical plant was closing, so I took my retirement at the end of July 2014. All I can say of ATW and Jobcentre Plus is that they made the process easy and painless for me and couldn’t have been more attentive to answering questions either by phone or e-mail in the first few weeks of me using the system."

### User story 3: Ms. Gerrard

More recently, there are signs that taxis are becoming more problematic.

Ms. Gerrard is a social care manager with a children’s team in the West Midlands. She has retinitis pigmentosa and is registered blind.

Following a reduction in opportunities for a lift to work, Ms. Gerrard approached ATW to request an increase in funding for taxi fares. To her consternation, her inability to use public transport was queried:

“Please provide medical evidence which states what your capabilities are in term of travelling by public transport. Also I need to know if you were travelling by public transport what would your journey be and where do you feel you will encounter difficulties in terms of travel”.

No form was provided for a GP or other medical professional to complete and there was no offer of reimbursement of any charges. (Ms. Gerrard’s GP waived the charge in the event, but it would normally have been £30).

Moreover, she was given only five working days to obtain the evidence, with a warning that:

“If you are not able to provide us with the details by the stated time, your application will be closed temporarily”.

The GP was not amused:

“This patient suffers with retinitis pigmentosa which means she is registered blind. I am sure that even the DWP can imagine and understand her difficulties in using public transport.

I would like to know which person has asked for this medical statement so I can take this up with the honourable Jeremy Hunt for yet again wasting more already limited GP time”.

Ms. Gerrard also provided, as requested, the following account of the obstacles that the use of public transport would entail:

“You are also aware, as I have previously submitted the document (CV1), that I have been declared blind by my consultant ophthalmologist, due to my diagnosis of retinitis pigmentosa and my significant loss of peripheral vision. I also have an inoperable cataract on my left eye, which is impacting on my vision. However in order to clarify, and specifically address the request in your e-mail, I am making a list, although not exhaustive, of some of the difficulties that I would encounter in using public transport to and from work:

Walking to the bus stop in the dark, in the sunlight, at dusk, and in heavy rain – all impact on my vision and ability to negotiate objects.

Identifying which bus to get on and stopping the bus in time (before it disappears into the distance) whilst waiting at bus stop.

Wheelie bins left on the pavement, steps, low-hanging trees and branches, kerbs, signs on the pavement indicating work being carried out.

Crowded buses and town centre and the added stress that negotiating this brings to my journey in trying to cope with sudden movement close to me, as I have little peripheral vision.

New ‘shared spaces’ with no safe crossing place/ pedestrian lights or zebra crossings”.

The ATW adviser declined to accept either the GP’s or Ms. Gerrard’s evidence:

“Thank you for your e-mail and doctor’s certificate. The medical does not state why you are unable to use the public transport, are unable to drive or walk. You doctor has not stated as to how your condition affects your ability to carry out these functions and therefore we ask your doctor to provide us with further detail before we can consider support.

Enclosed is a medical template[[1]](#footnote-1) [which asks] your doctor to state where you having difficulties in using the public transport.

"We are not questioning your medical condition and what we are simply seeking to find out is why you are not able to drive, use public transport and walk.

There are sight loss customers who can and do use the public transport to and from work. All we are seeking to find out is why in your case medically you are not able to do this.

Unfortunately, we are not able to reimburse any costs that may be incurred by you in obtaining this information".

The GP declined to revisit the matter, but through sheer persistence on her part, Ms. Gerrard has eventually negotiated a satisfactory outcome with ATW. Clearly, her experience of this process leaves much to be desired, in terms of pressure on her (and arguably the NHS), potential personal financial cost and lack of reasonable notice of the medical evidence request.

At the time of writing, we are receiving other reports of resistance to paying for use of taxis and inappropriate pressure to use public transport.

### User story 4: Mr. Atkinson

Mr. Atkinson, from the East Midlands, contacted our Helpline with a query about ATW and self-employment.

His enquiry concerned the termination of his ATW award. He is a self-employed builder who had received ATW support for many years, including funding of a driver for his van.

In April 2015, Mr. Atkinson received a letter from ATW. This stated that, as his annual earnings were less than the National Insurance Contribution lower earnings limit, his award would end on 20 June. His award indeed ended on this date. (ATW has since moved to the Universal Credit approach – which also has substantial earnings expectations after a year).

