HOUSE OF COMMONS

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Employment support for disabled people: Access to Work, HC 481
Wednesday 3 September 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- Action on Disability and Work UK
- RNIB
- Mencap (easyread version)
- Mencap
- National Autistic Society

Watch the meeting

Members present: Dame Anne Begg (Chair), Debbie Abrahams, Graham Evans
Glenda Jackson, Kwasi Kwarteng, Nigel Mills, Teresa Pearce, Mr Michael Thornton

Questions 52-149

Witnesses: **Andy Rickell**, Chief Executive Officer, Action on Disability and Work UK, **Fazilet Hadi**, RNIB Director of Engagement, and **Marije Davidson**, Equality and Diversity Adviser, York St John University, gave evidence.

Q52 Chair: Can I welcome you to this, the second oral session of our inquiry into the operation of Access to Work? Please introduce yourselves for the record.

Fazilet Hadi: Hello. I am Fazilet Hadi, from RNIB.

Andy Rickell: Hello. I am Andy Rickell, Chief Executive Officer from Action on Disability and Work UK.

Marije Davidson: Marije Davidson.

Q53 Chair: Can I just confirm that each one of you, although you are here representing organisations, actually also use Access to Work in your daily working lives?

Fazilet Hadi: Yes.

Andy Rickell: Yes.

Marije Davidson: I do not, no. I do not actually represent an organisation. I am Equality and Diversity Adviser at York St John University, but I do not represent them today.

Q54 Chair: Okay. That is fine. Thanks very much. Now, the first question is: if you put aside any concerns about the current level of funding and the DWP's administration of the scheme, do you agree that Access to Work is a good model for increasing the employment prospects of disabled people? Who wants to start?

Fazilet Hadi: I think Access to Work is a fabulous scheme. It is a real win-win scheme. It is fantastic for disabled people, as you say, when it works well. It certainly enabled me, personally, to achieve things I could never have achieved, and I think it must be good for government, as well, to have people in work contributing through taxation. Because it is such a fantastic route into employment, the scheme could be much more proactive about thinking about its role in moving people into work, whether that is young disabled people leaving school or college, or the 4,000 people who lose their sight each year who are already in work and need to stay in work. The shape of the scheme is fantastic, but it could be a much more proactive scheme.

Andy Rickell: I would agree. Access to Work is based on the right principles. It is disabled people's experience that they can be included in mainstream work if the barriers they face associated with their impairments are addressed, and Access to Work funding enables this to be done because it is personalised to their individual circumstances, and that makes it probably different from the rest of employment support, which is not so personalised. Access to Work is the right model; the rest of employment support should be attempting to replicate the Access to Work model.

However, it sort of sits in a no-man's-land, and in a sense, it is trying to answer a wider question. An employer might have a good issue—they are taking on a disabled person, or a disabled person would like to move into self-employment—or an employer might have a bad problem, which is that they have got an employee who has now acquired an impairment and is in danger of losing their job. At that point, what they probably want first is some advice about what the options are, and that is missing from the system. I think that is what should happen first; there should be an advice service that employers and disabled people could go to where they can get that information.

The second thing is actually to get really good information about what reasonable adjustments are available. Information on this is almost entirely unavailable to both employers and disabled people. There ought to be a very public place where all types of reasonable adjustments—whether physical, about support workers, or about assessors—are visible to people, so employers and disabled people can see that information, probably on the web; they can identify all the suppliers; they can even identify what the costs are, and they can potentially say, "Actually, we do not need to go for Access to Work funding. We can see what we need to do, and we can do it without going for Access to Work funding." Only at that point do people start asking whether they need state funding to do this.

Q55 Chair: Can I just pick up one of the points you made—I think we might have questions on this later on—regarding whether you think more should be done to keep people in work, rather than waiting until they have fallen out of work and then having to start almost from scratch again?

Andy Rickell: Yes. That is the real issue with the system. Over 400,000 disabled people each year lose their jobs, and if they are out of work for more than six months, there is a danger they never go back in again. The system fails to pick it up at that point. Yes, I think that is a major issue.

Q56 Chair: So your argument is that there needs to be some changes to Access to Work to allow it to help at that very early stage, rather than often waiting until someone's impairment has deteriorated and they have either lost their job, or they need more help?

Andy Rickell: Yes. One of the issues with Access to Work is that it does not move quickly.

Q57 Graham Evans: Have you got any experience of dealing with the professional body responsible for personnel managers?

Andy Rickell: CIPD?

Graham Evans: That is exactly it. Have you done any work with that professional organisation so as to raise awareness among personnel managers and directors about exactly the point you are making, so that personnel departments within organisations can be proactive, as you are saying? Is there any interaction with you?

Andy Rickell: We are at an early stage of the process of engagement with them, recognising that they are key players in the process.

Graham Evans: Because if we can get that into the DNA of employers, a professional qualification would include being aware of exactly what you are saying.

Andy Rickell: Yes.

Q58 Chair: Marije?

Marije Davidson: Access to Work is a really fantastic way of helping these people do their jobs, aside from the way it operates at the moment. I started a job where we agreed a grant for a certain time period, which is to be three years, and I can use the support in the way that suits me, in a flexible way. But it is really very powerful; I can be confident that, when going for any job, I can say, "Do not worry about support, about access, because I have got this Access to Work scheme, which will support me with the extra cost of time and interpretation and other support." It is a very good thing to have.

Q59 Chair: But for someone to know that they can give that reassurance to their employer, they have to know what Access to Work can give them, but until they get into the job, they do not always know what is available through Access to Work. Is that one of the conundrums of Access to Work?

Marije Davidson: That is absolutely right. When I started working in the UK, 13 years ago, I was very fortunate, because I started working at RNID—the Royal National Institute for Deaf People—so they knew what support was available, and they were very helpful in accessing that support. At that time, the Access to Work adviser I had was really very helpful. I mean, I put in the application and she laughed her head off, because what I asked for was so silly—because I did not know what to ask for. So at that time, we sorted out the package for three years, and it worked well. I am on a fixed-term contract now, so my contract finishes next year. It may be extended; it may not be. I can no longer be confident that I will get the support that I need to start a new job, or that my new employer will be able to pay in advance for the support.

Young people may have some limited work experience, but not experience working for a long time. They will not know what support is available to them. They may not know what works well with them. They may not know what the job is like, and yet now they are expected to be consummate professionals regarding how it works in practice: how many meetings they have; how often they will be on the telephone, and what kind of support works for them. In that way, Access to Work is almost a barrier to work.

Q60 Chair: We will be picking up on this, particularly in regard to the 30-hour rule, but what you have just said leads us quite neatly on to the next question, which is: is there a clear distinction between the reasonable adjustments that employers are obliged to make for their disabled employees under the Equality Act, and the types of support that Access to Work provides?

Fazilet Hadi: I think so. It is probably different for different people and different employment situations, but I would agree with what Marije said. Access to Work is there to support disabled people to come into a workplace as an equal and not as some sort of burden. Where the employer needs to put the Equality Act into play is through a whole range of things: the anticipatory duties, so that they have made sure that the IT systems they have bought can be made accessible; the fabric of the building, so they can make sure the physical environment is accessible; the culture of the organisation, which should be inclusive, so that disabled people feel they can function as equals within that organisation; and the way meetings are run, papers are sent out and colleagues support you and treat you.

These are all things that are reasonable adjustments, but when I walk into the workplace, I—like Marije—want my package of support so that I go into that workplace as a functioning worker, and that is why I think there is a difference. It is probably not hard and fast, but I feel the difference; I think it is a real one. Employers, of course, have a role to play, because I could walk in with my support worker and my package of Access to Work benefits, but if the employer has not done their part of the bargain in terms of the Equality Act and reasonable adjustment, I could find that a very alien and uncomfortable workplace.

Andy Rickell: I take Fazilet's general point about the general environment. I do not think, though, that employers are knowledgeable about what a reasonable adjustment might be. They know that they have got to do one, but there is no guidance out there to say, "Here are some examples of what has been done elsewhere." I think that is a real problem and a real experience that we are finding. Partly because Access to Work engages with a lot of what is, effectively, reasonable adjustments, making that information visible on the web so that it is easily available to employers and disabled people informs them and enables them to identify what it is they actually want to do.

I think, because of the invisibility of that information, there may even be overuse of Access to Work, because in some cases, people say, "I do not know what is available. Here is Access to Work; if we get an assessment done, at least we can find out what the issues might be." In my case, the reason why I had an assessment was not because I did not know what my needs were; I knew exactly what my needs were, but I did not know how those needs might be met. If the information was visibly available on the internet or whatever so that I could have done that, I might have said, "Oh, actually, I do not need to go through this process. I know what it is I need; that is the piece of equipment I need. Oh, it is going to cost 40 quid. Why am I even bothering making an Access to Work application?"

Q61 Chair: So are you saying that, particularly with medium to large employers, they should actually be paying for this themselves, rather than needing to use Access to Work?

Andy Rickell: I think that is right. The law uses the word "reasonable", and one aspect of reasonableness is financial clout. I am just concerned that, actually, Access to Work ends up being used by those people who know about it and not by those people who do not, rather than those people who need it.

