

How Accessible is Access to Work in Wales?

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Thank you to Wales Council of the Blind (WCB) for writing the source report and recommendations on which this document is based.

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Executive Summary

There are around 110,000 blind and partially sighted people in Wales (i). Across the UK around two thirds of working age blind and partially sighted people are not in work. In addition, government research has shown that 90% of employers believe that it would be impossible or difficult to employ someone with sight loss, presenting huge barriers to finding work. This is a situation that has to change. (ii)

RNIB's research briefing 'Key Findings from Employment Research' (iii) states that 66% of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are not in paid employment (2006), and that they are nearly five times more likely to have been not in paid employment for five years or more than the general population (2009).

It came to the attention of RNIB Cymru and Wales Council of the Blind in 2015 that blind and partially sighted people who were receiving support through the Access to Work programme were having difficulties, either in applying, through their assessment or in the level of support they were assessed to be entitled to.

A report released in early 2016 by RNIB and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, found through rigorous methodology practices, that the cost benefit of Access to Work to blind and partially sighted people is £2.48. That is to say that for every £1 spent on Access to Work, the economic and social benefits are worth £2.48. These effects could be felt through the impact of keeping the person with

sight loss in work, or them not feeling isolated and in need of other services, or much more.

It is within this context that RNIB Cymru, Wales Council of the Blind and Sight Cymru engaged a number of people who were in receipt of Access to Work support to ask them what their experiences were of the benefit and if they had noticed any changes to the level of support they were receiving or any problems in accessing it.

Many recipients reported that they had experienced difficulties with the system, citing issues with the assessors and people they spoke to within the contact centres who were not only uninterested, but also ignorant of the need to provide information in an accessible format or the right to privacy as they request someone to help the client fill out forms.

There seems to have been a change in the manner in which the clients are being treated; within the sessions clients told 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 ignorance seems to be rife within the system and ensures that those attempting to access it are left feeling embarrassed and a burden on the system.

The important 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 knowledge of the geography of Wales, required when understanding how someone will travel to work.

The report makes a number of recommendations which the Department for Work and Pensions needs to address and report on to ensure that Access to Work is accessible for those who need it. If they do not, there is a chance that any cost benefits of the programme will be lost and Wales, where the economy needs this vital injection and support for clients with sensory loss, will be harder hit than the rest of the UK.

Introduction

The Access to Work programme is a Department for Work and Pensions grant scheme, available to disabled people that are in work. 'This scheme provides grants to employers towards extra employment costs which result from an employee having a disability. The programme aims to provide practical advice and support to disabled people and their employers, in order to overcome work related obstacles which result from disability.'(iv). For people with sight loss the funding typically covers the purchase of specialist goods (e.g. adaptive computer software), the provision of a support worker and travel to, from and in work.

There are many barriers to work faced by blind and partially sighted people such as anxiety and confidence issues, transport and, where available, suitable employment as well as training and qualifications opportunities. Access to Work, a Government scheme which is meant to help people get and stay in work, appears to now be yet another barrier to the workplace.

There is overwhelming support from disabled people, employers and third sector organisations for the Access to Work programme in Wales and the support it provides. Yet employers are often unaware of the purpose, scope and impact of Access to Work and many people still consider the Access to Work Scheme to be one of the Government's best-kept secrets.

There is evidence of ambiguity and confusion around the services provided through Access to Work which may contribute to the reluctance of some employers to consider employing a person with sight loss. These have been compounded by changes to the Access to Work programme structure, which include the centralisation of assessment services through the reduction of locations across the UK from 70 to just three. This has resulted in a move towards telephone-based assessments rather than personal face to face assessments and has caused delay and unnecessary worry for people with sight loss.

Purpose of this report

This report outlines the problems that are currently being experienced by Access to Work applicants and recipients at the different stages of the process. The report highlights five themes emerging from focus group discussions:

Theme 1 - contact with clients

Theme 2 - provision of information

Theme 3 - advisor skills and knowledge

Theme 4 - assessments; and

Theme 5 - payments and personalised budgets.

