

R N I B

See differently

Access to Work

People with sight loss cannot wait any longer for action







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Introduction - Thousands of jobs and careers at risk due to unprecedented delays

Lengthy delays, often as long as half a year, for applications and claims to the Government's Access to Work scheme are putting thousands of jobs at risk for people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, including many people with sight loss.

The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), which runs Access to Work - a Government programme delivering practical and financial support to enable disabled people to find, or maintain, employment – needs to take decisive and comprehensive action to cut the backlog urgently.

The Government is proud of its record in seeing more than one million more disabled people in work compared to five years ago. But the gap in employment for blind and partially sighted people still lags behind and is twice that of other disability groups. Only one in four registered blind and partially sighted people of working age is in employment.

Delays in the processing of applications and claims for Access to Work support have made the employment barriers people with sight loss experience worse. Blind and partially sighted workers are put at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled colleagues.

The Minister for Disabled People, Tom Pursglove MP, has said: "Our goal to reduce the disability employment gap

remains. We will continue to galvanise action across Government and outside Government to ensure that we are ambitious about the employment of disabled people and people with health conditions." [1]

But, if this is to be achieved, the DWP needs to urgently take decisive and comprehensive action to tackle the delays.

RNIB is calling on Mel Stride MP, the Work and Pensions Secretary, to:

1. Provide adequate resources to Access to Work so that support is put in place within four weeks of any application and claims are promptly processed.
2. Remove the need for an Access to Work renewal process for customers when their support needs are not changing.
3. Automatically extend Access to Work packages until renewals can be processed so individuals can retain support.
4. Provide automatic software upgrades to software previously approved as part of an Access to Work grant.
5. Provide a 'cost of living' update for the value of Access to Work grant payments.
6. Fast track applicants who know what support they need.



[1] House of Commons Debate (24 November 2022),
UN International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Available from: [rnib.in/UNInternationalDayOfPersonsWithDisabilities](https://www.rnib.in/UNInternationalDayOfPersonsWithDisabilities)

What is Access to Work?

Access to Work delivers practical and financial support to people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, including blind and partially sighted people, in work and those starting a new job. It also covers work experience placements and apprenticeships.

The DWP runs the scheme and provides a discretionary grant towards any extra employment costs that result from a disability or long-term health condition. Access to Work is available across England, Scotland, and Wales. There are different programmes in Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands.

For blind and partially sighted people, Access to Work can pay for a range of support, including:

- adaptations to work premises and equipment
- special aids and equipment
- support workers
- travel to work where there are no practical public transport alternatives, and travel within work
- awareness training for colleagues.

The process starts with a telephone/online application. This is then followed by an assessment.



Here, an Access to Work customer with sight loss describes how the support they get through the scheme enables them to do their job:

“Fundamentally, Access to Work is a fantastic system, it helps people with disabilities get into work. For me, I get travel to work as I start work sometimes at 6am and I have no public transport where I live at that time.

“Without Access to Work I couldn’t do the job that I do. It allows me to do what is a skilled and professional job. My job is very technical. I use industry standard digital broadcast and recording studios and mobile radio equipment, so I have a support worker who is my eyes. They don’t do the job for me; I guide them and direct them.

“But unfortunately, the delays, bureaucracy and the hoops people have to jump through to access the support they need are putting a dent in employers’ confidence to take on people with disabilities.”

Lengthy delays are threatening jobs



For many blind and partially sighted people, Access to Work is highly valued and support through the scheme is very important for finding and retaining employment. However, the timeliness of this support – as well as its quality – is often crucial in the world of employment.

For more than a year, people applying to Access to Work, renewing their support, requesting a change of circumstance or submitting a claim,

have faced significant delays in accessing the support they need.

On average, it now takes five to six months from an initial application to assessment and determination of an application. Worryingly, the delays appear to be getting worse, with 25,103 outstanding applications in December 2022 (up from 15,000 outstanding applications 12 months before). Claims for payment against existing awards are also subject to significant delays.

For many blind and partially sighted people, these lengthy delays severely compromise their ability to secure, or maintain, employment, which is more important than ever during the current rise in the cost of living.

With these five-six month delays for Access to Work now commonplace, job offers are routinely being withdrawn for people with sight loss who rely on the scheme, but cannot access the support they need for their job.

Likewise, RNIB is receiving daily calls from individuals in work facing performance management or redundancy as a result of the delays. In some cases, individuals are having to subsidise their own support and support workers, and taxi companies also face significant delays in getting paid. This is unacceptable especially during the cost-of-living crisis and inevitably puts support - and, therefore, disabled people's jobs - at risk.

