HOUSE OF COMMONS

Work and Pensions Committee

Oral evidence: Employment support for disabled people: Access to Work, HC 481
Wednesday 15 October 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

- Association of Sign Language Interpreters
- Business Disability Forum
- Remploy
- TLT Solicitors

Members present**:** Dame Anne Begg (Chair), Debbie Abrahams, Graham Evans, Sheila Gilmore, Glenda Jackson, Kwasi Kwarteng, Paul Maynard, Nigel Mills, Anne Marie Morris, Teresa Pearce

Questions 149 - 252

Witnesses: **Dr Jules Dickinson**, Member of Access to Work working group, Association of Sign Language Interpreters, **Susan Scott-Parker OBE**, Chief Executive Officer, Business Disability Forum, **Julie Fernandez**, Freelance actor/broadcaster and small business owner, **Gareth Parry**, Disability Capability Director, Remploy, and **Lee Reed**, Equality and Diversity Officer, TLT Solicitors, gave evidence.

Q149 Chair: Thank you very much for coming along this morning. This is the third evidence session of our inquiry into Access to Work. This morning we have representatives from employers and self-employed people, but also some of the providers of services. Thank you very much for coming this morning. Can I first of all ask—maybe starting with you, Julie—if you could introduce yourselves for the record?

Julie Fernandez: I am Julie Fernandez, and this is Leanne Wawra, my support worker.

Dr Dickinson: I am Jules Dickinson from the Association of Sign Language Interpreters.

Gareth Parry: I am Gareth Parry from Remploy Employment Services.

Lee Reed: I am Lee Reed from TLT.

Susan Scott-Parker: I am Susan Scott-Parker from the Business Disability Forum.

Q150 Chair: Thank you very much. Some of you are new; some of you are familiar old faces. I should not say "old"; you are familiar faces. Thank you for coming. Can I start, perhaps, with you, Lee? In your introduction you gave the acronym for the title of your company, but it is a law firm. Is that correct?

Lee Reed: It is, yes.

Chair: It is a law firm. You employ a number of disabled people who use Access to Work.

Lee Reed: That is correct.

Chair: Some employers have told us that delays are common at every stage of the Access to Work application and assessment process and there is actually a problem around poor administration. It is a good programme, but it has poor administration. However, your evidence was much more positive than that. It suggests that, as a company, you are able to access Access to Work relatively easily. Is that because your company makes a particular effort, or have you got extra resources that you invest in helping your employees who require Access to Work?

Lee Reed: Yes. We are very proactive at promoting it to all of our employees. Also, in my role, I work to support people who are not claiming Access to Work, so, where necessary, I will deal with Access to Work on their behalf and it then takes the administrative side away from the individuals. Because of that, I have quite a close working relationship with our local teams.

Q151 Chair: Have things changed recently, in the last few months or so? Some of the evidence we have received up until now was that things were working relatively smoothly until recent months, with reassessments and changes to some of the rules. We will be talking about the 30-hour rule later. That has actually made a difference; have you noticed that?

Lee Reed: I would not know, to be honest, because we have not had to reassess anyone in the last six months.

Q152 Chair: When you are advertising jobs for your company, is it clear from the advert that you welcome disabled people, that you help, or is it just by word of mouth that people get to know about your company?

Lee Reed: It is on our standard job description that all the recruitment team are trained in Access to Work, so they can answer questions on that. What that has led to is an increase in disclosure at the application stage, which has been helpful.

Chair: Do you find that, as a result, you get more disabled people applying for jobs in your company?

Lee Reed: I would not know, to be honest.

Q153 Chair: Do you have a single point of contact within your company, then, that deals with all the Access to Work?

Lee Reed: Yes, that is me.

Q154 Chair: That is you. However, you actually say in your evidence that you welcome the opportunity to engage directly with the DWP as an employer on behalf of your employees. In what circumstances would that be particularly helpful?

Lee Reed: I think it would be useful in the negotiations. I gave an example in our evidence where an employee was assessed and, it turned out, was arguably put on the wrong stream. Therefore, there was an employer contribution, so he was then in a position where he had to approach us for a couple of thousand pounds towards equipment for his private vehicle, which we would have done, but we did not feel that was necessarily appropriate, because that is his travel to and from work.

If we were involved in the negotiations at the outset, we could have dealt with that—rather than him having to feel potentially uncomfortable approaching us, asking us for money for his private car.

Q155 Chair: Are there any other examples of that, where perhaps the resource has been put into work for your company but the person has moved on and that resource cannot follow them, because it is your company that has been part of the co-funding?

Lee Reed: To be honest with you, we have not had any adaptations made through Access to Work. It tends to be the travel that is the one that gets used in the main. We had one situation where we had some additional software that was purchased for a PC. That employee is still there, so it remains with us, but obviously that would be taken away.

Q156 Chair: Are you happy with the co-funding? Should that be wholly through Access to Work or, as a larger employer, should it actually be part of your responsibility?

Lee Reed: On the whole, we are comfortable with the cost-sharing that is in place at the moment.

Q157 Graham Evans: The Business Disability Forum notes that there is considerable inconsistency in the delivery of Access to Work. What do you believe is the cause of that inconsistency?

Susan Scott-Parker: It is a mixture of things. The restructuring in the last few months has caused turmoil in the system. There is an effort—I know well meant—to allow individual advisers to be flexible and to focus on different solutions for different individuals. However, what it means is that messages go out that suggest rules have changed and it was only guidance. One adviser says, "This is a rule," and another says, "This is just guidance; let us negotiate."

Much of it is driven by a lack of clarity on the purpose of Access to Work. The drive to cut costs seems to be heard as its primary purpose at the moment, so each negotiation with each stakeholder is around cost, rather than the purpose, which is to remove the disability's specific disadvantage. Because they are under this pressure to cut costs wherever they can, you get a feeling of this inconsistency as they are scrabbling in the system.

Q158 Graham Evans: When you say "cut costs", it is a finite budget. It is a case of just being aware that there is a finite budget, so you have to be careful on the costs used, so that rather than cutting it you are just spending money carefully.

Susan Scott-Parker: The point of Access to Work is to remove the disadvantage that prevents this person from working. It is not a benefit that goes to the individual. For some people, that disadvantage costs, say, £100; for another person it costs £5. If you stop giving £100 to the individual who needs £100 or you cut it to £80, they could lose their job. The purpose is not being delivered. What we are hoping we will see is that the whole system focuses much more clearly on workplace-related assessments that ensure you are getting the maximum impact on that individual in that individual job, because the assessment of the package they need in order to remove that disadvantage is more carefully done. You will get cost savings that way.

We had one example given to us recently where someone who is deaf and in work needs to communicate with their colleagues every day, but they have had their hours cut, so they have now been told by Access to Work that they can only communicate four days a week. They have to have a non-communication day. What employer is going to suddenly go, "I cannot talk to you today; you cannot go to any meetings today"? It is a false economy, because that person could then end up losing their job, but it looks as though you have saved a bit of money. Do you see where I am going?

Q159 Graham Evans: Yes. Using that example of only four out of the five days, when you went back to the adviser, was that being sorted out?

Susan Scott-Parker: No.

Graham Evans: I agree it does not make sense.

Susan Scott-Parker: No. There are so many stories like this floating around now. There is real fear and trepidation in the disability community, and from the employer's

perspective it means that your employee now is under considerable pressure and stress. It does not work for either side.

Q160 Graham Evans: That was my next question: is the process clear with employers?

Susan Scott-Parker: No.

Graham Evans: It is not. What can be done to make it clear to employers and users?

Susan Scott-Parker: We recently hosted a consultation with deaf users, the interpreters for the deaf, and that whole community. There is a lot of support for greater transparency, an online booking system, all the information about your case being available to you online, sharing information regarding different options in terms of what the technology costs might be and making it much more transparent.

On the employer front, there is confusion regarding what is the mandatory cost-share and what is voluntary. When you are approached as an employer for the voluntary contribution, very few employers realise this is actually voluntary. There is no guidance around this; there is nothing in the public domain that tells you what seems a sensible voluntary contribution.

Graham Evans: How could that be cleared up? How could we get that message across to employers?

Susan Scott-Parker: It could be on their website.

Graham Evans: That is just one thing. Do you have any other ideas?

Susan Scott-Parker: You could train the frontline Access to Work advisers to say the same things and to have guidance they could then send to every employer that is in writing to get consistency.

Graham Evans: Better communication with employers is what you are saying.

Susan Scott-Parker: It is crucial, absolutely.

Q161 Paul Maynard: I have two very quick follow-up questions. Just so I can clearly judge your evidence and understand it properly, are you arguing that Access to Work should be an uncapped budget?

Susan Scott-Parker: We would like to see it expanded on the understanding that any cost savings when you bring, say, 20,000 people off benefit into Access to Work are re-invested back into the programme. I forget what the language is when the Treasury acknowledges that ATW is saving the entire country—

Chair: It is called the AME/DEL switch.

Susan Scott-Parker: That is it. I can never remember it. We think that should apply, because then there is an incentive to bring more people into work.

Q162 Paul Maynard: Okay, that is clear. There are issues associated with that, but you are now clear in your evidence. Secondly, you are making a big point about simplifying the guidance. This always sets off alarm bells with me. Can you give me a concrete example of guidance you think could be removed without making it harder for disabled people to gain Access to Work funding because guidance affecting their particular condition has somehow been removed? Do you have a specific example or is it just a general point you want to make?

Susan Scott-Parker: I am probably asking for guidance to be added, not removed. I am looking for clarity on what you can expect.

Paul Maynard: You want it to be more complex.

Susan Scott-Parker: I say clarity: knowing what to expect, how many stages you have to go through before you can get a decision and what evidence is taken into account at each stage.

Paul Maynard: Clarity could mean more, then.

Susan Scott-Parker: It could indeed mean more. The essence of it is, "Can people understand what to expect?"

Q163 Chair: Can I just pick up on something you said earlier? You talked about one adviser saying it is a rule and another saying it is guidance. Is that the kind of thing you are talking about? The guidance is guidance, but actually it has been interpreted as rules.