Q62 Chair: Presumably, if that was the case, then, the budget goes a lot further and covers a lot more people?

Andy Rickell: In my opinion, I think it could go a lot further.

Q63 Chair: So how do you get that message to the employers? I think that was the sort of point Graham was making.

Andy Rickell: Given that DWP has a vested interest in trying to make Access to Work funding go further, I think there is something in the DWP actually having to take a lead in informing employers about what that is. The word I use is an "Amazon"—an Amazon-like website of reasonable adjustments. If you can have the full list of what is available, what has been used in different circumstances, and how you might even talk to the suppliers or whatever, that conversation could then be had between the employer, the disabled person, and the supplier. Access to Work does not even have to come into the picture.

Q64 Chair: Would it not put some employers off employing someone with a disability, though, if they thought they were going to have to pay extra in order to have that person as a member of staff?

Andy Rickell: In a sense, the fact that Access to Work in many cases helps to deal with what is, in practice, an employer obligation helps with the process of the disabled person not being excluded from employment on those grounds. I do agree. In a sense, if one is going to make some rules about the financial expectations on employers to make reasonable adjustments that Access to Work will not meet, one has to do it in such a way that one is not creating that very barrier, and I think you need to go quite high up the scale in terms of the size of employers before you insist that employers contribute.

Q65 Graham Evans: I always get a bit worried when you talk about employers, legalities, and what the law says you should or should not do. I have got experience, 20 years ago, of a blind analyst in financial services. He used to go into this office with his guide dog; he was the central attraction, part and parcel of that company, a highly respected colleague, and he did not need any lawyers, or any legal or government intervention. Everything was put in place to make sure that he could do his job, so there are good examples of best practice.

I was going to say to you that what would be helpful to Government and the DWP and so forth is if organisations like yours came up with an employer—and you may not necessarily need to name the employer, but you may want to—and said, "This is what this employer has done, without any need of government intervention or telling people what to do. They are a modern, enlightened organisation." Most employers will employ the right person. If they are disabled in some way, most reasonable employers will cater for that. If Governments try to legislate for that, sometimes we get things wrong, but I do think examples of best practice are helpful, examples of good employers in different industries: financial services is one. Telecommunications is another, and local government, for example. I have seen examples of local authorities employing blind people as receptionists and other things, and they are very highly valued colleagues. Best practice is something, perhaps, you could use.

Fazilet Hadi: I think there is a much more aggressive culture out there now about economic efficiency, etc. Do not get me wrong: I think there are enlightened individuals and employers, but if you look at it from the personal point of view of a disabled person, getting a job, full stop, is much, much harder for us, and I really feel strongly that psychologically, for me to go and sell myself to an employer, I need the Access to Work scheme behind me. That does not let them off behaving like a reasonable employer, delivering a business with ethics, but I kind of feel what you and Andy are saying is going too far in the other direction.

Andy Rickell: Can I try to answer that question? I think that the answer is that, if you ensure that the information that is available about reasonable adjustments is then coincidental with information about the potential availability of Access to Work funding, people can see, "This is what is available, but there might be Access to Work funding if needed." The two things are not mutually exclusive, and I think there is a way of doing that. My comment back to you would probably be that that is absolutely right. If we had that type of information about good practice available, it would really help people say,

"Ah, right. That is the way to do it." They are trying to sort it, but they are not quite sure how to do it, and my only comment back would be about whether the DWP should fund that process, because I think it is part of the process of getting the best value out of the state funding in supporting reasonable adjustments.

Q66 Chair: I am conscious of the time. Can I come to you, Marije, then, to start the next question? Liz Sayce said that Access to Work was very good, but you need more levers in order to get more disabled people into work. Would you agree with that analysis?

Marije Davidson: Yes. I think more needs to be done to challenge the attitudes and behaviours of employers. I work at a university, and that is a public employer of over 150 employees who already have published information, and that works; that is quite helpful. If you look at Access to Work, I think what Fazilet and I are trying to say is that Access to Work is the one thing that really empowers us as disabled individuals to go to the employer and to reduce the concerns that they may have about employing a disabled person. My big concern is that, when an employer sees a cost involved with applying for Access for Work and managing the support, managing Access to Work, they will have this negative experience, or see other employers having that negative experience and concerns. That will affect their decision-making about whether to recruit a disabled person, or whether to promote that person to a different job, because a different role means applying for Access to Work again. Employers may not do that consciously, but it may subconsciously influence their decisions. My university is now employing five disabled people, I think, and three are having quite a lot of problems with Access to Work now. It is impacting on the time that we have to do our job. All the time that we have to spend sorting out Access to Work we cannot use to do our job, which affects the university's business. I think my university is a really good employer to make reasonable adjustments all the time, and they are very supportive, but there is something in their mind, I think, that they might not find another employer as good. That is why the process needs to be smooth or they leave us desperate. But for me Access to Work is the one thing that needs working on.

Chair: We have some questions now on the DWP's administration of Access to Work.

Q67 Nigel Mills: Can you just talk us through your own experience of when you applied for Access to Work? Was it a quick and smooth process? Did you get what you wanted, or was it slow and cumbersome, perhaps? Andy, do you want to start?

Andy Rickell: I am someone who is very knowledgeable of Access to Work. It is what we advise on in our organisation, so we know the process, and I have been for assessments on previous occasions, etc. So in my current job, I applied for it, and an assessor comes round. First of all, in terms of the assessment, it takes a week or so for an assessor to come round; someone comes round, and that is good, but in practice, I did not really need an assessment. Interestingly, when I saw the assessment, I thought, "Well, hang on, he is just writing down what I told him to write." So assessment is not always appropriate. If someone knows what they require, the issue is about having access to the actual support. The reason why I benefited from him attending was because I got to find out what was available to meet the needs that I knew I already had.

The problem, I think, was he then came up with a whole load of things that I could have. I thought, "Well, they are all usable, so I will have them all. Thank you very much." I do not use them all a great deal, and if it had been something where I had to think about the money involved, I might have been much more focussed on the particular things that I knew I always needed. I have used a very small keyboard, because I am one-handed; it costs £40. What I really wanted was someone to provide that keyboard. I had used it on other occasions, and one of the issues with Access to Work is that, actually, I had a keyboard in my previous job. In theory, I could have taken it with me. It was paid for by Access to Work as well; it could have just been provided to me, but it was not. I had to apply for it a second time. I think I got an electric stapler, because it turns out that I did not realise such a thing existed, and it is really useful to have if you have only got one hand you can use.

But, actually, I have got other things like a really good seat: "Thank you, I will have a really good seat." But it is questionable whether, if we had had to look at that as something that we paid for ourselves, we would have gone for something quite so expensive. One of the issues about the assessment process is that you are then given some suppliers, and there are some questions about whether or not assessors should be indicating the suppliers, but the prices of some of these things are astronomical. You think, "Actually, I am sure we could get something like that cheaper." If that information was available more widely, I could have got what I wanted quicker through a different route. But it did all work; the money came through, and it paid for the relevant things and I got all that, and that was great. It was helpful in my case that, actually, the nature of what I needed was some equipment: one-off, hit, sorted, in place and done.

Q68 Nigel Mills: Were you happy with the speed of this? It was all ready in time for you to start your new job, was it?

Andy Rickell: No, and in practice the point is that fortunately I could find a way around doing stuff until the equipment came. There are some things that are complete barriers, and if the support is not available, you cannot do your job at all. I had to deal with a bigger keyboard; some of my administration was not as good as it otherwise would have been; I was slower at doing my job, but my employer knew that that was the case, and that was fine.

Q69 Nigel Mills: So how long did it take before your small keyboard came through?

Andy Rickell: I would have said you were looking at four to six weeks from start. Now, bear in mind, if I had literally needed that to do the job, that is four to six weeks as a chief executive where I am communicating with people and using the internet and using email, which are absolutely essential. If I had not had some other route, or was not able to cope with using something else, I would not have been able to do my job at all, and that is a real issue with Access to Work. It just operates on a completely different timescale to anything else, and the fact that it is not online also implies that it is not going to be quick, and it never is. We certainly have examples of people losing their jobs because the support is not in place in time.

Q70 Nigel Mills: Fazilet?

Fazilet Hadi: My experience is probably quite positive, because, like Andy, I am quite assertive. Thinking of my experience will not help you, I do not think, but I will tell you that before I start a job, weeks and weeks and weeks in advance, I talk to Access to Work and tell them exactly what I need. The last time I got a new job, I interviewed for my support worker before I started the job, because there was no way I was going to start a new job in which I wanted to shine without the support I needed in place, so I am a very bad example.

Having said that, they have supported me for years, and my recent experience with them is that their letters are quite rude; they are poorly framed; they write in an intimidating way; and they are abrupt on the phone, and you cannot get through to them. I do not like the culture. I still get print letters, even though I have been blind since I was nine years old. So it works for me because I make it work, but I really worry about others. Because I was coming to this Select Committee, of course I asked colleagues what their experiences were and what their customers were experiencing, and honestly I am ashamed to say that it was about 90% bad. There were people not being phoned back when they rang up to make an application. There were people having assessors who did not understand what being blind was, and as Marije has very eloquently said, you have not always lived with a disability that long. You do not always know what is out there. You cannot assume a disabled person is going to be like me and know exactly what their needs are. The whole culture of the scheme at the moment seems to be almost against supporting the disabled person, so something is going culturally wrong. You do not know what the rules are; you do not know whether the person who is doing your assessment has any expertise at all; there are huge delays. There were loads of examples. I think those people's stories are more valid than mine, probably.

