

Access to Work scheme

Citizens Advice's response to the
National Audit Office's investigation



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October 2025

About Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice provides free, confidential and independent advice to help people overcome their problems. In 2024, we gave advice to 1.6 million people. Of the people we help who share their health status, 48% report having a disability, a long-term health condition, or both.

Our response to this inquiry

In 2024, we supported 531 people with issues relating to Access to Work. Although the overall number of people we see on this topic is not especially high, the cases we do support provide us with detailed insight. In this consultation response, we draw on the experiences of our clients and our network of local advisers to highlight the challenges people face with the Access to Work scheme.

By the end of this year, we will also publish a more detailed briefing that builds on the insights shared here. Once published, we will share this with the National Audit Office.

1. What are the benefits of Access to Work for claimants and employers?

Workplace adjustments are essential for making workplaces accessible to many disabled people. The Access to Work scheme plays a vital role by covering the cost of adjustments that are not the employer's responsibility, ensuring disabled people can access and thrive in work.

Many disabled people are unable to take up a job offer until Access to Work has been guaranteed, because the cost of securing these adjustments would be too great for the individual themselves or their employer to cover. However, our clients face a number of barriers to Access to Work, which can both affect disabled people's ability to start, or stay in a role.

2. How effectively is DWP managing and operating the scheme?

Our case data shows that the most common form of advice clients receive from us about Access to Work is simply being told that the scheme exists. More must therefore be done to raise awareness among both individuals and employers, so they can actively encourage applications.

However, for the DWP to manage an increase in applications and ensure timely access to support, improvements in how the scheme is run and administered are essential. As we outlined in response to questions 3 and 4, the DWP still has considerable progress to make before it can be said to manage and operate the scheme effectively.

3. What challenges with the operation of the scheme have you and those you represent experienced?

The application process

As well as a lack of awareness about the scheme, we have also supported a number of clients who experienced difficulties submitting their Access to Work application. In the case of Ella, she would not have been able to do so without the help of Citizens Advice.

Ella's* Story

Ella recently started a new job as a self-employed delivery driver. She tried to apply for Access to Work, but found the process of applying very difficult.

Without the support of Citizens Advice and her wellbeing coach, Ella would not have been able to complete the Access to Work application. In addition, Ella was very disheartened when she learned about how long she would likely have to wait until she was awarded Access to Work.

*All names have been changed

Long wait times

Ella's experience makes clear how challenging the long wait times for Access to Work can be. As of the end of February of this year, the average processing time for new Access to Work applications was 84.6 days, up from 55.3 when the current government came into power in July 2024.¹

Difficulties getting communication support for an interview

Our clients can face challenges getting funding from Access to Work to pay for communication support in time for an interview. While Access to Work says it can make a decision on communication support within two working days, applicants must first provide Access to Work with details of a support worker's costs (including travel and administration costs), as well as details of the interview itself, which can be challenging for applicants.

What's more, only 150 people received an Access to Work payment for Communication Support for interviews in 2023 to 2024, suggesting this scheme is not being fully utilised.²

Difficulties managing a claim

As well as challenges applying for Access to Work, our clients can also face difficulties managing their claim. The system can lack transparency, especially when it comes to identifying where payments are paid to, which can in turn make it very difficult to identify potential errors.

Iman's* Story

¹ John Pring (2025) [Access to Work delays shoot up, just as government is trying to address disability employment](#), Disability News Service.

² Department for Work and Pensions (2024) [Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2024](#).

Iman receives Access to Work support for travel costs to work due to their IBS. Some payments are made directly to Iman, while others are paid to a taxi provider. Iman believes that some of their claims have not been paid. Although the Access to Work system shows certain payments as approved and paid into their bank account, these payments do not appear on their bank statements. Iman tried to make a list of the missing payments but found the process too complicated and gave up halfway. They also attempted to call Access to Work to confirm where the approved payments had gone but gave up after being left on hold for too long. Iman has now approached Citizens Advice for support in contacting Access to Work to clarify what has happened with these payments.

*All names have been changed

The process of claiming back expenses

The process of claiming back expenses through Access to Work can also be challenging for our clients. While the introduction of the Access to Work online claims portal in July 2023³ has helped make this process easier, by allowing individuals to upload invoices that are then sent to employers for approval, our clients can still struggle with having to make these payments upfront, and while waiting for reimbursement.

4. What has been the impact of any challenges with the scheme on claimants and employers?

Risk of losing employment

Delays in Access to Work decision-making have put some of our clients, like Ali, at risk of losing job offers or being unable to continue working.

Ali's* Story

Ali is partially sighted and cannot drive. They applied for Access to Work, and after seven months had still not received a decision when they started their new role. This role requires travel to different venues, which is not always possible by public transport. For example, to reach the nearest bus stop, Ali

³ Henshaws (2023) [Access To Work online claims portal explained](#).

must walk for an hour along unlit roads with no pavements. In winter, this becomes especially unsafe. As a result, Ali often has to use taxis. Their probation was initially set at six months, and the employer made clear that Ali could not pass probation without Access to Work support. In the meantime, the employer - a charity - has been covering transport costs, which they are struggling to afford. They agreed to extend Ali's probation to one year (until the end of September 2025) but refused to extend it further. Ali still has not received an Access to Work decision. With help from Citizens Advice, the case has now been escalated because Ali is at risk of losing their job.

*All names have been changed

Financial implications for applicants

In some cases, these delays have even forced individuals like Anna into debt while they wait for this essential financial support.

