# Transcript for the Update on the Access to Work scheme – TechShare Pro 2022.

ADI: Hi I'm Adi Latif and in this session, we are going to be talking about a service called Access to Work. Here we have with us on this session, Ian Milton and Debbie Bradford from the Department for Work and Pensions. Hi guys, welcome to the session. It's great to have you here and it'll be great to hear some information about Access to Work. Before we jump into that, my personal experience with Access to Work has been amazing. It's a service that I hold very dearly to close to my heart. For all of my working life, I've been tapping into Access to Work to help me level the playing field. I'm blind and I face very number of challenges in the workplace. When I first started working back in 2005, the workplace wasn't that accessible so Access to Work helped me fund a screen reader which reads the computer screen to me, but they also helped pay for programmers to make my screen reader work better with the inaccessible software that was present in the place I worked at. Access to Work isn't amazing all the time and many disabled people might have some nightmare stories about Access to Work, however it's got better and better as the years have gone on and I'm really excited to have Ian and Debbie with us today to tell us a little bit more about the service. Hi guys, so can you just start off and just by letting us know what Access to Work is if that's okay.

IAN: Yeah absolutely. So Access to Work is a scheme like you say for people with disabilities and health conditions who are either starting or returning to work and they may need some extra support to enable them within the workplace to overcome those challenges they may face that someone who doesn't share the same condition as them may face. If you don't know what support that you need, Access to Work can help you there by giving you an assessment the Access to Work will fund one hundred percent and that can be done in a workplace or virtually, depending on your job. But, that assessment provides recommendations on the different types of support to help you within the workplace and of course once that's all taken place, the Access to Work grant is made available up to I think it's £65,180 per year for those in work support needs. So, there's a real wide type of support that Access to Work can assist with, but generally it's there to help and support you in the workplace.

ADI: Amazing, can you confirm that any person who has a disability and is in the workplace can access the support, is that right?

IAN: Yes, that's correct, if they're over 16 years of age, they're living in what we call "Great Britain" so that includes Scotland, Wales, and England. And they're about to start work or they're in paid employment but they can also be self-employed, running a business, a freelancer or contractor but also, they could be an apprentice or on a supported internship traineeship. So, there is quite a broad eligibility criterion for people to be able to access this scheme.

ADI: Right and what would be useful to know is Ian, is to know what type of help do people get through Access to Work? It would just be nice to hear some of the types of help of people access.

IAN: Yeah, so one of the key things that we normally provide is especially specialist equipment. So that can be things like you mentioned earlier, screen readers. It can be scripting I think it was that you mentioned, to enable that to work better. It can be chairs, it can be filters, there can be a whole range of things, but additionally Access to Work can also provide support workers such as job coaches to enable you to learn the job and obviously overcome some of the barriers. It can be a British sign language interpreter to help with communication but also it can be a job aid. A job aid is someone that's enabling you within the workplace to do activities that you may not necessarily be able to do without that type of support and Access to Work does fund those. There are other types of support available from Access to Work such as assistance in travelling to and from work, where you can't necessarily use public transport or drive yourself because of various in relation to accessibility but actually Access to Work can also provide communication support at interview for individuals who can't express themselves clearly in that process but also in Sign Language interpreting to really help people overcome those barriers in that initial step that's really important in moving into employment.

ADI: I see so Access to Work can provide some sort of pre-employment support as well. I wasn't aware of that. How far does that extend?

IAN: So at the moment, it is mainly that communication support at interview but on some DWP programs, where someone's doing an in work element then Access to Work can provide some support that isn't available from the provider such as a work in a health program. But we do have some vocational programs across government, that I think I might have mentioned before, but they're also available for the in-work strands so supported internship, traineeships, apprenticeships but also Access to Work funding can be available where someone is doing work experience and that's for up to eight weeks per year. It doesn't have to be eight weeks in one go, it can be four periods of two weeks for example. As long as it is within a 12-month period and it doesn't exceed eight weeks, that funding is available for the work experience and that's the same as other Access to Work funding. It's just for a shorter period for the work experience.

ADI: That's amazing that sounds powerful, I wasn't aware of that but that's great. How does someone like an employer, if they've bought on someone disabled working for them or employed someone disabled, or they're thinking about having more disabled people work for them, how much commitment financially then does the employer have to put down or how do you figure out if the employer needs to pay for something or if Access to Work needs to pay for something?