Susan Scott-Parker: The classic is the story of the 30-hour rule.

Chair: It is not; it is 30-hour guidance.

Susan Scott-Parker: It is 30-hour guidance, but no-one understood that. Because there is no process of ongoing consultation with users, which is a proposal that came out of our consultation recently with the deaf community, it is very difficult to communicate at the moment with the users. Consistently, rumours start to run, because one decision is taken here and it is simply not transparent.

Q164 Glenda Jackson: I want to go back to the issue of the budget. Graham spoke of it being finite and, indeed, Paul followed up on that. However, you have told us that Access to Work is the best-kept secret in the DWP. Is there any evidence that the existing budget has ever been exceeded, or has it in fact never been fully utilised?

Susan Scott-Parker: My understanding is that it has never been fully utilised, because the officials have been under pressure not to tell too many people about it in case the demand grew.

Q165 Paul Maynard: Do you have any evidence of that?

Susan Scott-Parker: Do you mean of officials being under pressure not to tell people?

Paul Maynard: Yes.

Susan Scott-Parker: My evidence is only 15 or 18 years of conversations with officials. I have nothing on paper, of course.

Glenda Jackson: And being able to count.

Paul Maynard: You do not actually have any evidence, then.

Susan Scott-Parker: Just me talking to people.

Paul Maynard: Not that you would swear on oath.

Susan Scott-Parker: I would swear I believe it to be true.

Paul Maynard: We can call witnesses.

Chair: However, it is true that we do not know what the Access to Work budget is. It is not declared.

Paul Maynard: How can it be if you do not know what it is?

Glenda Jackson: Presumably, the evidence of the budget never being exceeded is very easy to find.

Paul Maynard: If there is no budget, how can you exceed a budget that does not exist?

Glenda Jackson: I am sorry. I did not get the reply, because I was being impertinently interrupted.

Paul Maynard: Oh dear. My apologies.

Glenda Jackson: I will repeat my question—or, rather, my statement. Presumably, the evidence that the budget has never been expanded in the past is easily verifiable and can be produced as evidence.

Susan Scott-Parker: The budget has been increased in the past, but I do not know if it has ever been—

Glenda Jackson: Burst.

Susan Scott-Parker: "Burst" is the word.

Q166 Graham Evans: Julie, recently there has been a new call centre established where you have not been able to contact a named adviser directly. There are some concerns over that. Could you share with the Committee the concerns that you have over that?

Julie Fernandez: Yes. I was contacted approximately five months ago by Access to Work to say my three-year funding is coming to an end. I then made contact with Access to Work and was given my first caseworker. You have to contact a central telephone number, give them your details, tell them what you want to speak to a caseworker about and

then await either a telephone call or an email. From my understanding, they have to get back to you within 10 working days, but that is often not the case. I had to chase many times—and I have it all logged at home: every time, every day that I chased. I logged when I called and what time I called.

I had my first caseworker, who asked me for a set of information that was going to take me a period of time to put together. He then put in place a temporary three-month funding, so that I could put that three months of information together, which consisted of a diary of everything that my support worker did for me every day and three months of accounts to prove that I was earning a decent standard of living.

Then there was a period where I then chased Access to Work, because it was coming up to when my funding ended. I was given a second caseworker and I then had to chase the second caseworker. It was seven or eight telephone calls on a daily basis to say, "My funding is ending in nine days, eight days, seven days, six days"—and I counted it down every day. I would say, "Please could somebody call me?" and eventually I got a phone call from a second caseworker, who did not want much of the information that the first caseworker wanted. She was interested in the diary; she was not interested in the accounts side of what the first caseworker asked for. She wanted some other type of account information.

She then came back to me some days later and said, "I am really sorry. I am not the appropriate caseworker for you." I then went on holiday, but the day before I went on holiday I had my third caseworker conversation, and the third caseworker asked for another set of information that they wanted to be able to ascertain whether they should carry on giving me Access to Work. I have not been contacted back by the third caseworker. I now have my fourth caseworker.

That is what it has been like for the past four or five months.

Q167 Graham Evans: I have a question here to ask you, and I think I know what the answer will be. Was the system more effective before the call centre was established?

Julie Fernandez: Okay, again, I am a believer that Access to Work is a fantastic secret. I genuinely could not work if I did not get Access to Work. My disability would not allow me to. I am not strong enough, so I need a full-time support worker to allow me to do my job. Access to Work has been very effective up until recently. It is literally in the last four or five months that my head has been blown by how this is running. You are not given your caseworker's telephone number; you are not allowed to ring a caseworker directly. You have to call the centre number, tell them what you want to talk about and await a call or email.

It makes it almost impossible, because you often then do not get the phone call. I know of and have spoken to various people within Equity, disabled actors, who have lost jobs because they have put a call into Access to Work to have the conversation about funding for a filming job, and they never then got that call back, so the job came and went.

This is what is happening. No, it is not very well run at the moment.

Q168 Graham Evans: I have to say to you that I do empathise with you. When I phone call centres I get frustrated, and I always like to talk to the same person rather than having to repeat myself all the time. It is not an uncommon thing; it is more to do with the nature of call centres. Would it help if you had an individual, just one person, dealing with you?

Julie Fernandez: Yes, 100%.

Graham Evans: Bearing in mind that, if we are going to expand and make it not the best-kept secret, there may be more people in your position, it may not physically be possible to have a named individual. However, there could be a system that is clear enough that it does not matter who looks at it. It could be somebody who you are familiar with or somebody who is new who may be covering for their holidays or whatever. They could look at the system and clearly understand Julie Fernandez's case, so you would not have to repeat yourself. Is it something to do with the system?

Julie Fernandez: It is to do with the system, and there is a deeper question within that, because I need to build a relationship with my caseworker because I have to describe very personal things about what my care needs are. This is not a conversation I want to have with Fred today, Jane tomorrow and Simon the next day. It is personal, and it is something that I want to build within a relationship. It does not have to be one; it could be two or three caseworkers, so that when I ring up they know, "This is someone with brittle bone disease, who suffers with a lot of pain every day. Julie's needs are this, this and this"—and I do not have to go through the whole process of what my needs are.

It becomes very impersonal and it becomes quite unkind, because in every conversation I have had with these caseworkers not once have they said, "Tell me about your disability and what that means to you and your working capabilities." The only thing they keep saying to me is, "You cost us too much money. We are reducing your funding and the wages that your support worker gets." I am trying to say, "I work six days a week. I have a business, so I am PAYE and I am self-employed. On a secondary note, I am also a foster parent. If you take that funding away from me, or one or two days of support worker, my disability does not disappear for one or two days. That means I cannot fulfil my contractual duties in my job, so I would have to give up all of it. I cannot do a bit of it."

It needs to be better organized. I do not mind if it is two or three caseworkers, but not someone different every time.

Q169 Graham Evans: Can I just clarify something about the call centre? That was your initial experience. Has it settled down? Whenever you change anything, there are always, perhaps, teething problems. Has your experience settled down with the call centre?

Julie Fernandez: No, it has not settled down.

Graham Evans: Before I go to Susan, do you have in your own mind how it could be administered locally, where it would be and by whom it would be administered?

Julie Fernandez: Yes, it would be great if it were administered locally, because then I could have face-to-face meetings with my caseworker and the team. I suspect most of the caseworkers are able-bodied people; it is highly unlikely there are going to be many disabled

people in those positions. It is very helpful for that able-bodied person to physically see me, physically see how I sit in the wheelchair and, when I get in the building, what my needs are. They can see my support worker help me take my coat off, get in and out of the taxi, open the door to the toilet. All of these things become more obvious. Yes to doing it on a local basis. How that works is a whole conversation we would have to have.

Q170 Graham Evans: The reason why I asked, Julie, is because I have a constituent very similar to you who cannot speak more highly of what has happened to her. That is why I am asking. I am just wondering if she has been dealt with locally, compared with your experience.

Julie Fernandez: I have never been dealt with locally, but up until recently, even not being dealt with locally, I always had the same caseworker or just a few caseworkers who got to know my history and what my needs were.

My disability has changed. As I have got older, my disability and the effects of it have got worse. I struggle with a lot more pain; I have a lot less energy. I have needed to access more and more support. If I had the same caseworker over a period of time, they would see how that progresses.

Q171 Glenda Jackson: It is the issue of you being asked the same question—I am paraphrasing—time after time under the new system. However, yours is not a new case. Your condition has been what it is. You have said it is deteriorating, yet you have been working for a considerable period of time.

Julie Fernandez: That is correct.

Glenda Jackson: Your previous caseworkers would not ask you those kinds of questions. Yet it would seem to me that your history has somehow been lost. Is that your feeling, or is it simply that the people who are now answering the phone have been ineffectually trained as to what they should be asking?

Julie Fernandez: That is correct. They are not interested in my disability. As I mentioned just now, not once in the last five months by the four caseworkers have I been asked anything specific about how my disability affects my working life. All they are interested in is, "How many hours do you use? This is how much you are costing us. We are going to have to reduce the funds." It is not anything about that. From a history point of view—

Glenda Jackson: You have not got one.

Julie Fernandez: No, I have not got one. They are not interested.

Q172 Glenda Jackson: You referred to different people answering you when you ring, but they are always asking you the same kinds of questions, are they?

Julie Fernandez: They are always asking me the same kinds of questions: "How much are you costing us? How many hours are you getting? We need to reduce your hours."

Q173 Glenda Jackson: Even though, in your own timeline that you gave us, you have answered those questions on more than one occasion, the only thing that is changing is the person who is hearing the answers at the other end of the phone.

Julie Fernandez: That is correct—and the information that each caseworker is asking for. Caseworker one asked for a set of information; caseworker two was not particularly interested in that evidence from caseworker one. She was only interested in one part of that evidence. She asked for a new set of evidence. Caseworker three was not interested in anything caseworker two or one asked for.

I work six days a week. I am busy enough as it is without having to accumulate all of this information. I keep saying to them, "Do you not log within the system under my name and my contract what each one of you is asking? Because there does not appear to be any continuity of the information that you are asking from me."

