

Written evidence from Sense (DYE0064)

I am writing to give more detailed information on some of the points I raised during the session.

Assistive technology in jobcentres

During the session, I highlighted the fact that none of the computers for ‘customer use’ in any of the jobcentres in Great Britain are equipped with specialist assistive technology.

The Department for Work and Pensions have explicitly confirmed to us in correspondence that this is the case. The Department’s [answers](#) to a series of written questions have similarly confirmed both that computers in jobcentres have only inbuilt screen readers and screen magnification software, and that there are no refreshable Braille displays in jobcentres. [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

While inbuilt screen readers and magnification software may meet the needs of some disabled people, it is more usual for blind and deafblind people to use specialist screen readers or specialist magnification software. It is worth noting that the Access to Work advisers commonly recommend specialist screen readers and screen magnification software to blind and deafblind employees.

It is worth emphasising that this specialist software can be very expensive for an individual disabled person to buy, with one common screen reader, [Jaws](#), costing around £880. Clearly, this would be a large cost for anyone, let alone an unemployed disabled person whose only income comes from benefits.

Given the cost, many disabled people do not own the specialist assistive technology themselves. While they may have previously accessed this technology at school or through Access to Work, they would lose access to this after leaving education or employment. This can leave them without the technology they need to look for jobs and fill in application forms.

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-02/183305>

² <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-17/185497>

³ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-16/185198>

⁴ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-05-16/185456>

That is why it is particularly important that disabled jobseekers can use computers in jobcentres. But the lack of specialist assistive technology in jobcentres means that this is not always the case.

Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund

As I mentioned during the evidence session, Sense is calling for the Government to introduce a £5 million Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund. This would be enough to equip every jobcentre in Great Britain with both specialist assistive hardware such as refreshable and specialist software including screen readers.

We produced this recommendation after working with our specialist employment service to develop a list of the most common forms of specialist assistive technology. Our estimate is based on the retail prices of these pieces of technology in 2023 and on the number of jobcentres in England, Scotland and Wales at the time, which was 639.⁵ We have assumed that the Government would pay the full retail prices for these pieces of equipment, but it is likely that they would receive a discount, given the size of the order.

The £5 million figure also includes a £1.5 million support fund for jobcentres to access if they need any additional pieces of assistive technology.

I have attached a detailed breakdown of how we arrived at this estimate in Annexe. Please note that we have revised up the cost of providing some of the specific pieces of equipment since submitting our written evidence.

Training for jobcentre staff

During the session, the Committee asked about the training received by jobcentre staff. I mentioned during the session that our research had found that there were significant gaps in the training for both Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers.

⁵ Our recommendation only covers England, Scotland and Wales as employment is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland.

Training for Work Coaches

As you will remember, we worked with you in 2023 to [table written questions](#) on the topics covered in the initial training for Work Coaches. The Department for Work and Pensions released the Training Index for Work Coaches, which you can [access here](#).

While the Training Index covers children, students and carers as distinct groups, it makes no reference to disabled people. It is possible that disability is covered under 'Complex Needs Part 1' and 'Complex Needs Part 2'. This does not, however, leave us confident that disability is covered in any depth at all during the training.

The Department's response to written questions also suggest that Work Coaches do not receive disability equality training focused on jobseekers, instead receiving only training in '[Becoming Disability Confident](#)', which is focused on colleagues rather than jobseekers.

In response to other [written questions](#), the Department have emphasised the soft skills that work coaches receive, which they say enables them 'to treat claimants as individuals'.⁶ But while important, this is no substitute for an understanding both of the barriers faced by disabled people in the labour market and the support that is available to help them overcome those barriers.

Based on our experience of providing specialist employment support, Sense does not believe that it is possible to provide the right support to disabled people without having first received training in the barriers faced by disabled jobseekers and employers.

While Work Coaches can refer jobseekers to Disability Employment Advisers, who do receive specialist training in disability employment, the Work Coach remains the jobseeker's primary contact in the jobcentre. It is therefore vital that they have received specific training in how to support disabled claimants, including jobseekers with complex disabilities.