Mr. Atkinson says that, without ATW, he will effectively have to stop work, even though he has several contracts lined up.

This example raises difficult issues. Self-employment can present real opportunities and can sometimes provide a route into work for disabled people who have been unable to convince an employer to take them on. Even if the business yields a very low income, the experience and contacts may lead to better things. However, the use of ATW funds to subsidise plainly non-viable self-employment is obviously inappropriate. There is a balance to be struck.

We recommendthat the role of ATW in supporting self-employment should be revisited, to see if the right balance has been achieved between opening up opportunities and realistic assessment of a business’s prospects. In particular, purely arithmetical financial calculations should be replaced by a more holistic assessment of the viability of a business. Account should also be taken of situations in which small-scale freelance work is supplementing paid employment.

### User story 5: Mr. Best

Mr. Best lives in South Wales and like Mr. Atkinson, is self-employed. He applied for an ATW assessment for assistance with travel. The application was resisted, ATW declining to progress it.

RNIB Cymru was contacted by Mr. Best, approached ATW on his behalf and was told they would be phoned back within seven days. No call was received and when RNIB Cymru rang the original ATW adviser, they were told the claim had been closed because of the length of time that had passed. Mr. Best had by now been waiting for nearly three months and has been advised to make a new application.

It is unclear why Mr. Best’s original application was not progressed and it may be that the perceived viability of his business was again an issue. But the delay and lack of communication experienced by both Mr. Best and RNIB Cymru point towards administrative malfunction.

### User story 6: Ms. Carter

Ms. Carter, who also lives in Wales, had tried to contact ATW a dozen or so times over the course of a two week period, to discuss her support worker being on long-term sickness – obviously a matter of some urgency.

She contacted RNIB Cymru, who phoned the contact centre – impressing on them that they should flag this as an urgent call – and three times were told they would have a return call within three hours, only for nothing to happen. RNIB Cymru then asked for the ATW adviser to contact the client directly, as a matter of urgency, and were told Ms. Carter would be put on a one hour call back – this again happened three times over the course of two days.

The call was finally returned some three weeks after Ms. Carter’s original phone call. She had meanwhile suffered considerable distress and disruption to her job, having to turn down many meetings and appointments.

Again, delay and poor communication were a feature of this case.

### User story 7: Ms. French

Delay can impact upon employers’ attitudes. Ms. French told us:

"I am seeking full-time or part-time employment. However, although recruiters are interested in my CV and I have had telephone interviews, as soon as the subject of ATW comes up, and the equipment required, their attitude changes. They always say that the employer is in a hurry and will not wait for the work assessment to be completed by ATW or for equipment to be ordered."

### User story 8: Mr. Collins

Mr. Collins writes:

"I first accessed the fund in 1996 after being unemployed for five months. It enabled me to go to an employer knowing there was help available for them to purchase equipment to aid me to do the job. My first job was on an out of town industrial estate 16 miles from my house. There was no linking bus service from Northampton (the nearest town). Taxi fares were reimbursed for the journey from the town to the job.

After three years I landed a job with the DWP, who operate the scheme and I have been here nearly 16 years. The help is still available for me but not via ATW now.

Without this help I would've (almost certainly) remained unemployed."

So Mr. Collins provides a wholly positive message (albeit based on experience a few years ago) illustrating the life-changing potential of ATW.

### User story 9: Mr. Parsons

The scheme also gets a good reference from Mr. Parsons:

"As a blind person, I have been in receipt of ATW for many years, both as an employed and self-employed person.

I have been helped to obtain both hardware and software to assist me, along with a personal assistant who provides practical support. For me this has been invaluable and enabled me to work.

I myself have provided guidance and practical support in obtaining ATW for others and seen how this has benefited – and continues to benefit – my clients.

The expansion of ATW is vital but we do need to make sure that it is adequately funded and that the service has the appropriate level of staffing, financial and practical resources if it is to meet current and future demand."

### User story 10: Mr. Green

Mr. Green retired a couple of years ago. He is blind and had used ATW extensively during his working life, both employed and self-employed. He used ATW while living and working in England, Scotland and Wales. It paid for a personal reader, engineering measuring equipment, a dictaphone and a screen reader.