I get, "This is a privilege, not a right. You do not have a right to this benefit. You cost us a lot of money. We need to save money." The second caseworker said to me, "It is my name that goes on the form and I have to justify the money that I give you—and you cost us a lot of money."

Q174 Glenda Jackson: Is there anybody you can contact above the people who answer your calls, so you could lodge a really serious complaint?

Julie Fernandez: I have spoken to one or two disabled people who are also having issues, who have requested to put a complaints procedure in. They have been refused.

Q175 Graham Evans: Susan, on the point of the call centre and the decision-making process being undertaken locally for Access to Work, can you go through that proposition with the Committee? How would that work? Where would it be? In Julie's case, what difference would that make? Can you explain to us how it actually would work? Where would Julie go?

Susan Scott-Parker: We need Access to Work to understand the reality for the person and the job. That is very difficult to do on a telephone through a contact centre. Especially for people who are seen to be more high-cost, what we need is to put an assessment process in place in the workplace with the individual and the employer to work through the right mix of supports and the reality of the job to find the most cost-effective way through.

I do not know if the person at the end of the phone who arranges that workplace assessment needs to be local or national, but that is the kind of information they need—and it needs to be held somewhere centrally and there needs to be someone that you can talk to.

Q176 Graham Evans: When you say "somewhere centrally", where do you mean?

Susan Scott-Parker: With the technology as it is now, I do not know if it matters if you have 100 contact centres in 100 towns or if you have one place where this information

goes. It is whether it is efficiently managed. However, the information needs to be gathered in the workplace. Does that make sense?

For me, the logic that seems to be missing here is that, logically, it is the people like you, who seem to cost more to Access to Work as it removes employment disadvantage, who are going to cost more to the state on benefit for longer—because they are the people who are going to find it particularly difficult to get a job without it. They cannot work without it. People who cost more to Access to Work are precisely the people who should be getting the support.

Q177 Graham Evans: Something is clearly not right in the examples that you have used, but do you have any experience of where it does work well?

Susan Scott-Parker: Gosh, yes.

Graham Evans: Whatever it is that they are doing right, which is working for people, is it not possible to use that as an example? I am going to use the words "best practice", Chair. You look at what is the best way to handle this. Whoever is doing it right, learn from that and use that as an example.

Susan Scott-Parker: The programme has been a brilliant success over the years. In fact, I have travelled the world encouraging other governments to copy it.

Q178 Chair: Is there something that has happened recently that has changed? That is the sense we are getting.

Graham Evans: Is it the call centre?

Chair: It was working reasonably well, but something has happened in the last six months.

Julie Fernandez: What might be a really good suggestion is that the DWP and Access to Work employ a lot more disabled people to run a system catering for disabled people's needs, because we understand what it is like to feel, "Right now, I have the energy. In 10 minutes' time, that might be gone. In half an hour, that might be back again." We understand what disabled people's needs are. It might be worth employing more disabled people within Access to Work to run it more efficiently and have a better understanding.

Q179 Graham Evans: The words there are "better understanding". The people who are speaking to you on the phone need to have a screen in front of them so they do not have to repeat the questions. They can clearly look at the screen and understand your needs. If what you are saying is correct, some of the things that have been said are not appropriate. At least, if they are not disabled, they need to make sure they do understand the predicament disabled people find themselves in.

Therefore, the call centre, the training and the whole processes may need looking at, but I get back to my original point: if we are going to expand this, there are going to be more people like you. The system does have to be able to cope with it.

Chair: Susan had indicated she wants to answer, and Gareth wants to come in as well.

Susan Scott-Parker: What has changed is that there seems to be confusion that it is a benefit—in the midst of a drive, driven by austerity, to cut benefits. Officials are driven, I am sure, by the need to be seen to be cutting costs, so that is an end in itself.

This is not a benefit in the same way that other benefits are. This is an intervention into the labour market that removes disadvantage. It does not go to the individual; it does not help them to buy takeaway Chinese food on a Friday night. This goes straight into the labour market as a way of enabling people who otherwise would not be working. To put it into the same pot with a Department that is trying to bring people off benefit makes it feel like it is a benefit cut—and it is not a benefit for the individual in that way at all.

Q180 Chair: Yet the system recognises that it is not a benefit, which is why there is no appeal or anything, because it is not an entitlement.

Susan Scott-Parker: It is discretionary.

Chair: It is something the Government chooses to put in place to help people.

Gareth Parry: I just wonder if part of the solution to this may be already identified in the recent disability and health employment strategy. In that, there is a proposal to introduce the concept of specialist employment advisers, who will take a holistic assessment of support needs for an individual on their journey into work and how to sustain it. Rather than that being a straightforward assessment of, "How do you get the person into work?" in the traditional sense, it is intended to be a much more holistic assessment of the individual's life and support needs to enable that journey to work.

If that strategy is to move forward and the proposal is to move and test that role of the specialist employment adviser, then maybe this is where some of that sits.

Q181 Chair: That would work for new claimants. Would it work for people like Julie, who have successfully been on Access to Work for a number of years, but it was just that her contract came up for renegotiation?

Gareth Parry: It is all about capacity in the system, isn't it? However, everybody's needs should be reassessed at various points. Some people have reducing needs; some people have increasing needs. It is quite reasonable. Generally, people do not say they have a problem with it being looked at, but the system sometimes has that drive to say it is not about the needs of the individual; it is about cost savings. However, a more holistic approach could open up some creativity in the system as well, because often, in our experience, it is about short-term fixes to a particular problem rather than a long-term view of what the longer-term solution is.

If I can give you some very basic examples, we see people with learning disabilities quite rightly accessing Access to Work support provision, where maybe they are given taxi support. That is fantastic, but there is no flexibility in the system to say, "Could this individual receive training to be able to travel independently and use technology to be able to do that? Could Access to Work do that?" In the short term, that might be a slightly more

costly solution, but in the long term that is a much more economically efficient way of doing it, and it also gives the individual much greater independence in the way they lead their life as well.

However, the rules of Access to Work tend to be fairly one-dimensional in terms of fixing individual problems on a short to medium-term basis only.

Chair: Okay. We are moving on to questions on employer cost-sharing.

Q182 Anne Marie Morris: Susan, I would be very grateful for your thoughts on this. First of all, what are your thoughts on what the argument is for and against this contribution and why it has been set up in the way it has been, so that if you have a business with more than 50 employees you contribute and if you have fewer you do not? What you said was that in the grand scheme of things some of the sums of money are so small that the administrative burden on DWP means it is a-zero sum game and not worth doing.

Could I hear a little bit from you about why you think Government originally conceived that this is the way to do it, and your evidence as to why you think that it does not really work and that you lose by having such a system in place?

Susan Scott-Parker: I think the Government decided to do it this way because it believes employers should pay as a matter of ideology. I do not know whether there was a logic to it.

If we come back to Access to Work, the premise is that of course employers pay when they recruit anyone, and they should pay what is, in law, a reasonable contribution to bringing someone through the process and bringing them in and so on. However, when there are extraordinary, considerable, extra, significant costs—because it is in the interests of Government and the employer—they come together and share those costs. What the Government has never quite understood is how much the employer spends anyway when they are bringing people in, particularly people who require more time from supervisors, more time in the process etc.

However, most importantly, because most people do not require a lot of expenditure, you end up with civil servants chasing a local authority for £300 as their share of the costs. When we looked at that in the advisory panel that the DWP had, I cannot remember quite how much they were recovering from it, but it certainly did not compensate for the amount of time spent trying to actually get the right person in the right employer department to pay.

Q183 Anne Marie Morris: What sort of evidence did they give you so you could actually see how much time DWP are spending to get these small amounts of money?

Susan Scott-Parker: I do not remember what we had on paper with regard to it, but there was plenty of evidence from the front line saying they could not find the person in the local authority. They chased; they chased; they chased. The local adviser on the phone does not have the right to go to the chief executive and say, "Look, figure out how to pay this £300." We were given these kinds of stories, but I do not know if I ever saw a paper on it.

Anne Marie Morris: Okay. It would be quite interesting if we could ascertain from DWP exactly how much time they do spend trying to sort these things out.

Susan Scott-Parker: I do not know if their system allows them to deconstruct all that, but it might.

Q184 Anne Marie Morris: The other piece is around the amounts being small but the employers making a substantially greater contribution.

Susan Scott-Parker: That happens sometimes.

Anne Marie Morris: I suspect many employers would like a bit more of a pat on the back for what they are doing. Should we be looking at collecting some of this information? Because you are right: the Government concept was, "This is a two-way relationship, and therefore both parties need to put something into it." However, it seems to me at the moment that we are not collecting the information with regard to what that contribution is. Would that be helpful?

Susan Scott-Parker: Yes, I think so—certainly to get clarity with regards to what comes out from the conversation that is designed to say that we want a voluntary contribution. I have no information with regard to what the impact of that conversation is. The message of Access to Work should be, "The Government is prepared to pay for those few individuals who do bring with them extra costs." Do not forget we have nearly 3.5 million disabled people in work; only 30,000-plus are on Access to Work. Employers have more than 3.5 million people out there who they are making the adjustments for and working it all through with.

Our concern is that there is still a deep-rooted assumption that disabled people cost too much. The wonderful thing about Access to Work is that it benefits non-users. It benefits all those disabled people who can reassure their employer, "It is not going to cost too much if I do end up costing more money in the next six months." They might never use it, but it helps them to get over that big hurdle.

Q185 Anne Marie Morris: How do employers feel about this? Does the system as it stands—if you have more than 50 employees—put them off taking—

Susan Scott-Parker: Most employers have never heard of Access to Work.

Anne Marie Morris: What you are saying is that the employer, by and large, is not impacted by that. They are either going to take them or not and do the right thing.

Susan Scott-Parker: What they are impacted by is the assumption that disabled people in general cost too much. Where we would win is if they knew that Access to Work was there for the few that do. It just opens the door to all the rest to get across that hurdle and say, "Let's just talk about me and what I can contribute. This is all I need."