These are addressed in turn and recommendations given to address concerns arising. For ease of reference, a complete list of recommendations can be found in Appendix 1

Context

Prior to the restructuring of Access to Work it was considered by people with sight loss in Wales and the organisations that serve them to be a very good service. It was felt that the Wales-based advisors had a deep knowledge and understanding of sight conditions as well as the challenges of the local transport infrastructure and what that means to people with sight loss. Now, however, feedback suggests a very different service. People with sight loss are reporting inconsistency, complexity, lack of information and guidance and regret at losing the single named advisor. Users of the service with visual impairments have stated that:

“Previously, somebody joined the dots – but I just don’t think this happens now”.

“Access to Work is there to help you get back to work, but they are making it hard for you to do that”.

“I feel treated like an abuser of the system, not a user”.

“It’s as if they’re not really listening, they’re just trying to think how they can save money”.

There is a feeling that the client is being somehow screened out of a system that is there to enable them.

Method

In May 2015, 34 people with sight loss from a range of employment backgrounds attended a focus group to share their experiences of the Access to Work scheme. The focus group was held by RNIB Cymru and Wales Council of the Blind following concerns raised at the Wales Vision Forum (a sight loss sector discussion and planning group) and by individuals directly with RNIB Cymru and WCB, who provided additional case studies. Further groups were convened with the assistance of Musicians in Focus (August 2015), Sight Cymru (June 2015), and Wales Council of the Blind's Regional Groups (throughout 2015).

This report highlights the experiences of the focus group participants and gives recommendations for improved performance. Where appropriate, these are referenced against the Access to Work Provider Guidance v7 (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422853/pg-access-to-work-needs-assessment-v7.pdf) which runs until 2nd November 2016. Where used, these are indicated in brackets.

Theme 1: Contact with clients

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

Provider Guidance (15) states that Contractors are required to:

- Record all Needs Assessment Referrals and assess, prioritise and action them in an efficient, customer focussed and cost effective manner.
- Requisition an appropriate holistic assessment ... from an approved assessor named in (their) contract.
- Contact the Access to Work customer within 24 hours of receipt of the Needs Assessment Referral to arrange a date and time for the holistic assessment.
- Offer the customer at least 5 appointment slots in the 10 day window
- Make at least 3 attempts within the first 3 days to contact the customer to schedule the assessment

Experiences of first contact with Access to Work (Access to Work) have been variable and there is a perceived lack of consistency as clients feel they are not dealing with the same advisor each time and are unable to build up a rapport and understanding of their disability. Our focus group participants said:

“We’ve lost that, and it’s a real shame”.

“Some people have to make several phone calls and still don’t end up talking to the original person they spoke to.”

“They’re not terribly helpful of late (they used to be better). It doesn’t make the process easy. There’s a lack of consistency with the people you speak to”.

“Used to have a case officer and could ask them directly if I needed to increase support worker hours. Now you call the contact centre. You speak to different people, not the advisors”.

“It was one of my worst experiences of trying to get help – I was 19 and it was my first job, and my advisor wasn’t really great. There were really simple things they got wrong, like no one ever came out to visit me to assess me. They said they didn’t do support workers and that I couldn’t get taxis because I was freelance. I’ve given up. I’m just trying to do it on my own, because I just don’t want to go back to them.”

“Now it is the worst it has ever been. Instead of being able to chat with your case worker, it all has to go via the contact centre. It’s a really frustrating process. The auto-email response says someone will get back to you in 48 hours – they don’t. You have to chase it up at least 3 times before you get any response. I have changed my support package twice recently

but it's all been sorted within ten days – but I think that's because I know the system now, and how to prove that I need what I need.”

“Previously, a dedicated officer provided support and a place to go when I had questions. This helped with changes in my work patterns and any extra help I needed. I had access to a taxi to go to and from work and support workers throughout the day.”

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.”

There are suggestions that the pervasive attitude reflects rather more ‘efficiency’ and ‘cost effectiveness’ than customer focus:

“It's degrading to have to battle for this. You don't need the extra hassle of having to explain repeatedly your situation. It's maddening.”

“It's degrading explaining your condition all the time”.

Recommendations for addressing issues around contact with clients:

that Access to Work reinstates the practice of assigning a named advisor for each client, with telephone access that bypasses the call centre. This would provide continuity and stability for the client;

that Access to Work demonstrates more sensitivity and flexibility around contact arrangements and only closes a case in consultation with the client.