He said the main advantage was simply that ATW was able to keep him in employment. Without it, he would not have been employed. Applying was easy, he no problems and got what he needed, when he needed it.

### User story 11: Ms. Daniels

RNIB Cymru, on the other hand, reports that they are finding that ATW assessments are being carried out by assessors who do not have a good knowledge of visual impairment.

Ms. Daniels, from South Wales, applied to ATW for a visual impairment assessment and was assessed by someone who was not familiar with the field. Fortunately, Ms. Daniels knew her own condition well and was confident enough to be able to tell the assessor what equipment was required to do her job. But that would not often be the case with someone who was recently diagnosed or who lacked confidence – and who could therefore miss out on support that should be available to them.

Lack of specialist knowledge among assessors has proved a recurrent theme in our research.

### User story 12: Ms. Ellison

Ms. Ellison is a self-employed teacher, based in the South East of England. She applied for ATW for assistance with the cost of specialist equipment. The process did not go well. The following are extracts from her correspondence with Action for Blind People.

"I now run two classes a week at the local adult education college. I've also recently started running one class a week on behalf of the local council. So your employability training has really worked!

When we last spoke I'd submitted my business plan to ATW in order to "prove" my eligibility for assistance. After much hard work from RNIB (and me!) ATW accepted that I was eligible for help. It's taken many months, but I've now bought equipment that I'm using and am happy with. Unfortunately, the ATW award didn't cover the full cost. This is because the Royal British Legion Industries (RBLI) assessor recommended alternative (cheaper) unsuitable equipment and ATW followed his recommendation.

I found the whole ATW process stressful and frustrating. I now want to try to ensure that future ATW claimants have a better experience than I've had. I've therefore complained to both the Chief Executive of RBLI and the Head of Access to Work."

[Extract from the latter complaint]:

Dear Mr. ..........

I'm writing to complain about the service I have received from Access to Work and the advisers ATW employs.

I'm unhappy with ATW's handling of my case. Specifically –

1. I'm self-employed. To be eligible for help from ATW, I was required to produce evidence that my business is likely to deliver profits in excess of £5,800 a year, which I did. [However] surely this profits threshold puts the self-employed at a huge disadvantage compared to those who are able to gain work in an employed capacity?

2. I'm visually impaired, but my case was not dealt with by ATW staff specialising in VI claimants. Instead it was handled only by the department dealing with the self-employed. I believe this led to an over-reliance on the (flawed) assessor's report and a reluctance to discuss my needs directly with me.

3. The award covers three products. None of these meet my needs. I have therefore had to purchase suitable equipment and fund the shortfall myself.

[See point 5 below for a summary of the items specified in Ms. Ellison’s ATW award].

4. I'm disappointed that in reconsidering my claim, the Reconsideration Team (RT) made no effort to contact me for further information. Prior to my claim being forwarded to the RT, I had not been informed of the procedure, nor that the RT's decision would be "final".

The RT decision stated that my request for a portable magnifier with built in battery was not as a result of my disability but was a result of the way I "run the business". I strongly refute this. My work as a freelance tutor is carried out in exactly the same way as a sighted freelance tutor. The marketplace for freelance teachers in my field requires that tutors are able to work at locations as directed by clients, be they colleges, companies or private individuals. Without lightweight, portable devices with built-in batteries, I cannot compete with sighted tutors who are able to operate in any location.

The RT did not address my dissatisfaction with the electronic reader and hand-held magnifier recommended by the assessor.

5. In conclusion: the end result of ATW's mishandling of my claim is that ATW has funded three items that are totally useless to me, namely:

 - A "portable" and "lightweight" electronic magnifier that weighs 15 kg., with no built-in battery. I have not purchased the device recommended.

 - A handheld magnifier that cannot read students’ handwriting in class. I have not purchased the device recommended.

 - An electronic reader that is heavy (for such a device) and has no built-in battery. I have not purchased the device recommended.

Instead of the three devices recommended by your assessor, I have purchased the three devices that I requested from ATW. I'm now using these and confirm that they all meet my needs. In doing this, I have had to fund the shortfall of £510. I believe this is unacceptable and request that you review my claim."