DEBBIE: Yeah that's a good question. That's a very complicated question.

ADI: Okay, you've got one minute! [Laughter].

IAN: So this does get really complicated because the system as you probably know from your own experience, it isn't always straightforward but I'm going to try and make this as simple as I can. So if someone's been in work for more than six weeks, when they apply for Access to Work the employer may be required to make a contribution towards the cost of that support. Now normally that specialist aids and equipment, things like support workers and other elements of Access to Work are ruled out but there are some, just getting to the minute detail, but we'll keep it high level for the minute, but there's a threshold for medium employers it's £500 and large employers, it's a £1000, so that's the first part. And then beyond that, 20 percent of the remaining costs, the employer will contribute towards but the Access to Work case managers are very well skilled in this area to talk to employers about it and they'll support them through. They've got an information sheet to give to employers to help them as well so there are there are needs in certain circumstances for employers to have a contribution, but we tend to talk about them on a case-by-case basis because it really does vary depending on the type of sport you're receiving.

DEBBIE: Yeah and that calculation that Ian was discussing there is based on the number of staff the employer has, so obviously for the small and micro employers I think that's 0 to 50 and there is no contribution required at all. And then anything between 50 and 250 is the medium-sized employer which is the £500 initial contribution and anything over 500 is the £1000 pounds contribution.

ADI: Okay and it is kind of based also in a case-by-case basis. Okay that's great. How does one get the ball rolling with Access to Work then? What's the process of applying for it?

IAN: So to apply for Access to Work there's a number of ways. Our main way that we would suggest is by visiting the gov.uk page and type in Access to Work into any search engine or just go to gov.uk/access-to-work. Quite a mouthful but if you go to that address, it's available 24/7 and that is the easiest way to apply for Access to Work. You can do it using mobile phones, tablets, desktop and computers. It's been designed with disabled people for them to make sure that it does work. The other ways are via the Access to Work helpline and that is by phone. You can use the video relay service if your first language is say British sign language but also we have a text phone service as well, that's normally open between the hours of 9 till 5 Monday to Friday and can be contacted on 0800 121 7479 and they're our two key main routes to come into Access to Work and apply. But like I said, the online application takes all of the information and is available 24/7. I recommend that as the best route to come into Access to Work and apply.

ADI: Fantastic Ian, and I guess just for people watching just to get into some practical examples, so like I said I use Access to Work on the ground, so I've had funding for things like a screen reader, I've had funding for support workers at times so as a blind person I need a set of values at times. If I'm creating a PowerPoint presentation you know I need someone to say, "Oh that looks really ugly" or you know, "there's something wrong with your writing there", "that's a bit off-centred". all that kind of stuff so I get help at times through a support worker to get to the office, I got some funding for a little while for travel to work, so I would get an Uber to the office and all that would be covered by Access to Work. Can you just walk us through what the sort of back end of the process is to get that money? What kind of levels of admin is involved with that? Just to give people an insight to that.

[Laughter]

DEBBIE: Ian can chip in if I get this wrong. It's quite a complex system for Access to Work, so you will submit your application, a caseworker will be allocated your application. Now if you know what support you need then that support can be put in place straight away but if you don't know what support you need then your application will be sent to one of our holistic assessors, who will come out and see you in the workplace or you can do that virtually. The assessor will assess what needs you need, talk to you, talk to your employer, and make recommendations which will then go back to the Access to Work caseworker who will then use those recommendations to put the inward in place. Once that is done you will be notified of the amount of funding that has been agreed and what it's for and then you can apply to get that funding either in one lump sum if it is for a piece of equipment or monthly if it is for ongoing support.

ADI: Amazing Debbie, that's fantastic and that funding - just to clarify that doesn't come into my bank, that sits with Access to Work, and I chip away at it every time I submit a form, is that right?

DEBBIE: Correct.

ADI: Okay that's lovely and those forms I mentioned that you know I've had some struggles with Access to Work, those forms in the past were always paper based, you know to fill out forms to sign them physically and then post them back and that was very challenging for me as a blind person to do that and for many other people that I know had similar struggles. But since the pandemic, one of the kind of upsides I've found is, it's moved to be more digital so now you can submit things electronically. Can you just confirm is that is that going to stay? Or are we going to go back to the paper system again?

