



Department
for Work &
Pensions



Government
Social Research

Journeys to Access to Work

Improving the understanding of how and why people
choose to apply for Access to Work to
improve the support that DWP provide to their customers.

June 2026

DWP Research Report 1136

A report of research carried out by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

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Executive summary

Background

Access to Work (AtW) is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help more disabled people and people with health conditions start or stay in work. It provides funding for support which is considered above the 'reasonable adjustments' that employers are statutorily required to make under the Equality Act 2010. This includes Elements such as special aids and equipment, support workers, support provided by the Mental Health Support Service, and travel to work support. People may be eligible if: they have a disability or physical or mental health condition that affects their ability to work; are 16 or over; are in, or about to start, paid employment, and live and work in England, Scotland or Wales.

Demand for AtW has increased substantially in recent years, yet there is limited evidence about how people experience the scheme. In particular, the DWP wanted to understand:

- People's experience accessing support before they apply to AtW
- How they become aware of the scheme
- Why they apply
- Their journeys through the application process
- The extent to which the support helps them enter or remain in work

This research was commissioned to address these gaps and to support ongoing policy development.

Methodology

The research involved 90 qualitative interviews with AtW applicants and 26 interviews with employers of different sizes and sectors. Applicants were recruited using quotas to achieve a diverse sample, including applicants with different health conditions and who had been approved for different types of support. Interviews explored applicants' awareness of AtW, their reasons for applying, their experiences of the application process, and their views on the support provided. Similar themes were explored with employers, with the addition of barriers and enablers to providing reasonable adjustments or facilitating provision of AtW support. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically, with quotations used in the main report to illustrate applicants' and employers' experiences.

Findings

Journeys to Access to Work

Applicants' experiences of AtW were influenced by multiple intersecting factors: their health condition(s), how long they had lived with the condition, whether they had help completing the application, their understanding of support needs, prior experience with disability benefits, the type of AtW support sought, motivation for applying, employment status, and how essential support was for them to stay in work.

These factors combined in different ways to produce six common journeys to claiming AtW. While each applicant's claim is shaped by highly individual factors, this journey typology illustrates a range of barriers or challenges to applying to AtW that some are able to overcome and others not. These include an applicant's capacity to self-advocate for their needs within the workplace and to adequately evidence their needs during the AtW application process in order to support their claim.

Awareness and routes into Access to Work

Awareness of AtW varied and depended on whether applicants had existing connections who were familiar with the scheme, either in their personal lives or at work. Applicants may have first heard about AtW informally through colleagues, managers, family and friends, disability organisations or health professionals. Others found out only after searching for support when their circumstances changed.

Reasons for applying included changes in applicants' health or symptoms, which made work more difficult without support. Workplace changes, such as new responsibilities, hybrid working or updated technology, also created new challenges and led people to apply. Other applicants applied immediately after learning about AtW for the first time, or after exhausting other support options such as reasonable adjustments or NHS provision.

Experiences of the information available online were mixed. Those with previous experience of disability support found it clearer, while others, particularly those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions, found it difficult to navigate. Employers also wanted clearer information about eligibility, cost-sharing and their responsibilities.

Support provided by employers

Applicants' experiences of support from employers before applying to AtW depended on how well employers understood and provided reasonable adjustments. Where employers had a clear understanding of reasonable adjustments, they offered support such as flexible working or equipment, which helped applicants manage their roles before needing AtW. Other employers had limited awareness and were unsure what adjustments they were responsible for, which meant applicants received only temporary or minimal support. Other reasons for not implementing adjustments

included cost constraints, organisational processes or the nature of the role, which limited what could be offered.

Whether AtW was discussed with employers before applying varied and depended on how confident applicants felt raising their needs and how familiar employers were with the scheme. Applicants reported discussing AtW at the start of a new job or within ongoing informal conversations about support. Others discussed AtW only in more formal settings, often triggered by a change in circumstances, such as a health event or new workplace demands, and sometimes after being referred to occupational health to clarify support needs.

Where applicants did not discuss AtW at all, this tended to be due to applicants' concerns about being judged by colleagues, or that applying would impact their probation, or fearing their employers' reaction to the cost share requirements. Others were unable to have conversations because employers were unsupportive and did not make time for discussions about support.

Experiences of applying to Access to Work

Applicants' experiences of applying varied according to their circumstances, understanding of their needs and the support available. Applicants who received support from employers, friends or family, or who applied by phone, generally found the process manageable. Others, especially those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions, found the online form difficult because of technical language, long open-text questions and the administrative effort involved.

Regarding the AtW Workplace Assessment, applicants felt more positive when assessors took time to understand their situation and explain support options. Others described Workplace Assessments that felt rushed or insufficiently tailored to their condition. Booking the Workplace Assessment was difficult for some, particularly when calls came without notice or could not be rearranged.

Decision letters were clearest when they listed the support awarded, although many applicants remained unsure about next steps, including how employer contributions worked or how to claim funding. Applicants were not always satisfied with the lack of explanation when an award was denied or did not reflect the discussion with the assessor. Renewal periods were challenging when people received limited notice or had to repeat information already provided.

Timeframes for applications being reviewed varied considerably, ranging from weeks to months, and created uncertainty for many applicants. These delays were particularly challenging for people starting new jobs or managing worsening health. Longer waits meant working without appropriate support, relying on temporary adjustments or reducing hours. Self-employed applicants described losing clients or work opportunities because they could not take on roles without knowing whether support would be in place.

Experiences of receiving support and impacts

Applicants' experiences of receiving support depended on the award and the clarity of guidance provided. Although one view applicants expressed was that information about sourcing support was clear and straightforward, others reported inconsistent or incomplete guidance. Applicants seeking support workers found it difficult to identify appropriate providers, and payment delays discouraged potential support workers. Employers sourcing equipment on behalf of staff also encountered practical barriers, including compatibility issues with organisational systems and lengthy procurement.

AtW involves applicants being awarded a grant for specific provision of support, known as Elements. They then claim against this grant after incurring the expenditure (excluding support provided by the Mental Health Support Service) by providing documentation (e.g. invoices or receipts) online or by post. Those who found the process of claiming funding straightforward cited the ease of using the online portal or their reliance on employers to manage claims. Others found the process burdensome, particularly when submitting frequent claims. In particular, delays in reimbursement created financial strain for the applicant or employer managing the claim. Applicants who did not use their award (and whose employers did not fund the support themselves) said they were unsure how to claim or felt the support did not meet their needs.

Despite these challenges, AtW provided meaningful benefits for applicants, who described improved confidence, independence and comfort at work. For applicants with significant challenges at work, they considered AtW to be essential to remaining in employment. Support workers helped applicants to complete tasks, travel to work support enabled reliable commuting, and specialist equipment improved productivity. Employers also reported wider benefits, including being able to provide a more inclusive workplace for disabled staff.

Suggested improvements to Access to Work

Applicants and employers made suggestions for improvements to the application process, accessing and paying for support, and the timeframe for receiving support and reimbursement.

The main themes for improvement were:

- **Clearer information from the outset**, including simpler language in the application form, clearer eligibility guidance and better explanations of employer responsibilities.
- **More flexible and predictable Workplace Assessments**, including more notice for calls and better options for rescheduling.
- **More consistent guidance on sourcing support**, with clearer advice about approved providers, and how to source suitable equipment.
- **Faster and more reliable reimbursements**, because delays created financial strain for applicants and employers.

- **Better alignment between awarded support and workplace systems,** particularly where equipment needed to be installed or integrated.
- **Greater awareness of AtW among professionals,** including health practitioners, Jobcentre advisers and HR teams, so that people are signposted to the scheme earlier.

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Glossary of key terms

Access to Work	Access to Work (AtW) is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help disabled people and people with health conditions start or stay in work. It can provide practical and financial support for people who have a disability or physical or mental health condition. Support can be provided where someone needs help or adaptations beyond the reasonable adjustments that employers are required to make under the Equality Act 2010. To get an AtW grant, you must have a disability or health condition that affects your ability to work, be 16 or over, be employed or due to start working and live in England, Scotland or Wales.
Appointee	An appointee is somebody who has been granted the right to handle the benefits of someone who can't manage their own affairs because they're mentally incapable or severely disabled.
Applicant	An applicant is someone who has submitted an application to the AtW scheme.
Case manager	A Case Manager is the Access to Work staff member assigned to process an applicant's claim. They review applications, make referrals for an assessment or request evidence from applicants or employers where necessary, and ultimately decide what Elements are awarded. They also act as the main point of contact for applicants and employers.
Workplace Assessment	Applicants may be referred for a Workplace Assessment by a Case Manager if deemed appropriate. A Workplace Assessment is the process used by Access to Work to understand an applicant's workplace barriers and identify what support or adjustments may be appropriate. Workplace Assessments are conducted by external assessors. Not all applicants will be referred, particularly where they have a strong understanding of, and are able to evidence, the support they need to start or remain in work.
Element	An Element refers to a specific type of support funded by Access to Work. Element types include, special aids and equipment, support workers, mental health support, or travel to work.

Support worker	A support worker is someone who provides practical assistance or coaching to an AtW recipient to help them carry out work-related tasks.
Employer contribution / cost share	The employer contribution or cost share requirement refers to the portion of the cost of support that employers may be required to fund. Employers are only required to fund certain types of support: special aids and equipment and adaptations to premises. The amount depends on the size of the organisation and when the applicant started their job. When cost sharing applies, AtW will refund up to 80% of the approved costs between a threshold and £10,000. The employer contributes 100% of costs up to the threshold level and 20% of the costs for the next £10,000. Any balance above £10,000 will normally be met by AtW. The amount of the threshold is determined by the number of employees: 0 to 49 employees - nil 50 to 249 employees - £500 Over 250 employees - £1,000

Introduction

Background

Access to Work (AtW) is a publicly funded employment support programme that aims to help disabled people and people with health conditions start or stay in work. It provides funding for support which is considered above the 'reasonable adjustments' that employers are statutorily required to make under the Equality Act 2010. Through AtW, applicants can receive funding for one or more 'Elements', that is, specific forms of support over and above reasonable adjustments. These include, but are not limited to, special aids and equipment, support workers, support provided by the Mental Health Support Service, and travel to work support. These Elements make up the vast majority of AtW expenditure. To be eligible, an applicant must have a physical or mental health condition or disability that means they need support to do their job or get to and from work, be 16 or over, live in England, Scotland or Wales, and be in (or about to start or return to) paid work.¹ Applicants are not required to have a formal diagnosis and can be employed or self-employed.

Demand for AtW has increased rapidly in recent years. In 2024/25, there were 157,000 applications for support, more than double the number of applications received in 2018-19 (76,100)². However, there has been limited recent research on AtW and little evidence to explain the increase in demand for the scheme. The DWP therefore commissioned NatCen to carry out this research to better understand how and why individuals apply for AtW, and whether it is meeting its intended purpose. The study aimed to do this by examining applicants' experiences of the AtW customer journey prior to, during and after applying, as well as those of employers with employees who have used the scheme.

The AtW customer journey

The AtW customer journey follows six main stages:

1. The individual applies for AtW by completing an online application form or by telephone.
2. The DWP gathers further information if required, by contacting the customer and employer and/or making a referral for a Workplace Assessment.
3. The DWP approves or rejects support provision.

¹ One exception to this is young people on work placement with an employer as part of the Department for Education's supported internship or traineeship programme.

² The National Audit Office (2026). The Access to Work scheme. <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-access-to-work-scheme/>

4. The applicant is notified of the DWP's decision. AtW funding is provided in the form of a grant. The decision letter informs the applicant and their employer of the value of the grant approved and the Element(s) it can be used to fund.
5. The applicant or their employer commissions the approved support provision.
6. The applicant or their employer submits invoices to the DWP.
7. The DWP pays the invoices for the approved grant.

Note that support provided by the Mental Health Support Service (MHSS)³ follows a different process. Applicants seeking mental health support may self-refer directly to the MHSS or be referred by the DWP as part of AtW support (or may receive mental health support solely through other Elements, e.g. a support worker). Those who receive support from the MHSS will also be considered for other Elements provided by AtW, following the stages outlined above.

The exact format of stage 2 can vary for applicants. An applicant might first be approved for a 'Workplace Assessment'. Workplace Assessments involve an assessor employed by an external provider working with the applicant and their employer to assess what support the applicant needs to enter or stay in work. Some Workplace Assessments lead to people being approved for an Element, but some do not. This might be because the support that an applicant needs should be provided by the employer as a reasonable adjustment. Conversely, some people are directly approved for an Element without a Workplace Assessment if they have a good understanding of their support needs from the outset and are able to provide evidence to support this. Grants are approved for up to three years. If recipients would like support to continue, they can apply to renew their award up to 12 weeks before it is due to expire.

Not all applicants who are approved for a Workplace Assessment or Element go on to submit a claim for a payment. This could be for one of several reasons, such as running out of time to submit the invoices or where the applicant or employer decides to pay for the support in full themselves. Employers are sometimes required to share the cost of support approved under AtW. This depends on how long the applicant has been in their job when they apply and the type of support approved. Employers are required to contribute for applicants that have been working for them for more than 6 weeks where the help required involved special aids and equipment, or adaptations to the workplace. The amount the employer needs to pay is determined by their number of employees, with larger employers paying more.

Research objectives

The research explored six key research questions:

³ The MHSS is provided by two contracted providers who are paid directly by the DWP.

- a) How do new customers find out about AtW? Where or who do they get this information from?
- b) Are discussions held with employers before people apply? If so, what do they entail? What support is already in place and what other options are considered before applying?
- c) Why do people apply for AtW? Is this decision primarily driven by a change in people's circumstances, such as a change in their employment, their health, or their benefits? Or is it primarily driven by becoming newly aware of the service? Or something else?
- d) How and to what extent does the support provided under AtW support employees to enter or stay in work, and support employers to be more inclusive?
- e) Are employers using AtW to fund what would normally be provided as a reasonable adjustment? Why or why not? What barriers do employers face to implementing reasonable adjustments? Why do some people not take up the support they are approved for through an AtW assessment?
- f) How easy or difficult is it to apply for AtW? What barriers, if any, exist in the application journey?

Methodology

The research comprised semi-structured interviews with two participant groups: AtW applicants, and employers supporting employees to access the scheme.

Sampling and recruitment

Applicants

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 90 AtW applicants across two batches of fieldwork. The sample was drawn by the DWP and quotas were agreed around the following sampling characteristics: primary health condition that AtW support was sought for, working status, applicant type (described further below), Element type approved, and when approved for AtW. Secondary sampling characteristics were monitored to ensure diversity within the sample. These were age, region, employer size, Personal Independence Payment (PIP) status (whether claimed in the last 3 years) and sex.

The findings presented in this report are based on a sample designed to capture a broad range of experiences and perspectives. They are not statistically representative of all AtW applicants or employers.

Participants were initially contacted by email or text message and given the opportunity to opt out of the study. Recruitment calls were then conducted by NatCen, ensuring coverage across the key sampling characteristics.

An initial sample of 43 participants were interviewed between September and October 2025. An additional sample of 47 participants were interviewed between November 2025 and January 2026. All applicants who took part received a £40 shopping voucher.

