

Department for Work and Pensions

Research Report No 619

Evaluation of Access to Work: Core Evaluation

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A report of research carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions

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Summary

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake a qualitative evaluation of Access to Work (AtW) provision. AtW is designed for people with long-term health conditions or impairments who need extra practical support to gain or remain in work. The types of support provided by AtW includes: special aids and equipment; adaptations to premises and equipment; travel to work grants; support workers; and, communicator support at interview. Any help received from AtW is in addition to the reasonable adjustments made by employers in accordance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

This evaluation has three elements:

- an overall evaluation of AtW, the core evaluation;
- an exploration of the effects of the decision that ministerial government departments (MGD) should pay for their own in-work support, previously paid for by AtW;
- a consideration of employment support (including AtW provision) within Individual Budget pilot (IBP) areas.

This report presents the findings from the core evaluation of AtW. Reports on the MGD and IBP strands have been published separately¹.

The main aims of the core evaluation have been to:

- examine customers' experience of AtW;
- examine the level of service customers are receiving;
- explore how AtW is being administered, and how the balance between providing appropriate support, i.e. what customers need, and getting value for money is achieved;

¹ Aston. J. (2009). Evaluation of Access to Work: Individual Budget Pilot Strand. DWP Report Number 620. CDS. Dewson. S., Fearn. H., and Williams. C. (2009). Evaluation of Access to Work: Ministerial Government Departments. DWP Report Number 621. CDS.

- examine the factors affecting deadweight in AtW, and identify ways in which it might be minimised;
- identify areas where service could be improved.

The approach taken to this evaluation has been entirely qualitative. In-depth interviews have been carried out with: AtW customers (60); employers of AtW customers (36); Jobcentre Plus and DWP head office staff; staff from the AtW National Delivery Team; AtW Business Centre staff; Jobcentre Plus advisers and Disability Employment Advisers (DEA); AtW assessment providers; and New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) and WORKSTEP providers.

At the time the research was commissioned and undertaken, AtW was delivered by Jobcentre Plus through a network of 11 Business Centres, operating within each region in England, and in Scotland and Wales. It should be noted that since this time, the delivery model for AtW has changed: Business Centres no longer exist and have been replaced by three Operational Support Units that deliver the AtW administrative function. The vast majority of AtW advisers are now based in Jobcentre Plus offices.

Key findings

Marketing and awareness

Customers found out about AtW from a number of sources including friends, family members and colleagues, employers, Jobcentre Plus literature and advisers, and from charities and disability organisations. There is no evidence to suggest that customers found out about the programme in any systematic way, particularly in their interaction with government officials or departments and some customers reported that awareness of AtW seemed poor amongst Jobcentre Plus staff. Customers felt that they often found out about AtW by accident. A number of customers who were already in employment prior to receiving AtW had experienced severe and chronic health problems for sometime before they found about AtW.

Awareness of AtW was fairly low amongst employers and most had not heard about the programme until one of their employees made an application for support. Few employers could recall seeing any marketing literature on the programme. Larger companies, employers in the public sector and charities were more likely to be aware of AtW than other employing organisations.

Awareness of the AtW programme was patchy within Jobcentre Plus. Staff who were more routinely involved with customers with disabilities, such as DEAs, seemed more likely to know about the programme than other front line staff.

Application process

There were high levels of support for the AtW application process. Customers found it simple to follow and several customers reported positively on the telephone application process that has recently been introduced. Customers and

employers also reported high levels of satisfaction with AtW Business Centres and staff. Where problems were experienced, they related primarily to: the nature of customers' impairments which were difficult to explain or categorise; a reliance on standard application formats, which some customers found difficult if not impossible to complete; self employment, which was often difficult to substantiate with paperwork; and, the time taken to complete the application process and get support in place.

Business Centre staff also reported positively on the application process overall. However, AtW advisers did sometimes experience problems getting support in place within the required timeframe, which was a source of frustration. Advisers felt that meeting their deadlines was largely out of their hands and often impossible because employers have the ultimate responsibility to order and purchase support.

Assessments

Customers and employers again reported high levels of satisfaction with the assessment process for AtW. In the main, they reported that assessments had been carried out quickly, and that they had been appropriate to the customers' needs and very comprehensive. Employers, in particular, said that they had learned a lot as a result of the assessment process and were much more knowledgeable about the particular disability or health condition, and ways in which they could help and support their employees.