The impact of this lack of training in the barriers faced by disabled people is clear from our research. One person with complex disabilities told us that their last meeting with a Work Coach was a 'disgrace', as 'she didn't listen to what I wanted and told me instead to go back in

⁶ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-09-06/48250>

education, which I didn't want to do." Fortunately, as a result of Sense's support, they have now entered work.⁷

Another jobseeker who is deafblind told us that they had eventually disengaged from the jobcentre, coming to the conclusion that: "No one wants to listen to the fact I want a job; I'd just have to accept that."⁸

These are not isolated examples. Our research has found that over half of jobseekers with complex disabilities did not feel supported by Work Coaches.⁹

Training for Disability Employment Advisers

Through questions tabled on our behalf by Barry Sheerman MP, we have also been able to access the syllabus for the initial training for Disability Employment Advisers, which you can access here.

As far as we can see, the training for Disability Employment Advisers does not cover assistive technology. (Indeed, we met Disability Employment Advisers during our research who did not know what a screen reader was.)

When we have raised this with the Department, they have pointed to the fact that all Disability Employment Advisers undergo the training to be a Work Coach, which includes a module on 'Assisted digital'. But this module seems to cover digital exclusion rather than assistive technology.

Given that many disabled people need to use assistive technology to enable them to work, it is vital that Disability Employment Advisers understand what assistive technology is and how it can support disabled employees and jobseekers.

While we have come across positive examples of disabled people receiving high-quality support from Disability Employment Advisers, this experience is not universal, with Sense's

⁷ <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

⁸ <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

⁹ <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

polling finding that **46% of jobseekers with complex disabilities** saying that they do not feel supported by their Disability Employment Advisers. ¹⁰

It is worth noting that, as a result of Sense meeting last year with the then Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Tom Pursglove MP, we have begun engaging constructively with the team responsible for setting the training for Disability Employment Advisers. We have not, however, been able to engage with the Department around training for Work Coaches.

Proportion of Disability Employment Advisers who are themselves disabled

During the evidence session, David Linden MP asked what proportion of Disability Employment Advisers are themselves disabled.

Through written questions tabled on our behalf, we have found that, as of June 2022, there were **298 (FTE) Disability Employment Advisers who described themselves as disabled**. Given that there were **941 FTE Disability Employment Advisers in total in July 2022**, a rough calculation would suggest that about 30% of Disability Employment Advisers are disabled, compared to 24% of the general population. ¹¹

¹⁰ <https://www.sense.org.uk/information-and-advice/for-professionals/policy-public-affairs-and-research/employment-support-for-people-with-complex-disabilities/full-research-report/#key-findings>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2021-to-2022>

Annexe: Breakdown of the £5 million Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund

Funding for specific equipment and software (£3.5 million)

1. Specialist screen reader and screen magnification software

Many blind and deafblind people use software that reads out the text on a screen, called screen readers. Blind people with low vision may instead use specialist magnification software, which, unlike built-in screen magnification, is designed to prevent pixelation at high magnification.

We have assumed that each jobcentre would need three professional licences for [Fusion](#), which is a popular programme combining both a screen reader and specialist screen magnification software.

It would cost £5,400 to provide a jobcentre with three licences for Fusion.

2. Specialist dictation software

Some disabled people who are not able to use a keyboard need specialist dictation software, such as [Nuance Dragon](#), to write and edit documents.

It would cost £2,040 to provide a jobcentre with 3 professional licences for Nuance Dragon.

3. Braille note taker and reader

Some blind and deafblind people use Braille note takers and readers both to read what is on a screen and to control a computer. As they are less popular than the other forms of assistive technology we've mentioned, we have assumed that a jobcentre would only need one.

We have used the [RNIB's Orbit Reader 20](#) in our calculations.

It would cost £600 to provide a jobcentre with a single Orbit Reader 20.

4. Headphones (£90 for 3)

Headphones are required to use screen readers. During our research, we used the [Logitech G231 Prodigy](#) as an example, as this model has been recommended by the National Deaf

Children's Society. While this model seems to have been discontinued, it is still possible to get a good quality set of headphones with a microphone for £30.

It would cost £90 to provide a jobcentre with three sets of good quality headphones.

Buying this list of specific equipment would work out at £8130 per jobcentre, or £3.5 million for every jobcentre in the country. The remaining £1.5 million of the Jobcentre Assistive Technology Fund would be available on a grant basis to any jobcentre wishing to purchase additional assistive technology used by disabled claimants at the jobcentre.

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