The characteristics of the achieved sample are shown in tables 1 - 5 below:

Table 1: Primary medical condition

	Number of participants
Physical health condition	35
Mental health condition	27
Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition	28

Table 2: Working status at the point of applying for AtW

	Number of participants
Employed	57
Self-employed	22
Unemployed	11

Table 3. Applicant Type

	Number of participants
Approved and received payment for an Element	43
Approved for but not received payment for an Element	26
Approved for a Workplace Assessment but not approved for any Element	21

Table 4. Element type approved

	Number of participants
Support worker	40
Special aids and equipment	30
Travel to work	21
Mental Health Support Service	16

Note: applicants can be approved for one or more Elements

Table 5. When approved for AtW

	Number of participants
Before 1st November 2023	19
After 1st November 2023	71

Note: 1st November 2023 was chosen as the threshold between more and less recent applications as it marked the midpoint of the approval dates for AtW in the sample provided.

A topic guide was developed which is included in the Technical Appendix. The interviews explored details of applicants' disability or health condition and work

arrangements, awareness and understanding of AtW, experience of applying and support received, and any suggested improvements to the scheme.

Employers

Alongside applicant interviews, 26 interviews were conducted with employers during the second batch of fieldwork. Throughout this report, 'employer' refers to the individual in the organisation who provided support to the employee applying to AtW.

The DWP provided a sample of small, medium and large organisations⁴ with named contacts of individuals who were recorded as having supported employees to access the scheme. Employers were initially contacted by email and given the opportunity to opt out of the study. NatCen conducted screening calls to recruit employers, ensuring they met the inclusion criteria, that is, they were familiar with AtW and had supported employees to access the scheme.

These interviews took place between December 2025 and January 2026. A topic guide was developed which is included in the Technical Appendix. The interviews with employers explored understanding and awareness of AtW, experiences of providing support within the workplace, views and experiences of AtW, and suggested improvements.

Employers were offered a £50 donation to one of three charities: CALM, Macmillan and Disability Rights UK.

The breakdown of employers by size is shown in table 6 below:

Table 6: Employer sample composition

Organisation size	No. of participants
Large organisation (250 or more employees)	11
Medium organisation (50-249 employees)	9
Small organisation (less than 50 employees)	6

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Researchers used the Framework approach to qualitative data management, developed by NatCen, to chart (collate and summarise) transcribed data by theme and case (Ritchie *et al.* 2013). Data management involved summarising interview data in a matrix in which each row represented an individual interview and each column a theme and any related sub-themes.

Analysis involved identifying participants' views and experiences on a given topic, listing these and then sorting them thematically. Once different themes in the data

⁴ Small employers are those with 0 to 49 employees; medium employers have 50 to 249; and large employers have 250 or more.

were identified, we created higher level categories that worked as meaningful conceptual groupings for participants' views and experiences.

Verbatim quotes have been used throughout this report to help illustrate findings. Quotes from applicants have been labelled according to relevant characteristics (job status, employer size, age and disability type). Employer quotes have been labelled with the size of the organisation.

Journeys to Access to Work

This chapter presents a typology of applicant journeys to applying for the AtW scheme which emerged from the findings. The typology has been produced to illustrate the diversity of applicant experience and present the key factors and characteristics that differentiate common journeys from each other. This is to inform the DWP's understanding of applicant experiences. This chapter sets out the journey typology that emerged through the research. These journeys were shaped and differentiated by a range of factors that featured heavily in participants' accounts and subsequent analysis. This chapter first describes these factors, before exploring how they affected applicants' experiences. It should be noted that, as applicants' journeys were also influenced by highly individual factors, there was substantial variety in the experiences within each journey 'type'.

Key factors influencing applicant journeys

Based on our analysis of interviews with applicants, we have identified a number of key factors which influenced applicant journeys. These factors intersected in different ways to influence how and why applicants came to apply for AtW and their experiences while doing so. The relative influence of these factors on an applicant's experience varied for each individual with, for example, in some cases work status having greater impact than condition type, but the opposite in other instances. These factors are referenced throughout the chapters that follow.

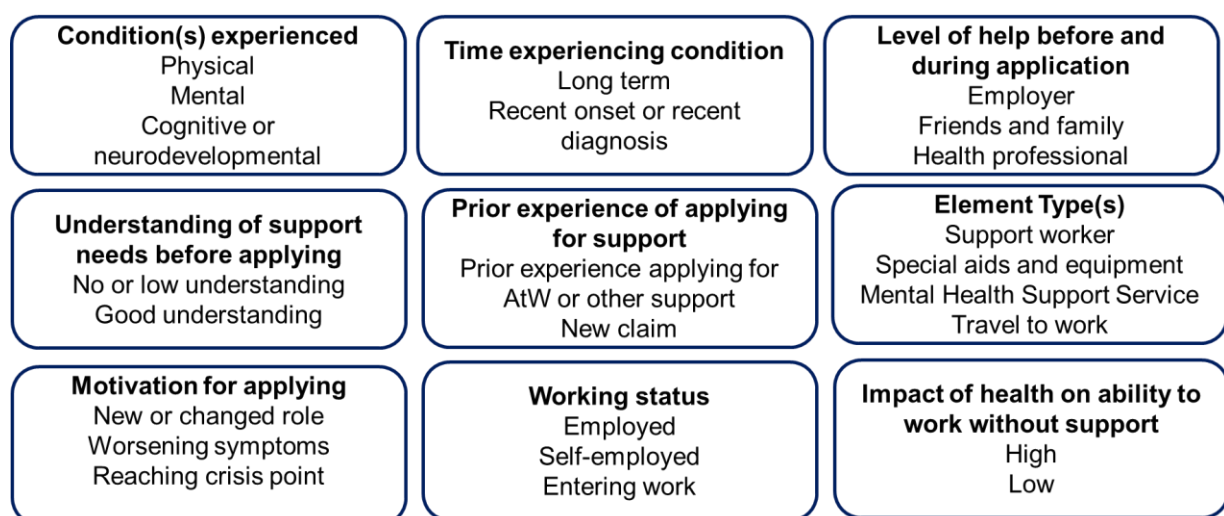


Figure 1: Factors influencing AtW applicant journeys

Disability or health condition(s) experienced

This includes both the primary health condition that the applicant was seeking support with work for through AtW, as well as additional conditions which applicants may or may not have mentioned on their application. Experiences varied substantially between applicants with physical health conditions and those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions or mental health conditions. Experiences differed for those with multiple co-existing conditions that interacted in ways which affected their symptoms and support needs, compared to those with a single or main condition.

Length of time experiencing condition

Applicants' experiences differed depending on whether they had been impacted by their health condition or disability for many years prior to their AtW application, or whether their symptoms had started more recently. The former included both those who had been born with their health condition or disability, as well as those with progressive or degenerative conditions. The latter included later onset illnesses and injuries. The timing of an applicant's diagnosis or intervention from a health professional relative to starting their application was also relevant. While having a formal diagnosis is not essential to access AtW support, among applicants were those who had not sought any type of support until after they had received one, despite experiencing the effects of their condition for many years. This was particularly relevant to applicants with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions, such as ADHD or autism.

Access to help with their AtW application

Applicants' experiences varied depending on whether they had access to help with their AtW application. This support could be both emotional (e.g. encouragement) and practical (e.g. drafting responses). Help was provided by one of three main sources: friends and family, employers, or health or social care professionals. Friends and family tended to include those with personal experience of a similar health condition or of the AtW scheme itself. Health and social care professionals included General Practitioners (GPs), specialists, occupational health and social workers. Whether applicants were supported by an employer to apply depended on a number of factors, including the employer's size and access to resources, familiarity with the AtW scheme, organisational approach to supporting disabled employees, and attitude of direct line managers.

Understanding of support needs before applying

This factor was closely associated both with the nature of an applicant's health condition or disability and the length of time for which they had been experiencing it and/or had a diagnosis. An applicant's prior understanding of their support needs was significant as applicants can forego the Workplace Assessment component of the application process if they already know what support they need. Those with

disabilities or health conditions that affected them physically tended to have a good understanding of the support they needed in the workplace. This was especially true for those who had been experiencing their conditions for multiple years prior to applying to AtW. In contrast, those with mental health conditions or cognitive and neurodevelopmental impairments tended to have limited or no understanding and found it more difficult to set out what support they thought might be helpful in the application form.

Prior experience of applying for support

Applicants' experiences also differed depending on whether they had had prior experiences of applying for health and disability benefits (including PIP). Those who did have previous experience tended to be more confident with completing the AtW application form, as well as answering questions about their health conditions and/or disabilities and support needs during the Workplace Assessment component. They were generally more comfortable navigating the DWP's processes and compared the AtW application favourably to other benefit processes, finding it less intrusive and more straightforward. It also meant that they tended not to need support from friends and family, employers or health professionals to apply.

Element type(s) sought and awarded

The research included applicants who had sought and/or had been awarded one or more of the following Element types: special aids and equipment, support worker, MHSS, or travel to work. Element type affected applicants' experiences in a number of ways:

- Certain Elements were better understood than others. For example, applicants had a clearer sense of what might be provided under the travel to work Element than through a support worker.
- Certain Elements were easier to source and arrange reimbursement for than others.
- Employers were more likely to facilitate provision of, and cover upfront costs for, certain Elements than others, particularly special aids and equipment which usually involved one discrete payment.

Motivation for applying

Applicants' experiences of applying for AtW also depended on their motivation for applying. It could influence how they found out about AtW, the level and type of support available to them from an employer to apply, and the urgency with which they awaited the award decision. Experiences varied depending on whether an individual was applying because:

- A recent onset condition or worsening symptoms had led to a decline in their performance or wellbeing at work.

- Their role, day-to-day tasks or working conditions had changed for which they required different or extra support.
- They had reached a breaking point with their employment following years of struggling.

Working status

Whether an applicant was employed, self-employed or entering work influenced how they found out about the AtW scheme, and the extent and sources of support they had during and after their application. While not always the case, employed applicants and those entering work were more likely to have access to practical support. This was often via their employer, either through the line manager system or recruitment process. This included discussions to better understand their work-related support needs and help to source provision after an award was made. However, unsupportive employers could be an additional barrier to overcome for applicants in these groups. This was especially true where they had to first negotiate reasonable adjustments or encountered resistance to employers' cost sharing with the awarded grant. In contrast, self-employed applicants were unencumbered by unsupportive employers but were also more likely to have to undertake the application process and source provision alone.

Ability to work without support

Applicants were asked about the impact that the AtW scheme had on their experience of work. Applicants reflected both on their experience of the AtW application process and support received following an award. Applicants were divided between those who reported being highly dependent on support to be able to work at all, and those for whom support simply made doing their job easier or more comfortable. This factor affected applicants' experiences as, for the former group, their need for support was more urgent and time-sensitive, with unsuccessful applications leading to more severe consequences.

Common journeys to claiming AtW

The key factors outlined above combine and interact in different ways in each individual customer journey. However, analysis of the qualitative evidence collected during the applicant strand and, to a lesser extent, the employer strand, generated some common journey types that were repeatedly evidenced in this research. These are illustrated in summary within Figure 12 and detailed further below.

	Application trigger	Characterised by	Common support needs
Independent, proactive, informed	Worsening symptoms or change in role	Long term health conditions. High needs awareness. Prior PIP/ AtW experience	Improved explanation if Award changes at renewal
Sudden change in health	Sudden decline in ability to carry out their role (including following injury or accident)	High needs awareness. Motivated employer	Given urgent need, long waits for decision could be particularly impactful
Discovering late	Found out about the scheme whilst experiencing 'breaking point' with work	Late diagnosed cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions. Self-driven and reliant on own research	Support to fully evidence needs during the application process, and with admin tasks to access funding
Entering the workplace supported	Entering employment for the first time. Claim made during or shortly after recruitment	High agency in asking for support. Often advised by pre-existing support networks (family and health professionals)	Support to source and secure support workers that can provide help sufficiently tailored to them
Gradual decline	Ageing worsens symptoms; family concern	Low needs awareness as coped independently for years. Closely supported by family at all stages of application	Encouragement to speak openly and disclose difficulties to fully evidence their claim
Difficult life or workplace event	Difficult life event or work pressures	Mental health conditions. Unclear what support would help. Low capacity to advocate for their needs.	Reassurance and encouragement to continue claim process. Additional support to manage Award if no clear workplace advocate.

Figure 2: Common journeys to claiming AtW

Journey 1: Independent, proactive, informed

This journey was most often experienced by those with longer term health conditions and/or disabilities that affected them physically. They were usually motivated to apply by a worsening of their symptoms or a change in the requirements of their role. They tended to have pre-existing awareness of the AtW scheme and to self-refer with minimal input from their employer.

As they had been symptomatic for multiple years prior to applying and had usually already been receiving treatment or support of some kind with their condition, they had good awareness of the support they needed to remain in work. This knowledge meant that they were able to self-advocate for increased support within the workplace. They also tended to have previous experience of applying for health and disability benefits (particularly PIP). Familiarity with the DWP's forms and processes enabled them to navigate the AtW application with minimal support from others.

Good awareness of their needs and confidence in completing the AtW application form to evidence their claim meant that they were generally satisfied with their award. They were able to collaborate with their employer to ensure the most suitable support was sourced, though this at times relied on their own knowledge of their needs rather than the support proposed in the award letter.

They were also better able to manage the administration involved in arranging reimbursement than others. Despite clear strengths to their experience, this group included individuals who initially delayed applying due to confusion about their eligibility (for example, thinking the scheme was only applicable to those looking for

work). It also included individuals who were confused by how a change in employer would affect their claim or who were surprised by reductions in their awarded funding at renewal.

Journey 2: Sudden change in health

This journey tended to be experienced by those with a recent onset disability or condition that affected them physically, including those who had experienced injuries or accidents. The trigger for their application was usually a sudden decline in their ability to carry out their role. As a result, the application to AtW tended to be instigated by their employer as part of wider efforts to ensure they could remain in their role.

Due to the physical nature of their condition, they tended to have a good awareness of what support they needed (typically travel to work or special aids and equipment), however they lacked any prior experience of applying for health or disability benefits. This could make the application process more daunting as they were unfamiliar with the DWP's forms and processes and the type of information that might be needed to evidence their claim.

Support needs among this group tended to be sudden and urgent. This meant that long waits to receive an award could have a significant negative impact on their employment, particularly if their employer was unable or unwilling to cover support in the interim. However, once an award was received, support was usually put in place quickly, with the support of their employer.

Journey 3: Discovering late

Applicants on this journey included those diagnosed with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions later in life. They were driven to seek out support as they had reached a 'breaking point' having experienced life-long but unexplained or unrecognised symptoms that had shaped and negatively impacted on their working lives. This looked different for different applicants but included burn out, losing clients, repeated job losses, or coping mechanisms no longer being sufficient to manage day-to-day. This journey included those who had pursued self-employment, having found their previous employment incompatible with their needs.

Participants on this journey tended to find out about AtW through their own online research or through friends with similar experiences. They tended to apply to AtW as soon as they found out about the scheme, either self-referring (particularly among those who were self-employed) or raising the option of AtW with their employer. While having good awareness of their symptoms, they had limited to no understanding of what or how support through AtW could make a difference to them. They often found information available on GOV.UK inadequate to explain this. As such, they relied heavily on the Workplace Assessment to determine what might be helpful to them.

Despite this, they felt ill-equipped to advocate for themselves or properly evidence their needs during the application process. They reported challenges answering open-ended questions in the application form and hypothetical questions in the Workplace Assessment. At times, this resulted in dissatisfaction with the outcome of the Assessment and with the award received, including viewing proposed support as inappropriate or inadequately tailored to them. Following the award, applicants on this journey faced further barriers including difficulty managing the administration involved in accessing the funding. Those awarded the support worker Element struggled to find a provider suitably tailored to their needs and who would work within the conditions set by the AtW award.