We have quoted Ms. Ellison’s correspondence at length as it again illustrates some of the issues around self-employment, while also highlighting why specialist knowledge on the part of the assessor is important.

### User story 13: Mr. Filmer

Mr. Filmer writes:

"I am 62 years old and have been receiving ATW support for five years. My eyesight has been getting worse just lately, so I got in touch with ATW again to see if they could give me any further help. They responded immediately and sent a workplace assessor to see me, who recommended a larger magnifier and was very supportive and helpful.

I think ATW support should be increased to help more people like myself stay in work. I have found their support invaluable."

So, like some of our other correspondents, Mr. Filmer’s experience illustrates how crucial ATW can be.

### User story 14: Mr. Millross

Mr. Millross writes:

"You are asking for experiences of the way ATW has had an impact on disabled people’s lives.

I am in receipt of ATW funding for both equipment and travel. Before ATW helped me, I was facing a huge bill of around £8,000 for equipment to keep me able to do my job as a self-employed drama teacher. There was no [other] help available to self-employed people and even with ATW they were wanting me to spend the £8,000 and then claim it back, which I simply couldn't afford to do. In the end they paid for the equipment up front, which was good.

Before I had the travel funding approved, I used to have to travel from Eastbourne to Hove by bus while carrying a laptop, holdall and managing a guide dog. The journey was also approximately a three hour trip each way and after getting on the 05.55 bus I would arrive at work at 08.30 with just enough time to set up my classroom before the children arrived. I had no time to go to the toilet or get a drink before I started work.

Without the funding for both the equipment and travel, I would simply have had no other choice than to give up work which I love so much."

Again, here is an illustration of how important ATW can be – and an insight into the often crucial role of help with travel, as well as with equipment.

### User story 15: Mrs. Davies

Positive experiences of ATW were also reported by Mrs. Davies:

"I am visually impaired, due to a brain tumour I had 20 years ago. ATW has been brilliant, both times I have used it, in providing equipment to support me at work to minimise the impact of my sight loss.

The first time was when I was returning to work, after having had the brain tumour and was coping with disabilities caused by the surgery to remove it.

The second time I accessed the service was through my employer when I needed up-to-date equipment to help me in my job.

Each time, I found the ATW coordinator friendly, helpful and knowledgeable and I feel it would be a great loss if this service was no longer offered.

I am about to contact the ATW service for the third time, as I am about to return to work after nine months’ sick leave following a cancer diagnosis. During the time I have been off work, I feel that technology may have moved on and left me behind. I found the service to be useful, informative and knowledgeable during the two previous occasions I used it and am hoping to have a positive experience this time."

### User story 16: Ms. Shah

This is a slightly edited version of Ms. Shah’s letter of complaint to the ATW Operational Support Unit at Harrow Jobcentre. At the time, she worked for a national disability charity. She is no longer there, in part because she was unable to secure the equipment she needed through ATW. She now works as a volunteer with Action for Blind People.

"I am writing to lodge a formal complaint concerning ATW’s failure to carry out a workplace assessment and the decision taken not to fund a piece of equipment I require in order to undertake my duties in my role, thereby putting my continued employment at risk.

It is my understanding that the ATW grant is there to assist disabled people into, and to retain, work by providing support and adaptations beyond the reasonable adjustments which an employer is legally obliged to provide under the Equality Act 2010.

Failure to carry out an assessment:

On 7 May 2015 I received an offer of employment as Governance Support Officer. Upon receipt of this offer, I contacted ATW to arrange an assessment of the equipment I require to support me in overcoming workplace barriers that arise from my disability. Having recently completed a degree course, I was able to advise on the equipment that best meets my needs. On this basis, and the fact that my new employer was a disability charity with expertise in this area, the person I spoke to advised that I would not need a workplace assessment.

I contend that ATW had a responsibility to carry out this assessment regardless of who my employer was or the fact that I was able to identify the equipment that I required, particularly as I am new to full-time employment. Further, the decision that ATW has taken not to fund the equipment I require, has not been based on an appropriate assessment of my needs nor the duties associated with my job.