Below are some examples of the very serious detrimental impact the Access to Work delays are having on people with sight loss, supported by RNIB's employment services. These examples show why the DWP needs to urgently speed up the timescale for accessing Access to Work support significantly:

- an individual's six month-contract ended before they received a determination of their Access to Work claim;
- an employee who applied to renew their existing Access to Work grant six weeks before it was due to expire – and yet six months after its expiry, has still not had a determination of the renewal application, with the consequence that their support worker has not been paid for more than six months;
- an employee's braille display broke and needed Access to Work funding for a replacement – but had to wait 15 weeks for such funding to be approved, during which time they were unable to perform crucial aspects of their job;
- an employee who lost their sight was told it would be six months before they would be contacted by an advisor about their application. Without the right support in place, the individual is struggling with travel to work in the dark and getting more and more anxious;
- an employee who, due to their sight loss and other health conditions could not use public transport to travel to work, was unable to find a taxi firm willing to open an Access to Work account with them, due to the long delays in getting paid by the scheme. Paying for the taxi fare upfront was not an option for the customer, who could not afford to pay and use all their wages, and then wait to be reimbursed by Access to Work.

How the delays are impacting blind and partially sighted employees

"I require a support worker. Due to the delays, I am unable to perform elements of my role. I have had to have my duties reduced. This is having a significant effect on my mental health and has meant I have lost a lot of confidence. I am worried that if a support worker isn't in place, I may not pass my probationary period."

"I have fallen foul of delayed renewals, meaning I had no support worker or travel to work for a period of time. This was only rectified by the involvement of my MP. These delays can further compound the worries that employers have around taking on a VI [visually impaired] person."

"I am having to find money from my own pocket to pay for a support worker, which means I can only afford minimal support. This means I don't get all the support required. I have struggled to go to meetings. I also get nervous and scared trying to find and navigate new places alone."

"If I need to travel somewhere for work, I need to bring a support worker with me. I must pay my support worker's travel costs and claim the money back. Sometimes that's £100 or £200 a month that I'm having to pay up front that my wage does not cover. I'm then waiting months to get that money back in the middle of a cost of living crisis."



A timeline of Access to Work delays

Official answers to parliamentary questions have revealed a high number of outstanding Access to Work applications:

February 2020 - **8,500 outstanding applications.**



March 2021 - **4,980 outstanding applications.**



August 2021 - **9,280 outstanding applications.**



December 2021 - **15,000 outstanding applications.**



March 2022 - **20,909 outstanding applications.**



June 2022 - **23,805 outstanding applications.**



September 2022 - **25,101 outstanding applications.**



December 2022 - **25,103 outstanding applications.**

Current delays risk being unlawful

The DWP is under a legal duty to process claims and determine applications in a reasonable time. The extent of the current delays to the administration of the scheme therefore are at risk of being unlawful. This is the case especially in circumstances where the delays undermine the very purpose of the scheme, for example, if an individual's job is placed at risk as they do not have the support they need, or their offer of employment is withdrawn because Access to Work support is not put in place quickly enough for them to benefit from it.

The Public Sector Equality Duty requires the DWP to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations (between

persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it) in everything it does. Its failure to provide a properly functioning scheme does not advance equality of opportunity for disabled people despite this being part of the very purpose of the scheme.

In addition, the Department is placing disabled employees at risk of discrimination in employment if they are, for example, unable to do their jobs (or secure a job) because of a failure to make what should essentially be reasonable adjustments. The DWP also risks potentially "pitting" disabled people against non-disabled candidates, colleagues and employers causing unnecessary tensions in the workplace.



Our six recommendations to the DWP for urgent action to cut the delays

In response to the concerns raised by disability organisations, the DWP has taken some steps to address the delays. These include overtime working and the employment of additional staff, the prioritisation of applicants due to begin a new job within four weeks and renewal applications for on-going support.

While welcome, these measures are clearly not sufficient.

We are calling on the Work and Pensions Secretary to:

1. Provide adequate resources to Access to Work so that support is put in place within four weeks of any application and claims are promptly processed.

The DWP should urgently put in place additional measures so blind and partially sighted people can access vital support in a timely manner and claims can be processed promptly.

There should be a ministerial target for support to be in place within four weeks of any application, as four weeks is the average lead in time from an offer to starting a job.

2. Remove the need for an Access to Work renewal process for customers whose support needs will stay the same.

By cutting the number of Access to Work processes, the DWP would save

money and ease the pressure on the service. Learnings could be taken from Scotland, where claimants for Child Disability Payment or Adult Disability Payment with a condition that is unlikely to change have longer review periods, and a “light touch” approach used, where possible.

For people on a capped Access to Work grant, it is important that the annual uplift to their grant is maintained.

One benefit of the renewal process is that it allows people to request extra support if their needs change. However, communications could be sent to alert people to their ability to adjust their requests without requiring all Access to Work recipients to go through a full renewal process.