Q186 Anne Marie Morris: That is very helpful. Really, what you are saying is that this is not currently an incentive for the average employer, but, equally, they do not see it as a burden either.

Susan Scott-Parker: No, not across the system. Where you have employers who know about Access to Work, it does relax things. It makes it easier for them to persuade managers to consider targeted recruitment projects and partnerships with outfits like Remploy, because you can assure the manager that in the rare event where there are extra costs, access to work will kick in.

It is used very positively by the companies that know about it, but, if we are looking across the UK, because there is not high-profile marketing and communications around it, most employers do not yet factor it in to their way of thinking.

Q187 Anne Marie Morris: Really what you are saying is that communication needs to be improved so that more people know about it and, secondly, that businesses need to feel that this is something that is not going to be an expensive process. They are probably more concerned about being recognised for what they do rather than nickel-and-diming for £200.

Susan Scott-Parker: Or they are concerned with simply recruiting good people who then do the job.

Q188 Paul Maynard: I have a very quick question again. I am sorry; I am picking on you, aren't I? Are you satisfied that Access to Work is adequately covered in the Disability Confident campaign?

Susan Scott-Parker: No.

Paul Maynard: Can you evidence that?

Susan Scott-Parker: It does not feature highly in the campaign.

Paul Maynard: How highly does it need to feature?

Susan Scott-Parker: The message should be that support is there for the employer as well as the person. Access to Work and the connection should be in all their communications—and it is certainly not.

Paul Maynard: Because it was on page one of the presentation I sat through.

Susan Scott-Parker: No—

Paul Maynard: Okay, we will agree to differ.

Q189 Chair: Julie, do you want to come back on this?

Julie Fernandez: Yes. Could I just have a bit more of a conversation with you about what you have just been talking about? Because there is maybe a bigger picture here—and I want to go back a few years—in that some years ago we had the Disability Discrimination Act and Part M was all about access to goods and services. It was all about businesses

making themselves accessible to disabled people as customers and employers. Unfortunately, the legislation was really quite woolly and what it said was, "Businesses have to reasonably adjust their premises in order to make themselves accessible."

What that actually meant was that many businesses did as little as possible so that they paid out as little as possible. My shop has made itself fully accessible not just because I work there a few days a week but because I value disabled people as customers. Disabled people have money to spend. If they cannot physically get through the door because there is not a ramp there and a bigger, wider door, how are they going to get in? How am I going to tap into the millions and millions of pounds that disabled customers have?

The extension on to what Susan was just saying is that all of the onus seems to be on the employer and the disabled person, but maybe the Government needs to look at wider access and how society views disabled people and how little businesses really are tapping into the value of disabled people as customers by spending the money on making themselves accessible. That is quite important.

Q190 Anne Marie Morris: You make a very important point, because clearly the communication is just one example of the fact this whole issue of enabling disabled people to engage in the whole working world has many different aspects to it, only one of which is this particular scheme. You make a very valid point.

Julie Fernandez: It is awfully hard to get a job when you have a physical disability—and it is even harder, in my understanding, if you have a mental health disability. I know a lot of disabled people who will try to apply for a job and not even tell them about the fact that they are disabled, because what we worry about is that society sees us as not intelligent enough to be able to work. We are not seen as a positive contributor as an employee within the whole firm. The assumption is that we have to take a lot of time off sick. I employ 11 people in my shop and all of them are able-bodied except for me. I am the one who has taken the least amount of time off work, because I know how to manage my disability. The assumption is we have to take a lot of time off work for illness and doctor's appointments.

We are battling society's attitudes towards us as individuals, and we are not seen as a positive contributor; we are rather seen as, "Gosh, if we employ a disabled person"—a wheelchair user—"I am going to have to pay to have the building made accessible. What if she has to take time off sick?" That is why there are a lot of disabled people out there who, like me, have ended up starting their own businesses or have become self-employed, because it is too much of a battle to try to get a job in the normal context.

Q191 Anne Marie Morris: One could collect the evidence to show the benefit. I am not quite sure how you would do that, but that would certainly make a difference.

Lee, I am interested in your perspective on this. If you pop your employer hat on, does it make a difference that they do or do not have to contribute? Should employers be expected to contribute as a matter of principle to all of this, or is it actually getting in the way? What is the employer perspective?

Lee Reed: Obviously, I can only speak for TLT. Personally, I think there is a wider benefit to clients as well by having adjustments in place. We have not actually made any physical adjustments, because our buildings are all accessible, but I can see that there would be a wider benefit to clients and, therefore, greater business coming in. We are in the private sector.

Yes, I do not have any issues with the current funding arrangements. I also understand that, where there is a wider benefit to other employees through making an adjustment, we absolutely would then accept the negotiations on the voluntary contributions on that basis as well.

Q192 Anne Marie Morris: In a sense what you are saying, which is slightly different, is that actually it is not such a block, but maybe there is some middle ground. If we believe, as a matter of principle, that we are in this together, and if employers put in something and we recognise what they put in but we make the system simpler, as opposed to nickel-and-diming it, would that make it work rather better? Because they will know we are nickel-and-diming it, this amount for this, rather than saying, "Actually, for every employer over 50 employees, it is X pounds." I mean something simple.

Susan Scott-Parker: The reason any employer over 50 employees pays that £1,000 is, first, we took soundings and most employers regard that as perfectly sensible and reasonable. We are concerned about people who cost beyond what an employer would regard as sensible or reasonable, who would cause an employer to think, "Well, I cannot afford this."

Q193 Anne Marie Morris: What you are doing is taking the issue above and beyond this particular benefit. What you are saying is there needs to be a dialogue about the funding above and beyond this Access to Work piece, which is a different conversation.

Susan Scott-Parker: If it was decided not to charge employers at all—if Access to Work simply came in and picked up the extra cost—you would save a lot of administration costs.

Anne Marie Morris: Are you also arguing that it should not be capped at £1,000?

Susan Scott-Parker: I was simply explaining where that £1,000 came from. That was a view. If employers have to pay something, that was a sensible amount to ask for, because employers are going to agree that that seems quite reasonable. This is in the context of employers having to pick up the costs. We are talking about people who have substantial extra costs. That is really where we should be focusing our conversation, because most employers are picking up the reasonable adjustment costs as we go.

Q194 Anne Marie Morris: What I am hearing is, one, better communication and, two, you would not have such a problem with the small sums if you made it simple and maybe got rid of the administrative burden. But what the Government does need to address is the people who need more than that, which is the point that Julie made. It is a two-way street. It is about recognising that employers are prepared to do something and, as you rightly say, under the legislation they are required to. It is about having a grown-up discussion about what

the genuine cost is and making sure the employer does not feel frightened by it—and is in some way recognised, at least, for what they do, even if they are not compensated.

Susan Scott-Parker: Perhaps there could be an employer helpdesk—a more explicit acknowledgement on the part of Access to Work that the employer is a service user, a customer. A helpdesk would help the employer manage their piece of it. There could also be more sophisticated approach, where you understand that, if you are in cost-share, you have two customers in the employer: the manager of the individual and the finance director or the corporate entity that has to pay. We are always prepared to offer to bring the employers together to help the officials to work that through.

Gareth Parry: One of the really important benefits of Access to Work is it addresses a perceived barrier to employment. It is not always necessarily a reality. There is a thing called an eligibility letter, which lots of the disabled people we support get—it is a pre-eligibility letter—when they go for a job interview. If they talk about the disability and the reasonable adjustment it has, the fact they have a letter that says, "Should this person subsequently be given employment, Access to Work will be on hand to help provide the solution," takes away that anticipation or ignorance that sometimes sits with the employers, so it enables a more proactive conversation about, "How can we make this work, then?"

Often when the individual gets the job, the employer actually finds their own reasonable adjustments—this is very much what has been said—and does not go down the Access to Work route anyway, because there are very sensible workplace solutions. However, what that letter did was get the individual into a dialogue with the employer to say, "There is no need to be afraid of employing me. Actually, there is a sensible solution. I can be a really fantastic employee." It gets over that barrier.

Where the issue becomes more significant is where it is a much more high-cost issue, which is exactly the point we have just been saying, but from our perspective what Access to Work does is address this perceived barrier and it enables a discussion to take place to say, "There is a solution here. Therefore, let us at least have a conversation about the employment situation."

Q195 Paul Maynard: We have just had mental health week. We have heard time and again in the news about the scale of the mental health problems in this country, yet you cater for—I think I am right in recalling this—2,590 people for the last year for which figures are available. There is a 90% success rate, which is superb, but is there not a case for a separate project, fund or solution specifically for mental health conditions that is somehow separate to Access to Work?

Gareth Parry: It is there. The contract we deliver is a separate solution for people with mental health issues. It is exclusively for people with mental health issues. Prior to when this contract came in, there was no support through Access to Work for anybody with a mental health issue, so it was a significant step forward. We have supported probably getting on for about 3,000 people now. I agree: it is a drop in the ocean, relative to the community of people out there who are in employment experiencing mental health issues—but something is better than nothing, that is the first thing I would say.

The contract has significant capacity to grow. Those numbers are not limited by ability to deliver; those numbers are limited by the number of people accessing the service.

The issue is more around the promotion of the service, the branding, perhaps, of the service and making people aware of it.

You asked before about the Disability Confident website. I agree: Access to Work is publicised on the Disability Confident website, but it is just a link to another website. If you go on to that website, it does not even refer to services for people with mental health issues. It is the more traditional approach to Access to Work. There are significant improvements that need to be and could be made around promoting Access to Work and, in particular, promoting Access to Work for mental health service users.

Q196 Paul Maynard: The Centre for Mental Health clearly does not like you very much. They think you are not experts in more severe mental health problems, that your service is "very superficial" and only suitable for people with relatively mild problems. How do you respond to their quite strong attack on you, let's say?

Gareth Parry: I do not think it was too strong. There is also evidence submitted, which has been signed up to by the Centre for Mental Health, which says the Remploy service is a good service as well. We need to focus on what we do. We provide a service for anybody who comes to the service; we do not discriminate as to the severity or complexity of their mental health. Anybody who comes to the service is supported by the service.