Journey 4: Entering the workplace supported

This journey consisted of individuals applying to AtW as they were entering employment for the first time. These applicants instigated a discussion with their employer about AtW support during or shortly after the recruitment process. They were often supported or advised in this by family (including those with the same conditions) and/or health and social care professionals (including social workers, health specialists or work coaches). It was common for this journey to involve applicants with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions who had received a diagnosis early in life.

As a result of their early diagnosis and/or recognised family history, this group were more informed and aware of their support needs than applicants with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions with later-in-life diagnosis. They also tended to have received support with their condition in the past, for example, at school or university. As a result, they were better able to navigate the AtW application process and had greater ease in providing evidence to support their claim, especially when helped by their established support networks.

Despite greater satisfaction with their award than those on Journey 3 given their greater sense of control and agency during the application process, this group also encountered difficulty in managing administration to claim the funding. Challenges in sourcing suitable support workers was another common experience.

Journey 5: Gradual decline

Journey 5 was experienced by older applicants with a long-term disability or health condition who had been getting by with minimal support for many years. They tended to apply to AtW because their symptoms were getting worse or their ability to manage without support was declining as they aged. They tended to find out about AtW in the context of discussions with their GP or a social worker and were encouraged to apply by relatives concerned about their ability to cope.

As these individuals were used to 'getting by' with little support, they tended not to recognise the full extent of their own support needs and were reluctant to speak openly about their work-related challenges. This group also included those with low

digital confidence. As a result of these two factors, they were often supported and encouraged during the application process by these same relatives, who helped with completing the application form.

These applicants tended to be awarded the travel to work or specialist aids and equipment Elements. They had often been with the same employer for an extended period, and employers were proactive in putting support in place so they could remain in their role. Family members continued to support with the administrative tasks involved in accessing the funding, such as managing invoices for taxis.

Journey 6: Difficult life or workplace event

The final journey identified involved applicants who were triggered to apply for AtW when a difficult life event or work-related stress led to a decline in their mental health, which impacted their ability to work. These applicants struggled to address their needs with their employer due to concerns around stigmatisation in the workplace, and so tended to be signposted to AtW by a healthcare provider or support charity.

This group also had generally low awareness of what support would make a difference to them and often initially queried whether AtW was at all applicable to their situation. They required greater encouragement to apply to AtW and reassurance from others that their claim was worthwhile. The acute nature of their health condition and circumstances created difficulties in fully describing and evidencing their support needs on the AtW application form and during Workplace Assessments.

Once awarded, they struggled to make decisions around how and where to source support. Low emotional capacity meant they were reliant on others (particularly employers) to source appropriate support on their behalf and to manage interactions with the DWP around reimbursement. Where individuals did not have a strong workplace advocate, this lowered capacity could lead to failure to access the funding altogether.

Awareness and Understanding of Access to work

This chapter explores how applicants find out about AtW, why they decide to apply (including any considerations when applying), their experience understanding the process, and satisfaction with information about AtW. It also explores how employers find out about AtW, their understanding of the scheme and their satisfaction with the information available on GOV.UK about the scheme.

Finding out about Access to Work

Applicants' views

Applicants found out about AtW in three main ways: through recommendations from people they trusted, independently through online research or through organisations providing similar support.

Personal recommendations came from employers or colleagues who were familiar with AtW. An employer or manager sometimes formally suggested applying when people started a new role, particularly in organisations with a high number of disabled employees already using the scheme. In other cases, colleagues with similar conditions informally encouraged applicants to explore the scheme.

Health professionals were another important source of recommendations, especially for those with new diagnoses. These included both GPs and specialists such as hearing technicians, ADHD assessors and ADHD coaches. Within the workplace, occupational health teams or external consultants sometimes suggested AtW when they determined that additional workplace support might be needed.

Friends and family also influenced decisions to apply, particularly when they had similar conditions and the new applicant could see the benefits.

“Seeing how much it had helped her [applicant’s mother] was definitely the thing that prompted me [to apply].” (Employed, Large organisation, 18-25, Mental health condition)

Alongside these recommendations, applicants found out about AtW independently when searching for support. These applicants used disability forums, Facebook groups or online communities where they read about others’ experiences and advice on support options.

Applicants also found out about AtW through organisations providing disability or employment support. These included:

- Charities supporting people with specific conditions, such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB).
- Jobcentre work coaches, who told people about AtW when they were looking for work.
- Citizens Advice, where staff explained support options including AtW.

Employers' views

Employers typically learnt about AtW through their workplace, either in their current role or a previous role, when supporting disabled employees. They heard about the scheme either through general discussion in their organisation or when looking for support for a specific staff member. AtW was sometimes raised during discussions with colleagues or senior leaders, where it was mentioned as an option to explore.

"We are always on the look out for things that can support us financially to be able to be the sort of employer that we would like to be." (Employer, Medium organisation)

Another experience was employers learning about AtW directly from employees who were applying themselves. This included employers who had little prior experience with disability support. In other cases, employers knew about AtW from seeking out support for their own disability.

Why new applicants apply to AtW

Applicants' views

Applicants applied to AtW for several main reasons: changes in work, changes in health, wanting more clarity about their support needs, applying once they learnt about the scheme, and applying once they had exhausted other options for support.

Change in work circumstances

One group of applicants applied because their work circumstances had changed and they needed new or different support. These changes included new roles, new responsibilities, relocation, or changes to hybrid working patterns meaning more time spent in the office. These changes impacted applicants' ability to meet the day-to-day requirements of their job, leading to the need for new or more intensive support.

Starting a new job also prompted applications, particularly for those entering work for the first time or returning after unemployment. Some organisations asked new starters to apply before or immediately after starting work, for example, for deaf employees who would require BSL interpreters from day one. For those already in work, workplace or technology changes also created new support needs. Equipment sometimes became incompatible with updated IT systems or software no longer worked on new devices, leading people to apply, or reapply if the existing provision was funded through AtW.

For those not in work, they chose to apply once they made the decision to return to work, for personal or financial reasons.

Change in health circumstances

Other applicants applied because their health needs had changed and they could no longer manage work without support or with the same level of support as previously. This included worsening symptoms, new symptoms, or a new diagnosis. For those with worsening symptoms, working without support had become difficult or unsafe, or meant they could no longer travel to work or complete tasks without adjustments. For participants who were prompted to apply by receiving a new diagnosis, the diagnosis helped them understand their symptoms and gave them confidence to seek support.

Understanding their support needs

Applicants with little prior knowledge of their support needs applied because they wanted help to understand what support they needed at work following, for example, a recent diagnosis. They saw the Workplace Assessment as a way to clarify what would help them. Others applied to obtain independent evidence to share with their employer during conversations about support. This helped them explain their needs and request adjustments.

Applying when they learnt about AtW

Others applied as soon as they became aware of AtW, or of their own eligibility, reflecting mixed awareness or understanding of the scheme more generally. These applicants typically felt AtW was not promoted widely enough, as they were unaware of the support available through the scheme despite being an eligible recipient. This included people newly learning that AtW was available to particular groups, including people already in employment and self-employed people.

"I kind of thought Access to Work was just about getting people into work. I didn't realise it was applicable to people already in work." (Employed, Large organisation, 26-35, Physical health condition)

"I've probably been talking about it for two years before I ever thought of applying it to myself because I thought it was just for people in employment. Never occurred to me that it applied to somebody who was self-employed." (Self-employed, 56-65, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

Applying after exhausting other options

For applicants who had already explored reasonable adjustments at work or support from the NHS or charities, AtW was sometimes seen as a last resort to help them remain in work.

"I've been fighting very long to get a job as I've been rejected in the past because of my conditions [...] but I finally found a job and I finally felt a bit more independent and like maybe I could work. And then when I was really struggling [at work]. I just wanted to try and find anything that was going to be able to help me stay in that situation." (Employed, Small organisation, 18-25, Mental health condition)

In other cases, participants described reaching a point of burnout or crisis, which led them to apply.

"Everything felt very out of control... I was very stressed and I was burned out." (Self-employed, 26-35, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

Satisfaction with the information available

Applicants' views

Applicants' satisfaction with available information depended on how well they understood their support needs and whether they knew someone who had applied before.

Those who already understood their needs, or knew someone who had applied, found information on GOV.UK sufficient and felt able to navigate the process. In contrast, applicants who were new to AtW, especially those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions, often felt the information did not meet their needs.

Those who were unsatisfied with the information provided wanted:

- Clearer explanations of what the AtW Workplace Assessment involved.
- More detailed examples of the type of support available through AtW and how it applied to different conditions.

"Access to Work says 'you can ask us for things' but gives you no clue as to what those might be." (Self-employed, 46-55, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

- Clearer upfront information about the employer's role, such as when support should be provided by the employer as a reasonable adjustment, and whether an employer would have to contribute to costs of an Element.
- Timelines for the application process, to ease the uncertainty around how long they might have to wait for a decision.

"When you're in that position, you don't know what to do, where to go. You need some sort of assurance [...] It was basically fill out a form and just wait." (Employed, Small organisation, 18-25, Mental health condition)

Employers' views

Employers' understanding of AtW when they first heard about the scheme was generally low, especially if it was not commonly used in their organisation. Awareness improved once they gained more experience of supporting employees with applications.

"When I got to the end of the reasonable adjustments I could provide, I didn't know where else to go [...] now I would always say to somebody that [AtW is] worth looking into." (Employer, Large organisation)

Employers did not seek out information about AtW, especially those less involved with the AtW application process. For those who did look for information, views on the adequacy of information for employers was mixed. Where applicants viewed the information available positively, they reflected that it was easy to find the information they were looking for. Others felt there were gaps in the information available and it did not cover specific things they had questions about, particularly information about how to source support. However, these employers were able to get answers through the AtW helpline.

“I can't say it really informed me on the extent that [AtW] could help. It felt really loose, the information it was giving, and didn't really go into any depth.”
(Employer, Large organisation)

Employers wanted clearer information about their role and responsibilities when supporting an employee with AtW. Specifically, they wanted to understand:

- What the employer is responsible for compared to the employee, including who pays for the Element.
- The administrative tasks expected of employers, such as developing support plans.
- How AtW works with Supported Internships.

Because of these gaps, other sources of information were used, such as blogs or professional forums, which employers found helpful in providing more practical guidance about supporting employees through AtW.

Considerations before applying

Applicants' views

Applicants' considerations before applying varied depending on how well they understood their support needs, their views about eligibility, and their previous experiences of seeking support. These factors shaped whether people felt confident about applying or were unsure about whether AtW was appropriate for them.

The applicant's understanding of their support needs

Applicants with little understanding of their support needs often questioned whether they should apply, particularly those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions applying for the first time. They sometimes felt their needs were less significant than others' or did not see themselves as disabled. This meant they were surprised to learn that AtW was relevant to them.

“Someone like me [...] I didn't think I deserved that kind of help.” (Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

These applicants also worried they would not be understood or taken seriously by the AtW assessor, particularly those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions who may have masked their support needs.

"I've come across as more capable than I actually am [...] I've just had to learn because I still only got diagnosed at 42." (Unemployed, 36-45, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions)

These participants tended to weigh their concerns against other factors, such as the benefit of a shorter wait for support than with a GP.

Previous experience of AtW or disability benefits

Applicants with previous experience of AtW, or other disability benefits, were more confident about applying because they already understood what support was available. This group tended to include those with physical health conditions, those who had received support from AtW or other sources (such as PIP) in the past, and those who were renewing their claim.

However, applicants with negative past experiences of applying to AtW or other support were cautious about approaching the scheme. Previous challenges claiming other disability benefits or awareness of others' difficulty in accessing disability support also made people wary of AtW.

"Every other disabled person that I know, that has tried to engage with disability services has basically felt like they are on trial for trying to ask for help." (Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Multiple health conditions)

Level of support from employer

Applicants with limited support from their employer were concerned about the consequences of applying, including how colleagues might react and whether the organisation might need to contribute financially. Those with mental health or cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions were worried about their condition being known in the workplace.

For those starting new jobs, one concern was that applying might affect their employment, particularly if there would be costs to the employer.

"I was just trying to get my feet on the ground [...] I didn't want this [the AtW application] affecting my work, my probation." (Employed, Medium organisation, 56-65, multiple health conditions)

Applicants were also concerned about administrative requirements, particularly in organisations where decisions about adjustments required senior approval.

"With my company, somebody like me that's got a disability, things like this have to be approved by a CEO. I find that really bizarre when it's a disability and it can't be approved by your line manager." (Employed, Medium organisation, 56-65, Physical health condition)

Support provided by employers prior to application

Reasonable adjustments refer to support that employers are legally responsible for providing under the Equality Act 2010. These are changes to make sure disabled workers, or those with physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs. This can include providing support, changes to the work environment or work patterns. Employers are obligated to make these changes, so long as they are effective, practical, affordable and do not change the nature of the role.⁵ AtW is intended to fund support that goes beyond what an employer is legally obliged to provide through reasonable adjustments, with the latter serving as the first point of support.

This chapter first outlines applicants' perspectives on employer support, including their understanding of reasonable adjustments, the discussions they had about them, and when AtW was raised. It then explores employers' perspectives, focusing on their understanding of reasonable adjustments, barriers to implementing support, and the circumstances and content of discussions about AtW.

Understanding of reasonable adjustments

Applicants' views

Applicants' understanding of reasonable adjustments typically depended on whether they had previously received support for their disability or health condition.

Those with limited understanding

Applicants with little or no awareness of reasonable adjustments tended to either have a recent diagnosis or onset of symptoms, or a long-term condition, but had never previously received support at work.

Applicants who had recently received a diagnosis for a cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition were unaware of what support was available to them prior to their diagnosis. Similarly, applicants who experienced a recent health event that resulted in a physical health condition had little awareness of reasonable adjustments as their support needs were new to them.

Similarly, applicants with a diagnosed long-term condition that they spent most of their life managing without support were unaware of what adjustments would be useful. This included those with physical and mental health conditions:

⁵ ACAS (2025). Reasonable adjustments at work. <https://www.acas.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments>

“Because I've lived with it for so long - it's a lifetime condition, it's not going to get any better, put it that way, I will always have it - I've just learnt to adapt to it myself.” (Self-employed, 46-55, Physical health condition)

Those with good understanding

Applicants with good awareness and understanding of reasonable adjustments tended to have a long-term condition for which they had received ongoing support throughout their life. This included those with physical disabilities such as hearing and visual impairments and musculoskeletal conditions.

Additionally, those who received support from a medical professional or family and friends tended to have a higher awareness of reasonable adjustments. Those with support from a medical professional had reasonable adjustments recommended and explained to them, following a diagnosis. Moreover, friends or family with a similar condition explained to applicants what support they may be entitled to. There were also examples where applicants had gained an understanding of reasonable adjustments through their own work supporting or advising disabled employees, and were therefore well informed when their own needs arose.

Employers' views

Employers described a range of views on reasonable adjustments, noting that unclear definitions and limited guidance made it challenging to determine what support they were responsible for providing.

Views on guidance

Employers felt that the definition of what constitutes a reasonable adjustment was unclear. Despite their efforts, employers felt that they were unable to find a clear definition of reasonable adjustments:

“I long for a legal definition of reasonable that is cut and dry and doesn't leave room for interpretation.” (Employer, Medium organisation)

Employers also struggled to understand how the DWP interpreted 'reasonable adjustments' and felt it was unclear why some Element types were funded while others were judged to be the employer's responsibility. Employers stated that having a clear definition of reasonable adjustments would be useful as they would have more confidence in their decision and spend less time deliberating on the correct route.