Theme 2: Information

Concerns about information are threefold: information about Access to Work and available support; information provided to the client in accessible formats; and the move to online digital information.

1. Information about Access to Work and available support.

There are strong feelings that the availability of support is a well-hidden secret and that this should be made clearer:

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

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:

“There is no guidance on what to ask for.”

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

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

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.”

Recommendations for addressing issues around information about Access to Work Provision:

that Access to Work considers better informing the public about what is available under the scheme so that an applicant is more confident to apply for support unaided.

2. Provision of information in accessible formats.

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 people with sight loss, this includes access to information in a format that suits them. Therefore, at the initial point of contact, every effort should be made by Access to Work to determine the client’s preferred format and to issue all correspondence in that format. The client’s chosen format is being recorded at the first point of contact, but no one present at the focus groups had received information in their preferred format.

“They even go through the rigmarole of asking you your preferred format, but even so they don’t send information to you in it”.

“Why are they recording the need for accessible formats when it’s not being used?”

“I couldn’t read my assessment report, and nor could my line manager, so I insisted we get it in another format, but it took a long time to sort it out.”

Insensitivity around the individual’s privacy and independence was apparent when one client was asked “can’t you get someone to fill in the form for you?”

Clients need to receive all information from Access to Work in an accessible format of their choosing, and Access to Work should be providing this under the Equality Act 2010 and making arrangements for this to be done. For example, there are Third Sector and commercial providers that could be contracted to produce reports confidentially in a range of accessible formats (audio, Braille, large print, etc.).

Recommendations for addressing issues around provision of information in accessible formats:

that advisors understand the need to promote independence, preserve dignity and ensure confidentiality with regard to completion of forms;

that Access to Work implements the production of accessible documents in line with their policy of capturing the preferred format of each client.

3. The move to online, digital information.

With people having difficulties completing claim forms and experiencing delays with payment we welcome Access to Work's plans to introduce an online claim form for fares within work, support worker hours etc. "They need to have a portal." This portal would need to be accessible to software screen readers to provide a much more accessible and expedient service than is currently available. However, we should be mindful of digital exclusion where we cannot assume that everyone will be availed of such technologies.

Recommendation for addressing the move to online information:

that digital exclusion is accounted for in plans to digitise the application and claims processes.

Theme 3: Advisor skills and knowledge

Focus Group members have noted a lack of empathy and understanding from the Advisors. Access to Work has stated that “Disability Awareness forms an integral part of our Advisor Training” Advisors have mentors who are identified and appointed based on their knowledge of disability and awareness presentations have been sourced from RNIB. However, despite this, knowledge is largely reported as being poor and there appears to be a lack of training specifically around vision impairment and sight conditions. One client’s advisor documented his eye condition as “Nysthemus” instead of Nystagmus, which indicated a lack of knowledge of the field.

“When I got through to someone, they made me feel really stupid. Like they didn’t know what my eye condition was and I had to explain what it was and how it affected my work”.

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

“I was asked ‘Are you still blind?’”

Formerly, having a named advisor who would handle your case throughout was beneficial because this consistency made the service person-centred where the advisor 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 advisor “what would a normal person do?”

Whilst 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 advisor more understanding of each client’s individual requirements and avoids a culture of ‘one size fits all’.

Recommendation for addressing Advisor skills and knowledge:

that Access to Work advisors receive specific vision impairment awareness training, to include knowledge of sight conditions and disability equality training, delivered by blind and partially sighted people themselves. This would provide positive role models and adopt the ‘nothing about us without us’ approach.

Theme 4: Assessments

Provider Guidance states that ‘the customer’s expectations should be managed throughout the holistic assessment process... the final report should not come as a surprise to the customer’. (Provider Guidance 16)

It also states that a ‘suitably qualified assessor’ will (Provider Guidance 17):

- Meet with the customer face to face;
- Undertake the specified holistic assessment;
- Make recommendations to address work related barriers specifically related to the customer’s disability;
- Produce a written Needs Assessment Report (to a specified standard).

Access to Work reported that “around 43 VI 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 the Access to Work is aiming to cut costs by avoiding paying for external assessors.