If you wanted me to, I could sit here and reel off case study after case study of people who have particularly complex situations. I do not know if that is what the Committee wants to hear, but I can provide that as evidence. I will give you one as an example. A lady who developed a tropical disease whilst she was pregnant had to go into isolation. The tropical disease had a danger of her losing her limbs. She was in complete isolation from her family and could only have verbal communication, no physical communication. The medication she was on resulted in the baby being born prematurely.

That led on to a whole series of physical problems that the medical teams were trying to deal with, but whilst they were dealing with the medical issues there was an onset of some quite complex mental health issues that were not really addressed: post-natal depression, which was quite significant, isolation and loneliness. Because of the issue she developed some safety behaviours, in that she had developed an OCD, where she could not swallow because she thought her throat was continually tightening and therefore was obsessively-compulsively sucking cough sweets.

This was an individual who was off work and had all of those complex issues. Now, the service worked with her. We worked with the medical team. We put a whole plan of action in place to get her out of hospital and to support her when she went home. Even though she started to bond with her child and her family again, she could not go out of the home, so we put a plan in place to say, "How can we help you?"

We arranged for the mental health services to deliver their services to her in her home, rather than her going to the services. Over a period of time, quite an extensive programme was put together. She is now back in work and performing really well. She has coping strategies in place to deal with the trigger points that set off those things.

That is a pretty complex person to deal with. I would not say that is typical; the typical person who is accessing our services is a person experiencing stress, anxiety or depression, but we do have those quite complex cases coming through as well. I would refute any allegation that the system cannot cope with those issues.

Q197 Paul Maynard: I am glad to hear it; I did not agree with the allegation. Clearly, you are aiming a service at people who are already in work. There are other people for whom mental health is a barrier to getting into work. Does the contract specifically exclude helping that group of people?

Gareth Parry: Yes, it does. You can work with somebody who has a confirmed job offer, but, effectively, it is an in-work support service. That is the contract that has been commissioned. The expectation is that programmes such as Work Choice would support people with mental health issues who are pre-employment.

Q198 Paul Maynard: At the moment, you are the sole provider of this service. Clearly, there is already demand for services that you are not meeting currently. Is there a case for having another provider, or is it so specialist that only you can provide it?

Gareth Parry: No, it is not so specialist that only we can provide it. We put the best tender in; we put the best bid in at a competitive price. That is why we won the contract. I am pleased to say that we deliver that contract to what we believe is a high standard—and what the contract says is a high standard. Clearly, however, there are other people in the marketplace who can provide those kinds of services.

There has been some allegations around, "Does the Remploy contract offer enough choice?" and we, as an organisation, are big advocates of choice and control for disabled people. We are very conscious that whenever anybody comes on to the service, they come to Remploy—because there is no alternative option. It is really important that what I get across is that all we do is broker a suite of solutions with that individual for what is right for them. We do not deliver those services. We broker those services and we put that individual in touch with local service organisations that do provide those kinds of services. We set up those appointments for them; we help negotiate access to the service; and we put all of that in place.

Actually, the individual has a lot of choice and control in which local services they are accessing under the Remploy contract. Just because they come to Remploy and it is a Remploy contract does not mean they only get a service from Remploy. They get access to a whole range of service providers that sit underneath that case-management service. It is Remploy-delivered, but there are lots of other organisations involved. That is what I am trying to get across.

However, yes, there are other organisations that could do that. Those organisations presumably put their bids in when the contract was up for tender.

Q199 Paul Maynard: Presumably your contract essentially allows you to help 3,000 people, full stop; there is no capacity to help above and beyond that.

Gareth Parry: There is no cap on the contract. The limiter is the number of people accessing the service.

Q200 Paul Maynard: Do you feel you are doing all you can to advertise the service or do you feel that DWP needs to do more to advertise the service?

Gareth Parry: There could be much more advertising per se of Access to Work. We have already talked about ignorance and the need for education and better communications. That applies probably more so to mental health services, because it is a relatively new extension of Access to Work, so therefore there are even greater ignorance levels around it. There needs to be that.

We have done lots of work with organisations like Susan's organisation. We have targeted GPs; we have worked with legal firms. We have tried to do quite a lot, but it is difficult to get that message out to everybody. It needs a more co-ordinated approach, I would suggest: DWP, Department of Health, probably BIS as well, and working on a more strategic level to get that communication out.

We also then have to address some of the pragmatic issues. I do not want to go over old ground, but this time last year we were dealing with twice the referral volumes that we are dealing with now. I would not want to say all of the reason for the reduction is down to the referral gateway on to the programme, but clearly the substantial amount of change that has happened around contact centres and gateways has created issues. We do get reports back of people phoning up the contact centres, and it is obviously new people working there and they do not know there is a mental health service under Access to Work, so people come back to us saying, "I phoned the number, but we were told that your service does not exist." We say, "Clearly we are here—and we do exist."

That is not the only issue. There are other changes that we strongly believe should be reintroduced. About 12 months ago, as the contact centre restructuring took place, it was decided that the individual could only self-refer by contacting the contact centre. Before that, an employer could ring on their behalf; a third party could ring on their behalf; an advocate or a support worker could ring on their behalf. That has all stopped now. Therefore there is more dependency on the individual themselves taking the step to pick up the phone and call the contact centre.

In many walks of life, that might be a perfectly normal, acceptable thing to do, but for somebody experiencing high levels of stress or anxiety or, particularly, depression, making that phone call to an anonymous person can be quite a difficult experience. We do think if we had more flexibility brought back into that gateway process on who can ring on behalf of the individual, that would open the service back up again.

Chair: We are going back to the problems of the contact centre.

Q201 Sheila Gilmore: You obviously operate UK-wide. Have you seen any regional differences in take-up? Because of the difficulties you have just described, instead of this number going up are you expecting it to plateau or even come down?

Gareth Parry: I will deal with the second one first, if I can. Our referral levels now are running at about half the levels they were 12 months ago, so we have seen a significant drop. We are currently, in the last three months, seeing incremental increases month on month. We are back up to in excess of 100 people per month accessing the service now, so we are seeing some improvements. Some of the changes to the contact centres, despite what I have said, are starting to settle down and we are starting to see some improvements there. We are seeing incremental improvements, but nothing in terms of addressing what the level of potential demand could be.

There are significant regional variations. We see a very low level of referrals coming from Wales and Scotland. In those devolved regions there are some other solutions available as well. However, even in England we see a very low level of referrals, for example, coming from the North West, but we see very high level of referrals coming from the South East, from the Midlands and the North East. We do not see consistent patterns of referral coming through to the service. I cannot offer a detailed, logical explanation as to why that would be.

Q202 Chair: Have you got any estimation of the unmet need? You obviously think there is quite a lot. You are doing 3,000 a year; how many do you think it would be across the UK?

Gareth Parry: I do not know. Lots of people who experience mental health difficulties have received appropriate treatment and are managing that condition and leading perfectly normal daily lives, so it is very difficult. What we do see is clearly the sickness absence statistics that come from employers, saying the main cause of sickness absence in the UK today is stress and anxiety. I cannot remember the number now, but it is tens of thousands of days per year lost through sickness and anxiety and mental health-related issues. It is clearly a big issue. When we talk to people like Susan and our employer partners, everybody says it is the number one issue that they have.

Chair: One of the other big areas is the 30-hour rule. We have got some questions on that from Shelia.

Q203 Sheila Gilmore: My question is in the first instance to Jules Dickinson, who has been sitting quietly waiting for some questions. Is the fundamental problem with the guidance for support workers that it is lumping all support workers together? Is that what you see the problem being?

Dr Dickinson: There is an element of a problem with that. However, for me and for interpreters and definitely for deaf people, I think the fundamental problem with the 30-hour guidance is the 30-hour guidance. It was established, as far as I can tell, with no consultation with service users or service providers. I cannot speak for providers of other forms of support, but there was no discussion as to how it could be delivered if an interpreter is working 30 hours a week, and also the fact that—it has been referred to earlier—guidance is being applied as a rule rather than as guidance. My initial reaction is that it is the guidance itself that is the problem.

In terms of interpreters being fitted into the support work category, it would be helpful if we were differentiated. That is not to denigrate in any way the work done by other support workers, but interpreters go through a great deal of training, have professional standards,

confidentiality, ethics and rules, which means that they do provide quite a specialist service. I feel that would help considerably.

Q204 Sheila Gilmore: The DWP has said that this has been the result of something that originally was put in place in 2011, although not fully implemented for existing users at that stage. You are saying that you do not feel it was discussed or consulted on. Over this three-year period, has there been much discussion at all?

Dr Dickinson: No. We have offered to input into the DWP and to Access to Work. That is very difficult. We have produced a report that points out the problems and the issues if interpreters are working full time with one particular deaf person, which are numerous. If we had had the opportunity to feed into that process I think it would be a very different outcome now, but we are pretty much banging our heads against a brick wall.

Q205 Sheila Gilmore: The DWP told us, and I think announced generally, that they have had an internal review. That is not yet reported, and they will temporarily suspend the guidance. Have you seen any change during that period?

Dr Dickinson: No. A lot of deaf people do not even think that the suspension has happened. I know from my own experience, supporting a couple of deaf colleagues in my region, they are still going through the same problems where they are told they have got to employ an interpreter. Some people have not had any interpreter support because they have not been able to do that. I have seen hardly any changes.

Q206 Sheila Gilmore: The purpose, obviously, of a review is to review and presumably consult. Are you aware of any process ongoing?

Dr Dickinson: There are different organisations. There is an organisation called DeafATW. I believe they are having discussions. We have produced a report, which we will provide to Access to Work. There does not seem to be any great deal of meaningful consultation going on either, as far as I am aware, with some of the deaf organisations or with the interpreter professional bodies.

Q207 Sheila Gilmore: We have had evidence—we received a lot of written evidence on this issue—that suggested that interpreters have actually been experiencing quite considerable delays in the payment of invoices. DWP said that there are no known delays. Have you any light to shed on that at all?