Reasonable adjustments provided

Applicants' views

This section outlines the type of reasonable adjustments applicants received. From applicants' accounts, employers existed along a spectrum from those who provided extensive support to those who provided very limited or no support. Applicants with employers towards the higher support end of the spectrum tended to receive a range

of permanent adjustments, while those who received less support from employers or were in roles that restricted what could be offered typically received only discrete, temporary support.

Permanent adjustments

Applicants who received a higher level of support from employers before their application tended to have regular ongoing discussions about their support needs resulting in permanent adjustments. These adjustments included a range of support including working from home, flexible start times and specialist equipment. AtW was then considered if these adjustments did not adequately support the employee.

Temporary adjustments

Applicants who received a lower level of support from employers before their application tended to receive limited temporary adjustments after a formal discussion. These included discrete adjustments which served as a stopgap until the applicant received an AtW Element. For example, the employee could work from home until they received travel to work support. Such adjustments were temporary as the employer viewed them as conflicting with the nature of the role.

Reasonable adjustment passports

Applicants were asked whether they had any formal documentation recording agreed workplace changes, sometimes referred to as a 'reasonable adjustment passport'. Applicants were generally unfamiliar with the term, however, some applicants and employers reported a form of documentation that served a similar purpose. For example, this included a formal form implemented by an employer, or the applicant independently documenting their adjustments.

Why reasonable adjustments were not implemented

Employers' views

Employers reported three broad barriers to implementing reasonable adjustments. These were based on employers' own understanding of reasonable adjustments and obligations, which may differ based the type and size of organisation. The arrangements discussed may not always fully align with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. These findings are nevertheless helpful for understanding employers' approach and thought processes when considering reasonable adjustments in practice.

Constraints of the adjustment

Cost constraints

Charities and smaller businesses tended to have limited internal resources and lacked ring-fenced budgets to fund reasonable adjustments. Employers from these organisations perceived that directing resources to support could mean removing

funding from other essential areas of the organisation, depending on the cost of the support. Consequently, smaller businesses and charities tended to fund low-cost adjustments such as remote or flexible working or apply to AtW to fund support that was not affordable in the first instance.

Conversely, larger organisations tended to have more internal resources to fund adjustments such as equipment or software and only applied for AtW if these adjustments did not fully meet the employee's needs.

Constraints on nature of the role and staffing resources

Certain adjustments were viewed as being incompatible with the nature of the employee's role. For instance, staff that worked in different locations (e.g. carers) could not work from home or change their working hours. Additionally, employers from small and medium sized organisations described limited capacity to move these employees into another role or reduce their caseload as forms of adjustment. AtW was less likely to be used in these circumstances as it was not always practical to put support in place, meaning employees who could not manage without support were less likely to stay in these roles.

Employer barriers

Organisations which had limited understanding and experience of reasonable adjustments typically lacked the institutional knowledge required to implement support. This included lacking existing processes in setting up support, as well as awareness of how to support disabled employees.

Employee attitudes towards reasonable adjustments

Across organisations, some employees were reluctant to receive support even if their manager identified that they were struggling. This was typically because employees did not want to be treated differently to their peers:

“A lot of people are still quite proud and don't necessarily want to accept reasonable adjustments because of how it will look to others.” (Employer, Medium organisation)

Whether Access to Work is discussed with employers

This section focuses on whether AtW was discussed with employers, either following or in lieu of discussions about reasonable adjustments. It outlines when these conversations occurred, their content, and why some applicants did not have them.

Applicants' views on the circumstances of discussions

Not all applicants had discussions with their employer before applying. For those that did, discussions tended to take place in three different circumstances, depending on applicants' understanding of their support needs, employers' familiarity with AtW, and employers' level of support.

When starting a new job

Applicants with a strong understanding of their support needs tended to initiate a discussion about AtW as soon as they were employed in a new role. These applicants typically had not received support from an employer before and wanted a 'fresh start' where the required support was in place throughout their employment:

"I wanted to have the conversation ASAP so the record was set straight from the get-go. I wanted to be open and transparent from day one." (Employed, Large organisation, 26-35, Physical health condition)

Informal discussions

Other applicants with a strong understanding of their support needs and support from their employer had regular informal discussions about their reasonable adjustments. Within these routine conversations with HR or their line manager, the employee or their employer suggested that they apply for AtW to fund support that went beyond reasonable adjustments.

Formal discussions

Formal discussions were typically held with employers when applicants had no previous support in place. Discussions were typically held with line managers or HR; if both the applicant and employer had a low awareness of AtW and their support needs, then the applicant was referred to occupational health. These formal discussions tended to take place in three circumstances:

Change in circumstances

Applicants who had a health event or a change in their workplace initiated a formal conversation with their employer about needing additional support. Health events experienced by applicants resulted in a physical disability or intensified existing symptoms, leading to new support needs. Similarly, a change in the workplace, such as return to office working post-COVID, or digitalisation of previously paper-based tasks, changed the nature of applicants' roles and their support needs. Typically, within these discussions, both reasonable adjustments and AtW were discussed.

On hearing about Access to Work

One group of applicants discussed AtW with their employer as soon as they heard about it. Of these applicants, some had a low understanding of their support needs and did not have any previous reasonable adjustments as they were unaware of what support would be available and useful. This included applicants with cognitive or neurodevelopmental or mental health conditions who had masked their symptoms in the past, particularly from their employer. Others already had reasonable adjustments in place but applied for AtW to get support that they perceived their employer would not fund, such as coaching.

After being settled in a role

Applicants with less supportive employers who had a good understanding of their support needs typically initiated a discussion after they were settled in their role. As

they were concerned that discussing support needs would impact their probation period, these applicants waited to initiate a conversation.

Applicants' views on the content of discussions

This section explores the content of discussions about AtW. These conversations reflected how well applicants and employers understood their support needs, influencing whether decisions were made independently or jointly.

When starting a job

When applicants discussed AtW when starting a new job, they either informed their employer that they planned to apply or made a joint decision with their employer about whether to do so. Applicants who had a strong understanding of their support needs tended to have a clear view of the help they required. These applicants often knew they needed specific forms of support to work effectively, such as travel to work support or a support worker. Applicants with a limited understanding of their support needs, but whose employer had good awareness of AtW, were more likely to reach a decision about applying after discussing the applicant's support needs.

Informal discussions

Within informal discussions, applicants collectively decided with their employer whether to apply for AtW, following discussions about reasonable adjustments. Those who received more support from employers and had a strong understanding of AtW, tended to have regular informal discussions. Within these, AtW was sought to fund additional support that exceeded what employers would be considered reasonable to provide, such as travel to work support or expensive specialist equipment like a touch screen laptop.

Formal discussions

Within formal discussions, applicants requested that they apply for AtW, rather than coming to this decision collaboratively with their employer. This happened in one of two ways. Applicants approached their employer, informing them that they wanted to apply to AtW for specific support, such as coaching or specialist equipment. Alternatively, applicants were referred to occupational health when both they and their employer had limited understanding of their support needs. Those who received an occupational health assessment felt that this added credibility to their request for support which may not have been actioned otherwise.

Employers' views on the circumstances and content of discussions

Employers who had discussions with their employees about their support needs, prior to applying for AtW, typically held them in three circumstances which influenced the outcomes.

When starting a new job

Employers that discussed employees' support needs during the hiring process tended to have a good understanding of AtW and provided support before the

employee's application. For some employers, they tried to encourage employees to disclose any disabilities by asking them to complete a medical form and emphasising that they would provide reasonable adjustments and support them to apply for AtW if appropriate. Other employers sought to identify employees' support needs without the need for them to disclose their disability. This was done through the organisation's own support assessment, as well as monitoring their progress during their probation period. For example, one employer gradually increased new starters' caseloads to identify anyone who struggled to manage their diary:

"We can see quite early on with most people when it's an issue so we can offer that support reasonably early." (Employer, Medium organisation)

Employers and employees then came to a decision together about the support required. The employer ultimately decided whether to fund the support through reasonable adjustments, weighing up practicality and affordability, or encouraging the employee to apply for AtW.

Informal discussions

Employers who were supportive and had good understanding of AtW, initiated informal discussions with employees about their support needs. Through regular one-to-one line management meetings, employers tried to foster a supportive respectful environment that encouraged employees to disclose disabilities and health conditions that meant they needed support to do their job or get to and from work.

"[We were] demonstrating that we are an organisation who isn't trying to catch anyone out, who are genuinely motivated to support staff who disclose stuff to us." (Employer, Medium organisation)

The outcome of these discussions varied, with some employees only applying to AtW if initial adjustments, such as flexible working, did not help, while others applied to AtW to fund all Element types.

Formal discussions

In line with applicant reports, employers described formal discussions being initiated when applicants or employers identified a change in support needs. Employers also reported initiating conversations about support when an employee's performance had declined.

Following these discussions, line managers typically sought advice from HR or occupational health on whether the applicant should apply to AtW. Some employers referred applicants directly to occupational health or to AtW for a Workplace Assessment. Employers with limited experience supporting disabled employees often found the Workplace Assessment helpful, as it provided clearer guidance on what support might be beneficial:

"But just having that assessment was beneficial in helping them just know what sort of things would be beneficial to them. So that was really what helped us." (Employer, Medium organisation)

Following consultation with HR or occupational health, the line manager decided whether to recommend the employee apply to AtW. The final decision on whether to apply was ultimately left with the individual employee.

Applicants who did not have a prior discussion

Applicants who did not have a prior discussion with their employer about AtW before applying, typically did so for two main reasons:

Concerns they would be treated differently

Applicants did not initiate discussions about AtW as they were concerned doing so would impact their job or prevent them from being hired. Those in employment were concerned that if the employer had to contribute to the support, then the applicant would be viewed negatively and potentially as 'too expensive' to remain employed. Similarly, those looking for work worried that discussing AtW would prevent them from being hired.

*"If you went on about stuff like that [travel to work support] it would be a case of, I don't want to employ him because he's causing trouble already."
(Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)*

Unsupportive employers

Other applicants felt that their employer prevented them discussing their support needs, or from receiving the correct support by, for example, continually rescheduling meetings about reasonable adjustments and AtW. Other ways in which employers could be unsupportive included ordering different equipment than that agreed with the employee, or refusing to contribute to the cost of specialist equipment.

Experiences applying for Access to Work

This chapter explores applicants' experiences across each stage of the AtW application process, including the application form, Workplace Assessment, award decision and renewal. It then explores employers' experiences of the same stages before outlining the timeframe involved and the impacts of this on both groups.

Application form

An AtW application is completed online or by phone, and while information applicants provide can vary, it typically includes:

- Personal details
- Employment details
- Disability or health condition
- Workplace barriers
- Support requested
- Employer information and involvement

What made applying easier

There were multiple factors which affected applicants' experience of completing the application form, including the application format, whether they had previously applied for other disability benefits, and whether they received support to complete the form.

Form available in accessible formats

Applicants valued being able to complete the application form in accessible formats. Some applicants found it easier to apply over the phone with an AtW advisor, particularly those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions or with visual impairments. However, not all applicants were aware of the option to apply by phone, which meant some people continued to use the online form even when it was less accessible to them. Applicants also highlighted the value of the website working well with screen readers.

Previous experience of disability benefits

Applicants with previous experience of disability benefits found the application form easier to complete. People who had applied for PIP or Disability Living Allowance (DLA) before said they felt more confident describing their needs because they had

done so previously. Applicants appreciated that the questions focused on the support they needed rather than on detailed personal medical information.

Having support to apply

Some applicants could not have completed the form without help from others including family and friends, their employer, and support workers. Other applicants accessed support from the DWP staff over the phone and described the assistance as friendly and helpful.

“[the DWP helpline was] a really friendly voice at the other end of the phone who didn't judge me for the fact that I struggle with phones [...] and wasn't sort of talking down to me at all and they just helped me go through the different sections.” (Unemployed, 36-45, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

What made applying more difficult

Applicants with cognitive and neurodevelopmental conditions, a recent onset condition or new diagnosis found the application form more difficult. A number of barriers were raised, including the terminology used, the format of questions and amount of administration required.

Inaccessible terminology

Applicants struggled to understand some of the terminology used in the application form. Examples included technical or bureaucratic terms such as ‘eligibility checker’, ‘Case Manager’, ‘UTR number’ (i.e. Unique Taxpayer Reference number). It also included long or complicated sentences which applicants with dyslexia found particularly challenging.

In addition, some applicants felt that questions in the Support Worker Record of Tasks (SWRoT) were written to “catch you out” because they used unfamiliar terms such as ‘agreed additional costs’, ‘customer declaration’, and ‘contribution by employer’ which provoked feelings of anxiety.

Inaccessible question format

Additionally, applicants struggled with the open format of some questions which included long free-text boxes (up to 1,000 characters). This was particularly difficult for people with cognitive and neurodevelopmental conditions who can find it hard to concentrate for extended periods or write in a structured way. It was also challenging for those who were newly disabled or who had recently received a diagnosis and therefore still working out what support they needed.

Administrative burden

Applicants found the application more difficult because of the volume of administration required. Again, this was more challenging for those with cognitive and neurodevelopmental conditions who struggled with administrative tasks.

“Well, it's comical because I don't know if you know anything about ADHD. We struggle to prioritise, focus, stay on task [...] and then I have to fill in this

ridiculously long form online, which just felt painful.” (Self-employed, 56-65, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

Self-employed applicants also faced additional administrative tasks, including providing business information and income forecasts. For example, one applicant with an established business reported having to estimate their income for the next three years which was hard to predict.

Workplace Assessment

After the application form has been submitted, a DWP Case Manager makes initial contact with the applicant to discuss their needs in detail. This may then lead to a Workplace Assessment where the applicant’s workplace-related barriers to employment are explored with an external assessor, who makes recommendations on how these can be addressed. The DWP Case Manager then uses these recommendations to inform their final decision on the application.

What made the Workplace Assessment easier

Applicants found the Workplace Assessment easier when assessors took a supportive and person-centred approach. Those with prior experience of other health benefit assessments felt that the AtW Workplace Assessment was less invasive than others they have done in the past, and that the assessor believed their account of their needs. Others said that assessors listened carefully and took time to understand their situation.

What made the Workplace Assessment more difficult

Applicants described the Workplace Assessment as more challenging when assessor behaviour felt rushed or disengaged, when booking arrangements were unclear or inflexible, and when assessors lacked knowledge of their health conditions or asked abstract or hypothetical questions.

Negative assessor approaches

Applicants had mixed views on the quality of the assessors’ approach within the Workplace Assessment. Some applicants felt that the assessors were “*there to do a service as quickly as they can*” and were in a rush to reach a conclusion very quickly, leaving them to feel like an inconvenience. Some applicants felt that assessors were patronising and would have liked them to be more personable.

Difficulties booking Workplace Assessments

Applicants described having difficulties booking Workplace Assessments due to both poor communication from assessors and inflexible booking times. Some applicants reported missing their Workplace Assessment because the provider did not give them a specific time when they would be contacted. Other applicants reported being told by the provider that if they were unavailable at the time when the assessment

was scheduled, for example, because they were on holiday, they could not rearrange the appointment and would need to be re-referred by their Case Manager.

Lack of understanding of health conditions

Assessors did not always have a good understanding of applicants' health conditions. As a result, applicants stated assessors did not clearly explain the types of support available or how this support could help them. For example, one hearing-impaired applicant described needing to explain their condition in depth, rather than focussing on the support they needed.