Q71 Nigel Mills: Is it right that you cannot appeal?

Fazilet Hadi: You can challenge it. I do not think there is a formal appeal process but, certainly, when I spoke to some of our internal lawyers, people are appealing. There may not be a process but they are writing a letter and appealing. They are, however, doing their utmost outside the normal rules—I do not know if there are any formal rules. She thought there were not.

Q72 Nigel Mills: Marije—your experience?

Marije Davidson: I started a new job a year ago in June, and I was proactive as well. I was moving to a new job, so the first thing I did, as soon as I accepted the job, was to try to email Access to Work and say, "New job. I need to review my support package." A year before, I had come to the end of the three-year period of my grant, so there was a new review but it was quite smooth and straightforward and just looking at the needs of my role and whether it was okay work-wise, a couple of quotes for an interpreter to see how much, and that was it: a new package in place for three years. That was November 2012. It took three months before I started the job and one month after I started this job before they agreed my support and it was not until I phoned the manager of my so-called adviser to say, "Hang on, what are you doing? You are just delaying my support. You are demanding a certain formal assessment for a piece of equipment that my employer had

already agreed to pay. You do not need to assess me for that. You need to assess me for an interpreter, a palantypist. That is what you need to assess me for." The next day, a letter in the post: support approved.

We had to have that review about three months after, at my request, because I thought it was a new role so, after three months, I wanted to see if everything was working well. It worked well and I did not need as many hours as I thought. The letter arrived to say my support was approved until February 2014, and then another assessment—come on. So I contacted them and they said it would be March 2015, because that was my fixed-term contract. I said, "I don't understand". They said, "Yes, your support has been approved for three years. We were going to review it in February, but now we are going to review it in May and we are going to write you a letter to confirm that". That was two emails. In April, I think it was, interpreters and palantypists started contacting me: "My invoices have not been paid. They are not paying me. Why not?" I phoned Access to Work, to say that the payments had not been made. "No, support was terminated in February. We are waiting to hear from your adviser whether we can pay the invoices." I was like, "Why did you not tell me that the support had stopped? Why did you not contact me?" Actually, my support had been extended until the end of April. My review is up very soon and I have not received a letter or anything in the post. I always got a letter before the review is up.

In the meantime, the interpreters were not getting paid, so the bills were running up. I contacted the adviser directly: "Sorry, yes, we will sort out the payment." However, now, under the new rules, which have been talked about, they say that I now have to contact a call centre who will log my request for a review, and an adviser will then be in touch with me. I phoned them in the middle of May and it took me seven weeks from the first phone call to the actual assessment. I phoned the call centre and I said, "My support seems to have finished, so I want an assessment very soon because I need to pay my interpreter." "The woman said "cancel all your interpreter support until the assessment." "Are you telling me I have to stop work?" In the end, the assessment means the interpreter will be paid. I have been using interpreters to contact Access to Work. My English is OK so I can write emails and that helps me a little bit, or used to help me, but there are lots of deaf people whose English is not good. They need support with their English.

All the time, they are not getting their support approved. They are using support, but very expensive. Who is responsible for that? It takes time away from me doing my job and the thing is, also, if at the end of three years, I get a new review and everything now has to start from scratch. I have to explain that I am deaf. They knew I was deaf. I have to explain my role. They have the job description on their system. I have to explain my needs. I have to explain what support is right. Everything was on their system, yet I have to fill in all the forms from scratch. I got an assessment, and how I got an assessment was I had to phone and phone and phone. At the same time, in the past I could phone the right person at Access to Work directly. I could phone them directly, but now I have to call the central number, who may or may not pass on the request to the right people. You phone and it appears in this black hole. I phoned so many times to first get an adviser allocated, which took about two weeks. I then got the forms and returned them at the same time. It was easy because it was copy and paste. I spent 10 days waiting for an assessment. Nothing happened, so I phoned, I phoned, I phoned, I emailed and, at the same time they were closing the phone numbers, so I tried to phone them and, "Sorry, we are closed. You

have to call this central number." It is not going to happen. I got this other number from past correspondence. I tried this one and it happened: Access to Work adviser after five weeks just for an assessment at that time.

Chair: I think we have questions on the 30-hour rule, so I will come back to Nigel.

Q73 Glenda Jackson: Have the changes to the system affected everybody on Access to Work? Does everybody now have to go to that central telephone number? Is the assessment something that is imposed by time or by a change in employer or—somebody mentioned it earlier—a promotion within an existing position which requires additional support from Access to Work? Is that true for everybody? I get the feeling from what we have heard so far that you are very au fait with big employers and big organisations, but the real job creators are the very small and medium-sized businesses, and I do not know how they would deal with this. On the issue of the reassessments and the changes to the system, however, have they been imposed from outside?

Andy Rickell: In a sense, going back to first principles, I think an issue here is around the lack of engagement with disabled people and their organisations about the changes that are made. I am sure that, if some of the changes had been made more in consultation—and, historically, disabled people have not been engaged in this process—some of those things could have been done much better. What happens is that they are imposed, and the things like the call centre and the fact that you, therefore, do not know who your adviser is, which is a major issue for disabled people—they really like to know where they need to go—is a major factor.

Q74 Glenda Jackson: Forgive me, but were these people in employment and still with Access to Work told that these changes were going to come in directly by the Department?

Andy Rickell: No.

Q75 Glenda Jackson: The only way they knew about it, then, was—?

Andy Rickell: Finding out. I think a major issue is the fact that Access to Work is not online, so there is not even a website where it could have said, "By the way, our telephone number has changed." Therefore, effectively, it is literally a black hole. You are entirely in the dark. I think Access to Work should be much more visible on the internet and it should be willing to engage with people by email, partly because that means you have a sense of where the information is going and the idea that there is a named person who might respond. If nobody responds, who do you complain to about the fact that nobody has responded?

Q76 Glenda Jackson: When were these changes brought in? When was the move to a central telephone number and things like that?

Marije Davidson: In the last year Access to Work has introduced a whole raft of new rules without consultation, or with limited consultation. They have never written about it, and

that is part of the problem. So the assessment was done and, on that assessment, I was told that they were capping the rates of interpreters at £25 or £35 an hour. In my experience, an interpreter costs about £35 an hour, or a bit more, depending on where you live. The important thing is that changes are applied retrospectively. They do not try to assess us. They could, but they do not try to assess us.

Q77 Glenda Jackson: With respect, what I am trying to find out is: what is the present system? You have said that the central telephone number has changed. No one was told that was happening. No one in the existing Access to Work programme was informed of that. Is that correct?

Fazilet Hadi: Yes. I think what happened was there used to be a local office you were attached to. If I was reviewed every three years, I would know my local office: I had a number and I had a name. They had probably moved on but I still had the local number. Very recently—I am sorry, but I do not know the date—they moved to one business centre or one call centre, so that has been quite a recent change. It has become more anonymous.

Q78 Glenda Jackson: You mentioned that your reassessment was every three years, so is that part and parcel for everybody? With respect, not necessarily three years, depending on the individual.

Fazilet Hadi: Again, I do not know whether the rules have changed, because Marije was saying that hers are practically every six months. I do not know. Taking Andy's point, I will not know until someone sends me a paper form again.

Andy Rickell: Interestingly, the process is that Fazilet will not get a paper form. What happens is the individual is supposed to know that their review is up, and the first time they realise that their review is up is because, if they have ongoing support, it stops. That is it. They are not even told it has stopped.

Q79 Glenda Jackson: There is, then, no notification that you are going to have to go through some process which constitutes a review. It just stops.

Andy Rickell: My deputy chief executive had to deal with that a few weeks ago. She suddenly found out that Access to Work had stopped her support package some time ago, and no one had told her.

Q80 Glenda Jackson: No one had told her that?

Andy Rickell: Yes. Basically, we were paying workers who were paid for by Access to Work without realising we were not going to get the money for them.

Q81 Chair: Let me get this right: if you are blind, you get a paper copy; if you are deaf, you are expected to make an application by phone; and this is an organisation that is meant to be disability-aware?

Andy Rickell: Yes.

Q82 Glenda Jackson: In addition, they make fundamental changes to the funding and nobody gets told about it.

Andy Rickell: That is right.

Q83 Chair: In the DWP submission to us, it just says, "We changed the system." I presume that that is what you were explaining. Nigel, have you finished your questions? I think we have probably covered them. Glenda has some more specific questions about the 30-hour rule, which affects people with hearing impairments. All of this explains why we have been deluged—I think that is a gentle term—with submissions from people from the hearing-impaired community, simply because they have been at the very sharp end of this.