Dr Dickinson: I am quite surprised really by the DWP response, given the fact that they are clearly undergoing a massive restructure—the fact that, when we phone up, advisers are very explicit about the fact that they are suffering from job cuts and restaffing and reorganisation. I think that is quite a strange response by the DWP. The big problem is not, perhaps, delays in remunerating interpreters; it is the fact that interpreters are not being paid at all. There is a huge problem where deaf people have their awards stopped all of a sudden. They are not told of that with a review. They have booked interpreters in good faith, and interpreters have delivered the service in good faith, only to find out that the award has been

revised or stopped. Then people are owed, to my knowledge, £15,000—£7,000 for individual interpreters—because they have not had the money paid to them.

Q208 Sheila Gilmore: So whose responsibility do you think it is to inform the interpreter that the award is being reviewed or has been disallowed?

Dr Dickinson: It is quite a complex issue because in some instances the deaf person and the interpreter have an agreement; there is no real contract going on there. In other instances the contract, if you like, is with the employer, who is then reimbursed by Access to Work. So there are no real clear contracting agreements for interpreting deaf people.

The other problem is that deaf people do not really know what their award is or when it is running out. I have worked with a colleague who suddenly received a letter that said, "Your budget has run out; you cannot employ any more interpreters." That was the first she knew that there was a limit on the budget. She thought she had a set number of hours, and this was how much she could pay her interpreters, and until it was reviewed she thought that was the arrangement, so that is how she booked her interpreters. If deaf people or disabled people are not aware of what their award is, then I am not sure how they can then enter into a contract to book their support. It is a huge problem.

Q209 Sheila Gilmore: Is there any direct access for the interpreters with DWP to check what the position is?

Dr Dickinson: We can contact to ask about invoices that have been submitted, but that is just about the extent of the information we can have. I am not sure it would be appropriate for a deaf person's award to be shared with us, because that is a data protection issue. There does need to be greater transparency throughout the entire system.

Q210 Sheila Gilmore: What is your view, in general terms, about this question of capping the hourly rate? Do you think it is reasonable to cap the hourly rate for interpreters?

Dr Dickinson: I think it is reasonable that Access to Work has guidance as to reasonable rates. Obviously it is coming from a public budget; it is public funds—we are aware of that. Any capping or any limiting of the amount that can be paid needs to be done in consultation with interpreting bodies. We can have a lot of input into what is a reasonable fee, and it can vary widely from national needs to regional needs, or depending on the deaf person's job. Deaf people work in every field of employment imaginable. That has to be thrashed out in consultation with interpreter organisations.

Q211 Sheila Gilmore: So you do not have a specific view on what might be an acceptable hourly rate?

Dr Dickinson: I do not think it is an answer I could give today, but it is something that a number of interpreter organisations are working on. We would be willing to share that information.

Q212 Sheila Gilmore: Some of the information that we have been given, in some of the submissions that we have had, is that the DWP have been calculating awards on the basis that the average annual income for sign language interpreters was between £30,000 and £35,000. Is that right?

Dr Dickinson: I do not think it is. We have to acknowledge that the vast majority of sign language interpreters work as self-employed. They work on a freelance basis. As self-employed people they have all the costs that come with running your own business or being self-employed. You have to differentiate between a salary of £30,000 and an income of £30,000. Out of an income a self-employed person would have to take out their training, their tax, their holiday, their sick pay: all the benefits that a salaried employee would get. I think it is quite a hard comparison to make.

Q213 Teresa Pearce: Dr Dickinson, you mentioned there that many sign language interpreters are self-employed. We have heard evidence that many people are employed through agencies. Is that your experience? Is that common?

Dr Dickinson: It is quite complicated. Sorry, it is hard to answer. Just to give you a little bit of an overview, traditionally, years ago, interpreters would have been employed by specialist deaf-related agencies. Some of those agencies still exist. There are specialist interpreting agencies out there. More recently, under the contracting arrangements, large spoken language interpreting agencies have won contracts, for example with the MOJ, and then they subcontract to interpreters who are working on a freelance basis.

Q214 Teresa Pearce: So it is not agency workers as we would understand normally in just general employment agencies; it is a specialist.

Dr Dickinson: There are specialist sign language interpreting agencies, but more recently the shift has been that the spoken language agencies bid for the work and have BSL interpreting as a small part of that. The problem is that they submit a bid on a very low amount and then cannot source interpreters at that rate.

Q215 Teresa Pearce: You are saying they bid on low amounts, so does it add to the cost of interpreters or not, or does it actually undercut them? Or is that just too simplistic a question?

Dr Dickinson: Yes. Obviously agencies have costs. There is a lack of transparency as to what the add-on costs are on top of the interpreter's fee. There is a real drive at the moment to undercut interpreting costs.

Q216 Teresa Pearce: It sounds similar to the way some of the Work Programme worked, where you had big organisations in the Work Programme and then charities or the third sector underneath delivering the service. Would it be feasible for the DWP to contract directly with sign language interpreters, rather than through agencies? Would that be for the DWP to do that—to have a bank?

Dr Dickinson: I have to say I lack confidence in the DWP's ability to do that, given their management of some other aspects of the scheme. It would be complicated. The important thing is for the deaf person to have a variety of options. Maybe the DWP could say, "We have a bank of staff: you could go this way; you could go through an agency; or contact interpreters directly yourself," but they should have that choice rather than one set route.

Q217 Teresa Pearce: Are there alternatives to face-to-face sign language interpretation, such as video relay services?

Dr Dickinson: There are.

Q218 Teresa Pearce: Would they be more cost effective? Could you explain how they work?

Dr Dickinson: Okay. VRS, video relay services, is basically where the deaf person and the hearing person are in a different place, and the call goes through the interpreter, who is in a remote setting. It is a bit like an interpreted telephone call. Does that make sense?

Q219 Teresa Pearce: Yes. So it would be similar to when we have people come and present to us who speak in a different language. We have had representations from other Governments, have we not, at times, and we have an interpreter in our ear.

Dr Dickinson: For example a deaf employee might want to make a call to ascertain a meeting they have got the next day. They make the call to the interpreter, in a remote setting, who then phones the hearing person. So the deaf person can see the interpreter, working in BSL, and the interpreter is speaking to a hearing person and then relaying that.

Q220 Teresa Pearce: So there are situations where that would be an effective means, but would it always be an effective means?

Dr Dickinson: No. VRS undoubtedly can transform a deaf person's working life, and has many uses. It is not a panacea to replace face-to-face interpreting.

Q221 Teresa Pearce: It could possibly be less expensive, but it would not fit people's needs.

Dr Dickinson: I think the cost would need to be looked at. I do not do a lot of VRS; I do a lot of Access to Work interpreting, but as far as I know there are packages available. One really useful use of VRS would be for Access to Work to use it, so that the deaf person does not have to make a telephone call for which they have to have an interpreter with them. If Access to Work had a contract with a VRS supplier where the deaf person could go through that service to make their queries, that would transform the process of trying to get through to Access to Work. It is not suitable for things like a meeting like today. You could not do that through VRS. It has its uses and its positives, and it has its drawbacks.

Q222 Teresa Pearce: It is an additional facility that can be useful at times, but it is not a cure-all.

Dr Dickinson: It can complement face-to-face interpreting.

Q223 Teresa Pearce: But as you said earlier, it is about choice.

Dr Dickinson: Yes, about having options.

Q224 Teresa Pearce: There is clearly a high demand for sign language interpreters and it is clearly a very skilled job. However, there seem to be relatively few. The few that I have met are people who seem to have gone into it by accident in a way. Something has happened in their life where they have decided that this is a skill they want to learn. How do we attract more people to enter the profession? Is there a career path for this?

Dr Dickinson: There are a number of elements to that. At the heart of it is the recognition that British Sign Language is a full and proper language. It is not just a case of people waving their hands about a bit. That brings into question things like, for example, having GCSEs or whatever the qualifications are now. They were perhaps GCSEs in my day.

Teresa Pearce: They were O-levels in my day.

Dr Dickinson: So children could learn British Sign Language at school, as well as French, German etc., and then have that as an option to go into interpreting. It is about valuing the status and professionalism of interpreters. It is not all about the money. It is quite uncomfortable sitting here today talking about money; it is about the fact that we study long and hard to achieve professional standards. There are colleagues in the room today who are providing really important access for deaf colleagues. It is about valuing that status of interpreters so that people want to go into the profession and know that they will be remunerated adequately.

Q225 Teresa Pearce: In your experience, how do people normally enter into this? Do they stumble across it, or is there a career path?

Dr Dickinson: I think more recently there has been a clearer career path. Unless you have come from a deaf family, it is still a case very much of people meeting deaf people, just thinking, "Wow, that is an amazing language; I want to be able to communicate," and then having that interest to then take it up. Many people take it up through night school, and there are universities offering interpreting qualifications.

Q226 Teresa Pearce: So it is recognition as a language, as others could be, for a career step forward.

Dr Dickinson: As a language, as a career option, yes.

Q227 Glenda Jackson: I do not know if this is actually appropriate to this, and this is anecdotal. To go back to your reference to VRS, many of my constituents complain,

justifiably, that they may see or read about a potential job but when they wish to raise that at their local Jobcentre Plus there is no-one there to communicate with. Would VRS in Jobcentres tackle that problem?

Dr Dickinson: It would be a step in the right direction, definitely. The whole jobseeking process is virtually inaccessible for deaf people. Jobcentres refuse, quite often, to book interpreters for somebody to go and meet the disability employment adviser, which is crazy.

Glenda Jackson: Bizarre.

Dr Dickinson: Yes. VRS definitely has many options and could widen up access for deaf people.

Q228 Glenda Jackson: To go back to the question of encouraging people to enter the field, there are opportunities—we all demand more signing and see it more at public meetings, performances or things of that nature. It goes back to the point that Julie was making earlier, and that is that society as a whole does not acknowledge what the barriers are. They are perfectly prepared to acknowledge the disability, but they are not prepared to acknowledge the minute, very detailed barriers that are in the way of people becoming employed. It is a responsibility for all of us, isn't it, to push that more?