Although in the minority, some customers felt that the assessment process was more suited to people with stable conditions but that it was not always appropriate or adequate for customers with more complex needs. There was also some concern that AtW was better able to help people with physical disabilities and that the assessment process was geared largely to those sorts of needs rather than with mental health difficulties or impairments that could not be seen. A few customers felt that the assessment process was constrained by cost considerations, and that these shaped the recommendations made by assessors, whilst a couple of other customers with stable conditions questioned whether an assessment was actually necessary at all.

Assessment providers stressed the need to undertake comprehensive assessments that identified (packages of) support that met the needs of customers. Often these solutions would include a period of training or follow-up once support was put in place, although not as often as assessors would like: many requested additional AtW funding to provide a routine follow-up service to all customers.

Cost and value-for-money are primary drivers for AtW, and these shaped the recommendations made by assessors and those authorised by AtW staff. When making recommendations and determining what support will be funded though, assessors and AtW Business Centre staff stressed the need to ensure that the support solution was effective and met customers' needs. The speed at which suppliers could get support in place and suppliers' customer service record were also important considerations when making recommendations.

The few concerns raised in relation to the assessment process centred primarily on the time limits set by Business Centres for provider assessments, and paperwork. Assessment providers relied on gaining access to employers and other key members of staff within a two-week timeframe but this was sometimes not possible if employers/line managers were on leave. Assessment providers were also constrained by the amount of paperwork involved in the process. Because of data protection issues, most communication with Business Centres had to be faxed or posted which often resulted in delays.

Outcomes

Customers received a broad range of support from AtW including help with taxi fares to and from work, British Sign Language interpreters, support workers, specialist IT equipment, bespoke chairs and desks, wheelchairs, and adaptations to office premises and vehicles. Customers and employers were generally very happy with the amount and quality of support that had been put in place by AtW. Customers who received ongoing support from AtW, for travel to work or support workers for example, were most likely to report high levels of satisfaction. Customers who received one-off types of help were more likely to experience some difficulties, although these cases were still in the minority. The main problems that customers experienced relate to:

- the perception that AtW solutions were in some way inferior to other support;
- an inability to use the support that had been put in place, e.g. because of a lack of training or incompatibility with existing working practices and (IT) systems;
- delays in getting support in place, which in some cases had resulted in worsening health and job losses; and
- onerous paperwork, particularly collating receipts and claiming monies back from AtW.

AtW support is reviewed, formally, every three years for those customers who receive ongoing support, although Business Centre staff usually checked with new customers, more informally, within the first three to six months, to ensure that the support was working well and that their needs were being met. Some customers were unsure about maintaining contact with Business Centres and some believed, erroneously, that they could only apply to AtW for a limited period/once only. A number of customers were also confused about what to do if they changed their job and whether they were able to take their support with them.

Impact

Customers reported a number of positive impacts related to AtW including: reducing their levels of sickness and absenteeism; providing a level playing field in employment; allowing them to stay in work; saving them significant work-related expense; and improving their general feelings of well-being. Employers reported that AtW had:

- helped them to understand the needs of their disabled employees;
- improved employee well-being;
- increased productivity;
- improved their staff retention rates; and
- in a few cases, enabled them to recruit disabled people.

The issues of deadweight and additionality were explored with employers and were found to relate largely to the type of support provided by AtW. The only example of full, or nearly full, additionality in AtW is associated with travel to work grants with nearly all employers reporting that they would be very unlikely or unwilling, to cover these costs in the absence of AtW. Employer size and sector seemed to be weak determinants of deadweight or additionality with some larger employers, and those in the public sector, reporting that they were as likely, or unlikely, to put support in place in the absence of AtW as smaller, private sector employers. Partial deadweight is much more common in AtW: many employers said that they would put support in place if AtW was unavailable but that this support would be likely to be of a poorer quality or would take much longer to put in place. Having said this, many employers would have been unable to put support in place for their disabled employees without the advice and assessments provided by AtW, which appeared crucial.

Areas for improvement

There is general widespread support for increasing awareness of AtW by improving marketing materials, providing case study examples for publication on the internet etc, and by improving information flows to key staff in Jobcentre Plus and other organisations, particularly health-related organisations. Improvements could also be made to the application process, including providing application forms in alternative formats as standard.