Q84 Glenda Jackson: I think we have pretty much covered the first two questions, which were on reviewing awards, but I will go with it anyway. The Minister announced the suspension of the 30-hour guidance in June. Everybody's awards have been reviewed, have they? This is mostly for you, Marije.

Marije Davidson: The 30-hour rule does not apply to me. There are deaf people who are affected by it but mainly they are not, because not all of us need 30 hours' support. The capping of the cost of interpreters below market rates is the one thing that affects all deaf people. I asked for a reconsideration of the costs, and they said, "We have done research and we have consulted with a deaf group"—which was not even a deaf group—"and this is the market rate. Most interpreters are paid only £25."

Q85 Glenda Jackson: Are you saying to me that interpreters simply cannot work for that money?

Marije Davidson: Possibly.

Q86 Glenda Jackson: You said you cannot find someone who would accept that.

Marije Davidson: Yes.

Q87 Glenda Jackson: If you tried to find someone who would work for that, they would say, "Sorry, no, it cannot be done."

Marije Davidson: Yes.

Q88 Glenda Jackson: Sorry to have interrupted. That, then, is still a difficulty that is being experienced: the inability to find interpreters who can work for that money.

Marije Davidson: Yes.

Q89 Glenda Jackson: What was the average, then, before they reduced this? What would you say is the average cost of a support interpreter?

Marije Davidson: The cost of an interpreter is still the same. My interpreter grant was a maximum of £45 an hour. I paid about £35-36 an hour. It depends on where you live or where you work. If you work in London, there are lots of interpreters locally. If you work in York, however, like me, there are maybe two or three local interpreters, so many interpreters have to come from far away. If their rate is about £35, which is really the going rate, you have to add travel expenses to that, because they have to come further. Access to Work says to some deaf people, "You cannot charge travel expenses"; other people are told, "You can but they must not show up on the invoice."

Q90 Glenda Jackson: How many hours would you need?

Marije Davidson: Me personally?

Q91 Glenda Jackson: Yes.

Marije Davidson: I have a package for 500 hours a year. That is the other interesting thing: I have an agreed annual package, so I can use 500 hours a year. Sometimes, I use a lot at certain times, but not at other times, such as holidays. My colleague has support for an agreed number of hours per week, but he is an academic. In term time, he uses interpreters a lot because he has to teach and meet his students. In the holidays, it is very quiet, so he does not use that support—maybe two or three hours a week. He is not allowed an annual budget like me. I am allowed but he is not. Why?

Q92 Glenda Jackson: Access to Work has a limited budget, so do you accept that it is legitimate for Government to consider finding more cost-effective ways of providing the support?

Marije Davidson: Absolutely. Interpreters are expensive, which is why we have Access to Work to pay for that. However, the Government should not be making those decisions without consulting us. They are treating us as criminals, as it were.

Q93 Glenda Jackson: You are not the only ones.

Marije Davidson: I think there are ways to make savings in the system, such as all those assessments, maybe. I think there are ways for deaf people to save support if they knew how to and if they were supported to make those decisions. I also think the Government should talk to interpreters directly about the cost, but they should not make us the victims of that decision to only pay the interpreter £25. The way they make those decisions needs to change.

Fazilet Hadi: If cost is an issue, which, of course, it must be, why can Government not lift itself to looking strategically at the things that Andy has been talking about and that we have been talking about? Access to Work is a fantastic scheme. It does support disabled

people into work. It could do more. When we look at quite a few other schemes that Government has, which they are spending quite a lot of money on, I do not believe they could show the impact that Access to Work shows.

If we look more strategically at where it fits in supporting disabled people into work, how it is aligned with reasonable adjustments and the employer's side of the bargain, how you can help people expand Access to Work and to get more disabled people into work through volunteer-based experience, work experience, apprenticeships and the links with retention that we were talking about earlier, all of this penny-pinching at the individual level that Marije and other deaf, blind and disabled people are experiencing is not acceptable as a way of saving money. It really is not. It is causing immense distress. Our legal cases have changed recently. They used to be about employment discrimination; now, a lot of them are about people losing work in the early months of work because things like Access to Work are not working. That is just shameful.

Andy Rickell: Can I add something to the issue around things like support workers? Given the commitment of the Government to get more disabled people into work, and recognising that some of them have particular needs that are met by support workers, there is something here about the DWP having strategic responsibility for supporting the market in terms of encouraging more support workers and more availability. The price of a BSL interpreter is directly impacted by the fact that there are not many BSL interpreters. If there were more, it would have an impact on that.

We have situations where, in other parts of the market, the 30-hour rule is fine and makes sense. Recently, however, I saw an assessment that had come in. There were three quotes for a support worker at £80 an hour. It was a type of job coach. The point was because there was no way for that individual to have access to all the information about where those support workers might be sourced, the few people who were able to engage with the assessor got their name down on the list of people who could provide that support at an extortionate rate. We looked at that rate and thought, "We could deliver that service at half that price, easily." The reason for that is because there is no Amazon for reasonable adjustments where all the support-work providers could show their wares and have a chance to compete for the business of disabled people.

Q94 Glenda Jackson: You referred earlier, Andy, to the failure to contact the organisations. On this specific one, which you have referred to a lot, you said only three people could do it and they wanted extortionate sums, so is there a way of the organisations having that information nationally—I do not mean little local things—always on hand, to be able to feed into the DWP in these kinds of situations? Have they ever attempted to speak to you about setting up something like that?

Andy Rickell: We are in the process of attempting to create a support-worker agency for this very reason, trying to make it national and trying to engage lots of organisations, including disabled-led ones, in the process of delivering that. In terms of the process up until now, my understanding is that the assessment is made and the commitment potential to the package is there. Then the individual and the employer have to go out and source that support. In many cases, again for the same reason that they do not necessarily understand reasonable adjustments, they do not necessarily know where to go for potential support-worker provision. Because, effectively, support work is a new industry, there are

a few people in the market, but the rest are not aware that there is an opportunity and there is no route to market for them, because they are not aware of where people with the Access to Work packages are, and people with the Access to Work packages are not aware of where they are. There is no opportunity to marry them up and get the benefits of competition in driving standards up and costs down.

Q95 Chair: Was the proposal that we now know as the 30-hour rule based on a complete misunderstanding of how people who use BSL interpreters particularly operate in real life? I can imagine how someone with a physical disability might have a single support worker whom they want to pay a weekly wage to, but that is not how BSL interpreters work at all, and it is not how they are used either. Was it just because it did not understand that section of the Access to Work market that they got it so wrong.

Marije Davidson: Yes, that is right.

Q96 Chair: Does anyone else wish to add to that? This session is coming to an end. We have two minutes. Would I be right in summing up that, basically, what all three of you have said is that Access to Work is a fantastic tool to help disabled people get into work and sustain work? It is not something to get them into work but certainly in sustaining work. It is, however, very poorly administered and, as a result of that poor administration, it is potentially costing the Government more and, as a result, is not able to cover everyone who might make use of it, had the resources been more effectively and efficiently used.

Andy Rickell: Yes.

Q97 Chair: I have summed it up. Can I thank you very much for coming along, unless there is anything else that you feel you came to say this morning and that you were burning to say and have not had a chance to say it?

Fazilet Hadi: Could I just say one thing? I just think blanket rules like "30 hours for this" or "You cannot have travel" are not person-centred. If the real purpose of Access to Work is to support disabled people into work and to have jobs, I think we need to have a more intelligent support service that does not feel the need to just bring in blanket rules that do not work.

Andy Rickell: I think there is a real sense that the system really does not understand disabled people. That is the experience of disabled people in their individual interactions with the system.

Chair: Thank you very much. Your evidence this morning will be extremely useful when we come to write our report.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses*:* **Ms Nicola Oliver**, Individual Placement with Support Project Coordinator, Centre for Mental Health, **Ms Ciara Lawrence**, Campaigns Assistant, and **Ms Ailis Hardy,** Staff Development Coordinator (Ciara's Access to Work funded Support Worker), Mencap, and **Ms Rachel Brown**, Administrative Assistant, Notting Hill Housing, and **Ms Susan Askew,** Workplace Support Consultant (Rachel's Access to Work funded Support Worker), National Autistic Society, gave evidence.

Q98 Chair: Can I welcome the second group of witnesses and thank you very much for coming along this morning? The first thing I have to ask is, if I can start with you, Nicola, to introduce yourselves for the record.

Nicola Oliver: My name is Nicola Oliver. I have bipolar disorder and use Access to Work after four years of unemployment. I also work with the Centre for Mental Health, where I support organisations to set up services to support people with severe mental illness in getting into work.

Q99 Chair: Ciara, I know you have a statement but just introduce yourself at the moment and we will get your statement next.

Ciara Lawrence: Yes. Thank you. Good morning. My name is Ciara Lawrence. I have a learning disability. I work as a campaigns assistant in the Campaigns and Activism Team at the learning disability charity Mencap.

Ailis Hardy: My name is Ailis. I work for Mencap as a Support Worker. I am funded through Access to Work and I am Ciara's supporter.

Susan Askew: Hello. My name is Susan Askew. I work as a Workplace Support Mentor for the National Autistic Society, and I am Rachel's Workplace Support Mentor.