“I was told the cost of a technical assessment and asked if I really needed one.”

“I was told Access to Work didn’t do technical assessments any more.”

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.

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

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

Furthermore, the Third Sector in Wales offers a wide range of services such as welfare benefits advice and advocacy, IT training, emotional support and transcription into Braille and other formats. The 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.

Three main concerns were raised in the focus groups: technical assessments, travel and the employment of a support worker. These are considered in turn:

1. Technical Assessments.

The Access to Work advisor is at risk of offering the wrong solutions because of their apparent reluctance to offer a proper technical assessment.

“I was given magnifiers without any assessment or training, so I didn’t actually know how to use them.”

“I gave up as I received no support when asking for a technical assessment.”

“You feel like you’re constantly having to justify you need stuff”.

There appears to be an expectation that all clients are experts in what can assist them in their jobs. A technical assessor should know of a broad range of solutions so that the best package is offered to suit the client’s particular employment scenario. On the other hand, where the client knows what they want through their own understanding of technology, this should be respected and acted upon by Access to Work.

“When I first started work around 11 years ago Access to Work provided me with an assessment by a specialist in vision impairment needs. This was vital as I was unaware of the equipment available to me.”

Today, however, the assessors’ experience and knowledge appears to be variable. This again points towards an inconsistent service. There is evidence that not all assessors have the intimate knowledge of the range of access technology for empowering people with sight loss.

“I asked for a video magnifier to help me enlarge print but the assessor was unaware of the products available and asked me to source three quotes for a product of my choice. I didn’t know what to choose, so I went to Wales Council of the Blind for advice. That’s not a great service from the assessor. I felt like I had to do all the work myself.”

“My assessor asked me ‘what do you want?’”

Where a technical assessment has been done, our focus group expressed concern that the recommendations were not always implemented:

“I was advised I needed SuperNova Access Suite by the assessor, but Access to Work then said I only need a screen magnifier because it was cheaper. I’d been advised by the assessor – so why won’t they provide it?”

If the investment is being made in a technical assessment, there needs to be confidence and trust in the assessor’s judgement. Moreover there needs to be a process in place for discussion of the results of the report with the client:

“You really have to know the system. I was happy with my assessment but felt that some of the recommended equipment should be funded by Access to Work and not my employer, as it is only being provided as a result of my sight loss. I wanted to discuss this with my advisor but instead had to make a formal appeal. This made me feel as if I was

complaining and I felt awkward with my employer because they felt that they shouldn't have to fund it. I won my appeal only because I understood the system but that might not be the same for others."

Recommendations for addressing issues around technical assessments:

that assessments should be offered as a matter of right and conducted by an individual who has a broad knowledge of sight loss, associated technologies and what is available in Wales. This will ensure that the client receives advice and recommendations that fully support their needs;

that where an assessment has been conducted it should form the basis for the subsequent package of support;

that clients are able to offer suggestions and modifications to the final report without having to go through a formal appeals process;

that the client's equipment needs are reviewed periodically.

2. Travel to, from and within work.

This can also be problematic. DWP has stated "applications will take into consideration whether customers already have a suitable vehicle supplied through the Motability scheme. This being the case, the customer should not require

additional assistance from Access to Work.” However, a person with visual impairment who has a vehicle from this scheme still requires someone to drive it. Finding alternative transport is difficult and clients have found that “Advisors’ knowledge of the geography of Wales is not good.”

Travel training, that is training to learn a particular route, is another little-known and misunderstood solution that can be funded through Access to Work. This is training around a specific route only. It is not a comprehensive package that enables someone to travel independently in all locations. In order to be effective, the service must be person-centred and understanding of their specific needs.

“There was a total lack of understanding that my guide dog couldn’t know all the routes that I needed to know for work. I really had to beg to get a support worker and say that without this, I would have to give up work.”

“I was encouraged to have a support worker rather than use taxis, even though this was not the most appropriate solution for me.”

In addition to tailoring support to individual need, it is important to recognise that different roles within the workplace may require certain types of support regarding transport. For example, some individuals may need to respond instantly to a requirement to travel – in which case a taxi may be more appropriate – while others may be able

to schedule their appointments around their support worker hours.