“The assessor [...] had no specialist knowledge of hearing impairments and how it impacts people working. [...]. He had no working knowledge and that just made it really hard. I felt like I was educating him rather than him offering me the support I needed.” (Employed, Large organisation, 46-55, Physical health condition)

People who did not know what support existed were overwhelmed when asked what support they wanted or needed.

“Because I’ve never received support how would I know every avenue of support available to me? What I really wanted was them to tell me what they offer [...] because I don’t know what support they did or did not offer so it was very difficult for me.” (Employed, Large organisation, 26-35, Physical health condition)

Applicants felt that assessors with more specialised knowledge would be better equipped to make appropriate recommendations.

Suitability of Workplace Assessment questions

People with cognitive or neurodevelopmental health conditions also struggled with the questions asked in the Workplace Assessment. Applicants found some of the abstract questions difficult to answer. For example, one applicant described being asked to estimate the cost of a bus journey on the spot. Another had difficulty explaining what form of support they needed, despite not having started work yet or knowing what support was available.

Award decision

After the Workplace Assessment, applicants received a decision letter outlining what support had been approved. As with earlier stages, some people found parts of this stage clear and understandable, while others struggled to interpret the information or understand how to act on it.

What made decisions easier to understand

Applicants generally found the award decision easier to understand when the letter presented the approved support in a simple and direct way. Applicants talked about

cases where the decision reflected what they had discussed with their assessor, which helped them feel confident that the award met their needs.

“The information that was given was very clear, it matched exactly what I needed perfectly.” (Employed, Medium organisation, 36-45, Physical health condition)

However, this clarity did not always extend to the practical steps that followed, such as how to claim support or what employers were required to do next.

What made decisions harder to understand

Applicants generally found the award decision harder to navigate when the practical steps they needed to take were not explained, or the reasons for reduced or refused support were not set out in the decision letter.

Lack of clarity on next steps

Applicants generally understood the decisions they received but were often unsure about the practical steps they needed to take afterwards. This included uncertainty around how employer contributions worked, how to claim costs, or how to put support in place. For example, an applicant said it was not clear how they should go about claiming their tutor sessions and described the process as “overwhelming”.

Confusion was made worse when support needed to be routed through employers who were unfamiliar with the scheme, leaving applicants feeling that they could not progress without their employer’s help.

Lack of rationale for decisions or reductions

Where applicants were dissatisfied with the award, this was in one of three main circumstances:

- They were not awarded an Element.
- Their award was reduced on renewal.
- They were awarded some, but not all, of the support they applied for.

Applicants felt that AtW did not explain clearly why some Elements were not approved or were reduced after applying for a renewal. Some applicants were not awarded Elements they expected, including cases where support arrangements discussed in the Workplace Assessment differed from the support ultimately awarded by the DWP Case Manager. Others were unsure why certain types of support were funded while they had to pay for other support themselves. This lack of explanation led some applicants to believe that the DWP were reluctant to award support workers because of the high costs.

Renewal process

Applicants can apply to renew their AtW grant up to 12 weeks before the end of the current grant.

What made applying more difficult

Applicants found the renewal stage more difficult when they received little notice about the renewal period and when they had to repeat information they had already provided.

Lack of notification and short timeframes

Applicants were usually not aware of the renewal period timeframe. Short-notice renewal emails created stress for applicants, particularly for those who did not find the instructions for renewing the claim straightforward.

“It felt like it came out of nowhere. One day I got an email saying your Access to Work is running out in a few weeks you need to get it renewed. And that's really stressful to receive.” (Employed, Large organisation, 18-25, Mental health condition)

It also meant that some applicants did not renew in time and continued to work without support from AtW.

Having to re-explain needs

Applicants disliked having re-explain their health conditions when reapplying for support. Applicants suggested that it would be beneficial to have a single point of contact or being able to follow-up with the same assessor who conducted their Workplace Assessment, where possible.

Employers' views

Employers described several factors that made the AtW process difficult to navigate. Their accounts highlighted challenges with the accessibility of the application form, uncertainty about their role, the suitability and booking of Workplace Assessments, and a lack of clarity around decisions and appeals.

Inaccessible application form

Like employees, employers felt that the application form was inaccessible for applicants with cognitive and neurodevelopmental conditions due to the terminology, question format and admin involved. They described employees who struggled with the open-ended questions, the complex wording of questions and generally managing the amount of admin.

Additional barriers for applicants

In addition to this, employers supporting deaf applicants felt that the application form was inaccessible and required the support of a BSL interpreter to explain the process and write responses. One employer described having to rely on interpreters supporting other AtW recipients for this purpose:

“We're lucky that we have people that would [...] either do it and wait for a budget to come through, or we'll fund it. But you could have a case where

employees are not in that position where they can do that." (Employer, Medium organisation)

Employers also highlighted issues specific to students applying for Supported Internships. Employers explained that students and their parents were often unsure which parent or guardian should act as the appointee, so applications were sometimes rejected if the form was signed by someone who was not the student's appointee. This added to the administrative burden and made it harder for students to progress through the initial stage of the application.

Unclear role of the employer

Employers that were more familiar with AtW were generally more confident with the process and their role in it. However, some employers were not confident in their role and were not sure what parts of the form they were meant to complete.

Unsuitable Workplace Assessment format

Employers felt that the Workplace Assessment format did not always suit employees' preferences and support needs. Employers reported being asked to attend the Workplace Assessment, although they felt it would have been more appropriate for this to take place in private. They described employees discussing personal information and what they could and could not do at work, which they felt employees should not have had to share in front of their managers.

"Some members of staff have found that a deeply humiliating experience." (Employer, Large organisation)

Employers also said that Workplace Assessments were usually carried out remotely, which sometimes meant applicants were not recommended the most suitable equipment. For example, one applicant was advised to use a chair that did not adequately meet their needs for neck support because the assessor was unable to view and understand the dimensions and set-up of their workstation.

Difficulties booking the Workplace Assessment

Similar to employees, employers experienced difficulties booking Workplace Assessments due to both poor communication and inflexible booking times. For example, an employer recalled supporting an employee who was unable to attend a Workplace Assessment as they were on maternity leave and could not reach their Case Manager. Another example included the Case Manager calling the applicant when they were on holiday without any notice.

No rationale for decisions or reductions

Employers felt that decisions were not always explained fully. This included both situations where employees were not awarded an Element or received a reduction in support after renewing their claim. They were not provided with an explanation or clarity around these decisions, and some did not make sense for the individual. For

example, an applicant needed a piece of software for their support needs but was awarded job coaching sessions instead which were more expensive.

No clear process for appeals

Employers felt that there should be clearer guidance for the appeal process. They described trying to appeal decisions if the funding was too low for the support granted but felt that there was no clear process to follow.

"There's not a clear and automatic appeal process for when that happens so you have to go back to AtW to find out what to do." (Employer, Medium organisation)

Timeframe

The timeframe for progressing through AtW varied widely for applicants. AtW prioritises applications from those who were due to start a new job within the next month, which means others often wait longer.

The time between application and Workplace Assessment ranged from a few weeks to a year before applicants had an assessment or heard back. The period between Workplace Assessment and decision was much shorter, with some people receiving an email outlining their support on the same day, though the wait reported could be as long as multiple months.

Applicants and employers reported longer delays in recent years, noting that new applications now took more time to progress than before.

Support during the wait

Support during the waiting period varied and depended on employers' familiarity with AtW and their financial capacity. Employers that understood the scheme or had previous experience were more likely to support employees while they waited for their award.

Some employers were willing to fund support temporarily because they were aware of the application timeframe or were generally more aware of employees' support needs.

"If you have got an understanding employer who knows about AtW that's absolutely fine, they might be willing to carry on that financial risk of covering AtW costs until the award comes through, but other employers may not be as understanding so that is a significant issue." (Employer, Medium organisation).

Additionally, disability-led employers, i.e. organisations led by disabled people or with disabled people in key leadership roles, reported that support could be backdated to the application date. This meant they could submit invoices later and recover costs from the point at which the employee started their role.

In contrast, smaller employers sometimes could not afford to fund the support upfront, which limited the adjustments available to the employee during the waiting period. These employers sometimes used temporary measures, such as adapting the employee's job role or giving them alternative duties.

Impacts

Applicants experienced several impacts whilst waiting for Workplace Assessments or support to be approved. These included:

- Employment impacts, such as self-employed applicants losing clients or being unable to take on new work and employed applicants at risk of reduced hours or job loss. For example, applicants who were awarded travel to work support at the start of their employment had to temporarily work from home, with one applicant losing their job after 11 months as their role could not accommodate long-term home working.
- Health impacts, including people managing without essential equipment or adjustments. Applicants reported increased pain or discomfort, as well as psychological impacts, including stress about whether they could continue working.
- Financial impacts, including having to pay for taxis or other travel costs during the wait.

“Disabled people are facing barriers because of the wait for Access to Work funding, the wait for an assessment, it's all the way through really. Wait times need to be improved.” (Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Physical health condition)

Experience of receiving Access to Work support

This chapter will explore the experiences of AtW recipients who were awarded an Element, including their experience of sourcing support and claiming funding. It also explores employers' experiences of sourcing support and claiming funding or supporting their employees to do so.

Experience of sourcing aids, equipment or support

Recipients' views

After the DWP awarded an Element, either the recipient or their employer sourced the support, depending on the level of involvement of the employer. Experiences of recipients who sourced the support themselves varied; recipients' responses highlighted six factors related to this.

Inconsistencies in information and guidance

There were inconsistencies in the information provided by the DWP and level of guidance given by Case Managers around where and how to source support. One group of recipients described being provided with an approved list of providers for equipment or contact details for support workers. However, this was not the case for all, leaving recipients unsure about where to look for support.

Recipients were sometimes asked to provide quotes from different providers or support workers, to be approved by the Case Manager. Again, this was not the experience of all recipients and appeared to be related to the individual Case Manager they were assigned. For example, a recipient described the involved process of getting quotes from multiple job coaches, only to be assigned a new Case Manager who did not request quotes.

There were also inconsistencies in recipients' understanding of where they could source support. For example, recipients reported being specifically asked to source equipment from a particular retailer, whereas others reported not being permitted to use that same retailer.

Limits placed on the support available

Recipients were sometimes limited in the type of support they could access. For those who did receive a list of approved providers, they did not always consider these suggestions appropriate or feasible.

One perception was that the suggested providers were not always appropriate for the recipients' needs. This was particularly true for those sourcing support workers, as it was important to recipients that they found someone they felt comfortable working with.

Company policies around the types of equipment permitted in the workplace were another barrier to the support available. These policies impacted the recipient's choice of equipment, and meant they were not always able to access the specific support recommended.

"The [tablet] is what I was really, really interested in [...] it was granted and recommended, but then my employer wouldn't allow it." (Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

Reliance on own research

Where suggestions were not provided, or were not appropriate, recipients described doing their own research or asking for recommendations from others. This included looking at blogs or posts written by people with a similar disability or health condition who had used AtW, or asking people they knew, e.g., in disability support groups.

Recipients' own research was sometimes viewed as more helpful for sourcing support than the list of approved suppliers provided by the DWP. Through independent research, recipients were able to choose the support they thought would best meet their needs. In particular, those who had previous experience working with support workers valued being able to work with someone they already knew and trusted.

However, for other recipients, having to do this research could be burdensome, and their preference would be for the DWP to select and source the support for them.

"It was quite a lot of extra work to find [the right support] - that for me was a barrier." (Unemployed, 36-45, Mental health condition)

Type of Element awarded

Experiences of sourcing support also varied by Element type, with specific challenges associated with sourcing support workers and special aids and equipment.

Support workers

Recipients described some support workers being unwilling to work with AtW customers, generally due to delays to reimbursement which impacted how long it took before they were paid. In some cases, support workers only agreed to work with AtW recipients if they paid invoices upfront themselves (rather than waiting to be reimbursed by the DWP). This resulted in financial pressures for recipients who chose to bear the initial cost of support.

"A lot of [BSL] interpreters have refused to then work with me because of the Access to Work payment and then it means that that massively impacts your

life and it means I don't have freedom. I don't get choice of interpreters."
(Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Physical health condition)

Recipients awarded the support worker Element also found hiring support workers challenging, because they often lacked the knowledge and experience needed to recruit someone, which created a barrier to putting support in place. This included employed recipients who sourced support themselves if their employer was not involved in the process.

"The problem I came up against once I actually got the award, that's when I was just completely bamboozled with how you actually recruit someone, like how do you advertise for someone and employ them? [...] that's why my award letter sat there for almost a year without me using it, because I just didn't know what to do." (Employed, Large organisation, 56-65, Physical health condition)

Special aids and equipment

Recipients awarded special aids and equipment described challenges around knowing what support would be suitable. This was particularly daunting for recipients who were sourcing expensive equipment as it was not always possible for recipients to view or try out the equipment in advance, or to change their mind.

"There is no trial and error in this process because your funding has already gone through and it's done." (Employed, Large organisation, 26-35, Physical health condition)

Requirement for tailored or specialist support

Recipients who needed tailored or specialist support found it particularly difficult to recruit suitable support workers. For example, some recipients required a support worker with a specific skillset, such as experience providing visual interpretation for visually impaired people, or a job coach with knowledge of a particular industry. Recipients were not always able to find support workers with these qualities, leading to gaps in support.

Another group of recipients required less specialised support but still struggled to find a support worker because the tasks they needed support for were irregular or inconsistent. Recipients in this situation often had funding for support workers to assist with ad hoc tasks, however, they perceived the uncertain hours to be undesirable to potential support workers.

Self-employment

Self-employment also shaped recipients' experiences, because it required them to publicise details of their health condition or disability when sourcing support workers. Recipients described feeling vulnerable when they had to disclose this information.

"I found it really scary to just go out into the world and say I'm a disabled person that has all these vulnerabilities and I need this help and advertise it publicly." (Self-employed, 36-45, Mental health condition)

The impacts of not being able to secure support were also greater for self-employed recipients, as not being able to perform all aspects of their role meant a loss of earnings.

Employers' views

Employers also reported challenges with sourcing support, which depended on the type of support sought.

Special aids and equipment

Where employers sourced support on their employee's behalf, they reported some specific challenges in sourcing specialist aids and equipment. It was not always possible to put the recommended support in place, due to IT or security policies prohibiting certain types of equipment or software, or suppliers not aligning with the company's approved supplier list. Employers from large organisations also reported lengthy internal procurement processes, which delayed how quickly support could be put in place.

Medium and large employers are required to share the cost of certain types of AtW support (special aids and equipment and adaptations to premises) if the employee has been in their role for more than six weeks when they apply. The employer's contribution is determined by the size of the organisation; for employers with limited budgets, the cost of the recommended equipment was a barrier. Employers appeared to take different approaches to this. One strategy was to forgo the recommendations and fund a less expensive alternative themselves.

"Ultimately, we were able to find something cheaper through our own suppliers [...] So we ended up still getting the person something that they could use that was suitable, but not what the DWP had suggested." (Employer, Large organisation)

Another approach involved employers procuring the support recommended, even if it came at a significant cost to the business.

"Sometimes we've had people who've got very specific needs [...] like a specific chair and then the one that Access to Work identifies might cost over £1000 [...] But obviously, it's needed, so we just allow it." (Employer, Large organisation)

Support workers

Where employees sourced support workers themselves, employers were not always comfortable with their lack of involvement in the process. Employees managing support workers independently meant employers did not have the same level of oversight as they would for an employee. They were therefore unaware of the details of their work and hours worked but were still responsible for approving time sheets.