Rachel Brown: Good morning. My name is Rachel Brown. I have Asperger's syndrome, which is on the autistic spectrum. I am an Office Services Officer at Notting Hill Housing Trust, which is a housing association, and I receive support of one hour per two weeks from Susan Askew.

Q100 Chair: Thank you all for coming along. We look forward to your evidence. Ciara, I know that you have a statement to make.

Ciara Lawrence: Yes. Thank you. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Ciara Lawrence and I have a learning disability. I am a full-time Campaigns Assistant in the Campaigns and Activism team at Mencap. Access to Work pays for Mencap to employ my colleague Ailis Hardy, who supports me and three of my colleagues with a learning disability in our jobs. She is there to help me develop new skills in my job so I can do new things. Ailis supports me to plan my workload, manage my work diary better, and my timekeeping. She helps me to prioritise my tasks and meet all of my work deadlines. I am also a media spokesperson for Mencap. Ailis supports me to get ready for my interviews by doing a pretend interview, so that I can practise how I answer questions.

Going to meetings is a very important part of my job, but I could not go by myself. This is because sometimes I find following meetings hard. At meetings, Ailis takes notes for me while I listen to what is being said and explains complicated parts of the meeting. A really good example of this is the Learning Disability Programme Board, which is chaired by Norman Lamb, who is the Minister for Care and Support. Ailis and I prepare by going through the agenda and the papers. We talk about the subjects that will be spoken about at the meeting and prepare questions to ask. We also talk to our colleagues to get their views. I often have to travel to lots of events, like the party conferences, which I will be going to soon. As a spokesperson for Inclusion Europe and International, I also have to travel abroad. Ailis supports me with travelling. Without the support, I would not have been able to go to the meetings on my own.

I know Ailis is there to help if anything goes wrong. If I did not have a support worker like Ailis and I did not work for an organisation that understands the support that I need, like Mencap, I am not sure whether I could do my job to the best of my ability. Before Ailis came to work with us, I had good support from my manager and my colleagues, but I feel that my work has got much better and I have improved in my job, like being able to do pieces of work to a really good standard and on time. I have also developed new skills and become much more confident.

There are ways I think Access to Work can get better. I know I need support to do things, but when you phone up Access to Work they use jargon and long words, and it makes it very difficult to speak to the person on the other end of the telephone. I had a bad experience, when one of the advisers on the phone was patronising. The advisers need training in communicating with people with a learning disability. I always say at the beginning of the call, "I have a learning disability", but I find it very frustrating and it makes me feel really stupid.

Ailis is third-party contact, which means we can call on speakerphone, and she acts as an advocate, but it should not have to be like that. Access to Work should make sure the same advisers have the same cases, so I always talk to the same person. It used to be like this, but now we always have to speak to a different person and explain things over and over again. I find it upsetting to have to explain again and again what I find difficult.

All of the paperwork should be in Easy Read. This means information in easy-to-read words and with pictures. They know I and my colleagues have a learning disability but they send out really inaccessible letters that we do not always understand. Other parts of the Department for Work and Pensions have information like Easy Read leaflets, and Access to Work use accessible formats like audio and Braille, so it seems really strange that they do not produce Easy Read materials.

Not a lot of people know that Access to Work can be used to support people with a learning disability. The Government needs to promote Access to Work. The Government should also lead by really good example and have advisers with a learning disability working in their teams. Applying for Access to Work is frustrating, but I have the support that I need. I can get out there and speak out for Mencap a lot more now. The support I have had has helped me to go out to groups of people with a learning disability and talk to them about our big current campaign, which is called Hear My Voice. The campaign is about empowering people with a learning disability to tell their MPs and candidates what

issues are important to them in the lead-up to the General Election. Thank you for listening.

Q101 Chair: Thank you very much. I think that answers all the questions I had, so I am going to ask you a slightly different question, which is: did you have a job before you got your present job?

Ciara Lawrence: Yes, I did.

Q102 Chair: Did you have a support worker in that job?

Ciara Lawrence: No, I did not, but I had really good support from my manager and my colleagues.

Q103 Chair: Although you had some support but you did not have a support worker, what difference did you notice between that job and this job, now that you have Ailis working for you?

Ciara Lawrence: I have been able to prioritise my work time better. That means I have been able to go to more meetings. I have been able to take part more in those meetings. I have taken on many more tasks in my job, so I have been able to do lots of new things within my work time, which I really enjoyed. I have been able to meet work deadlines. A really good thing is that, now, the work that I am doing, people have said that I have been able to do my work to a high standard, and that gives me confidence to know that I am doing a good job. Ailis is there to make sure that I do my good job and that I do it to a good, high standard. She is there if anything goes wrong. I have been able to do lots more in my job. I know that there is someone there who I can rely on for questions, and it has been really fantastic. It has boosted my confidence and I really want to show that, as someone with a learning disability, I can do a good job, just like anyone else.

Q104 Chair: It sounds as though you get to travel the world.

Ciara Lawrence: I do—I am very lucky. With my role with Inclusion International and Inclusion Europe, I have been to places like Nepal and Washington. I go out as a Mencap representative and spokesperson and I get to talk about learning disability and what it is like for people in the UK all over the world. That is because I have had the right support to go and do it. I am very proud to do that.

Q105 Glenda Jackson: Does Ailis go with you?

Ciara Lawrence: Yes.

Q106 Glenda Jackson: That is okay then.

Q107 Chair: Do you know if Access to Work pays for Ailis to go with you, or is that paid by the organisation that would be paying your expenses?

Ailis Hardy: Because Inclusion Europe and Inclusion International are learning disability organisations, they understand that people need a support worker, so they pay. I think Access to Work would pay if they did not. For example, if we are going to party conferences, they are paying for me to accompany Ciara and another colleague.

Chair: There is an understanding, however, amongst organisations that you go to speak to that disabled people very often need support workers with them. I do as well—I need someone with me too.

Q108 Debbie Abrahams: You mentioned that you used to have an adviser who you used to contact, and now there are different people who you contact and it is very frustrating for you. When did those changes happen?

Ailis Hardy: When I was first in post, we had one adviser who worked across all four people who I support. I could call her up at any time and ask questions, and she gave advice to me and to Ciara and the other colleagues. In the last year and a half, it has changed, but there was no notice of it changing. It was all very sudden and we were having to ring the contact centre and talk to a different person every time, which has been frustrating.

Q109 Debbie Abrahams: That situation, then, has not resolved itself.

Ailis Hardy: Yes.

Q110 Chair: Can I just ask the rest of the panel if that is your own experience, that things have changed quite recently and, like the experience of the first panel, without anybody really being told?

Rachel Brown: The first time I ever heard of the Access to Work administrative processes changing from one single person to a call centre was earlier this year, when Susan asked me to get Fhold of my original offer letter. I contacted the number expecting to be put through to the adviser who I had always had, should I need to contact Access to Work, to find it was a central call centre. I asked them a simple question and they sent me an email saying that I needed to call them back to confirm the address where I needed the copy of the offer letter posted to. Why the conversation could not have just happened by email or I could not have confirmed that by email, I do not know. Why the single-person-contact method has gone, I do not know. Why we were not told, I do not know. The fact is, because I am on the autistic spectrum, I like knowing what is happening, who I need to contact and how I need to sort it out. To be told one thing and then I need to do another thing and then I need to jump through another hoop is just frustrating, really.

Q111 Debbie Abrahams: The next question is to Ailis, if that is alright. I understand that you support a number of other workers as well. How does that work?

Ailis Hardy: When the package was put together, there were 52 hours that I could draw from every week. It depends on what person needs what sort of support during that week. A week when Ciara is going to the LDPB, we would be doing a lot of work together. She needs a lot of support in that meeting. The next week, however, she might not have as many, and another person who I support would be getting more hours. It is a system that works really well because I am embedded in the team and I know their support. I am consistent. I know them and what they need, and I can offer that as soon as anything arises that they need support with. It would be much harder, I think, if I was working across different teams but, because we all sit together, we all work very well. I know what is going on in the team. I know the work of the Campaigns Team and, therefore, I understand the work that Ciara and our colleagues need to do.

Q112 Debbie Abrahams: Ciara, I see you nodding. Does it work well for you?

Ciara Lawrence: It does, yes. We all get the right support that we need to do our jobs. We have really seen that. I have seen my other colleagues blossom in their jobs in the last few months, and it has really made a positive impact in our team, so it has definitely been really worth it. We all have more tasks in our jobs now that we do than we used to do, which is really good, because we can be really good role models for other people and say, "We are doing really well. If you had a job, you could have that support and do really well too." For us, it is really important that, if we do a really good job, we can show other people what we can do.

Q113 Debbie Abrahams: Thanks, Ciara. Ailis, in terms of the administrative arrangements, you are paid directly by Mencap—is that right?

Ailis Hardy: I am, yes.

Q114 Debbie Abrahams: Does that work well? Have there been any administrative hiccups?

Ailis Hardy: There have been hiccups, just because Access to Work do not always tell you when something has gone wrong. Because I am paid through Mencap, I do not see the problem occurring in my bank account. It is only when the Finance team at Mencap tell me someone's funding has not come through that I realise there is a problem.