The research has highlighted the need for effective and ongoing communication between Business Centre staff, customers, employers and assessment providers at various stages in the AtW process to minimise the risk of delay and confusion. It is important that all parties understand their roles and responsibilities throughout. There is also a need to consider how interim support measures could be provided to minimise the impact of delays in getting full support packages in place.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to undertake a qualitative evaluation of Access to Work (AtW) provision, involving customers, employers and a range of other stakeholders. The AtW programme has been operating in Great Britain (GB) since 1994, and is designed for people with long-term health conditions or impairments who need extra practical support to take up work or to do their job. It aims to reduce inequalities between disabled people and non-disabled people in the workplace by removing practical barriers to work. To this end, the AtW programme can pay towards the following types of provision:

- **Special Aids and Equipment (SAE)**, which helps pay for equipment to help a disabled person overcome disability related barriers in the work place.
- **Adaptations to Premises and Equipment (APE)**, which helps to pay for the cost of making premises and equipment accessible.
- **Travel to Work (TtW)** grants, which are available to meet the additional costs of travel to work for people who are unable to use public transport.
- **Support Worker (SW)**, which allows the applicant to use the services of a helper. Types of support might include reading to a visually-impaired person, communicating for a hearing-impaired person via sign language (other than at interview which is covered by Communicator Support at Interview (CSI), providing specialist coaching for a person with a learning difficulty or helping with personal care needs.
- **CSI**, which meets the full cost of hiring an interpreter to remove barriers to communication at interview.
- **Miscellaneous expenditure**, to remove disability-related barriers not covered elsewhere – e.g. car park charges incurred because disability requires the individual to use a convenient but chargeable car park.

The AtW programme has been the subject of evaluation since it was introduced although the last published evaluation, based on a case study methodology, was

carried out by Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York in 2002². Since this time there have been significant policy developments in AtW including the decision that ministerial government departments (MGDs) should pay for their own adjustments, and wider developments such as the piloting of Individual Budgets in 13 local authorities, and which affect people who need and could benefit from AtW-type support to obtain and stay in work. In more operational terms, a new national AtW team has recently been established to standardise practice at the AtW Business Centre level and to improve customer focus. There is a need now both to update knowledge of how the policy is operating and to look more widely at the range of participants and stakeholder groups involved in AtW.

1.2 Research aims

This research project, in its entirety, consists of three strands:

- an overall evaluation of AtW, the core evaluation;
- an exploration of the effects of the decision that ministerial government departments should pay for their own adjustments;
- a consideration of employment support (including AtW provision) within Individual Budget pilot areas.

The main aims of this research are to:

- examine customers' experience of AtW (in ministerial government departments where adjustments are no longer funded through AtW, this will involve the examination of the customer experience of workplace adjustments funded by MGDs), including the experiences of customers in Individual Budget pilot areas;
- examine the level of service customers are receiving, including new recipients and those needing on-going support;
- explore how AtW is being administered, and how the balance between providing appropriate support, i.e. what customers need, and getting value for money is achieved;
- examine how ministerial government departments are delivering support to their staff since the removal of AtW;
- examine issues arising from interactions between AtW and other services;
- examine the factors affecting deadweight in AtW, and identify ways in which it might be minimised;
- identify areas where service could be improved;
- provide information on the use of AtW by disability group;

² Thornton, P. and Corden, A. (2002). *Evaluating the Impact of Access to Work: A Case Study Approach*, Research and Development Report WAE138, DWP: Sheffield.

- inform policy-making on the development of AtW and employment-related support within the Individual Budgets.

1.3 Our approach

It should be stressed at the outset that this is a qualitative methodology, based on depth interviews, and it does not offer an impact evaluation of AtW (it does not, for example, provide any quantitative estimates of the effect of AtW funding on the employment experiences of disabled people). We have designed a methodology to address the three strands of this research and our methodology has also had three overlapping strands:

- The first strand consists of the **core evaluation of the operation of AtW**, comprising qualitative interviews with four distinct groups of stakeholders: 1) AtW customers; 2) Jobcentre Plus and DWP head office staff, staff from the National AtW Delivery Team, AtW Business Centre staff, Jobcentre Plus Advisers and Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs), and AtW Assessment Providers/Contractors; 3) New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) and WORKSTEP providers³; and 4) employers of AtW customers.

³ Both these programmes have been evaluated in their own right: Stafford, B. *et al.*, (2007). *NDDP: Third Synthesis Report – Key findings from the evaluation*. DWP Report Number 430, CDS. The New Deal for Disabled People is a DWP programme of advice and practical support, which helps people move from disability and health-related benefits into paid employment. The programme is delivered through a network of 'Job Brokers' from a range of organisations (providers). Each Job Broker offers different services and these can include: assessing individuals' skills and abilities and identifying suitable job opportunities; helping with application forms, writing CVs and preparing for interviews; identifying training needs; and supporting individuals (and their employers) during their first six months in employment.