Dr Dickinson: The thing that really resonated with me was that I did a job with a deaf colleague, and at the end of that she had to make a phone call to initiate an Access to Work application. I was not booked to do that but I said I would do that, because I had a few minutes before going on to my next job. We made three phone calls. Each time it said, "You have not been successful in contacting the Department." Then I had to go and leave that person to try to find another way of contacting them. If VRS was available, they might have been able to do that through their smartphone, through an interpreter, and have made instant contact. It is about widening awareness and widening access.

Q229 Chair: That was going to be my question. We have heard a lot that things seem to have gone, administratively, downhill since the introduction of the contact centre. At the last evidence session we had a blind person saying that the Department kept insisting on communicating with her by letter. A deaf person has said that they kept insisting that they communicate by call centre. How does someone who is making an application for Access to Work— someone who has not got it in place and does not have access to an interpreter—make that initial claim?

Dr Dickinson: I understand that email is a possibility to initiate, but the initial barrier is there that you have to perhaps ask your employer to make the phone call on your behalf. As Julie said earlier, you are going through somebody who perhaps you cannot communicate with. Your employer or colleague probably cannot sign, so how accurate is the information going to be? You might be discussing very personal issues. It is a barrier before people can even get the benefit in place.

Q230 Chair: The other thing that has been made very clear in a lot of the evidence that we have received from people who are hearing-impaired is that for those who sign all the time, BSL is their first language. English is their second language. Therefore communicating in any written form is not necessarily acceptable as an alternative. In those cases, what happens?

Dr Dickinson: Again, it comes down to deaf people having to rely on colleagues to make calls for them. If you have got an interpreter with you who can translate the emails and letters, it makes life easier. However, for many deaf people there is that real barrier, again, around written English.

Q231 Chair: If the DWP's Access to Work section fails to understand the needs of BSL users in order to apply, is it any wonder that they have got it wrong when they came to change the guidance around 30 hours?

Dr Dickinson: No.

Q232 Chair: The fundamental understanding of the needs of someone who uses BSL as their main means of communication is simply not there in the Department.

Dr Dickinson: No. The barriers are there all the way through the process.

Q233 Chair: Some of that could be solved by introducing the VRS system. It would not be an answer for everyone, but it would certainly help.

Dr Dickinson: It opens up access. It comes back to what we said earlier. Julie, you said about having advisers who have an understanding and empathy of what a disabled person goes through. Having deaf advisers on the Access to Work team that could go out and do face-to-face workplace assessments would be an immense step.

Chair: Julie?

Julie Fernandez: As a disabled person who lives with brittle bone disease, I have had 100 fractures and approximately 70 operations. Just my disability alone, and getting through my day, popping painkillers, is exhausting, as is just stepping outside my front door and dealing with society and its general attitude, or just going shopping, being ignored, and people's attitudes toward me, let alone dealing with DWP and Access to Work, where, as you have said, a Jobcentre is refusing to pay for a sign language interpreter. We have people from all these different countries coming and living in England and they get all these language interpreters, and that is fine. Why are we fighting? It is tough enough to get through my day. I go to bed at 8.30 at night in order that I have enough energy to be able to go to work the next day. I do not have a social life because I choose to work. That is enough. Have a little bit of grace and understanding towards the needs of disabled people, please.

Chair: Our next set of questions is on self-employment. Some of these maybe have already been answered. I will leave it up to Debbie and Glenda to work out what bits of our brief we have not covered.

Q234 Debbie Abrahams: Julie, your earlier evidence was very powerful and I found it quite shocking what you said in terms of—I think I have got this right—being told, "You cost us too much money."

Julie Fernandez: Yes.

Debbie Abrahams: I think that is a disgrace. I really do.

Julie Fernandez: So do I.

Q235 Debbie Abrahams: Moving on though, you said that the particular problems around Access to Work have really been over the last few months. I know you have got different roles, in terms of your acting role and your small business role. When it worked well, how did it work?

Julie Fernandez: When it worked well with me with Access to Work was when I was in regular contact with one caseworker: one or two people that knew about my working situation and knew about my disability. I could talk to them about how my disability was shifting and changing. I also have a wonderful agency that I put my contract through. I do not have the time or the actual knowledge and ability to be able to run PAYE and everything involved in employing a full-time support worker. I use a wonderful charitable agency called Ellingham, which is based in Walthamstow, that does that all for me. That works brilliantly, because I deal with Ellingham and I fill out all my forms for how many hours each support worker has done. I log everything with Ellingham and then Ellingham do all the paperwork for me. That has worked for me for many years very well.

Now they are saying to me they want to turn it into a salaried position, which I am really uncomfortable with, because I do not have the knowledge and expertise in doing that. That is why I use an agency. I work six days a week, so I have one support worker that does Monday, Tuesday and then another support worker that does Wednesday to Saturday. Sometimes I work seven days a week, because if a media job comes or something happens, I need to be there. My agent calls, I need to get in the car and I need to go. It works very well for me. Also, the two cover for each other. They both have children. They both work through the agency for me. If one has a situation with her daughter, the other one can cover and they swap days. It works beautifully and I find that comfortable. Actually it works nicely having two support workers, because I do not spend six days a week with my husband. It is a very intimate relationship that one has with one's support worker because they go everywhere with me.

Q236 Debbie Abrahams: How many hours approximately would you have that support?

Julie Fernandez: I have been getting, through Access to Work, for many years 45 to 60 hours a week. However, I used to claim the upper end, the 55 to 60, in the days when *The Office* was out and when my media career was at its highest. More recently, I have been averaging 42 hours a week. Access to Work is saying that is too many hours—that I should not be working that many hours—but unfortunately that is just the way my career is. I want to work. I have to say, in living with daily pain and popping painkillers throughout the day, one thing that I find beneficial in working is that when I am, say, in my shop or I am filming,

whatever it is, I am dealing with a customer. What I am going through is irrelevant, so I have to shut that away and deal with my working situation. I find working quite beneficial in pain management and dealing with my disability. If I was at home every day all day, not working, all I would be thinking about is how unwell I felt. When I work, that is secondary: I have to do my job and I have to do it well.

Q237 Debbie Abrahams: Could you share with us how much the support worker costs?

Julie Fernandez: Yes. Through the agency, Ellingham, I get £18.50 an hour. £9.50 an hour goes to the support worker for their wages. Then the rest is broken down into employer's national insurance contributions; contributions to pension; 5.6 working weeks' paid holiday for the support worker; and sick pay. Also, when the support worker goes on holiday they have to get what they get for being on holiday, but then I need another support worker to cover for when the original support worker is on holiday. That is also built into the £18.50. Plus I think it is £2 or £3 that Ellingham, the agency, takes to administer all of the paperwork that is created through Access to Work.

Q238 Debbie Abrahams: Can we move on now? The problems that you have experienced over the last few months have been when your review has come up. I understand that you have been below the income threshold that DWP have set.

Julie Fernandez: Yes.

Debbie Abrahams: That has been the particular issue. If you do not mind me quoting, it is because you earned less than the national minimum wage for the hours that you worked. That is the threshold that they have set. Is that right?

Julie Fernandez: Yes.

Q239 Debbie Abrahams: Could you tell me what period that they covered that for?

Julie Fernandez: The first caseworker asked me for an annual set of accounts. I sent that in. I had run at a loss on the last financial year. He then said to me, "Okay, we will give you three months' temporary funding, and in that three months we want a break-down diary of everything your support worker does every day and three months of finances, income and expenditure, to see whether you are earning minimum wage." This is the thing about a media career. I make documentaries on a yearly basis for Radio 4. I only get about £1,100 to make a documentary, but it will take me three or four months to make.

Debbie Abrahams: You are dealing with fluctuations.

Julie Fernandez: It is a huge fluctuation. It so happened, luckily, that during that three-month period I landed a job on *Doctors* and landed an advert for Scope, which is going across the cinemas. That was really great money. Where I had earned very little for the previous three months, all of a sudden there is a large amount of money coming in. It fluctuates. That is all my self-employed work.

I also must express that I have been working in the media industry as an actress and a presenter and a disability rights trainer for 20 years. In that 20 years, and even still recently, I get asked to do jobs either for free or at a heavily reduced rate to support the cause of disability equality. That in itself is a non-starter, because how can it be equal if you are asking me to do it for free? I have often had to do things at a reduced rate in order to accept the job. It is awfully difficult within the media industry, in that if you think about television you could probably count on one hand how many disabled actors and presenters there are in the mainstream. It is up and down, but that does not mean I do not work. I still do an awful lot.

From a PAYE point of view, my shop opened August 2011. On our second birthday we had to move premises. We had to double in size. So we moved from 750 square feet to 1,400 square feet. For various different reasons we had to do that. For the last year my business partner and I, who own the business 50/50, took very little wage. We took enough for petrol to get in and out every day, because we had doubled in size so we had to double the amount of stock. If you do not have the stock on the shelves, customers will not come. We employ 11 people, so paying the bank loan back and paying the employees and keeping the stock on the shelves at this point is taking a priority, as we are only three years old and growing and doing very well, over me earning a wage. I will do eventually, but that takes time.

Q240 Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. What you are describing is typical of anybody who is self-employed and starting a business. Currently, you probably know that there is a 40-year peak in the number of self-employed people. Of the 1.1 million new jobs that have been created, nearly three quarters of those are self-employed. That is since 2010. Again, we know that the income for self-employed people is much lower than average. I think it is about £10,000 lower compared with the average. It has reduced by nearly a quarter since 2009. So all the pressures you are describing are experienced by self-employed people. My follow-up question is, do you know whether your circumstances as a disabled self-employed person are typical of other people who are disabled and self-employed?

Julie Fernandez: I can talk about the media industry, in that I know quite a few disabled actors who, like me, over the years have been expected to do a lot of things for free or for a seriously reduced rate. That is really quite sad and disappointing. Yes, I think it does happen to quite a lot of disabled people within that genre of self-employed. I do not know about outside the media industry. You would have to speak to other people about that.

Q241 Debbie Abrahams: Are you in touch with, for example, the Federation of Small Businesses?