3. Automatically extend Access to Work packages until renewals can be processed so individuals can keep support

Automatically extending Access to Work packages until renewals can be processed would ensure that no Access to Work package lapses whilst an individual is in employment, which frequently occurs.

This extension should also be provided to those changing role, who must create a new application within the existing process. This can put people off starting new jobs.



To reduce the possibility of support lapsing while a renewal application is processed, the DWP should send reminders to customers of upcoming renewal dates. Due to the frequent use of paper-based documents, it can be particularly difficult for blind and partially sighted people to keep track of when their Access to Work support period finishes.

4. Provide automatic software upgrades to software previously approved as part of an Access to Work grant.

For many people with sight loss, getting upgrades on their software funded through Access to Work can be challenging, due to existing bureaucracy. This process should be automatic.

5. Provide a 'cost of living' update for the value of Access to Work grant payments

In the UK, everyday costs are steeply rising - including energy, fuel, food

and rent. This is resulting in some customers facing higher taxi fares and support worker costs.

The Department should provide a 'cost of living' update for the value of the Access to Work grant payments, for example, for paying for a support worker.

6. Fast track applicants who know what support they need

People who know what support they need from support they had in education or from previous Access to Work provision should not have to go through a lengthy assessment process to receive recommendations for adjustments to their workplace.

These individuals often have the knowledge and even, sometimes, the evidence from previous assessments to identify adjustments needed. The Department should approve applications in as short a timeframe as possible from applications who request specified support.

Once delays are under control, further issues need addressing

The Department's priority should be tackling the serious delays in determining claims and applications which are holding so many people back from entering the workplace or carrying out existing roles. But there are additional issues with the Access to Work scheme that need to be addressed once the delays are under control.

1. Improve advisers' understanding of reasonable adjustments available

People with sight loss have shared with RNIB that they find some of the Access to Work processes inaccessible and it can be challenging to get reasonable adjustments agreed by advisers.

"Advisers do not seem to understand the concept of an accessible document or realise that they can provide them. I had many issues trying to obtain a document in a Word format and this could be solved by a simple bit of training."

"I find the process to claim back costs is very time consuming and is not very accessible - I have to complete paper forms by hand, meaning that I am unable independently to submit my claims."

We have also received complaints from blind and partially sighted people with ongoing Access to Work claims who have requested email communications as a reasonable adjustment to paper forms and have been told by Access to Work advisers that it is not available. This is despite the requirement of the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments and the Access to Work policy confirming that email is a reasonable adjustment.

"This is already possible, but you have to reiterate this every time you talk to someone. Every time you get a different adviser it seems the old attitude of "we can only send things in print" mentality returns."

The requirement to sign claim forms with a wet signature is inaccessible for many people with sight loss, as providing a wet signature on paper claim forms is extremely challenging without sighted support. We recommend accepting electronic signatures on claim forms, including allowing claimants to type their name in a box. Again, we believe this is caught by the requirement of the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments.



RNIB welcomes the increased digitalisation of Access to Work, including the development of an online claims portal. We believe, when launched, this could make the scheme more accessible and efficient for blind and partially sighted people.

2. Roll out sight loss training to Access to Work advisers

A common frustration among many people with sight loss is the attitude of Access to Work staff.

A particular area of concern raised by blind and partially sighted people is that assessors lack specialist knowledge of sight loss issues. A survey carried out by RNIB in 2021 in response to the UK Government's Health and Disability Green Paper, found that 43 per cent of blind and partially sighted people thought Access to Work advisers did not have good knowledge and understanding of sight loss and the support and adjustments they need.

"Access to Work is a fantastic service, but most of the advisers seem to have no knowledge of sight loss and just how much technology can assist."

RNIB is available to train Access to Work staff on the range of jobs blind and partially sighted people do and the assistive technology that people with sight loss use in the workplace. The DWP should set up sight loss training for all Access to Work advisers.

3. Independent review of Access to Work

For more than 12 months, there has been a sharp rise in the number of the Access to Work initial and renewal applications which are subject to significant delay. It is now time for a review of all Access to Work's processes so they can be streamlined, and customers can access support in a timely manner.

Conclusion – Too many people are waiting too long for the help they are entitled to

Access to Work is an incredibly valuable scheme in enabling blind and partially sighted people of working age to become economically active and independent.

However, far too many people with sight loss are waiting too long to receive the Access to Work support they need. This is severely compromising the ability of working age blind and

partially sighted people to secure or maintain employment, or they are having to subsidise their own support. This situation is untenable, especially during the current cost-of-living crisis.

The DWP needs to urgently take decisive and comprehensive action to tackle the delays, so blind and partially sighted people facing long delays can access vital support in a timely manner.

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