Purvis, A, Lowrey, J. and Dobbs, L. (2006). *WORKSTEP evaluation case studies: Exploring the design, delivery and performance of the WORKSTEP programme*. DWP Report Number 348, CDS. WORKSTEP is a DWP-funded programme which provides job support to disabled people who face more complex barriers to getting and keeping a job, but who can work effectively with the right support. It enables eligible disabled people to realise their full potential to work within a commercial environment, giving them, whenever possible, an opportunity to progress into open employment. The programme also offers practical assistance to employers. Working through a network of providers, disabled people agree a development plan with their employer to ensure they have the necessary training and support to learn to do the job, and to develop in it.

- The second strand has focused on **ministerial government departments**, and has examined the effects of the requirement for them to pay for their own adjustments. This has been addressed through research with both human resources (HR) staff from MGDs, and through research with individuals working in MGDs who were previously AtW customers, as well as disabled employees (either newly disabled or newly employed since October 2006) who have applied for workplace support since the change in arrangements.
- The final strand of the evaluation has explored the **Individual Budget pilot (IBP) areas**. Research has been undertaken with customers in areas where the Individual Budget model is being piloted along with interviews with other appropriate stakeholders,⁴ e.g. local authority representatives, particularly Individual Budget Pilot lead managers, and third sector providers. The research has examined how AtW is working within the Individual Budget pilot areas and how pilots are taking forward the promotion of employment as an option for all working age people.

This report discusses the findings from the core evaluation of AtW. The further two strands of the evaluation have also been completed and will be published separately.

1.4 Core evaluation of Access to Work

The core evaluation of AtW has consisted of qualitative depth interviews with four key groups of stakeholders:

- 1 disabled recipients or users of AtW support (subsequently referred to as 'customers');
- 2 Jobcentre Plus and DWP head office staff, staff from the National AtW Delivery Team, AtW Business Centre⁴ staff, Jobcentre Plus Advisers, DEAs and AtW Assessment Providers/Contractors;
- 3 employers;
- 4 NDDP/WORKSTEP providers.

⁴ At the time the research was commissioned and undertaken, AtW was delivered by Jobcentre Plus through a network of 11 Business Centres, operating within each region in England, and in Scotland and Wales. It should be noted that since this time, the delivery model for AtW has changed: Business Centres no longer exist and have been replaced by three Operational Support Units that deliver the AtW administrative function. The vast majority of advisers are now based in Jobcentre Plus offices.