Anna's* Story

Anna is disabled and needs taxis to get to work. She applied for the Access to Work scheme to help her pay for this, but it took several months for her to receive support. The first time she applied, the DWP lost her paperwork. This meant she had to submit her forms a second time, but despite using next day delivery post, she still had to wait a further 5 weeks to receive the support she was entitled to. As a result, Anna built up over £1,600 in debt to the taxi company who were driving her to and from work. This put her under huge strain - the taxi company was considering refusing to drive her anymore, meaning she was at risk of losing her job. During that time her boiler also broke, but she was unable to replace it because she had used up all her savings on taxis.

*All names have been changed

Having to pay costs upfront and wait for reimbursement can be particularly stressful for individuals on low incomes. This was the case for our client, Aran.

Aran's* Story

Aran works for a pharmaceutical company. They receive Access to Work to support them with the cost of taxis to and from work. However, they find completing the paperwork and printing off the invoices to get reimbursed for these costs very overwhelming. While they should be reimbursed over £1,000 a month from Access to Work for the cost of these taxis, the taxi company does not always email them the invoices and they have to print these out and post them to the DWP themselves. This whole process has worsened Aran's anxiety, due to the difficulties claiming back the taxi money and having to pay for the costs upfront.

*All names have been changed

And for our client Lena, the process of arranging communication support for a job interview through Access to Work was too difficult. As a result, they were unable to access the support they were entitled to, and had to pay for it themselves.

Lena's* Story

Lena has autism, anxiety, and depression, which significantly affect her ability to communicate with strangers, initiate conversations, and visit unfamiliar places. When she was recently offered a job interview, she required the assistance of a communication support worker to attend. Without this support, she would have found it extremely difficult to enter the interview building or speak during the interview, making it virtually impossible for her to demonstrate her suitability for the role. The Jobcentre advised Lena to apply for funding through Access to Work to cover the cost of a support worker. The employer provided five working days' notice of the interview. The Disability Employment Adviser at her Jobcentre managed to source a support worker the day before the interview, but several barriers made it impossible to obtain approval from Access to Work for communication support before the interview. The Access to Work helpline had extremely long waiting times, and Lena could not get through. The support worker did not provide any paperwork or a quote until after the interview. Lena chose to proceed with the

support worker and risk covering the cost herself if Access to Work declined to reimburse it. But her claim was rejected because she had not applied before her interview.

*All names have been changed

The impact on businesses

These delays in decision-making not only harm individuals but also negatively impact businesses. There have been instances of businesses saying that they are owed hundreds of thousands of pounds by Access to Work, and fearing they may have to let staff go.⁴

5. What are your views on DWP's progress in addressing challenges with the operation of the scheme?

We agree with the DWP that too few disabled workers receive Access to Work support. However, we disagree that the way to maximise its impact and reach is, as the Pathways to Work green paper implies, to reduce the support Access to Work provides. Scaling back a vital scheme that enables many disabled people to access work is directly at odds with the government's intention of getting more disabled people into work.

"They're talking about changes to the Access to Work budget. I mean, how does that even make sense as a joined-up policy? Obviously, you'd need to spend money and offer incentives to employers to hire disabled people — they're clearly not doing it voluntarily." - Citizens Advice adviser

There were a number of changes outlined in the Pathways to Work green paper that we were concerned to see. In particular, plans to: reduce higher-cost awards, put more responsibility on employers to make reasonable adjustments, put more responsibility on individuals to secure the changes and adaptations they need, and to move to a different delivery model.

Reducing higher-cost awards

The latest Access to Work statistics show that the most common element amongst people who received a payment was the Support Worker Element,

⁴ Michael Buchanan (2025) [Jobs fears as disability scheme owes businesses thousands](#), BBC News.

followed by the Mental Health Support Service.⁵ We understand that the Support Worker Element and Mental Health Support Service are the most costly elements.⁶ However, these more intensive costs are the very reason a scheme like Access to Work needs to exist, because unlike other adjustments, many employers won't be able to cover these costs themselves. The disability employment gap will not be reduced by only supporting those with lower-cost needs.

Putting more responsibility on employers

Rather than addressing the fact that Access to Work is currently struggling to meet demand, the Pathways to Work green paper instead suggests placing more of the burden on employers to make workplaces accessible. Yet many employers have a lot to do before their workplaces are accessible for disabled people. Expecting employers to make the adjustments disabled people need, when so many of our disabled clients have their reasonable adjustment requests denied or only partially met,⁷ risks fewer disabled people getting the adaptations they need.

Putting more responsibility on individuals

The experiences of our clients also raises concerns about the green paper's implied shift toward placing more responsibility on individuals to apply for and manage their own workplace adjustments. For example, the specific proposals for providing targeted funds to individuals to pay for workplace adaptations, beyond what could be considered reasonable adjustments. This approach not only seems to contradict the principles of the Equality Act - which states that employers are ultimately responsible for making adjustments - but also risks adding further barriers for those already struggling to access the support they need.

A different delivery model

Finally, before the DWP starts making significant changes to Access to Work's delivery model, as they consulted on in the green paper, we first urge them to prioritise addressing the issues with the scheme outlined in our response to this

⁵ Department for Work and Pensions (2024) [Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2024](#).

⁶ Department for Work and Pensions (2025) [Access to Work grant expenditure forecasts](#).

⁷ Pemberton E, Lynn E (2025) [Economic activity and health inequalities: how labour market experiences sustain health inequalities](#), Citizens Advice.

investigation. Central to this, should be working to ensure a wider remit of individuals can benefit from its support, without using this as a justification to cut the support it provides.