“It can be particularly difficult if you are freelance or self-employed as your work is hard to predict. It might not be appropriate to have a support worker, and be better to use taxis for travel. But they don’t understand this.”

Recommendations for addressing issues around travel assessments:

that Access to Work promotes a better understanding amongst staff and clients around the scope and purpose of travel training;

that advisors recognise the differing travel needs of individual clients, in relation to both their personal abilities and the requirements of their job. This includes implementing a more flexible approach for people with sight loss who are unable to drive motability vehicles.

3. Employment of support workers.

The biggest concern was around the inflexibility of the system, especially where the need for a support worker varied from week to week:

“They can’t be flexible over the need for a support worker. It has to be set hours over the weeks.”

“I can’t tell how much support I’ll need in any given week, but I have to have a fixed number of hours. The thing is I know that some people get flexible budgets. Why hasn’t his been offered to me?”

“There’s a lack of flexibility within budgets and how you use them. Once your budget has been reduced, then it’s very hard to get it increased again, even if your work circumstances have changed, like working more hours.”

The process of setting up the support worker has also proved distressing and problematic:

“I had to give a minute-by-minute account of why I needed a support worker. It was like I was having to justify it. I understand why they need that, but it’s the way they speak to you about it. It makes you feel like you’re doing something wrong”.

“It’s difficult to get a support worker when you’re only given a few hours – it’s not worth doing it.”

There would also seem to be some discrepancy in the amount different support workers are paid – some guidance from Access to Work about rates would generally be welcomed.

Recommendations for addressing issues around employment of support workers:

that advisors must promote choice and flexibility in how the hours for a support worker are allocated;

that guidance on salary / payments for support workers are made available.

Theme 5: Payments, Reviews and Personalised Budgets

The focus group participants have 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. It's important that the system ensures prompt payment:

“The impact of (lost paperwork) to my support workers was that they often had long delays for their wages and this affected them as they were self-employed and relied on that money. For me the delay in taxi payments caused a cash flow problem.”

“My biggest issue is with the payment team – they don't pay on a particular date. I've been told several times by the taxi company that they would cancel my account because, for example, it hasn't been paid for three months. They don't seem to care that I couldn't pay my support worker, and that that person couldn't pay their bills or their rent.

“They changed where you had to send your payment claims three times, and didn't even tell me.”

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

“It was frustrating. My payment hadn’t come through and I had to call the contact centre to chase it up. It took ages.”

“When you complain you’re just told ‘well, that’s how it happens - we’re very busy’ and so on.

“When you email, you have an auto-response saying someone will contact you within 48 hours. I’ve not been getting any response and had to email them three times.”

These delays create a disincentive to work as flexibly as the client’s job may, from time-to-time, demand. However, despite this some people have commented that for them the payment process has improved.

It is encouraging that people are continuing to remain in employment and are re-applying for support from Access to Work. However, it is not necessarily a smooth process as Access to Work 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 claim period had expired. This can put a further burden on the employer if they are asked to pay for support in the interim and further reinforces employers’ opinions that people with sight loss are difficult or impossible to employ (RNIB 2004).

“It would be helpful, when the support period is coming to an end, to be sent a reminder well before this date to book a review appointment.”

“It was a nightmare trying to re-apply for my claim. The advisor said ‘we’re too busy now with people trying to apply’ as though it were a bad thing. It comes across as being a bit of a production line.”

“I assumed my agreement for my support worker was for three years, as it had been usually, but it was only up to the end of the year. So I overran the deadline and had to begin the application process almost from the beginning. It’s taken months and months to sort out.”

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 is, after all, the aim of the Access to Work service. “Access to Work is a key provision to support disabled people with moving into and remaining in work” (DWP key objectives). This will be achieved by having regular reviews and ensuring that the assessor keeps up-to-date with the full range of solutions available.

It is also important to remember that “Many vision impaired people gradually lose their sight over time so it is important that this is considered so that a review of needs is offered to address any change in sight.”

Personalised budgets and self-employment.