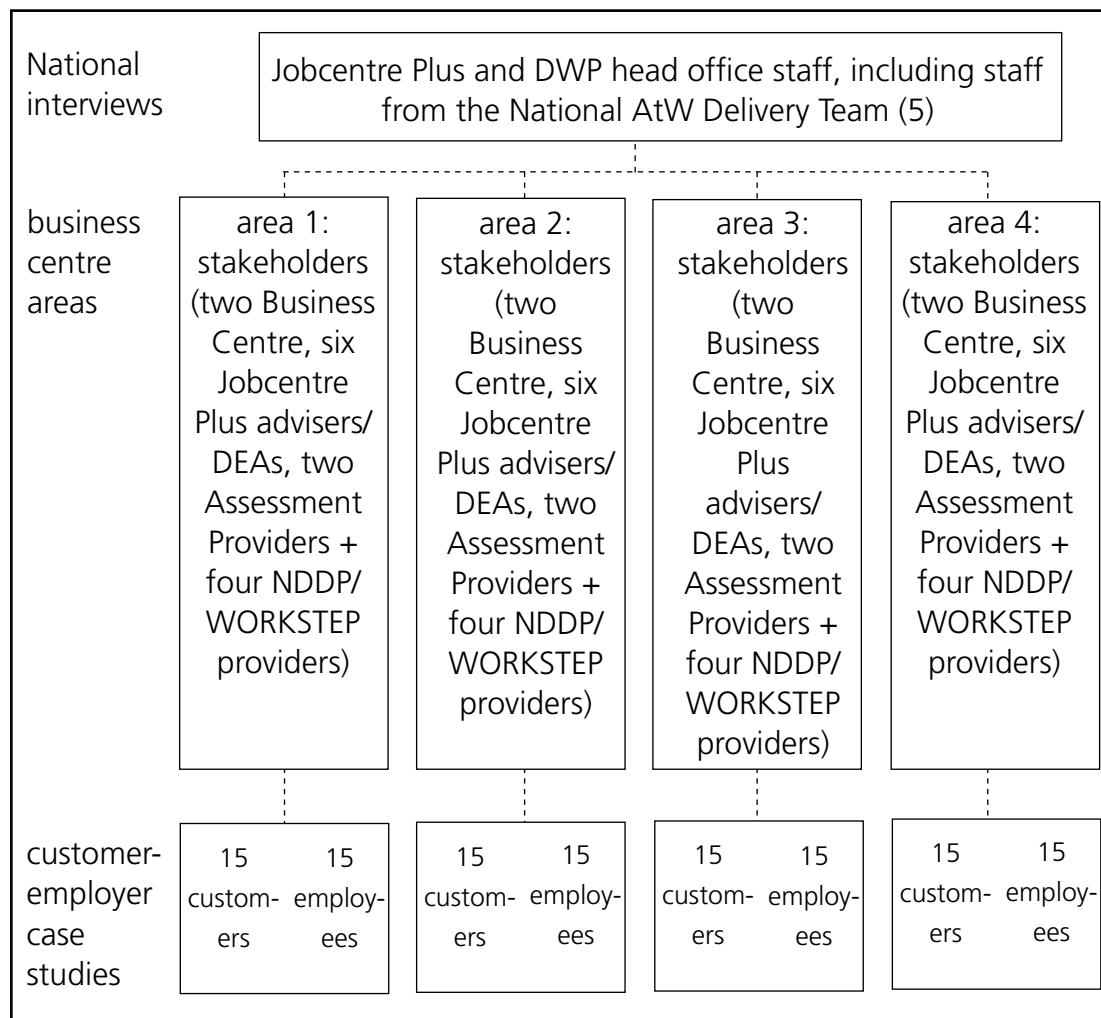
A layered, case-study approach has been adopted. That is:

- wherever possible, individual customers have been matched with their employers. Exceptions have been made where the AtW customer has been self-employed, or where participation of the employer could not be secured (the starting point for each case-study has been the individual customer; the corresponding employer has been approached only when participation of the customer in the case-study has been achieved and their agreement to contact their employer secured). Some employers have not been included in the research because they were unaware that their employee received help from AtW. Employees have acted as gatekeepers for employers throughout the research;
- the research has focused on a sample of four of the 11 AtW Business Centre areas with case-study customers and employers also coming from these four areas. The areas have been chosen to secure a reasonable geographical spread, and to include areas exhibiting different patterns of AtW use and expenditure. In addition, the four areas have been chosen to include an Individual Budget pilot area;
- stakeholder interviewees have also been located in the four AtW Business Centre areas. As well as the AtW Business Centre staff themselves, other stakeholders have included Jobcentre Plus Advisers, DEAs, AtW Assessment Providers/Contractors and NDDP/WORKSTEP providers;
- some interviews, notably those of Jobcentre Plus and DWP head office staff, and staff from the National AtW Delivery Team have been carried out at national level.

The fieldwork for the core evaluation has been undertaken in two phases. The first phase of interviewing began in October 2007 and was completed in January 2008. The second phase of interviewing commenced in December 2007 and was completed in February 2008.

Figure 1.1 shows the planned structure of the core evaluation at a national and regional level.

Figure 1.1 Planned structure of the core evaluation at a national and regional level



1.4.1 Sample selection and fieldwork

We drew the customer sample for this research from the AtW database that was in operation at October 2006. This database represented the most comprehensive dataset available on customers at the time we began the research. We selected customers according to a range of factors which we felt would provide us with a broad spectrum of AtW histories and customer experiences. We elected not to stratify the sample in any way according to disability or health condition as the aim of the research was not to look at disability per se but to look across different support types and different employment scenarios. The final sample selection sought to ensure participation from customers:

- with various demographic characteristics including gender, age and ethnicity;
- a variety of support types (e.g. special aids and equipment, adaptations to premises and equipment, travel to work, support workers, communicator support at interview);

- a variety of employment scenarios (e.g. recently entered employment, retained a job, changed jobs recently, left employment, also on WORKSTEP);
- a variety of employment characteristics (e.g. working in different sectors and in different firm sizes, the self-employed).