Q115 Debbie Abrahams: Has that happened?

Ailis Hardy: It has, yes. We then have to go back and chase Access to Work by going through the call centre, which takes ages because they have to ring you back and you have to wait for the adviser to get in contact, so it can take a really long time. With transport for work, several of my colleagues get taxis to and from work. The taxi firm are invoicing them and they might not be getting paid. That has happened before: Access to Work have just stopped or reduced the payments, and not told us or the taxi firm why. It is not until we have chased them. Once I have chased them, they also do not let you know when the problem has been resolved, so you could be worrying about it for a while and then find out

that the payments have started going through again. The system now is inconsistent and ineffective. It just does not work.

Q116 Debbie Abrahams: Are the administrative issues recent?

Ailis Hardy: I have been working with that system for the last two years so, in the whole time that I have been working with them, it has just been like this.

Q117 Chair: It sounds as though the solution that you have come up with—that you service, if you like, four different people—is eminently sensible and absolute common sense, and is probably cheaper, in the long term, for Access to Work. I think it is the sort of arrangement that was alluded to by the first panel as being a good thing for Access to Work, Yet, from what you are saying, Access to Work makes it quite difficult to come up with that kind of sensible arrangement that, ultimately, would save them money.

Ailis Hardy: I think it would be very hard to get that package together now, just because four different people ringing the contact centre would be given four different advisers, who might not talk to each other. It worked well when our package was being put together, because we had an adviser who understood learning disability. There was an independent assessor who came out and also understood learning disability and could see what the support needs of the people I now support were.

Q118 Chair: Are you saying that it has got worse?

Ailis Hardy: I think it would be much harder.

Q119 Chair: These sensible arrangements that people have come up with, which make sense in their situation and have been accepted in the past, are less likely to be accepted now.

Ailis Hardy: Yes.

Q120 Chair: I wonder whether the difficulty created by the administration of Access of Work is putting people off applying for it, because it is just too difficult. Nicola, from your perspective, do you have any views on that?

Nicola Oliver: Could you repeat the question, please?

Q121 Chair: Because the administration of Access to Work has been made very difficult and seems to be getting worse, I wonder whether that means that some people are put off applying for Access to Work, because it is just too much effort and, therefore, they would rather not be in work because, to get into work, they need Access to Work, which is just too much effort.

Nicola Oliver: I think the application to Access to Work is not a problem because, when you make that first call, you do not know what you are going to expect. Some people with

a lot of anxiety will not be able to deal with the conversation themselves, so they are asked if they want an advocate to negotiate with Access to Work.

Q122 Chair: Are there are any other views about whether the difficulties are putting people off from applying?

Susan Askew: Yes, I would say that the difficulties are definitely putting people off. Particularly people on the spectrum feel quite wary about approaching officials of a Government organisation. They are very hesitant to make that first move and quite often find it very difficult to be proactive. They very often do not know about the existence of Access to Work, and nor do their employers.

At the National Autistic Society, we are often the first people to tell people that it is a possibility and that it is something that they can do—to apply for Access to Work. I have, however, met people who are very reluctant to do that, particularly because it is by phone, which is very off-putting for people on the spectrum. Another issue that has arisen from the call-centre situation is that someone makes that first call, and sometimes we are with them when they make that first call to help them through that. Then they are told that they will be called back, but not exactly when, so they will receive a call out of the blue from Access to Work, which takes someone on the spectrum by surprise and they are not ready for it. Very often, at that point, they say, "I am fine. I do not need help" and that is the end of it.

Chair: We have more questions on that now from Mike.

Q123 Mike Thornton: This is for Rachel. How did you hear about Access to Work and how does it help make it easier for you to work and carry out your duties at work?

Rachel Brown: I heard about Access to Work from Susan's predecessor Emma Jones, who was then my support worker from the National Autistic Society, about three or so years ago, when I first started my job at Notting Hill. Before then, I had never heard of Access to Work. I had never even heard of its existence. Also, my employers knew about it but they did not know about it to a great extent, until Emma, Susan's predecessor, had explained it to them. The prospect of having to apply on the telephone did not fill me with too much glee, being, as Susan says, on the spectrum. The idea of ringing people up, especially people who would have some kind of authority over whether or not I would get the funding for the support I needed, was something that filled me with quite a great deal of anxiety.

Also, I did have the experience of needing to be called back and not being told when I would be called back. I work full-time and, as I said, Susan is not with me all the time. She comes in an hour every two weeks; at that point, it was an hour every week. The chances of them ringing me back when Susan was not there, then, were much higher than when she was there. Also, there is the fact that I have my phone off while I am at work, because I am at work. They may try to call me back and may or may not leave a voicemail message for me, and I will think, "Goodness, I am going to have to call them back. Are they going to be available?"—phone tag. Once it is all sorted out, the support that Access to Work funding has enabled me to have through Susan has really helped me

with my anxiety issues and to do my job and to gain more responsibility in my job, so much so that, if you were to look at me on a normal day, you would not even know I had autism.

Nicola Oliver: My experience of Access to Work contacting me back has been very different. I think when I put in the application form, they asked me whether I wanted to be contacted by email or by phone. They would send me an email asking me when I would like them to call me or when I could call them, which made the whole process a lot easier. The variation, however, means it is not a consistent process.

Chair: It can be done.

Q124 Mike Thornton: Basically, we want them to do the best and learn from other people who do it properly—best practice.

Rachel Brown: I never had a face-to-face assessment when I first went for Access to Work. My original Access to Work assessment was done entirely over the phone. Looking back on it, I think it might have been better to have had maybe even just a short face-to-face chat with an adviser, so that they could read my body language. It is more difficult—especially at that time, when I was worse off than I am now—for me to make myself heard over the telephone than face-to-face. Also, they do, in my experience, prefer you to contact them on the telephone rather than via email, because, when I asked for them to contact me via email, they did say, "That is not ideal because we cannot discuss your full case via email, because of confidentiality rules." I understand where they are coming from, but I want time to be able to answer any questions that they are asking me and time to formulate my response, which I cannot do as easily when I am on the telephone.

Q125 Mike Thornton: It would be helpful to be able to have an initial discussion by email, followed up by a verbal discussion, preferably face-to-face. At least if you had had time to do everything on the email when you had a follow-up conversation on the telephone, would that have been a lot easier?

Rachel Brown: Yes. If they told me when they were going to call me or when I could call them, so I could tell my manager, "I need to take an important phone call. Can I step into a meeting room or are you okay if they ring me on my work phone?" or just make arrangements.

Q126 Mike Thornton: You could also arrange for Susan to join you as well if necessary.

Rachel Brown: If necessary, depending on her availability, but if I knew and I was prepared for it, in the worst-case scenario I could do it on my own. I have rung up Access to Work on my own, for example, when I was in Legal and Susan was on holiday and was not going to be there until after the time that I had to phone them had passed.

Nicola Oliver: I agree with the lady's comment about face-to-face and discussions, because people with a mental health condition do not necessarily know exactly what they need to support them into work. The belief is that the support is mainly about physical

support. What would be really helpful is if somebody with a mental health condition could describe their symptoms and what difficulty they think they might have, and have somebody help advise what kind of support could be provided to counteract those symptoms.

Q127 Mike Thornton: Would it be helpful if you could send that information over in an email so you could think about it, write it, discuss it with somebody else, and then have a follow-up conversation on the phone? Would that be probably a more efficient way of dealing with it as well?

Ailis Hardy: It would cut out a lot of the processes. At the moment, you have to wait and it just drags it all out so much, because you are just waiting for these phone calls. If they miss you or you miss them, then it takes so much longer. If you can get everything that you want to say to them down first, and then them ring you back and go over it with you again, that shortens the process a lot and it would make everything so much faster.

Q128 Mike Thornton: And save money.

Ailis Hardy: And save money. It would be easier, yes.

Susan Askew: You need the adviser or the assessor at the other end of the process to be someone with an understanding of autism, because autism is a hidden disability. It is often hidden not only to other people but, to a certain extent, sometimes to the person themselves. Other people with various different kinds of disability might be very sure of what they need; people with autism are often not sure at all, so you need a very understanding assessor at the other end, who can ask the correct questions and knows how to address those questions to someone with autism, not wide-open questions like "What difficulties do you have?" It has to be much more specific than that.

Q129 Mike Thornton: If there is an initial email from Rachel or whoever, then they could make sure it goes to the right person, not say "That person is not in the office. Someone else can deal with it." Just simple organisational things.

Rachel Brown: Going to the right person but also to somebody who can at least take a message if that person is not in the office, You do not want it to go into the kind of black hole where they are not in the office, and therefore it is not going to be dealt with for three weeks.

Mr Thornton: I take your point there, definitely.

Susan Askew: Another factor is that Access to Work then speak to the relevant line manager. Really you have to hope and have the goodwill that that line manager is someone with an understanding of their employees' needs. Generally when we have worked with people, that is the case, but I sometimes worry about how the process would work if someone was on the autism spectrum in a smaller company and decided to approach Access to Work completely as a standalone thing and maybe did not have the support of their manager. Their manager is then going to get a call asking, "What are the person's needs?", and they might say, "Well, he is fine," or, "I'm not sure what his needs are."

