Transcript for Update on the Access to Work scheme

Robin Christopherson:

We are back. Hi, guys, another AbilityNet Podcast. I'm with Mark again. Hi, Mark.

Mark Walker

Hiya. Hi, Robin. How are you doing?

Robin Christopherson:

Really good. Thank you. So it's about Access to Work this time. Now, not everyone might know what Access to Work is. So you want to give us a quick potted summary?

Mark Walker:

Well, this is interesting for us, I think because Access to Work is one of those mechanics through which disabled people are given support in the workplace. And it's a government fund. And it's a pot. It is a UK government fund. I know we'll have international listeners here. And it's not something that's particularly replicated in other in other parts of the world, there are some parts of the world that have something similar, but because employers may need additional support for particular employees, they can use the Access to Work fund to support the employees. So you can claim for taxi journeys, should it be necessary for you to use a taxi to get to get to and from work or to where you're working. That's a simple example. Anybody who is disabled and is and is familiar with Access to Work knows how important it is in their day to day. Ability to be participating and productive in the workplace. And I think what's really interesting about Access to Work is if you've never heard of it, then it's one of those things you don't know that you don't know. It's a classic sort of gap filler for people who are thinking, well, I can't employ disabled people, I wouldn't know what to do. Well, Access to Work is sitting in that gap saying, well, here's some support. Here's some resources and funds that the government provides, it's not the employer, it's not the employee. I mean, so I'm guessing, Robin that you've had experience of Access to Work in various years.

Robin Christopherson

Yeah, I qualify. I use Access to Work for the odd bit of support to help me you know, create better visual presentations to deal with paperwork where that's still a thing. So yeah, absolutely. Now this is Adi, isn't it? Adi Latif, brilliant colleague of ours talking to Ian Milton and Debbie Bradford. Both are at DWP, the Department of Work and Pensions. And yeah, talking about kind of what Access to Work is, and kind of latest developments. So should we give it a go?

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!

Mark Walker

So, Robin, that's great, isn't it? I mean, I think that it's really important. And particularly I'm sure listeners will get the sense that you know, it's quite difficult for the Department of Work and Pensions to talk about Access to Work in a disability event. It's it. There's a lot of questions in there that they need to answer an ongoing basis and we're talking to them, you know, the civil servants who are attempting to make sense of policies. I felt quite apart from the quality the information is in there. I think it's worth saying that I was very pleased that TechShare Pro for them provided a space that they could connect with the disability community that Adi who is a user of Access to Work and is really familiar with its you know, it’s good and bad sort of features. They were able to connect with him. And you know, when on behalf of AbilityNet, you know, it's important Access to Work is important to us as an employer as well. So I really love that mix. And of course, there's some great nuggets in there. There's some sort of sense of direction in terms of the way that technology is being adopted within the workplace. And I know that we're going to continue to be connecting in with the DWP and potentially, you know, bring them back next year, find out more about Access to Work, as the scheme evolves in relation to technology. I thought that was a really brilliant session to have brought together for us. And I'm hoping people find it really interesting.

Robin Christopherson

Yeah, it's great that the scheme is evolving to embrace the newer technologies that didn't exist before but are actually pivotal now. They're key, particularly when you're home working. In the case of Adi and myself, who can't see you haven't got a pair of eyes to call over when you need them. And just that extra level of support. So it's Yeah, embracing new ways of doing things, including a paperless finally, what's the year? Paperless process!

Mark Walker

Yeah, it's crazy. That was in the pandemic as well. You know, I’m Adi’s line manager, so that wouldn't have been obvious, but I have to sign off his claims on pieces of paper, so they have to be mailed to me. Yes, it's that that bit of the administration of it is,

Robin Christopherson

but guess what? It’s still not by default, it's on request. Anyway. But yeah, at least it's an option now. And I say everyone should request that if it's only for the for the sake of the trees. Cool. Nice one. That was really good. Thank you. That was great, wasn't it?