DEBBIE: We have some exciting news on that one, so Ian will give you an up-to-date report on that.

IAN: So some fantastic news and this has been kind of a positive that's come from the pandemic for us is it's given us the opportunity to push forward with something we've been talking about for years in moving Access to Work payments online. So really positively we're in the process at the moment of testing an online claims portal which what that means is that Access to Work customers will have a place that they can go to, I'm assuming it's going to be on gov.uk because that's where we normally build everything, but it will be linked to your Access to Work account that only you will have access to. You can submit your claims online including your receipts, so there's no need for paper and you can tell us who you’re the person is to sign your claims to confirm the support you've received.

ADI: Yeah, so that's just to confirm that "Yes Adi, you did take the taxi to work today" and "Yes, Adi, you've had the support worker work for you for five hours this week" - it's usually the manager or someone in the organisation.

IAN: Absolutely, we're even taking that act to an electronic authentication. Ultimately what's happening is the employer will get an email once you've, or whoever you've told us, once you've clicked submit on your payment once they get that email to click on a one-time link to say "yes Adi was doing this on this day" comes back into our system and then it's paid.

ADI: Amazing, oh my God.

IAN: So it's been something I've been waiting for so long and I know it's so frustrating for our customers because paper is so outdated and the technology is there. It's just been difficult to get it in but like I say the pandemic has been so helpful for us in that. So we are testing that at the moment, that started at the back end of September, we're hoping to conclude by November and review it in December so that in the new year we can aim to roll that out to all Access to Work customers. We haven't got a date in the new year, but our digital teams are telling us the new year is when they're looking to do it so it's not that far away and I hope it's fantastic news for you and everyone else who comes to Access to Work.

ADI: Wow, that is incredible, just as an audio description I've got a big, massive smile on my face. I guess that brings me on to my next point, I know we had a little chat before we started today, you know we were talking about there's quite a backlog and I guess there's various reasons, but it'll be nice for you to just maybe share that with us, the backlog. But I'm guessing this move to digital will help to reduce the backlog, but can you just tell us a little bit about this backlog, just to help people manage their expectations?

DEBBIE: Yeah so, you're absolutely right, we've got a massive digital transformation programme going on, so at the moment we've got the front end digitalised so you can apply online and we've got the back end hopefully digitalised, which means payments will come through but it's the middle chunk that is currently also being transformed and is taking some time and that's causing some of the problems with delay. But what we have seen is obviously with the pandemic, we introduced a new offer for disabled people which reacted to the situation people were in and it's for hybrid working. So what this means is that you can have support in the office in the workplace and also at home. This is something new and I think we've seen a lot of people take up this offer recently and one of the main criticisms, we get about Access to Work is it's the government's best kept secret. Well we've started to unlock that secret and we've been doing an awful lot of promotion work and the numbers have just been flooding in and I think it's a combination of all of that that has caused the problem but what we are doing within Access to Work, if you've got a job to start within the next four weeks your application will be prioritised or if you are applying for Renewal so you've already got access to work and it's going to run out your application will also be prioritised so we've put in some steps to try and protect the employment. We've brought in additional staff; there's nearly 150 new staff have been brought in to support Access to Work and they are working overtime as well so loads of measures are in place and we are you know desperately trying to get that backlogged down because we've done all this work to bring people in so we want to make sure they get that support now.

ADI: That sounds really promising. Just a technical question, if there is say someone's support has run out and it's taken a little while for it to be renewed, will they get that time in between that the payment might have stopped, will that be covered?

DEBBIE: Yeah, as long as they still they need that support it will be covered.

ADI: Excellent, just to finish, is there anything you want to say that's not been covered so far that you'd like people to know about?