Nicola Oliver: I agree with the need for the advisers to be fully trained in the diagnosis they are dealing with, because in the issue of mental health, the default is the Remploy mental health service, and if you look at their documentation, it might be okay for people with mild to moderate symptoms, but it certainly would not be applicable to people with more severe mental health conditions.

Chair: We have some questions on that coming later.

Q130 Mr Thornton: That is what I would like to ask you about, Rachel. You are on the Asperger's end of the spectrum, which means, as I understand it, your language skills have not been inhibited.

Rachel Brown: Not really. My problem is with anxiety. When I am feeling anxious, I would say that my language is impaired. My communication is impaired in that I have a block that comes down and that is what Susan helps me with: tips and tricks on how to cope with things that make me anxious, and training for my colleagues and my manager to deal with that.

Q131 Mr Thornton: Obviously, there is a huge range across the autistic disability spectrum, right the way from somebody obviously functioning well with help, to somebody who would find it difficult to leave the house in the morning, and even more extreme than that. So it is a very wide-ranging question that I am going to ask you, which you probably cannot answer, but any ideas from you would be helpful.

Rachel Brown: I will have a shot at it.

Mr Thornton: We talked about the email, but with your knowledge of where you stand and people in different areas on the spectrum, what other kinds of support do you think that people on the spectrum typically need in employment? Can you think of anything? I know to throw that at you like that is a bit unfair.

Rachel Brown: Having a support worker is a big thing that I think definitely people at my end, and probably people more towards the severe end of the autistic spectrum, would need in order to keep in employment. The more severe the person's autism is, the more hours of support they would require from a support worker in order to function effectively in employment. There is also the possibility that they might need to work in a more sheltered environment than that which a mainstream employer could provide. There should definitely be training for the employee's colleagues and manager on the specific type of autism that the person has. So my colleagues and manager received training on Asperger's syndrome because that is what I have got. Somebody with more severe autism would need their colleagues to receive training on more severe autism as appropriate.

In addition, why is it us that need to contact Access to Work? Why can't Susan do it? That was my question, especially for more severely autistic people who cannot communicate, for whom picking up the phone and talking to somebody would instil in them so much dread that they would not do it—that they would put it off. Also, when Access to Work communicate with you, the support worker needs to be in the loop, so that if you perhaps do not feel you can deal with it—because your autism is such that you

cannot deal with these things on your own—the support worker needs to step in and help sort it out.

With regard to the phone, perhaps an online application process would help, but this would need to have the functionality, like most online applications do these days, to save your work so that you can come back to it later, instead of a time-out that means you lose everything. It needs to be functional and easily accessible, in language that we understand.

People with autism, in my experience, need routine; they generally need a certain thing to happen at a certain time. With support, I have been able to counteract that to some degree and become more flexible, but the more you get towards the severe end of the spectrum, the more routine, typically, I think, people need. And employers, Access to Work, support workers, colleagues and managers need to be able to deal with and accommodate that.

Q132 Mr Thornton: Obviously, there is such a huge range, and I was wondering if you think people in the Access to Work system, and in the system as a whole, understand the difference between somebody like you, who is on one end of the spectrum, and somebody who could be completely thrown out by moving a time from eight o'clock to 8.15. I just wondered whether you and Susan feel there is that knowledge in the system.

Rachel Brown: Not really. If you ask the man on the Clapham omnibus about autism, he would think *Rain Man*. He would not think necessarily of the extreme end of the spectrum. There are people like me at one end and there are people right at the other end who cannot leave their houses. When I tell somebody I have Asperger's, sometimes, if they have not been told what it is, they ask, "What is Asperger's?" and I have to explain it to them. Also, people do not know that autism—and Asperger's within that—has so much of a range that I am different from Person B with autism, who is different again from Person C with autism, and we all have individual, unique needs. The Access to Work assessor that we speak to needs to have knowledge of the autistic spectrum when they are dealing with somebody with autism, so they can help put in place the support we need but that we might not know that we need.

Susan Askew: Yes. I think we say, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Everyone is very individual and has their own needs, and I do not think that is fully understood by Access to Work. When I have supported clients in their contact with Access to Work, we have come across some advisers who clearly do not have an understanding of what autism is. So we talk about needing a support worker, and someone once said to me, "Well, that would be lovely; we would all love to have one of those." That kind of comment is not helpful.

Ailis Hardy: I think that is also why there needs to be consistent and ongoing support. People with a learning disability are often offered job coaching, but that does not allow for any leeway of change. For people with a learning disability, something might happen and they might not be able to deal with it and have to go through the whole process of applying to Access to Work again. That is why the model of me being embedded in the team with four people with a learning disability works so well, because I am able to deal with an issue or a problem before it becomes so much bigger and that person might lose their job because of it.

Q133 Nigel Mills: Can we just switch back to how Access to Work supports people with mental health conditions? Nicola, I think you mentioned a little while ago that perhaps people see it as being for people with physical difficulties, not mental illnesses. What could be done to change that perception? Have you got any ideas for that?

Nicola Oliver: There is an issue with the marketing for Access to Work, because the examples that tend to be given are physical examples, or the Remploy system. When people with mental health conditions contact Access to Work, they are not necessarily sure about what support would be available, or how to verbalise the difficulties they face.

Q134 Nigel Mills: Do you think that some published examples of how people with mental health conditions have been helped would be a useful way of stimulating interest?

Nicola Oliver: Yes, it would. Also, the location of the marketing needs to be addressed. Most of the marketing I have seen is actually focussed on the employer, and many people with mental health conditions will not actually disclose their condition to employers. The support needs to be available without the employer's knowledge.

Q135 Nigel Mills: How would you do that? Would that be through health providers?

Nicola Oliver: I think that should be the primary marketing area. So, community mental health teams who are dealing with people with severe mental illness, IAPT teams and possibly GPs as well need to talk to them about whether they want to go back to work, to make sure they know that Access to Work is an option for them, and also when they go on sick-leave, to help keep them in work rather than exiting employment.

Rachel Brown: I would like to add something to that. I am under the West London mental health service for my anxiety issues, and when I went to my GP, and more so the specialist mental health assessment centre, there was no mention whatsoever of Access to Work or wanting to go back into work on the posters—not that I can recall from when I was sitting in the waiting room waiting for this specialist to see me. That would definitely be one place to put it.

As I said, there is no real marketing of Access to Work whatsoever. I had not heard of it before I started at Notting Hill and Susan's predecessor told me about it. I had had three jobs before then, and I had not had any real support in any of those three jobs because I did not know support existed within the workplace, especially for someone on the autistic spectrum, or with a learning difficulty, or with mental health issues. When you think of support in the workplace, you think of a wheelchair ramp, or a bigger screen, or something like that that people with physical disabilities need.

Nicola Oliver: I help organisations to set up employment services for people with mental illnesses. I set up a working group between the different mental health charities and Remploy, and other people interested in this kind of work. That was not managed by Access to Work; that was me wanting to help people with mental illness.

We have a network of services that provide people with support to get them into work and stay in work. None of these services knew about Access to Work and these are people

working with severe mental illness on a daily basis. The promotion to them was through me, and then bringing in an external relations adviser from Access to Work. That external relations adviser no longer exists. I do not think that department exists any longer. I have got nobody to draw on to send to other services to provide more information about Access to Work.

Q136 Nigel Mills: Is this fixable, or should we have a separate scheme for people with mental health conditions and people with physical conditions?

Nicola Oliver: There clearly are services that promote support for people with mental health conditions. They should be contacted and supported to make them aware of what Access to Work could provide for their clients. Beyond that, getting the knowledge about Access to Work into health services and the understanding of what support could be provided would help increase the usage of Access to Work by people with mental health conditions. It is very low for that group at the moment.

Q137 Graham Evans: So Remploy is now the sole provider of mental health services. In your experience how effective are the Remploy services, Nicola?

Nicola Oliver: The people that I have spoken to from the services that I work with have not condoned the Remploy service because it is not adequate for people with severe mental illness. Also, we have to think about the journey into work of somebody with mental illness. They have probably been off work for a long period at a time, or they might have had a bad experience at work previously because of their condition. They are supported into work by one adviser organisation, developing a relationship with that adviser. Then they are asked to have contact with a completely different adviser. It is also very restricted contact; I think it is three face-to-face and six telephone conversations. So the anxiety of going back into work and having a different support worker, and that support being very restricted, means that it is not adequate for the people with mental health conditions.

Q138 Graham Evans: What would you say would be adequate? What would your solution be to that?

Nicola Oliver: I think that where somebody has been supporting an individual for a while, they should be allowed to be the support worker for that client. If they have not been working with them, then the person with the mental health condition should be asked if there is somebody they know who would be suitable to provide that support.

The mental health voluntary services—so Mind, Rethink, Bipolar UK—who are experts in that diagnosis should be allowed to provide the support to the people that have those specific conditions, because they understand their symptoms. They may not necessarily understand that particular workplace but they will be able to negotiate with the employer if the client wants to disclose.

Q139 Graham Evans: So do you think there should be other providers such as the ones you have mentioned?