In 2015, a new rationing measure was announced that sets a £40,800 cap on the personalised budget. We strongly suggest that existing recipients of budgets larger than this are formally notified of the new limit and that they are supported through this change. Where there is a significant drop in the client's personalised budget, it is essential that the specialist understanding and knowledge of an assessor is made available to the client so that an appropriate solution is found where possible. Solutions may exist with emerging technologies but Access to Work must be mindful that these may not be an effective substitute for a sighted support worker.

There are also concerns over the self-employed person being screened-out of this invaluable service where their income is below the tax threshold.

“As a newly started business, my income is below the minimum level to receive support from Access to Work. This is disempowering and I feel like I'm being punished for not earning enough at a time when the support is really needed to build my business and confidence”.

Clear guidance on tax thresholds and self-employment would be welcomed.

Recommendations for addressing issues around Payments, Reviews and Personalised Budgets:

that a direct line of contact is established between the client and the claims team to increase communication and the speed of payments;

that clients whose personal budgets exceed the cap are contacted well in advance to discuss solutions and receive support in adapting to the cut in the level of support;

that Access to Work contacts people with sight loss giving them advanced notice of their claim period coming to an end;

that Access to Work abandons the use of the tax threshold as a measure of eligibility for self-employed applicants in favour of a more holistic assessment of a business' viability.

Conclusion

Access to Work is a vital scheme, valued by people with disabilities and their employers. People with sight loss 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.

This report highlights difficulties experienced by real claimants and offers solutions through the recommendations given. It is hoped that these will be seriously considered by Access to Work and that they will contribute to improving the employability of people with sight loss in Wales.

Appendix 1: Summary of Recommendations

Contact with clients:

1. That Access to Work reinstates the practice of assigning a named advisor for each client, with telephone access that bypasses the call centre. This would provide continuity and stability for the client.
2. That Access to Work demonstrates more sensitivity and flexibility around contact arrangements and only closes a case in consultation with the client.

Information about Access to Work Provision:

3. That Access to Work considers better informing the public about what is available under the scheme so that an applicant is more confident to apply for support unaided.

Provision of information in accessible formats:

4. That advisors understand the need to promote independence, preserve dignity and ensure confidentiality with regard to completion of forms.
5. That Access to Work implements the production of accessible documents in line with their policy of capturing the preferred format of each client.

The move to online information:

6. That digital exclusion is accounted for in plans to digitise the application and claims processes.

Advisor skills and knowledge:

7. That Access to Work advisors receive specific vision impairment awareness training, to include knowledge of sight conditions and disability equality training, delivered by blind and partially sighted people themselves. This would provide positive role models and adopt the 'nothing about us without us' approach.

Technical assessments:

8. That assessments should be offered as a matter of right and conducted by an individual who has a broad knowledge of sight loss, associated technologies and what is available in Wales. This will ensure that the client receives advice and recommendations that fully support their needs.

9. That where an assessment has been conducted it should form the basis for the subsequent package of support.

10. That clients are able to offer suggestions and modifications to the final report without having to go through a formal appeals process.

11. That the client's equipment needs are reviewed periodically.

Travel assessments:

12. That Access to Work promotes a better understanding amongst staff and clients around the scope and purpose of travel training.

13. That advisors recognise the differing travel needs of individual clients, in relation to both their personal abilities and the requirements of their job. This includes implementing a more flexible approach for people with sight loss who are unable to drive motability vehicles.

Employment of support workers:

14. That advisors must promote choice and flexibility in how the hours for a support worker are allocated.

15. That guidance on salary / payments for support workers are made available.

Payments, Reviews and Personalised Budgets

16. That a direct line of contact is established between the client and the claims team to increase communication and the speed of payments.

17. That clients whose personal budgets exceed the cap are contacted well in advance to discuss solutions and receive support in adapting to the cut in the level of support.

18. That Access to Work contacts people with sight loss giving them advanced notice of their claim period coming to an end.

19. That Access to Work abandons the use of the tax threshold as a measure of eligibility for self employed applicants in favour of a more holistic assessment of a business' viability.

Appendix 2: List of participating organisations

The following organisations contributed to the focus groups:

- Job Centre Plus
- Wales Council of the Blind
- RNIB Cymru
- Sight Cymru
- Vision Support
- Guide Dogs Cymru
- Musicians in Focus
- UCAN Productions
- Work Choice
- Rehabilitation Officers throughout Wales

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