Decision not to fund:

The Core Values and Principles of the programme state that ATW can help with costs where these are “over and above what a non-disabled person would require to do their job” and “provides support that allows individuals to overcome workplace barriers that arise from their disability”.

As Governance Support Officer, my role provides administrative support and requires a great deal of paper and computer-based work. As part of their duty to make reasonable adjustments, my employer has provided me with Zoom Text software for my computer and I also have a handheld magnifier for paper-based work.

However, my work requires the ability to work between the two formats. For example, I am tasked with undertaking the archiving for my department. This requires reviewing paper-based files in order to identify whether they are to be retained in accordance with the organisation’s document retention policy, logging the action and either destroying or sending to archive those files that are to be retained. In order to decide, I am required to work between the hard copy file and electronic log.

A fully-sighted person would have no difficulty in switching between paper-based and computer-based work, enabling them to carry out their duties quickly and efficiently. As a partially sighted person, it takes me a great deal longer to both use and switch between the Zoom Text software and the hand-held magnifier. I therefore find it easier, quicker and more efficient to use the Optima Bioptics which I used while undertaking my degree course, allowing me to quickly switch between reading textbooks and writing essays on the computer. Unfortunately the pair I already own are broken and require continual readjustment.

Your decision not to fund is based on your guidelines, which state that these are considered medical aids and are therefore not funded under ATW. I contend that these are not in fact medical aids as they do not improve my health or eye condition. They are merely a magnifier which is mounted on a pair of spectacle frames, in order to allow hands-free access to a keyboard for typing.

Further, I contend that your guidelines are out of step with developments in wearable technology such as Google Glasses and Apple Watches, which are wearable on the person but do not provide any medical benefits.

I urge you to reconsider your decision not to fund the Optima Bioptics, as they will enable me to carry out the duties of my role as effectively and efficiently as a fully-sighted person could. As it stands, I have been slowed down in carrying out my duties and my continued employment, beyond my probationary period, has been put seriously at risk. Your decision has caused me a great deal of distress and the stress of the possibility of my being unable to retain employment is seriously impacting upon my health.

While I am mindful of the initial cost of the Optima Bioptics, should I not be kept on beyond my probationary period, it will cost the taxpayer a great deal more if I lose my job and am forced to go on benefits. Surely, the whole principle behind ATW is to level the playing field for disabled people in order that they are treated equally within the job market, thereby ensuring they are able to live as independent lives as possible, including obtaining and retaining employment."

As with Ms. Ellison, we have quoted Ms. Shah at length, as the detail of her equipment needs provides a real insight. Her anxiety concerning her job retention prospects also reminds us of how much can turn on an award decision.

### User story 17: Mr. Seeley

Mr. Seeley writes:

"I have used ATW for 14 years and have recently changed jobs with the same employer. I require additional support in my new role and started my application two months ago; however, to date, my application has only been partially approved and I have been informed that I have to start a new application to get the remainder of the support recommended within the assessment report.

The assessment report is another story altogether. I have been asked to sign a declaration, which will give funding for some of the items mentioned within the report itself. However, it is impossible for me to obtain a copy of the actual report via e-mail, despite having strongly complained about the direct discrimination this presents; they insist upon sending me a hard copy in the post I cannot read.

How is a visually impaired person supposed to remain employed only completing partial duties for such a significant period without the relationship with the employer becoming compromised? The scheme does not work well enough at application stage, it is slow, there is a lot of duplication, information is not sent in an accessible format and the employer has no control over the application which leaves them frustrated at why support is not in place.

It is of little wonder so many disabled people are out of work. How are employers to support disabled employees for such periods of time without resource?

[Problems with ATW are] the main reason I would not progress in my career, putting me off applying for new roles and having ambition to obtain promotion. Whilst I acknowledge it would be impossible for me to remain in work without the support provided, the journey to obtain the support is demoralising, stressful, and leaves you feeling very much like you spend months on end worrying about how you are to keep the job you have worked so hard to apply for and obtain in the first place. Visually impaired people have stressful enough lives without having to undergo this additional stress. Employers should have more control and responsibility over the process. At present all the onus is on the disabled person to obtain the support along with the additional pressure, work, time and resource that goes with it."

So Mr. Seeley is experiencing problems not only of delay, but also of inaccessible material not provided in an appropriate format. As with Ms. Shah, there are also concerns about job retention.