"While I totally see that she [support worker] didn't need to be employed by us and that a person with disabilities is totally able to do all of that side of it independently. It

then didn't feel right that I was the one signing off the work." (Employer, Large organisation)

Experience of claiming Access to Work funding

Recipients' views

AtW involves recipients claiming money from the DWP grant after expenditure, which can be done online or by post. The recipient or their employer may claim the money, depending on which party paid for the support. Recipients' experiences varied considerably, ranging from straightforward to challenging, and included a group of recipients not claiming AtW funding at all. The experiences of these three groups are outlined below.

Recipients who found claiming funding straightforward

Those who found the process of claiming funding straightforward cited two key reasons.

Ease of using the online system

One group of recipients viewed the online portal as an efficient and straightforward way to claim back funding, compared with the previous system of sending paperwork by post. Recipients liked the simplicity of being able to upload receipts or invoices rather than having to keep physical copies. Additionally, employers being able to approve costs digitally, particularly where there were multiple costs being processed, simplified the authorisation process.

"It's brilliant now it's online. It was a [...] a massive admin addition to work to do it when it was all paperwork. When it switched to being online, that was a bit of a miracle." (Self-employed, 46-55, Physical health condition)

Support from employer

Recipients valued the support of their employer in sourcing support and claiming funding on their behalf. This support was also sometimes offered to self-employed recipients working on a freelance basis.

Employers' involvement in claiming funding had three main benefits:

- Recipients were not responsible for the administrative elements of claiming funding.
- Recipients did not experience financial challenges as a result of having to wait to be reimbursed.
- Employers paying for support upfront meant those providing support (e.g. support workers, taxi companies) did not have to wait to be paid.

- Recipients also described support from others to claim back funding, including the DWP work coaches and support workers helping with the administration.

Recipients who found claiming funding challenging

Those who had difficulties with claiming funding cited two key challenges.

Administrative burden

Recipients cited the administration associated with claiming back expenses, e.g. collating and uploading multiple receipts, and managing invoices, as a barrier. This was a particular challenge for those who struggled with personal administration due to their condition or disability and those who specifically used AtW to fund administrative support. For example, one recipient with ADHD described using their workplace coach to keep on top of AtW administration:

"I remember some of my coaching sessions with my coach was my coach helping me do the invoices for my coaching [...] At one point my coaching, through Access to Work, was just existing to fuel itself." (Self-employed, 46-55, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

The amount of administration recipients had to manage was dependent on the Element type. Recipients having to manage multiple claims on a regular basis, e.g. those receiving funding for travel to work, or a support worker, reported finding the process more burdensome. Recipients were sometimes able to find more efficient ways to manage claims, e.g. paying a taxi company in batches rather than on a pay-as-you-go basis. However, others said this option was not offered by all providers.

Where administrative tasks were a barrier to accessing support, one solution recipients described was to use an external agency to manage invoices and make claims. Recipients reported finding these useful as they enabled their use of the scheme. However, the agency applied a fee, meaning the recipients did not benefit from the full grant amount as intended.

"It does feel like a lot of my award is going to an agency but if I didn't go through the agency, I wouldn't be able to access the support." (Self-employed, 36-45, Mental health condition)

Despite the view that the online system was more straightforward, there were also recipients who continued to claim funding by post. This was either because they were unaware of the online system, or for practical reasons, e.g. the employer requiring support workers to complete log sheets. Challenges associated with completing paperwork were particularly pronounced. For example, recipients described having to print many pages to complete claims for multiple taxi journeys. They also reported issues with paper forms being rejected due to information not being entered in the specified format and having to repeat the process.

Recipients also described challenges with the payment process which required them to contact the DWP. These included:

- Clerical errors. Issues with not receiving funds from the DWP meant recipients had to chase payments.
- Lack of clarity around change in circumstances. Recipients expressed confusion around how to amend their claim when there was a change in their circumstances. This could take a long time to resolve, leaving recipients having to cover the extra cost of support.
- Lack of notification about renewal. Recipients described their claims lapsing as they reportedly had not been notified of the need to renew it, leaving them without support and having to arrange backdated payments.

Lack of clarity around responsibility for claiming funding

Where employers were less familiar with AtW processes, there was sometimes uncertainty about who was responsible for managing and claiming funding. This lack of clarity contributed to delays and additional burden for recipients.

A key issue was employers' limited understanding of AtW requirements. Some employers were unaware that they were required to contribute to the cost of support, which resulted in delays in payments being processed. In one case, a recipient reported that a business manager initially refused to comply with payment requests because they believed the claim was illegitimate.

Employers' internal systems and processes also shaped their ability to support employees with claims. For example, some organisations were not set up to pay for support upfront, such as staff not having access to a company credit card. As a result, employees were required to cover the upfront cost themselves, creating financial strain, particularly where costs were substantial or frequent.

There were also instances of employers not paying invoices on time, which caused practical challenges for recipients. For those having ongoing sessions with a coach, late payments meant they were unable to book additional sessions until outstanding invoices were resolved, disrupting the continuity of support.

Those who did not claim funding

Some applicants did not claim funding for some or all of the support they were awarded. One reason for this was that their employer opted to cover the full cost of the support awarded. Other reasons for not claiming funding reflected a mix of practical, administrative and suitability related factors.

Difficulties understanding how to use the award

One reason for not claiming funding was due to lack of understanding of the claims process. This included confusion about how to source support or how to make a claim. As detailed above, applicants had particular challenges in sourcing a support worker, and sometimes did not go on to claim funding, as these difficulties prevented them from progressing. One self-employed applicant described the steps involved as "really complicated", which reflected how overwhelming the process could feel for people with health conditions or disabilities.

“I have ADHD, trying to remember to submit the receipts to my manager and then remind her to submit them to Access to Work, for someone with ADHD, that's not a process that's ever going to be completed.” (Employed, Small organisation, 18-25, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

Administrative demands preventing claims

Administrative demands also prevented some applicants from claiming funding. This was especially the case for those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions who found it difficult to manage tasks that involved multiple stages or coordination with their employer. Applicants also reported slow or inconsistent communication from the DWP when contacting them with questions or issues, and having to make multiple contact attempts. This added to the burden on applicants, and meant some did not pursue their claim because of the time and effort required to reach a solution. For others, the effort required to upload receipts or manage invoices outweighed the value of the support.

Missing deadlines to make a claim

Missing the timeframe for claiming funding was a barrier in some instances. This happened for several reasons, including difficulty deciding which support to choose, employers not purchasing support in time, or applicants forgetting to reclaim funding after paying upfront.

Awarded support not meeting applicants' needs

Another reason for not claiming funding was that applicants felt the awarded support did not meet their needs. This included the perspective that the support was too 'generic' and would not address their specific challenges at work. Others were dissatisfied because the support they had requested was not approved, even when the support they were awarded was more expensive. Applicants also felt some awards were impractical because they did not account for their circumstances, such as being awarded coaching that they would not have time to attend. Applicants also reported that decisions were not explained or justified in the award letter, which would help them understand why support was or was not awarded.

“I kind of felt that the support I needed was [...] ignored and I was given these sort of generic support things that they wanted me to do and wasn't really relevant. I didn't feel they were really relevant to my actual condition, so I didn't actually bother taking them in the end.” (Self-employed, 46-55, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

Employers' views

Where employers were responsible for claiming AtW funding, they reported challenges with managing the process.

Administrative burden for employers

Employers described the administrative requirements for claiming funding as time-consuming. They reported that completing physical claim forms involved substantial paperwork for each claim, which created additional workload. For employees using support workers, the requirement for signatures from the employer, employee and support worker was challenging to coordinate, especially when people worked remotely. These issues meant that physical paperwork was viewed as burdensome for organisations processing multiple claims.

However, physical paperwork was sometimes preferred because it aligned better with organisations' internal ways of working. These employers found it more manageable to collect and process paper forms in batches rather than manage individual online submissions. For example, one employer described filing completed forms and submitting them every two months made it easier to manage.

Impact of delayed payments

Employers also described the financial impact of delays in receiving payments from the DWP when they had paid for support upfront. Employers reported waiting several months for reimbursement, often for amounts totalling thousands of pounds, which created pressure on their budgets. This was particularly challenging for smaller businesses and charities that did not have large budgets available. Although the employer cost share reflected the size of the organisation, some large employers had limited budgets because they operated regionally with only a small regional allocation. Where employers attempted to chase the DWP for payments, they reported difficulties due to the lack of a clear route to contact the department.

“The stress of waiting for chunks of money because you still have to pay your staff is really stressful.” (Employer, Small organisation)

Delayed payments also affected employers' ability to secure the support their employees needed. Some employers reported that delays in reimbursing invoices meant suppliers were unwilling to continue providing support, which created disruption for employees. For example, one employer detailed how BSL interpreters were sometimes not paid for completed work for extended periods and therefore refused to continue working with the employer.

Impacts of support funded through Access to Work

This chapter will explore recipients' and employers' views on the positive impacts of support funded through AtW and, where recipients' support needs were not fully met, the reasons for this.

Recipients' views on positive impacts

Recipients described a wide range of ways in which AtW support positively influenced their employment. The extent and nature of this impact varied according to two broad themes: how dependent recipients were on AtW support, and the type of Element they were awarded.

Level of dependency on AtW support

For one group of recipients, AtW support was fundamental to their ability to stay in work. These individuals felt that, without the support provided, they would be unable to continue in their current job or unable to work at all.

"[Access to Work support] is a matter of me working or not [...] Without the support I'm struggling to cope." (Self-employed, 36-45, Mental health condition)

Another perception was that AtW enabled recipients to continue in skilled roles that matched their qualifications and professional background.

"It would have been hard for me to do something else, I'd probably be on benefits or I wouldn't be working." (Employed, Medium organisation, 46-55, Physical health condition).

For others, AtW support was not strictly necessary for remaining in employment but had a substantial effect on the quality of their working life. These recipients described being able to work more efficiently, maintain better focus, manage their time more effectively, and carry out their duties with greater confidence.

"I hadn't actually realised how much I was missing until I had all the equipment in place." (Self-employed, 46-55, Physical health condition).

Type of Element awarded

Different Elements awarded addressed different barriers at work, influencing the ways in which recipients were able to participate in and benefit from employment.

Support workers

Support workers enabled recipients to better understand their needs and adapt their work accordingly. Job coaching provided recipients with insight into how their

disability affected their work, particularly for recipients with cognitive or neurodevelopmental conditions. They also offered practical strategies to help recipients overcome specific challenges.

“[The coach] helped me [...] stop beating myself up and thinking that I was broken and weird and helped me start to understand that how I could do things that would work with my brain.” (Self-employed, 56-65, Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition)

For recipients with neurodevelopmental conditions, administrative support helped them organise their work and manage tasks that they found difficult to sustain independently. Support workers also played a crucial role for recipients with physical health conditions. For example, BSL interpreters provided support to deaf recipients and sight support workers supported visually impaired recipients with visual interpretation (i.e. describing visual information). This enabled them to carry out essential responsibilities and navigate their workplace effectively.

Mental Health Support Service

Mental health support provided by the MHSS contributed to improved resilience, wellbeing and confidence at work. Recipients explained that this support helped them develop coping strategies, better manage their mental health conditions and understand the adjustments they needed in their working environment.

Travel to work

Travel-related support enhanced recipients' independence and ability to participate fully in work. Recipients described being able to travel to work without relying on friends or family. Having a physical presence in the workplace allowed recipients to collaborate more easily with colleagues and feel more integrated into their team. For self-employed individuals, travel support expanded the geographical areas in which they could work, which was essential for securing and delivering work opportunities.

Special aids and equipment

Specialist equipment also had a substantial impact on recipients' productivity and comfort at work. Technology such as tablets, additional monitors and noise-cancelling headphones helped recipients work more efficiently. Software, including speech-to-text and screen readers, supported recipients to complete tasks more independently and accurately. Physical aids, such as specialist chairs, standing desks and over-bed desks, enabled recipients to manage pain or fatigue and maintain comfort throughout the working day. AtW also funded highly specialised equipment, such as the Roger Pen hearing device or powered wheelchairs, which recipients viewed as essential to their ability to work at all.

Reasons why support needs were not met

Recipients also described circumstances where their support needs were not met through AtW. These challenges fell into three broad categories: the nature of

recipients' work arrangements, delays to payments, and issues relating to the suitability or relevance of the support awarded.

Nature of work arrangements

Recipients were not always able to access appropriate support because of the way their work was structured. For example, recipients described struggling to find time during working hours to undertake training or coaching, meaning the support could not be integrated into their role as intended. There were also instances where employers did not purchase the recommended equipment because internal policies restricted the use of particular devices or software. These constraints meant that some recipients were unable to put support in place even when funding had been awarded.

Timeliness of payments

Delays in receiving reimbursement from the DWP created significant challenges for recipients, employers and suppliers. The length of time recipients waited for reimbursement varied considerably and often exceeded what they had anticipated.

Recipients who paid for support upfront described the delay in being reimbursed as financially burdensome. Regular or high-value costs, such as taxi fares, quickly accumulated and left recipients financially disadvantaged. These delays were compounded in cases where employers were required to approve expenses before they could be processed, adding an additional step and further extending the timeframe. For some, this created financial strain, including the need to rely on credit cards to cover ongoing costs.

Where support workers' invoices were paid directly by the DWP, delays meant that support workers waited significantly longer than their usual invoicing cycles.

Recipients described feeling responsible for chasing these payments, which they found stressful and time-consuming. In some cases, recipients took on the upfront cost themselves to avoid losing access to support, but this created further financial pressure. One recipient described repeated issues with BSL interpreter invoices, noting that the process involved prolonged back-and-forth communication and that the issue remained unresolved over an extended period. These issues were compounded by the lack of BSL translation:

"You send emails to these people. It's this whole chain of back and forth and it's extremely stressful because it's all based on English. It never gets resolved. And even now, it's still ongoing." (Employed, Large organisation, 36-45, Physical health condition)

Payment delays also affected recipients' ability to maintain the support they needed. Recipients described suppliers withdrawing their support due to not being paid on time, or being unwilling to work with recipients claiming through AtW in the first place. These disruptions directly affected recipients' ability to fulfil their job responsibilities. Recipients described being left without essential support, such as interpreters, which made it extremely difficult to participate in meetings or complete key tasks. This had knock-on effects on their confidence and sense of capability at work.

Suitability of the support awarded

One group of recipients felt that the specific support they were awarded did not meet their needs. This included recipients who had applied for specific equipment or support that was not granted, leaving them without what they considered essential tools to manage their condition at work. Others felt that the support offered was generic rather than tailored to their circumstances. For example, recipients described being awarded access to a course or seminar about managing their health condition, which was seen as not addressing their personal challenges at work. Recipients who had limited understanding of their support needs expressed a desire for assessors to use a more personalised approach to understand the recipient's particular needs at work and help identify what would be most beneficial.

“It didn't feel like it was helping me get Access to Work. It felt like here you go and now you're set, rather than the funding being tailored.” (Self-employed, 46-55, Mental health condition)

Others felt that while the support they received was helpful, it did not fully address their needs, leaving gaps that affected their ability to work effectively.

One experience recipients reported was that AtW did not sufficiently address their challenges because the barriers they faced in employment were already deeply entrenched by the time they sought support. For these individuals, AtW was a last resort, and the support provided was not always enough to overcome the difficulties they were experiencing in their role.