Nicola Oliver: Yes. If you think about it, Remploy is providing that kind of service, but they are not experts in those conditions, and the support they provide is very superficial, like time-management and condition-management. Support for these individuals should be much more bespoke.

The other issue with the Remploy service concerns situations where a client's behaviour and symptoms have started to cause difficulties at work and are perceived to be—for want of a better word—bad behaviour or anti-social behaviour. What the client needs then is somebody to advocate between the employer and the client to help them understand what the difference is between their symptoms and other issues, rather than going down a grievance process.

Q140 Chair: The mental health sector has recommended that assessments and agreements of funding for support are put in place for individuals with mental health problems before they have secured a job. In that context, why is the current Access to Work eligibility letter not enough? They have got a letter that they can take to their employer that says they would be eligible for Access to Work, but it does not say what that support is. That is not enough, because you and your organisation are advocating that the person should know, "This is the help I will get," so when they go to their employer they know all of that and it is all spelt out for them.

Nicola Oliver: The client needs to know what support they are going to get before they get into work, rather than be told they are eligible and then the support they ask for not being covered by Access to Work. That not knowing could be the difference between accepting a job and not accepting a job.

Q141 Chair: A lot of mental health conditions fluctuate. Does this not make it quite difficult to use something like Access to Work, which is continuing support, when in fact for six months of the year the person might not need it, but for six months of the year they might, or indeed it might be a week-to-week fluctuation? Is that the root of some of the difficulty of identifying the kind of support someone with a mental health problem might need?

Nicola Oliver: It should not be, if it is made clear. Access to Work can adjust the hours depending on who needs the support. One of my symptoms at certain times of the year is chronic fatigue, so I have got Access to Work to pay for car parking when I need it, rather than having to walk from the nearest free parking. They allocate 50 car parking tickets per year. If I run out of that, then they will negotiate more, so they are allowing me to self-manage the support that I need over the time.

Q142 Chair: Is it not more effective to concentrate on job retention? That was a question I put to the earlier panel: particularly for people with mental health problems who have been in work at some time in their life, but have fallen out of work and find it very difficult to get back in, when they start to present with some problems, it is not picked up, it is too far down the line before it is, and by that time they have lost their job.

Nicola Oliver: I would not say do not provide the support before the client gets a job; that is also needed, but as soon as the GP knows that they are asking for a fit note and they know that they have got a mental health condition, then they should make them aware of this Access to Work support and have job retention experts that will support them to stay in employment.

Q143 Chair: Do you think GPs know about that? Has anybody experienced whether GPs or clinicians of any type know very much about Access to Work?

Rachel Brown: I have not heard anything from my GP about Access to Work. I think they have it on my record somewhere that I have a support worker, because I told them, but when I went to my GP before Christmas last year and said, "I have got anxiety problems that are affecting my work because I have got Asperger's. I need help; here is a letter from my employer," the GP said, "We had better refer you to the specialist." I had a couple of months' wait, and then I saw the specialist.

Chair: By that time the anxiety was passed, was it?

Rachel Brown: No, my anxiety is an ongoing issue as part of my Asperger's syndrome. It is being managed by medication, which has made it better, but I still have issues with anxiety, even now. I had an hour and a half with the specialist, and there was still, as far as I can remember, no mention of Access to Work from him.

Mr Thornton: I think most doctors see a medical solution, not practical solutions. It is quite common I think.

Susan Askew: There used to be within Access to Work a Fluctuating Conditions team, which was the team that we used to deal with, because they understood that people with autism might need more support at certain times. But now the support that people receive is very much put down on a monthly basis. For example, if someone did need more support in one month and our claim form stated that, they would probably return it back to that person, as their client, to say, "You've gone over your allocated time for this month," which is a problem. I think if there was some flexibility as to when we could use our support, that would really help us.

Rachel Brown: Yes, because between one month and another, the working environment and things that are happening affect my anxiety levels. For example, when work went through a restructure and I had to apply for my job again, I needed more support from Susan. At a normal time, when everything is going hunky dory, she can come in once every two weeks and it is fine. Also, when I am on annual leave, I obviously do not need her to come in, because I am away.

Q144 Chair: The flexibility for Access to Work to be able to cope with those particular pinch points, when the anxiety is particularly acute, is important.

Susan Askew: Yes, absolutely. As I say, they might return a claim form. If in a particular month, say, a client had three hours a month and we had put four down on the form, they will send it back and say, "You have gone over your allocated time for this month." They send it back to the client—we have talked about this—and it causes huge anxiety for

people to receive that paperwork back. Quite often the clients that I deal with think that they have done something wrong or their support is going to end; they do not understand. If Rachel received a letter, she would bring it to me and we would discuss it; some of our clients do not. They put that letter to one side and do not deal with it, so we do not know that there has been a problem with the system. I think we have discussed that the administrative side needs to be thought about a lot more carefully so that the people who are providing the service are somehow included and know particularly when people's support comes to an end, because people do not have any notice of that, and therefore we do not either.

Q145 Chair: We have run out of questions and we have almost run out of time. I wanted to ask if there was anything else that any of you wanted to add. I think, Nicola, you might have wanted to add something.

Nicola Oliver: Yes, I had an incident where my payments should have ended in January, but I was not notified of it, so I was still trying to claim up until May or June, and it was only when I realised that there was a problem that I contacted Access to Work, and then eventually they dealt with it.

Q146 Chair: That is reflected in what we heard from the first panel as well. As I say, is there anything that you were hoping to say today that you have not managed to say and that you would like to say now?

Rachel Brown: Yes, please. I want to say something about the administrative hiccup that I had back in March. I had returned paperwork from Access to Work, saying that they could not pay Susan's invoice because of the signature being wrong. It was sent to my home address. I had just got back from work; I was tired. I looked at it and I thought, "What is that?" and I looked at it a bit more, and thought, "If I did not deal with invoices on a daily basis at work, and if the Access to Work form were not so similar to the forms our finance department send me when I have got something wrong and they cannot pay the invoice, that would have made me a lot more anxious." It did fill me with fear that the invoice would not be paid—that my support would stop. If I remember rightly, it was a few days before I saw Susan again, and I thought, "What on earth is going to happen? Will it be on time?"

Susan Askew: It is a paper-based system and that is a real problem. I think if it was online and people had an account online that they could look into, and all the past correspondence was there to check through and the third party had an agreement to look at that as well, it would make life so much better for all of us. It seems a very antiquated way of dealing with things now. As a support worker we have to receive the client's and the manager's signature on the form. Sometimes, getting the manager's signature is difficult, because the managers are often in meetings or they are away. I would say that it needs to be updated in its administration.

Rachel Brown: Yes, because the manager has to sign right there and then for the form to be accepted. They cannot accept scanned signatures; that is why I got the letter back.

Q147 Chair: Nicola?

Nicola Oliver: As well as my own experiences, I have asked employment advisers that refer to Access to Work what their experiences are and there are a couple of different things that they come up with. Somebody who had applied for taxis required the employer to be involved, and because the employment adviser could not get the employer to sign the forms, they would not pay for the taxis. Support is quite expensive; for example, you have to pay the taxi costs upfront, and then they will reimburse you at the end of the month, which is quite difficult for someone who is starting work for the very first time.

In terms of success, once Access to Work has agreed everything, they are actually very good at sticking to what has been promised. The recommendations from the services include more marketing, the use of social networking, providing employers with training on the diagnosis for the individual concerned so that the peers and the manager know how to support that individual, face-to-face assessments—possibly with the DEA at the local Jobcentres rather than over the phone—and training of staff.

Q148 Chair: Can I suggest—because we have run out of time—that if there is anything you feel you have not said today you would like to say, then please write in? Any written evidence in that respect will be accepted as well. Can I thank you very much for coming along today? It is not something you are used to doing. Well, I do not know. Ciara, I think you are quite used to doing this kind of thing, but I know it is not a normal thing that people do in a day's work, so we appreciate it all the more that you have come along and given us your time. I know that what you have said today will certainly help us a great deal in both writing our report but more importantly in making recommendations to the Government about how they can improve what I think you all agree is actually a really good system—if they can only get it right.

Ciara Lawrence: The only main thing I want to finish off by saying is that the information that is sent to us really needs to be more accessible.

Chair: You did mention this earlier.

Ciara Lawrence: That is the main point that I really want to stress. It has got to be fewer big words, less jargon. It just has to tell you what you need to do in a very clear way. When I get letters, I get so frustrated that I do not understand them, and I want to understand them. I have to take them to somebody and say, "I got this letter in the post last night at home; can you explain it to me?" and I have to do that, or else I will just put it in the drawer and I will not do anything about it. I have got to ask, and it makes me feel stupid that I have to ask, but I have to. If it were made a bit simpler, I could understand it. If things could be more accessible, I know that would really help people with a learning disability in their lives.

Mr Thornton: You are not the only one. There are loads of us that have difficulty reading those letters.

Chair: You are not the only one. It is all of them. I had one where a disabled constituent came to me and we could not understand the letter, and we had to write back to the local authority and say, "Please explain what this means, because none of us can

understand it." We have absolute sympathy with what you have just said. So, again, thank you very much for coming along this morning.