



Meeting summaries outline topics discussed by the Minister for Social Security and Disability and the Disability Unit Regional Stakeholder Network Chairs. These summaries do not reflect UK government policy unless specifically stated.

Meeting summary and action points - 2 June 2025

Quarterly meetings between the Minister for Social Security and Disability, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP (Minister Timms), and Regional Stakeholder Network (RSN) Chairs.

Attendees: Minister Timms, RSN Chairs - Justin Donne (East Midlands), Louise Mckiernan MBE (West Midlands), Marc Goblot (Greater London), Sam Everard / Wayne Ingram (South West), Ali Gunn (North West), Karen Hoe OBE (Yorkshire & Humber), Chloe Plummer (South East), Anne Wafula-Strike MBE (East of England), David Bateman - Head of Stakeholder Engagement, Disability Unit (DU) Cabinet Office and other officials from DU and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Apologies: John McDonald - (North East interim RSN Chair).

Discussion point	Action point
<p>Updates from Minister for Social Security and Disability, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minister Timms welcomed the RSN Chairs and congratulated Louise (West Midlands) on her recent MBE for services to disabled people. He thanked the Chairs for their vital involvement in the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill disability pay gap round tables and said that the <u>consultation</u> closes on 10 June. He thanked the Chairs for their detailed written feedback on the welfare reform theme, that they sent following the last meeting on 10 March. This was very useful and has been sent to DWP officials. The minutes from that meeting will be published on GOV.UK once the alternative formats are ready. Minister Timms said that the government continues with its work on the <u>Pathways to Work Green Paper</u> and gave an update on the proposals: There is a commitment to invest £1bn annually in employment support by the end of this Parliament, to ensure people out of work on health and disability grounds receive proper employment support. The Connect to Work initiative is currently being rolled out. The government is also focused on improving work incentives by addressing work disincentives associated with Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity (LCWRA). Finally, the government is looking at ensuring the long-term sustainability of Personal Independence Payment (PIP). The RSN are encouraged to contribute to the Green Paper consultation which closes on 30 June, as it is vital that the views and voices of disabled people across the regions are fed in. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> RSN Chairs to send ATech detailed feedback / case studies to the DU. DU to agree the September meeting theme at the DU-RSN meeting on 25 June and Minister's Office to send out the invite.