Employers' views

Employers described a range of positive impacts for employees, and these closely reflected the benefits that employees described themselves. They explained that AtW helped employees start or remain in work, reduced pain or discomfort during the working day, and improved productivity and employee satisfaction.

“It is absolutely essential in our workplace. Without AtW there's large aspects of their role that they would not be able to access in a similar way. Whether it is accessing training or doing day-to-day tasks.” (Employer, Medium organisation)

Additionally, employers in organisations that primarily hired disabled people highlighted benefits around skill development and workplace confidence. They said AtW helped people take up work experience placements that they may not otherwise have had access to, and supported young people to move towards paid work.

“Providing job coach[ing] or even just the transport so they can get to placements just makes a huge difference and just opens up doors and opportunities that they wouldn't have previously.” (Employer, Large organisation)

Wider impacts

Employers also reflected on wider organisational impacts, particularly around equality, inclusion and valuing their workforce. They said AtW helped them show employees that they were committed to supporting disabled staff.

"[AtW contributes to employees] feeling supported and valued and that the trust has invested in them and sees it a worthwhile investment in getting the necessary support." (Employer, Large organisation)

Relatedly, employers said AtW helped them demonstrate that their workplace was genuinely inclusive rather than inclusive only in policy. They felt that AtW held them accountable for ensuring that disabled people could take part fully in work.

"We can have as many EDI policies as we can write but unless we can prove we are a workplace where disabled people can work in practice it's not worth very much." (Employer, Medium organisation)

Suggested improvements to Access to Work

This section addresses three areas of potential improvements to AtW, suggested by applicants and employers.

Improvements to the Access to Work process

Applicants and employers made suggestions for improvements towards the application process, accessing and paying for Element types, and the timeframe for receiving support and reimbursement.

Application process

Improved accessibility

Applicants suggested improvements to the accessibility of the application process. This included reducing the amount of jargon, complex language and open-ended questions in the application form, and having fewer administrative requirements when first applying. This was particularly important for applicants with cognitive and neurodevelopmental impairments who found the complexity of the initial application created a barrier and often delayed completion.

Applicants also felt that evidentiary requirements were sometimes too rigid. For example, one person was asked to obtain an NHS letter confirming the unavailability of a wheelchair, despite NHS providers not offering wheelchairs themselves.

Greater flexibility

Applicants also wanted the DWP to offer more flexible ways to engage with the AtW application process. They felt that having different format options, such as completing the application by video call, would make the process more accessible. This was particularly important for deaf applicants, who relied on visual communication and needed BSL interpretation to take part fully.

Relatedly, applicants wanted more flexibility in how Workplace Assessment appointments and Case Manager calls were arranged. They explained that calls often came without warning, which made it difficult to plan around work or caring responsibilities. They felt the process would be easier if the Case Manager notified them in advance of when they would be contacted.

Applicants also wanted a longer period to gather the evidence needed to progress their application. One applicant described having to obtain three quotes within two weeks, which required taking time off work to travel to different wheelchair providers

for in-person measurements. The applicant was informed that any quotes outside of this two-week window would not be considered. This short deadline created significant stress and made it harder to complete the application.

Employer involvement in the Workplace Assessment

Where employers were not consulted in the Workplace Assessment, they felt more involvement would lead to more accurate and practical recommendations. They explained that assessors sometimes suggested equipment that did not work with their organisation's systems. For example, one employer described an employee waiting several months for specialist software, only to find that it could not be installed on the organisation's laptops. Employers felt that they could provide useful insight into the employee's role and organisational context but felt that their contributions during Workplace Assessments were overlooked.

Conversely, other employers preferred not to be present, so applicants felt more comfortable during the assessment and able to speak openly. Providing employers with the list of recommendations before the Award letter was issued could help to ensure support suggestions were feasible, without requiring employers to be present during assessments.

Timeframe

Applicants wanted more support during delays in their application being processed. Wait times varied from a few weeks to a year, greatly impacting those who needed immediate support. Providing more support during the application process, such as signposting to local organisations that provide support for specific disabilities or health conditions, would ease the impact of these delays.

Sourcing aids, equipment or support

Consistent information

AtW recipients wanted more consistent information on where and how to source support. For instance, recipients received inconsistent levels of guidance on contacting providers, retailers and support workers and on whether to provide quotes to Case Managers. Clearer and more consistent guidance would reduce uncertainty and ease recipients experience of sourcing support.

Practical guidance

Recipients wanted practical guidance on how to source a support worker. Those awarded this support were inexperienced in recruiting a support worker and suggested step-by-step information on how to advertise a role, how to create an invoice, and where to find suitable providers. They also wanted an up-to-date regional list of agencies, freelancers and approved providers, which would be particularly helpful for those needing support workers with specific skillsets.

Accessible support

Employers wanted the Case Manager to ensure that recommended equipment was accessible through their organisation. They explained that equipment was not available through the organisations approved suppliers and software was not

compatible with their systems, which meant that their staff could not access the Element. This resulted, for example, in one employee waiting months for software before learning that it could not be used on their organisation's laptop. Employers felt that better communication between themselves and the Case Manager could help to prevent this.

Claiming Access to Work funding

Simplified claims process

Recipients wanted the claims process to be simplified. Those with cognitive or neurodevelopmental impairments, or those with Element types that required regular claims, such as travel to work, found the admin involved in claiming funding burdensome. It was suggested that the paperwork required, such as uploading multiple receipts, could be streamlined, especially when regular similar claims are made.

Recipients suggested simplified and flexible ways for paying for support. This centred around difficulty paying the initial cost of support. For example, recipients suggested prepaid cards could be used to pay for Elements such as travel to work support, rather than paying themselves and waiting to be reimbursed. Recipients who were self-employed and just starting work, explained that they had little available cash flow to make these costs.

Timeframe

Recipients and employers wanted repayment delays to be reduced and handled more efficiently. Smaller businesses were greatly financially impacted by repayment delays. Reviewing how claims are processed so that these employers are prioritised would reduce this impact. Additionally, when delays occurred, employers and recipients often spent considerable time trying to contact Case Managers for updates on reimbursement. Providing regular updates on the progress of claims, along with a direct phone line for queries, would help to reduce this burden.

Improvements to communication and assessors

Increased communication

Applicants and employers wanted the DWP to provide more consistent and accessible communication throughout the application process. They felt that being able to contact their Case Manager by phone (rather than calling the AtW helpline) would prevent them from having to repeat information each time they contacted the service. A single point of contact would also give applicants and employers somewhere to ask questions about the scheme, check the progress of applications, and chase delayed payments. Employers described the strain of repeatedly following up on applications, especially when they were supporting several employees at the same time, and noted that the DWP only allowed them to discuss three applications in one call.

Similarly, applicants and employers wanted more proactive communication during the application process. They wanted reminders about key deadlines, such as renewal dates, and wanted notifications when claims had been received and when payments were expected. Applicants emphasised that those with a disability need greater reassurances throughout the application process:

*“The people that are applying for Access to Work are mostly vulnerable people. They need more reassurance, more help with everything.”
(Unemployed, 18-25, Mental health condition)*

Following the award, recipients also wanted the DWP to contact them and their employer to check whether they needed any assistance accessing the support.

Training for assessors

One suggestion was around the need for greater training and expertise for assessors. Applicants who made this suggestion felt that assessors lacked specialised knowledge about the disabilities that they were assessing and what support would be effective. Consequently, they felt that the Element being suggested was not practical and did not consider their support needs. For example, a visually impaired applicant was told to take a taxi to a bus stop to get to work, after the applicant had said they were unable to take public transport at all due to their condition. In the absence of specialist knowledge, they felt assessors needed to be more responsive to what the applicant told them about their support needs.

Increased information and awareness

More available information about the scheme

Applicants and employers wanted more information from the outset about what to expect from the scheme. Applicants in particular wanted information on the different Element types available as well as examples of how the scheme has previously supported employees. Employers wanted more information on the timelines and stages of the application process. Knowing this would save them time in trying to search for this information and reassure them and their employee:

“There was a lot of scrambling about, trying to find the right information...It [greater clarity on what to expect] makes things quicker. It means that the employee and the employer can feel a bit more confident in here is what we're doing and how long it might reasonably take.” (Employer, Large organisation)

Recipients wanted greater clarity about their award following a decision. This included guidance on how to use the awarded Element, such as specialist equipment and software. Recipients also wanted clarity on how moving job would impact their award as a fear of losing their support discouraged them from moving role and limited their career mobility.

Increased awareness of AtW

Applicants and employers wanted greater awareness of AtW amongst health and social care professionals. It was suggested that Job Centre Plus staff and health professionals should have greater awareness of the scheme so that they can recommend employees apply. Additionally, they wanted more awareness of the scheme within workplaces in the form of training for staff, and information in the hiring and induction process so that both employees and employers knew to apply. Employers were surprised by the limited knowledge of the scheme among other professionals:

“I think that says something about how well the scheme has been publicised if there are career HR professionals who aren't aware of it.” (Employer, Medium organisation)

Technical Appendix

Detailed methodology

Sampling and recruitment

Applicants

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 90 AtW applicants across two batches of fieldwork. The sample was provided by the DWP, and cleaned by NatCen prior to recruitment to remove any unusable cases, such as those without contact details. A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure range and diversity within the sample. Quotas were agreed with the DWP for a range of primary sampling characteristics with particular relevance to the research aims. The batched approach enabled us to prioritise certain groups based on the findings from the first set of interviews⁶. Secondary sampling characteristics were monitored to ensure variation across the sample. These are shown in tables 7 – 16 below.

Table 7. Primary health condition

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Physical health condition	17	18	35
Mental health condition	9	18	27
Cognitive or neurodevelopmental condition	17	11	28

Table 8. Working status at the point of applying for AtW

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Employed	22	35	57
Self-employed	14	8	22
Unemployed	7	4	11

Table 9. Applicant Type

Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
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⁶ Based on the Batch 1 sample characteristics, we adjusted the quotas for the primary sampling criteria for Batch 2 to ensure targets were met and prioritised recruitment of male participants and those in the 18-25 and 56-65 age groups.

Journeys to Access to Work

Approved and received payment for an Element	20	23	43
Approved for but not received payment for an Element	13	13	26
Approved for a Workplace Assessment but not an Element	10	11	21

Table 10. Element type approved

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Support worker	24	16	40
Special aids and equipment	15	15	30
Travel to work	9	12	21
Mental Health Support Service	7	9	16

Note: applicants can be approved for one or more Elements

Table 11. When approved for AtW

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Before 1st November 2023	9	10	19
After 1st November 2023	34	37	71

Note: 1st November 2023 was chosen as the threshold between more and less recent applications as it marked the midpoint of the approval dates for AtW in the sample provided.

Table 12. Age

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
18-25	4	9	13
26-35	10	5	15
36-45	15	13	28
46-55	13	10	23
56-65	1	10	11

Table 13. Country/Region

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Wales	3	1	4
Scotland	4	5	9
North East	3	2	5
North West	10	3	13

Yorkshire and The Humber	0	4	4
East Midlands	5	3	8
West Midlands	4	3	7
East of England	1	7	8
London	4	6	10
South East	3	7	10
South West	4	6	10

Table 14. Employer Size

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
1-49 employees	18	15	33
50-249 employees	7	4	11
250+ employees	18	28	46

Table 15. PIP status (whether claimed in the last 3 years)

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Yes	20	25	45
No	23	22	45

Table 16. Sex

	Batch 1 Achieved	Batch 2 Achieved	Total
Female	30	19	49
Male	13	28	41

Prior to the beginning of recruitment, participants were contacted by email or text message to inform them about the study and given the opportunity to opt out by email or by contacting the project freephone number. Participants who opted out were removed from the sample.

Recruitment was conducted by NatCen's specialist telephone recruiters. The recruiters conducted screening calls to explain what the research involved, establish

participants' willingness to take part and schedule appointments. Where an appointee acted on behalf of the applicant, the appointee was contacted and invited to take part in an interview on behalf of, or jointly with, the applicant. A range of adjustments were offered to support full participation, such as regular breaks and study materials in alternative formats.

Employers

Qualitative interviews were also conducted with employers whose employees had been supported by the scheme. The DWP provided a sample of small, medium and large organisations with named contacts who were recorded as having supported employees to access the scheme. The final achieved sample was 26 employers.

Given the size of the available sample, no quotas were set for employer interviews. The achieved sample is shown in table 17 below.

Table 17: employer sample composition

Employer size	Achieved sample
Large (250 or more employees)	11
Medium (50-249 employees)	9
Small (less than 50 employees)	6

As with employees, employers were contacted before recruitment began, giving them the opportunity to opt out of the study. Recruiters conducted screening calls with the purpose of checking that the named contact had knowledge of AtW and had supported employees to access it.

Data collection

Applicants

An initial sample of 43 participants were interviewed between September and October 2025. An additional sample of 47 participants were interviewed between November 2025 and January 2026. Interviews primarily took place online on MS Teams or via telephone, with a small number of interviews conducted in-person. Interviews lasted up to 45 minutes.

A topic guide was developed to explore the following topics: applicants' disability or health condition and work arrangements, awareness and understanding of AtW, experience of applying and support received, and any suggested improvements to the scheme. The topic guide is included below.

Some minor changes were made to the topic guide before the second phase of fieldwork, including the addition of probes about the process of renewing a claim and the experience of the Workplace Assessment.

Employers

Employer interviews took place between December 2025 and January 2026. Interviews took place on MS Teams or via telephone and lasted up to 45 minutes. The interviews explored employers' understanding and awareness of AtW, experiences of providing support within the workplace, views and experiences of AtW, and suggested improvements.

As part of the discussion on support for employees in the workplace, employers were shown a vignette presenting a hypothetical scenario about a disabled employee seeking support at work. Employers were asked what action they would advise the employer in the scenario to take (i.e. whether they should seek support through AtW) and what factors influenced their answer. Responses are reflected in employers' views on reasonable adjustments presented within the 'Support provided by employers prior to application' section of the report.

Analysis and reporting

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Researchers used the Framework approach to qualitative data management, developed by NatCen, to chart (collate and summarise) transcribed data by theme and case (Ritchie *et al.* 2013).

Separate frameworks were developed for applicant and employer interviews. Interview data was summarised within each matrix, with each row representing an individual interview, including relevant sampling information. Each column represented a theme explored in topic guides, with headings used for any related sub-themes.

Thematic analysis was then carried out to identify the range of participants' views and experiences on a given aspect of the AtW journey. Subgroup analysis was carried out to draw out differences of experience according to participant characteristics with particular salience to the research questions.

Analysis was conducted in stages in line with the batches of fieldwork, with analysis of the first 43 interviews informing an interim findings presentation delivered to the DWP in November 2025. A final presentation drawing on both applicant and employer interviews was delivered in April 2026.

Ethics

NatCen's Research Ethics Committee (REC) reviewed and approved NatCen's research proposal for this study in August 2025. The REC provides independent guidance and oversight to ensure that all studies conducted by NatCen uphold high ethical standards and meet the expectations of government and other research funders.