### User story 18: Ms. de Cordova

There is confusion as to where elected public representatives stand in relation to ATW support.

London Borough Councillor Ms. de Cordova writes:

"I was first elected in May 2014 as a Councillor in the London Borough of Lambeth. I first approached Access to Work about support. They advised me that ATW does not provide support to Councillors. This didn't sound right, so I asked them to send me a copy of the policy outlining this. They advised they are not able to do this.

I then advised Democratic Services at Lambeth Council, who contacted ATW and were advised also that no support could be provided. As a result, my local authority is currently paying for my support.

Anecdotally, I know of several Councillors who have had a similar experience to me."

All in all, our correspondents’ stories contained themes, both positive and negative, that emerged also from the larger numbers in our ATW users’ survey, as well as the WCB and My Voice evidence, reported above.

## 8. Conclusions: a key scheme, but with room for improvement

8.1 We said at the beginning that we welcomed the Government’s commitment to halving the disability employment gap. Opinion may be divided as to whether this will be achieved by 2020, but the fact that it is a high-profile target for public policy is a big step forward. And when it is achieved, there must then be a new target, to maintain progress.

8.2 ATW is one instrument in the range of policies that will be needed to address the obstacles to closing the gap. In its response to the Work, Health and Disability Green Paper, RNIB will offer comments and suggestions across this range. For our present purposes, this report focuses on ATW. It will be submitted as supplementary evidence to our Green Paper response.

8.3 Our research shows that ATW is very much valued by blind and partially sighted users, many of whom say they would not be in work without it.

8.4 Nevertheless, we have also noted that the experiences of the blind and partially sighted people who contributed to our research suggest that there are many practical problems in the operation of the scheme and inconsistencies in processes and outcomes. These must be addressed if ATW is to fulfil its potential.

8.5 In other words, this is a highly valued and important scheme, with a number of practical problems that need fixing.

8.6 We trust that this report has reflected both of these positive and negative dimensions and that the recommendations arising from them – set out in detail in section 9 below – will be of practical use as the scheme evolves.

## 9. Detailed recommendations

### Resources

1. The Government intends to increase the numbers supported by ATW. It is essential that the resources available keep pace, or there will be downward pressure on individual awards.

### Applying for ATW, communication and the role of advisers

2. ATW should reinstate the practice of assigning a named adviser to each client, with direct telephone access. This would provide continuity and stability for the ATW user, as well as helping to avoid delays, repetition and lack of an ability to build an understanding of the client’s disability and needs.

3. ATW should develop better information for the public about what is available under the scheme, so that an applicant is aware of its potential and relevance to them and more confident to apply for support unaided.

4. As well as ongoing publicity, there should be periodic awareness-raising initiatives, aimed at disabled people, employers, trade unions and appropriate health service personnel.

5. ATW should implement the production of accessible documents in line with the stated policy of capturing the required format for each client.

6. ATW advisers should be aware of the need to respect independence, preserve dignity and ensure confidentiality with regard to completion of forms. Applicants may not wish to have a third party complete the form for them.

7. The problem of digital exclusion should be taken into account in future development of the new digital application process. For those with access to the appropriate technology and with the skills to use it, this new facility will generally be welcome, but it should not become the only option.

8. The role and scope of the specialist visual impairment team should be clarified.

9. ATW advisers working with blind and partially sighted clients should receive specific visual impairment awareness training, including knowledge of sight conditions and disability equality issues, delivered by blind and partially sighted people. This would acknowledge the need for a “nothing about us without us” approach.

10. Awareness training should include the particular issues relating to deafblindness.

11. Training should include “people skills” – awareness of the need to treat clients with respect at all times.

### Assessments

12. ATW applicants should be able to choose who conducts their assessment from a pool of specialist providers.

13. Invitations to tender for assessment contracts should stress the need for quality (including impairment-specific and localised provision) and not just cost.

14. Technical assessments should be offered as a matter of right and conducted for blind and partially sighted people by an individual who has a broad knowledge of visual impairment and associated technologies. This will ensure that the client receives advice and recommendations that fully support their needs.