DEBBIE: Yeah, we've got some exciting things happening in Access to Work so something we've been testing in universities is to help disabled students coming out of the university and moving into the world of work is an adjustments passport. So we've been testing this in three universities in Wolverhampton, Manchester Metropolitan and King's College London. What is happening is that students are completing the passports with their students offices so any support that they've had at University, whether it's through a disabled student's allowance or the university has put support in place capturing all that support down so that then the students got that information so that when they go to see an employer they can say "this is the support I've had in the past" and "this is the support I will need in the future". Also this helps raise awareness of Access to Work because we found a lot of students were not aware of Access to Work and also employers, so we're trying to sort of bridge that gap with the passport. And then if the student is happy that passport has captured all their needs in the world of work, they can then use that for their Access to Work application so that we can get the support put in place quicker rather than having to go through on the assessment route. So we've been testing it for a year and we've had really great feedback on it. We will hopefully be able to roll that out. At the same time in our job centres we've introduced what we're calling the Health adjustments passport and this means if you're a disabled job seeker, you can have a conversation with your work coach get the passport completed and that will enable the work coach to then send you to the appropriate job for you and also raise with the employer that you will need support and the type of support you will need. So it stops any of those difficult conversations and also takes away some of the embarrassment because we have been told you know, particularly from students, that they don't like telling employers they have a disability whereas if they've got something with them that says "I've got this, I've got the support it's not going to be an issue" it's building that confidence. So really great things that are happening in that space.

ADI: That sounds absolutely amazing because one of the other nightmares people have been that they start a job and they've not got the support in place till like weeks and weeks and weeks into a job which is difficult it's hard enough starting a new job and then not having support in place just makes really challenging so that sounds really promising.

DEBBIE: Yeah so lots of activity in that space. We've done a lot of work in the self-employment area so particularly for disabled contractors and freelancers again, they can use the passport, but we've also introduced for them a Flexible application. Now what that means is, if you are working as a contractual freelancer obviously you have a contract for a period then you may not have another contract for another three or four months, so currently what happens is you put in your application you'll get support for three months then it ends. Then when you get your next job, you must reapply and start from the beginning again. With the flexible application, what that will mean is that the contractual freelancer will put in their application, support will be awarded for three years, and you'll be able to turn it on and turn it off as you move between jobs. So a bit like furlough so when you're in work you will get support then it will lay dormant until your next contract starts and then it will reactivate as soon as you move into the new area of work.

ADI: Wow that's incredible. That kind of flexibility was missing in Access to Work even though the support you get is amazing, but it was just this level of flexibility was missing and it's so encouraging to hear that's in place.

DEBBIE: Yeah and one final thing.

ADI: There's something else!

[Laughter]

DEBBIE: You shouldn't have started me off you see! We're also currently delivering a pilot known as "Access to Work plus" now Access to Work plus is really targeted at those individuals who need an awful lot of support to get into work so these will be people who need more than the current Access to Work. So we're introducing an enhanced level of support for these individuals that brings in things like supervision and ongoing job coaching so rather than job coaching sort of stopping after 26 weeks, this can be indefinite but at the same time recognising that an employer may have difficulties obviously because if you've got somebody who needs a lot of support it may affect the scope and the pace of the job that they're able to do. So where an employer is willing to flex that job and make adjustments to enable that individual to work. There is for the first time some funding that is available for that employer if they are willing to do that adaption to the job role to enable that individual to work. So it's only in the pilot stage at the moment so we're getting some interesting case studies of individuals who've never been able to work since they've left school and now sort of approaching 30 are moving into work for the first time. So some really positive outcomes that we'll probably be able to share with you next time.

ADI: That sounds incredible and for that scheme, do you have particular employers that you work with? Or would it just be down to the candidate to find an employer that'd be willing to take part in that kind of scheme?

DEBBIE: So it's open to all employers. We have been working with the disability confident employers to raise awareness of that and we've also been working with some social enterprises that again to raise awareness but the offer is open to any employer but those are the sort of key areas where we've been targeting our sort of focus on.

ADI: Fantastic. Great well it's been an absolute pleasure having you, Debbie and Ian, on this session and letting us know how Access to Work operates and also the new exciting developments that that have taken place. Can you just answer before we finish, where would somewhere go if they wanted to get a ball rolling with Access to Work?

IAN: So to get the ball rolling with Access to Work, people would need to apply on the gov.uk page and search Access to Work or just to find out a bit more or to ask advice or for more information, they can contact the Access to Work helpline between 9 to 5, Monday to Friday and all the contact details are available on the gov.uk page but just in case, the phone number is 0800-121-7479.

ADI: Fantastic great, thank you Ian, thank you Debbie so much for joining us on this session!