Data collection tools

Applicant interview topic guide

1. Background context (5 mins)

About the participant

- Tell me a bit about yourself or the participant (if an appointee)
 - Age, where you they/ live
 - Whether lives with others or by self
- Whether currently working
- If working, employee or self-employed

IF EMPLOYEE

- Employer/ employment sector
- Type of work. Role.
- Size of employer (e.g. number of staff)
- How long for
- Pattern of working (e.g. full or part time, if related to disability or health condition)
- Office based/ home-working/ both

IF SELF-EMPLOYED

- How long self-employed
- Why became self-employed
- Type of work. Role.
- Pattern of working (e.g. full or part time, if related to this disability or health condition)
- Office based/ home-working/ both
- Whether anyone else works with/ for them
- Annual turnover (if known)

IF NOT WORKING

- Current circumstances
- When last working
- Reasons for being out of work (e.g. due to health, employer wasn't accommodating, no suitable jobs)

FOR ALL

- In receipt of any other disability benefits - now or over the last three years (e.g. Personal Independence Payment, Employment and Support Allowance)
- Any support other than AtW to help them find employment, or stay in employment

About their disability

- Type of disability or health condition
 - Permanent, temporary, fluctuating
 - How it affects their daily life
 - How it affects their work or what they can do (e.g. flexible work arrangements, restricted roles or tasks)
 - Support needed to manage disability or health condition at work
- Any recent changes in health, disability or circumstances
- Disability or condition they sought support for through Access to Work (if different or more specific than above)
- How would disability/ health condition affect their ability to work without AtW

About the award of AtW

- Confirm whether awarded:
 - Assessment component only
 - Assessment and funded provisions (an Element or Elements)
 - Funded provisions with assessment
- If participant is unsure: An assessment is when the DWP makes a referral for a professional third-party assessor to assess what help or support you might need. This might be in person, by phone or by online video call
 - Whether their first award or a renewed award
- Type of assessment and/ or Elements awarded and used (if more than one application for AtW, or more than one Element awarded, explore all beginning with the most recent)

At first spontaneous, then ask for detail about specific types of equipment, aides or support used, for which they received a payment/s

- Communication support at interviews (e.g. BSL interpreters)
- Support worker - what support they provide (e.g. reading or interpreting information, physical assistance)
 - Communication support/ BSL interpreter/ personal reader
 - Carer
 - Driver/ travel buddy
 - Job coach

- Special aids and equipment (e.g. computer hardware or software, adjustments to the immediate work environment)
- Travel to work (e.g. additional costs if a person cannot use public transport, taxis)
- Mental health support (e.g. access to counselling or therapy to manage a person's mental health)

2. Awareness and deciding to apply for AtW (10 mins)

Before applying for AtW

- Any support from an employer or others (e.g. health professionals, charities) already in place
- If self-employed, any discussion or support from previous employers
- Whether knew what additional support they needed before applying to AtW
 - Knowledge about potential sources of support

How found out about AtW

- How first heard of AtW
 - When heard about it
 - Source/s of information
 - Through employer/ health service/ occupational health
 - Other sources (e.g. own research, charity, support group, news item, internet, social media, etc.)
- Understanding of AtW at this time
 - Eligibility criteria
 - Support available through AtW
 - Application process
- Whether information was clear/ unclear
 - Whether easy/ complicated to understand

Circumstances when they applied

- What prompted them to apply
- Any changes in circumstances immediately before applying
 - Change in employment

- New job
 - New role
 - New place of work (e.g. new building, new location)
- Change in their health or disability
 - New diagnosis
 - Anything else

Consideration of 'reasonable adjustments'

- Anything they considered before applying
 - Eligibility
 - How well they knew what support they needed (especially if they needed an assessment)
 - Perceived ease/ difficulty applying
- Any other sources of support considered or discussed
 - Financial support
 - Other support
- Any discussion with employer/ others (e.g. occupational health, health service professionals, charity)
 - What was discussed
 - Outcomes of discussions
 - Was occupational health or a health professional consulted
 - If no support from employer, why was that the case
 - Whether reasonable adjustments discussed
- Understanding of 'reasonable adjustments' (i.e. support an employer might be reasonably expected to give without need to access AtW)
 - Views on current guidance (e.g. clear/ unclear)
- What they consider 'reasonable' for AtW to support
 - Whether they had 'reasonable adjustment passport'
If participant is unsure: Voluntary record of adjustments agreed with employer. Can help in discussions with employer about support needs, including if employer or manager changes.
- If applicable, employer views on what was 'reasonable'

3. Experience of applying for AtW (10 mins)

Overall experience of applying

- What type of support they applied for
- Describe the different stages in the application process
- Experiences of applying for AtW
- Any support in applying (if they were supported, who helped them and why, including any third parties)
 - How easy/ difficult
 - Any barriers to applying (e.g. information available, accessibility, ability)
 - Understanding the process (e.g. different stages, difference between support for assessments and Elements)
 - Completing the application form
 - For them
 - For their appointee or employer
- Timeframe for application
 - How long did the application take
 - Whether longer or quicker than expected
 - If applicable, how quickly a decision was made on provision (Element) funded
- If received an assessment,
 - Information received beforehand (e.g. about format and purpose)
 - Whether information was clear/ unclear
 - Describe what took place during assessment
 - Views on experience (incl assessor's approach)
- If renewing AtW claim,
 - How this compared to initial application
 - Whether clear/ unclear when and how to renew
- Any impacts of the application process on starting/ keeping a job

After application

- Understanding of decisions
 - For assessment
 - For provision/ Element
- Whether decision was as expected
 - Worse or better than expected

- If received an assessment, any difference between what they needed and assessment decision
- If appealed, decision and outcome
- Final outcome
 - Check the final outcomes
- Whether decision on payments addressed their needs
 - Were any needs left outstanding (viz. not satisfied by AtW or employer)
 - Remaining barriers to employment
- Understanding of required actions of circumstances change (either health or employer)

4. Experience of AtW and impact on employment (10 mins)

Accessing support and claiming AtW

- Any challenges sourcing aides, equipment or support
- If self-employed, how/ where did they find support workers
- Experience of claiming the funding
 - Ease/ difficulty of claiming
- Views about claiming funding after expenditure
- If did not claim funding, reason they did not
 - Only needed AtW support with assessment
 - Employer paid for provision
 - Left the job
 - Award was small
 - Ran out of time to claim the money
 - Other

Positive impacts on employment

- Any positive impacts from AtW for you

Seek a spontaneous response first. Use prompts if needed

- Whether helped them/ their appointee:
 - Do an interview
 - Start a job
 - Keep a job
 - If self-employed, develop their business

- Impacts on them
 - For self-employed, on their business
 - Job stability or career progression
 - Views of people you/ they work with (e.g. managers, colleagues, customers)
 - Any wider positive effects (e.g. views about disabled people)
- What would have happened without AtW
 - Whether could have got support somewhere else

Challenges in relation to employment

- Any challenges that arose from award and receipt of AtW

Seek a spontaneous response first. Use prompts if needed.

- Speed of payments
- Delays to start of recruitment/ job
- Loss of job
- Renewal process
- Anything else
- What happened specifically that led to a challenge/s
 - Attitudes of employer or other third-party (e.g. health professional, charity)
 - Relationship with employer or other third-party
 - Inadequate or wrong type of support
 - Remaining barriers to work
 - Anything else
- What would help reduce/ remove these challenges/ barriers

Feelings about employer or other third-party involvement

- Whether a positive or negative experience
 - If positive, in what way/s
 - If negative, in what way/s
- If employee, anything would change about employer involvement

5. Improvement to AtW (5 mins)

- Improvements that could be made to AtW

Seek a spontaneous response first. Only use prompts if needed

- Raising awareness

- Eligibility requirements
- Ease of applying
- Ease of appealing decisions
- Clearer definition of 'reasonable adjustments' that should be provided
- Payment method
- Anything else
- Most important thing you would say to the DWP about AtW

6. Interview close

Employer interview topic guide

1. Background context (5 mins)

About the participant

- Type of organisation (incl sector)
- Participant's role within the organisation
- Size of organisation (e.g. number of staff)
- Whether organisation registered as disability confident

Overview of experience with AtW

- How familiar they are with AtW
 - If registered as disability confident, whether this has impacted their awareness or understanding of AtW (and how)
- How often it's used or accessed by employees
 - The number of employees it supports (if known).
 - Whether their organisation is a 'supported' business (i.e. 50% or more of staff have a disability or health condition)
- Their typical involvement in application process

2. Awareness and understanding of AtW (5 mins)

Awareness of AtW

- How and when they first became aware of AtW

- Through organisation/ employees/ health service/ occupational health
- Other sources (e.g. own research, employer networks, news item, internet, social media, etc.)
- Understanding of AtW at that time
 - Purpose of AtW
 - Eligibility criteria
 - Support available through AtW
 - Application process
- How this compares to their current understanding
- Views on available information about AtW
 - If not offered spontaneously, clarify the source of information referred to (e.g. from the DWP, employees, external organisation)
 - Whether clear/unclear
 - Any gaps in guidance

3. Supporting employees in the workplace (10 mins)

Explain that we would like to learn more about their organisation's typical processes for supporting disabled employees in work.

Typical process for

- Whether employee's support needs discussed
 - What prompted discussion (e.g. changes in employee's performance, requested by employee)
 - Timing/ context of discussion (e.g. when first hired or after building rapport, one off or ongoing basis, informal or part of HR meetings)
 - With whom (e.g. HR, manager, occupational health)
 - Format of discussions (casual or structured)
 - What is typically discussed
 - Ease/ difficulty of gathering necessary information
 - How they go about this
- Typical outcomes of these discussions

Support available within the workplace

- Types of support typically funded by the employer
 - How they are funded (e.g. whether from ring fenced or general budget)
- How type and level of support need is decided

- Whether occupational health or a health professional consulted
- How the cost of required support is determined
- Use of health adjustment passports
- Whether any role for AtW assessment in this
- Awareness and understanding of ‘reasonable adjustments’
 - Obligations of the employer
 - What they consider ‘reasonable’ in this context
 - Views on current guidance (e.g. clear/ unclear)
- Limitations/ barriers to what they can provide and why
 - Funding
 - Necessary expertise
 - Anything else
- Whether employee’s length of time in role is considered
- Barriers to employment or support needs left outstanding if AtW wasn’t in place

Vignettes

Explain that we are now going to present them with one of the following hypothetical scenarios and ask for their views on them. Stress this is not a test.

Vignette 1

Sarah works as a customer service assistant for a national supermarket chain. She has a hearing impairment which affects her ability to carry out phone conversations, an essential part of her role.

Sarah’s doctor has recommended the use of a specialised telephone headset that connects directly to her hearing aids. Sarah’s employer acknowledges her support need, but is reluctant to pay for the headset due to budget constraints. Instead, the employer suggests that Sarah apply for support through the Access to Work scheme.

Vignette 2

Jamal applied to work as an administrative assistant in a small legal firm and was successful. He has a hearing impairment which means that he requires a BSL interpreter for in-person meetings. Most of his responsibilities (diary management, inputting timesheets, recording travel arrangements) can be completed remotely and without BSL support. However, he is required to attend a weekly team meeting face-to-face. The firm is supportive of Jamal but is concerned that a BSL interpreter is unaffordable for them.

The employer explores the possibility of applying for support through Access to Work, and learns that the scheme cannot be used to fund reasonable adjustments as

they are the responsibility of the employer. The employer is unsure whether the support is a reasonable adjustment and is therefore uncertain how to proceed.

After each vignette explore

- Initial thoughts about the vignette
 - Any specific considerations for an employer in these circumstances
- Whether they consider the required support to be 'reasonable' within context of employer's legal obligations to provide support

Remind participant that we just interested in hearing their views and experiences

- Key factors in their decision-making (e.g. employer size, resources, financial support available)
 - If unsure, where they would go for further information/ advice
- View on barriers or challenges that employer might face in
 - Determining what is 'reasonable' (e.g. lack of clarity in legislation, lack of training or internal expertise, etc)
 - Implementing support (e.g. assessing what is needed, cost, sourcing support, etc)
- Suggestions for mitigating these barriers or challenges (e.g. clearer guidance, change in test of 'reasonableness', etc)
- Whether or not they would advise the employer to pursue AtW in this scenario
 - Reasons for this

4. Experience of AtW application (10 mins)

Decision to apply

- How this usually comes about (e.g. whether driven by employee, occupational health assessment, or routine HR/ management processes)
 - In what circumstances (e.g. change in employee's job, role or working environment; new diagnosis or worsening health)
 - Whether varies depending on employee's seniority or length of time in role
 - When (e.g. when a new employee joins the organisation, during regular management check-in, etc)
 - Whether any other options usually considered/ explored beforehand
- Awareness of possible cost share requirement (i.e. an employer may have to share the cost with Access to Work if the person has been working for them for more than 6 weeks when they apply)
 - Whether factors into application decision (and how)

Overall experience of the application process

- Whether applications made for specific support type (if so, whether any pattern to this)
- Describe their involvement in the process
 - How easy/ difficult
 - Any barriers involved (e.g. information available, communication from employee or the DWP, internal barriers such as delays in communication from HR or sign off from managers)
 - Completing the application form
 - Understanding the process (e.g. different stages, difference between support for assessment and Elements)
 - Experience of communications with Case Manager
 - Where referred by the DWP, their experience of the assessment process
 - Whether helpful/ unhelpful. In what ways.
 - Any challenges facilitating needs assessment

Usual timeframe for applications

- How long the process usually takes
 - Whether this varies and why
 - How quickly decisions usually made on provision (Element) funded
- Any impacts of this on the employee/ the workplace
 - Whether employee is supported while awaiting outcome
 - If not, why. Outcome of this.

After application

- Understanding of decisions
 - Whether clearly communicated
 - Understanding of the type of support being offered (whether anything confusing or unclear e.g. specific type of support worker)
 - View on length of award
- (If applicable) role in supporting employee through reconsideration process
- If employee renewing award, involvement in this process
 - Steps involved
 - How easy/ difficult

5. Experience of AtW and impact on employer (10 mins)

Accessing support and claiming AtW

- Whether know where/ how to find approved support (e.g. special aids and equipment)
 - If approved for support worker, experience of sourcing this
- Experience of claiming the funding
 - Ease/ difficulty of claiming
 - Ease/ difficulty of getting invoices paid for recurring costs (such as for support workers)
- Views about claiming funding after expenditure
- Whether ever decide to fund the support themselves
- Any other reasons, in their experience, why funding not claimed

Positive impact on workplace

- Whether helps employees to enter, stay in or progress in work
- Any wider implications (e.g. on hiring, productivity, inclusivity of the workplace)
- What would happen without AtW
 - Whether could have funded support internally
 - If so, any implications for quality, quantity or timeliness of support
 - Accessed funding elsewhere
 - If no other support available, whether any impact on employee retention

Any challenges or barriers

- Any challenges to accessing AtW

Seek a spontaneous response first. Use prompts if needed

- Lack of available or clear information about the scheme and how it works
- Resourcing or administrative burden
- Costs arising from AtW assessment recommendations
- Practical barriers to supporting AtW
- Cultural barriers

- Any challenges that arise from award and receipt of AtW

Seek a spontaneous response first. Use prompts if needed

- Speed of payments
- Delays to employee starting job
- Inadequate or wrong type of support
- Remaining barriers to work

- Renewal process
- Anything else
- How they responded to/ dealt with these challenges
 - Anything that could help reduce/ remove these barriers/ challenges in future

6. Improvement to AtW (5 mins)

- Improvements that could be made to AtW

Seek a spontaneous response first. Only use prompts if needed

- Raising awareness
- Guidance for employers
- How scheme is administered
- Eligibility requirements
- Clearer definition of 'reasonable adjustments' that should be provided
- Payment method
- Speed of process
- Clarity of communications for AtW
- Anything else
- Most important thing you would say to DWP about AtW

7. Interview close