15. Applicants should be informed in advance as to what will be covered by a work-based assessment commissioned by ATW.

16. Records should be maintained in such a way as to avoid repeat requests for information already held by ATW.

17. Best practice in achieving a smooth transition in support where there is a change of job, should be promoted across ATW.

18. Feedback should be systematically collected from employees and employers on the quality of the assessment, customer satisfaction and job sustainability following ATW support. This should be published and acted upon by the DWP.

19. There should be greater transparency around quality assurance of contracted assessment providers.

20. Individual assessors should hold or be working towards formal qualifications related to assessment provision, for example in information, advice and guidance and/ or vocational rehabilitation.

21. Clients should be able to offer suggestions and modifications to the final assessment report without having to go through the formal reconsideration process.

22. We need to be confident that ATW assessments are of high quality with the appropriate specialist input and also that consequent support packages adequately reflect the assessment. Support packages that accurately reflect inadequate assessments and good assessments that fail to translate into the right package, are both outcomes to be avoided.

23. The DWP should undertake further work to develop ways and means of speeding up the end-to-end process of application, assessment and design and implementation of a support package. The new digital application option should help and we are aware that research into ATW (as yet unpublished) has been undertaken for the DWP by KPMG, but there is a great deal to do.

### Equipment

24. Clients’ equipment needs should be reviewed periodically and appropriate adjustments made promptly.

25. Equipment provided should belong to the employee, being thus transferable to another employer if a person changes jobs.

### Travel

26. In respect of travel assessments, ATW should develop a better understanding among its advisers regarding the scope, purpose and limitations of travel training.

27. ATW should recognise the differing travel needs of individual clients, in relation to both their personal abilities and the requirements of their job.

28. There should be no withdrawal of support or unnecessary obstacles to applications from those for whom a taxi is the most appropriate and independent travel option. Formal medical evidence of inability to use public transport should not normally be required. In instances where, exceptionally, it is requested, reasonable notice should be given and there should meanwhile be no interruption of existing provision.

### Support workers

29. Advisers should promote choice and flexibility in how the hours for a support worker are allocated.

30. Advice and assistance should be offered to help ATW applicants or employers recruit support workers.

31. There should be clarity as to who is a support worker’s employer and comprehensive guidance provided if this is the ATW client.

### Award levels, payments and periods

32. Payments under personal budget arrangements should be prompt and a named contact provided to permit rapid resolution of any delays or other problems.

33. ATW should give clients adequate advance notice of an award period coming to an end, and of re-assessment arrangements.

34. The cap on individual awards should be removed. If it remains a feature of the ATW scheme, it should at the very least continue to be uprated annually, in line with movement in average earnings.

35. Clients whose awards are due to be reduced because they exceed the cap should be contacted well in advance to discuss solutions and should be offered support in adapting to the lower amount.

### Self-employment

36. The role of ATW in supporting self-employment should be revisited, to see if the right balance has been achieved between opening up opportunities and realistic assessment of a business’s prospects.

37. In particular, purely arithmetical financial calculations should be replaced by a more holistic assessment of the viability of a business.

38. Account should be taken of situations in which small-scale freelance work is supplementing paid employment.

### Scope of the scheme

39. Short-term and temporary employment should not be a barrier to ATW support.

40. ATW should be available to all elected public representatives and policy in this area made clear.

41. ATW should also be available to disabled people in volunteering roles, as current and relevant work experience is one of the key factors in helping to secure employment.

### Stakeholder engagement

42. To enable effective stakeholder liaison, a regular stakeholder forumshould be established, to discuss and seek to resolve issues arising from the practical operation of ATW.

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## Glossary of abbreviations

ATW: Access to Work

DVLA: Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

DWP: Department for Work and Pensions

GP: General Practitioner

LWI: Learning and Work Institute

MEP: Member of the European Parliament

MP: Member of Parliament

MSP: Member of the Scottish Parliament

NHS: National Health Service

NI: National Insurance

PDF: Portable Document Format

RBLI: Royal British Legion Industries

RNIB: Royal National Institute of Blind People

RT: Reconsideration Team

WCB: Wales Council of the Blind

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As ever, we are indebted to all those blind and partially sighted people who shared their experiences with us and made this report possible.



1. As noted above, this had not previously been supplied. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)