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anne (East of England) highlighted the importance of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) for those unable to work and raised concerns about potential changes to Access to Work (AtW), as this provides crucial support for disabled people who are working. Minister Timms reaffirmed the government's commitment to AtW and noted that a consultation is underway to explore how AtW can be improved, particularly in light of increased demand and application delays. Ali (North West) intends to submit a written account detailing a member's experience with AtW. <p>THEMATIC DISCUSSION: Feedback from RSN regions on Assistive and Accessible Technology (ATech)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RSN Chairs' meetings with the Minister are based upon specific themes, as set out in a forward plan. The theme for this meeting was agreed in advance as ATech. Minister Timms told the Chairs that ATech plays a positive role for lots of disabled people currently, but that there is greater potential not yet realised, so more can be done for the future. In the Pathways to Work Green Paper two priority ATech areas of work were announced: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To develop and deliver a digital resource that will help raise awareness of existing ATech and provide guidance on how it can be used to support disabled people. The first stage of the digital resource will be developed and launched in 2025. ○ To set up an ATech expert working group in 2025, made up of specialists from the ATech industry, disabled people's organisations, researchers, and relevant public and third sector organisations, to identify and where possible, develop solutions to the barriers disabled people face when trying to use and access ATech. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minister Timms asked the Chairs to share a brief summary of feedback from their regions/members on the <i>ATech theme</i>. DU officials attended to hear and capture this feedback. RSN Chairs will send detailed feedback and case studies to DU after this meeting. ● RSN East of England - Cost and availability are major barriers. ATech refers to products/services designed with accessibility in mind, but are often standardised. Interested in how it can be adapted to individual needs and integrated into broader digital accessibility efforts - some disabled people are unable to access digital platforms, or require support to do so. This can be trickier for certain types of disability (e.g. brain related). For example, the blue badge application process went digital and has proved challenging for many. ATech has so much to offer, but more needs to be done to show the benefits and how it could support disabled people, rather than focus on the pitfalls. Some disabilities, such as dyslexia, have been diagnosed using ATech, which is positive, however there are challenges when going to work if there is no tool to support them to articulate themselves, so their disability becomes a barrier again. Barriers with AI - some programmes have been found to be discriminatory to disabled people. There is a Cambridgeshire house that allows people to trial technology before buying. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RSN South West - Hidden costs - one member has an electric wheelchair funded by AtW, but each year has to pay to ship it for expensive servicing and these costs aren't covered by government schemes. Members have other equipment at home and have to pay each year for things like PAT testing. Schools have a preferred AAC (automated voice technology) service Grid, whereas the NHS prescribes other services, like LAMP, which schools then refuse to let children use due to non-compliance with school systems/training. There needs to be teacher training on various types of AAC or the NHS needs to prescribe what schools can use, so that young children don't have their voices taken away. ● RSN West Midlands - Cost is the biggest barrier - not just for purchasing but ongoing expenses. There is a lack of awareness of ATech amongst education establishments, employers, newly disabled individuals and those reentering the workforce. Where there is no previous exposure to ATech, it is a scramble to find out what may be available to support people to work or live independently. Training gaps in the NHS and care sector. Postcode lottery in ATech assessment services and confusion over funding responsibilities. Government guidance would be useful to show what a good ATech support service should look like. Education funding is unclear between schools and Local Authorities. AtW is a barrier - delays are impacting support and assessors lack knowledge on ATech, or push people to cheaper and less effective options. Same issue with Occupational Therapy (OT) services. There is a need for "try before you buy" centres, where people could test ATech before committing to purchase. ATech should be seen as a service (training/support etc.), not just equipment provision. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RSN Yorkshire & Humber - Visually impaired members have expressed how it is difficult to navigate in a sight led world, particularly if newly impaired - as well as challenges with learning new technology and inadequate building features and inaccessible lifts. Issues in accessing digital banking - new fraud checks are making it difficult for sight impaired people. Lack of availability in the workplace and cost of ATech is an issue - disabled people often have limited income and have to deal with costly insurance too. OT shortages - barriers to housing reasonable adjustments - there is a need for support with adaptations/equipment to allow people to function and be independent (sometimes replacing carers) - some have to research and buy themselves (if they can afford to). Some disabled people need assistance dogs to function on a daily basis - DWP don't recognise a dog as an aid under their definition - there are also hidden costs (food/health/insurance). Emerging AI tools are being welcomed as it can be beneficial for people who are visually impaired - sometimes it can be better than humans and it can be accessed via apps on smartphones, or smartglasses. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RSN North West - A Warrington charity showcases a “smart-enabled flat” equipped with technologies that support independent living, such as fall detection, voice-activated devices and facial recognition. Warrington Council is piloting a digital care (Broadband) project in 300 homes to improve care, safety and social inclusion. Voice recognition tools like Dragon, NaturallySpeaking and Microsoft Copilot help people with learning disabilities or other needs to write, communicate and work more effectively. “Digital divide” concerns - especially for older adults and those with cognitive impairments who lack skills to use digital tools, and some can’t afford. Apps/online services often claim to be accessible but fail in practice. AI bias/unintentional discrimination - concerns in recruitment. Some technologies (Bluetooth and certain Apple products) have triggered seizures for people with brain injuries - with a concern that studies on these are biased. Issues with wheelchair access on trains and buses, and inaccessible train stations. Some small businesses refused when they were offered free access audits and ramps, as they didn’t want to “encourage” disabled customers to visit. “App overload” - multiple health apps being developed. ATech should be an option, not a mandatory replacement for human support. Postcode lottery - concerns that access/funding varies by region and there have been some funding cuts to local digital innovation inclusion projects. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RSN Greater London - Employer resistance to ATech due to cost or security concerns - some say it isn't compatible with their IT security guidelines. Inconsistencies in employer reasonable adjustment practices - lack of provision of ATech to support individual needs - procurement isn't geared up for specialist ATech and tends to be more focussed on mainstream ATech. Lack of a marketplace - no resources (for both employers and consumers) on the options out there - sourcing options are narrow with perhaps one or two providers. There is no 'try before you buy' and there can be supply chain issues (this is an issue in the region). Lack of long-term evidence on ATech effectiveness, to help understand what sort of technology is good or bad. AtW assessors don't keep track of what ATech has worked to share with others. It is one thing to have ATech, but there needs to be more experts to support people to use it based on their needs, whether in the workplace or home. Carers often lack training/digital skills to be able to deploy it in social care settings. Issues raised around the use of technology (e.g. for hearing impairments) in public venues and access to transport. Issues with housing accessibility standards. Some councils are working on ATech provisions/pilots. Lambeth Council has an ATech centre for enabling people to trial technology. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● RSN East Midlands - Lack of detailed information on ATech in education, health and care plans (EHCPs) - inconsistent inclusion of ATech detail due to varying knowledge of staff gathering the information. Absence of a standardised approach to offering ATech i.e. 'an ATech passport'. Limited support for ATech continuity from children's services to adult services, which is impacting learner access to education. Local initiatives - referrals to the Disabled Facilities Grant and the Electronic Assistive Technology Service, with funding often sought from charities due to eligibility constraints. The new Connect to Work programme could support provision of ATech solutions for disabled people, especially at specialist colleges. Have spoken to the Karten Network who provide access to adaptive computer technology. Recommendations - ATech training should be integrated into initial teacher education training - clear funding pathways are needed for consistent, continuing support - create an ATech hub to provide information/centralised guidance. Justin will send two case studies demonstrating positive ATech impacts. ● RSN South East - The main barrier is cost. "Digital divide" amongst the disabled community issues - the technology is there but many lack the skills to use it effectively, or can only use it when they have a support worker with them (which isn't all the time). As well as equipment funding costs, there are also hidden costs like servicing. Issues with costs for employers and complexities around who owns the ATech when people transition between different services/jobs. Lots of fantastic ATech but some of it can often be a 'one size fits all' - for example seizure monitors can go under mattresses but can't track certain daytime activities - ATech effectiveness is therefore limited and needs further refinement to be tailored to different needs. Considerable challenges around assistance animals - how they are viewed in public spaces and issues with access denials. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Minister Timms asked if any of the Chairs had any success stories of people who have been helped by ATech. ● Ali (North West) - referenced the smart-enabled house, which has significantly improved a member's independence and has been transformative for their family. This is being showcased in Warrington to show how it can make a positive impact. ● Marc (Greater London) - said that a member, who is a wheelchair user, has taken part in some fantastic new robotic wheelchair user testing. He also said that there are examples of where AI can help people with CVs and business proposals. ● Justin (East Midlands) - explained that a physically disabled individual who had lost their business after many years, has used a virtual assistant on their iPad to start a new business. ● Wayne (South West) - supported (via the charity they work for, SAMEE) a Gulf War veteran, who is a wheelchair user with a passion for woodturning - AtW funding helped adapt all of his equipment to wheelchair height, which he found life changing. ● Minister Timms thanked the RSN Chairs for their valuable feedback on the ATech theme and looks forward to seeing their further detailed written feedback and any case studies they have, which the Chairs will send via the DU. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● David (DU) led a discussion on potential future themes for the upcoming RSN quarterly meetings. David said that in a previous meeting with the DU, RSN Chairs suggested that priority future themes, based on the issues most pressing for disabled people across the regions, are social care, SEND and transport. Transport is being considered for September, to ensure that themes fit with timings to influence government work, so the RSN can have the greatest impact. This is why the previous themes of employment support and welfare reform were chosen. DU will agree the next theme with the Chairs at their monthly DU-RSN Chair meeting on 25 June. ● Minister Timms agreed and said that the DU will confirm the September theme soon. Invites will then be sent out from the Minister's Office. ● Minister Timms asked if there was any other business that the RSN Chairs would like to raise. ● Anne (East of England) commented that there is ongoing online disability hate crime that should be looked at. This can impact disabled people who want to work. Minister Timms agreed that this is an important topic. ● Ali (North West) emphasised that disability hate crime is under-reported and welcomed the government's commitment to equal treatment of such crimes, and said that the charity she works for, United Response, has recently done some research on disability hate crime on public transport. Minister Timms asked that she send him the research. Ali also mentioned that next year is the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which we may like to incorporate in our forward plan. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Marc (Greater London) asked if there is a way to showcase and raise the profile of work that is happening around innovation/ATech for disabled people. Minister Timms said that he hoped that this is what the ATech digital resource could look to do. ● Minister Timms closed by thanking the RSN Chairs and their regional members for their valuable contributions. 	