Julie Fernandez: Yes, my shop is a member, absolutely.

Q242 Debbie Abrahams: There are particular issues of self-employed people. It seems to be a double whammy for self-employed people who have a disability, in terms of the barriers they are facing.

Julie Fernandez: The other thing is that if they take the funding away from me, or seriously reduce it, my shop will have to shut. It cannot cope if I am not there regularly. That means 11 people will become unemployed, so there will be 11 less tax-paying citizens, and my shop pays thousands into VAT. It is illogical.

Susan Scott-Parker: I just wanted to go back to whether it is guidance or a rule that says you have to, as an entrepreneur, be bringing in the minimum wage. Apparently the median income for people the Government regards as genuinely self-employed is £204 a week. This means a lot of people the Government regards as genuinely self-employed are not making minimum wage. I would like the policy, in terms of Access to Work, to reflect the Government's own definition of who qualifies as a genuinely self-employed individual in this country. If you qualify as self-employed and you are only making £100 a week, that should apply to people on Access to Work.

Q243 Glenda Jackson: I rather think you have answered the question, inasmuch as my question was: should there be some requirements, as far as the self-employed are concerned, to have a direct link to being able to access Access to Work? I think you have answered it, Susan. I do not know, Julie, if you would disagree with that. If it is going to be a requirement for the self-employed that it is the national minimum wage, then the DWP has to be honest about what national minimum wage is.

Susan Scott-Parker: I kind of meant that if you have to prove that you are making a certain level of income in order to be genuinely self-employed in the eyes of DWP, it should be the same rules as applied to those regarded as self-employed by the tax department. Also, during the start-up phase you cannot predict what kind of income you are going to have in three to five years. Perhaps Access to Work could develop a particular area of expertise, bringing some entrepreneurs together as an advisory group to help them to think this through. So many disabled people are compelled to be self-employed, as you have heard, because those are the only options open to them. Also, some of them are just born entrepreneurs, and so by investing at the beginning they can build their careers.

I was talking to a blind colleague the other day, who when he started out in 2002 had an income of £15,000 for the whole year. Then he had to pay all of his expenses and so on out of it. He is very clear that had he not had Access to Work he would now be unemployed. He has now got a business with a turnover of £100,000. He is paying corporation tax and personal income tax. His support workers are also paying income tax. Yet the Access to Work provision in all of that has been crucial to the success of his business. His income fluctuates with time and so on.

Q244 Glenda Jackson: How did he manage it?

Susan Scott-Parker: The point is, he got Access to Work. He is saying that if he had not had Access to Work trust him and support him at the beginning as he was in business start-up—

Glenda Jackson: So you are saying it was in a period of time before the present requirements regarding Access to Work.

Susan Scott-Parker: Absolutely right.

Q245 Glenda Jackson: So in effect the changes that have been brought in are actively working against what we understood—

Susan Scott-Parker: The best practice they used to have, absolutely.

Julie Fernandez: Ultimately, in my profession, the media profession, as I mentioned earlier, I earned very little for a couple of months and then all of a sudden I earned a lot in one month. They have to take that into account too. That does not mean in the lean periods I am sitting at home doing nothing. There are lots of things that you can be doing to work. It just means that you have not got a large pot. I would like to say I am an A-lister, but I am not and that is just the way it is.

Gareth Parry: We support several hundred people each year with disabilities set up as self-employed. A lot of them make that decision because of their fluctuating conditions with their disability. Working on a self-employed basis gives them a lot more flexibility in how they lead their working lives and their personal lives. Our experience of Access to Work is that it has been critical in just helping take away some of those initial barriers. Once people are up and running—a very general statement—then they are able to get on with their lives. They are able to manage their finances. Particularly in that start-up phase, support from Access to Work, whether it is buying some equipment for somebody who is visually impaired or whatever it is, is an absolute deal breaker for lots of people who aspire to be self-employed.

Q246 Glenda Jackson: Would that evidence still be on the record, as far as the Department is concerned? We are talking about what was before, and what now actively seems to be working against people with disabilities setting up their own businesses and exercising their entrepreneurial gift. Is there, do you think, any record of how it was before that proves the point you are making?

Gareth Parry: No. My contribution there, if I am honest with you, is based on experience. I am not close enough to some of the detail of the recent changes to know that. What I do see, as an organisation, is our number of people we are supporting who are choosing to go self-employed has reduced. Whether that is coincidence or whether that is correlated to some of those changes, I confess I do not have any evidence for.

Glenda Jackson: What about you, Susan? Do you think there is any?

Susan Scott-Parker: We are supported by a network of quite extraordinary disabled entrepreneurs. I could certainly ask them to go back and just give us some examples of the kind of support they used to get.

Glenda Jackson: It seems to me what you are saying, essentially, is that in the past that support was almost automatically there as far as Access to Work is concerned.

Susan Scott-Parker: Indeed.

Glenda Jackson: It was extremely successful. Now the system has been changed and it is actively working against that success. It would just be nice if we had some kind of numbers, because you know how Governments love numbers.

Chair: I think part of the problem is that we are talking about in the last six months, and often statistics take a wee while to come through. Certainly the evidence we have received would suggest there is a problem around self-employed.

Glenda Jackson: But I was arguing not just for the last six months but through using the example of how it worked before the changes came in.

Chair: That leads us on to the whole issue of resources and extra resources, our last section. Nigel, who has been patiently waiting, has now got the questions.

Q247 Nigel Mills: Gareth, I think Liz Sayce envisaged that the changes to the Remploy factories etc. would effectively release more money for Access to Work. I am not sure we have quite seen that happen yet. Can you perhaps give us an update on where Remploy see that and what the status is?

Gareth Parry: Remploy used to receive annual grant-in-aid funding that would support the factory network and the employment services business. In round numbers—these are approximations—around about £80 million to £85 million used to go into the business to support the factory infrastructure. Approximately £30 million would come into the business to support the employment services part of the business. All that is left of Remploy is pretty much employment services, so the funding for employment services remains with us, that £30 million. As we ourselves exit Government ownership in the next six months, that £30 million effectively will underpin the commercial contract that will go with Remploy. The money that was previously invested in Remploy factories clearly is now back with the Department. I am not in a position to be able to say what has happened to that, if I am honest.

Q248 Nigel Mills: So there is no ongoing funding of the reorganisation of the factories? That is all finished now?

Gareth Parry: There are some legacy issues to be tidied up, but I think they will all be pretty much tidied up in the next six months. The ongoing costs are relatively modest. Basically the money that was required to be put in the Remploy factories has been released.

Q249 Nigel Mills: Are you optimistic that your April 2015 commercialisation, or whatever you call it, is on track to happen in six months?

Gareth Parry: Yes, absolutely.

Q250 Nigel Mills: But you will then still receive the £30 million-odd a year to fund the work you do.

Gareth Parry: It will be delivered differently. It will no longer be a grant-in-aid contract. It will be a commercial contract in the same way that the rest of the Work Choice marketplace operates. It will be a commercial contract. We have to deliver to performance levels and we will be paid on outcomes that we achieve.

Q251 Nigel Mills: That is not going to be a tendered contract; that is the one you are in.

Gareth Parry: It is tendered in the sense that the investment opportunity for Remploy is in itself a competitive process. That is the process we are going through at the moment. I can provide more details of the process outside the meeting, if that is alright.

Nigel Mills: Okay, it is just to understand. We have not seen the £80 million that was going into your factories reappearing anywhere yet, I do not think.

Gareth Parry: I think that is a question for DWP and Treasury.

Q252 Nigel Mills: I suspect if I asked you if you all thought more money for Access to Work would be a good idea, you would all say yes. Is anybody not going to say yes to that? If you could make a change to the Access to Work system, other than more money, what would it be?

Julie Fernandez: I would like to see more disabled people become caseworkers, and more involved directly in supporting disabled people who are in the system and who would like to come into the system.

Dr Dickinson: I agree with Julie. I would also say more collaboration and more consultation. ASLI have previously offered to give interpreter awareness sessions to Access to Work teams, and we were told that they could not accept that because it was free. They would have to put it out to tender. It is about having an awareness and an understanding by the advisers. That would start a lot of the process going.

Gareth Parry: There are no arguments around better specialisms in assessment of support needs. I think much more flexibility in how money is spent rather than working to rigid rules, and saying that short, medium and long-term solutions might be more creative. For example, rather than just going on and investing time and time again in job coaches for certain people with certain disabilities, why not spend that money on building capability with employers so they can do more actual support in the workplace in the medium term? There are lots more flexibilities in the way that money could be spent, without ever taking away fundamental dependencies that people have got that require genuine support. It could be much more creatively spent as well.

Lee Reed: As I said earlier, it is about better engagement with the employers and getting them involved in the negotiations and the agreements earlier. That is partly because, as the employer, we might be in a better position to understand the implications and the application of those adjustments than the employee, who would have a less wide view, if you like, of the organisation as a whole.

Susan Scott-Parker: I would like to shift the assumption that it is a tailored little budget. We are spending something like £10,000 in benefits for every 92p we spend on Access to Work. I would like it to be a growth area where all the initials I can never remember, Anne, mean that the money we save as substantial numbers comes back in to Access to Work. Therefore, it becomes a growth intervention in the labour market that liberates many more people into work.

Nigel Mills: None of you said, "Scrap the concept," to my surprise.

Chair: I am not quite sure whether it can work in the same way, because it is not a benefit, so it is not in the AME or the DEL budget, whichever one it is.

Q253 Can I thank you very much? That is almost two hours of a session, so thank you very much. We have covered a huge amount this morning. I think if anything, this session illustrates that one size cannot fit all, because of the variety of disabilities and the different needs that people have. I think that is maybe one of the criticisms that you have of Access to Work: that it has become too rigid, whereas originally it was much more flexible and did look at those individual needs. Hopefully that will give us a lot of evidence. Our next session is with the Minister. Originally we thought it was Esther McVey, but it is now Mark Harper. He has taken over that role. The evidence that you have given us today will be very useful in how we frame our questions to him, and indeed in helping us write a report. Thanks very much for coming along this morning.