DWP supplied IES with a dataset containing approximately 150 customers per region from which we drew our sample. Opt-out letters were sent to all customers by the DWP requesting their participation and interviews were subsequently arranged by the research team. We also endeavoured to interview as many employers as possible when we visited customers to enable us to secure an overview of the AtW experience. We reached our target of 60 customer interviews but were a little short on the number of employer interviews we carried out (36 from a target of 45). Forty eight of the customers we interviewed were in employment; eight were self employed; and four were no longer working. We exceeded our interview targets for all other respondent groups.

1.5 Policy and operating context

As discussed earlier, the AtW programme was designed for people with long-term health conditions or impairments who need extra practical support to start work or to do their job. Combinations of AtW support are permitted, and are quite common. AtW is available to people who are disabled as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and also to those not covered by the Act because their disability affects them only at work. They must be in need of support to take up, or remain in, work on an equal basis with non-disabled colleagues. Importantly, AtW is intended to supplement rather than replace any reasonable adjustments made by employers in line with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). In some cases, employers share the costs of help provided by AtW, and particularly so in the case of SAE and APE.

The AtW programme is delivered by Jobcentre Plus and offers advice and practical support to people who are in work (both employed and self-employed) or who are about to start work. The aim of the programme is essentially twofold: to provide advice and practical support that helps people to overcome work-related obstacles associated with disability and long-term health conditions and impairments, and also to encourage employers to recruit and retain disabled people by offering practical help.

At the time this research was commissioned and undertaken AtW was delivered by Jobcentre Plus through a network of 11 Business Centres, operating within each region in England, and in Scotland and Wales. A National Delivery Team for AtW oversaw and managed the network and performance of Business Centres. This delivery model has since changed: Business Centres no longer exist and have been replaced by three Operational Support Units that deliver the AtW administrative function. The vast majority of advisers are now based in Jobcentre Plus offices. In 2008, a Standard Operating Model for AtW was introduced to

ensure a more standard approach to administering AtW and promote more consistent decision making by Business Centre advisers working with customers. At the same time as the decision-making functions and administration of AtW have become more centralised, funding for the programme has also moved away from the regions and now rests with the central National Delivery Team rather than with individual Jobcentre Plus regions as was previously the case. Spending on the AtW programme has, not surprisingly, grown significantly since it was first introduced from just over £15m in 1994-95 to over £69m in 2008-09. The White Paper *'Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future'* issued in December 2008 proposed a doubling of the budget by 2013-14. The number of people in receipt of AtW funding has also increased inexorably from just over 10,000 customers when the programme first began in 1994-95 to 27,500 customers in 2007-08.

1.6 Structure of report

The structure of this report is as follows:

- Chapter 2 discusses general awareness of AtW amongst customers, employers and other key stakeholder groups (particularly DEAs, Jobcentre Plus staff, NDDP and WORKSTEP providers). It assesses respondents' views on the marketing information available for AtW and offers some suggestions on how improvements could be made.
- Chapter 3 goes on to look in more detail at the application process for AtW. It discusses customers' and employers' opinions of the process, and identifies any problems that have been experienced.
- Chapter 4 looks at the assessment process from the perspective of customers, employers and assessment providers. This chapter also explores the issue of funding to establish how much employers contribute to their employee's support package.
- Chapter 5 identifies the key outcomes from the application process: at the support received and the problems experienced. It also explores customer and employer satisfaction with Business Centres, and their experience of reviews and ongoing support.
- Chapter 6 explores the main impacts arising from AtW to determine what sort of a difference support the programme has made to customers and employers. This includes an assessment of the harder and the softer impacts of workplace support. Importantly, this chapter also examines the issues of additionality and deadweight in relation to AtW.
- Chapter 7 draws together the conclusions arising from the study and offers some recommendations for future policy.

The report highlights any findings which appear to have changed since earlier evaluations. Throughout the report, we illustrate our findings with quotations from a number of sources, most notably AtW customers and their associated employers. Each of the customer and employer quotations has a reference number (from P1 through to P60) and brief details of these respondents are given in Appendix A.

2 Marketing and awareness of Access to Work

This chapter considers the channels through which customers and employers first learned about Access to Work (AtW), and ascertains their key sources of information on the programme. It looks at both customers' and employers' views of AtW marketing materials and other information available, and also considers the views of other stakeholders, such as Disability Employment Adviser (DEAs), Jobcentre Plus advisers, and New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) and WORKSTEP providers on the issues of marketing and awareness of AtW.

We should state at this early stage that many of the customers and employers who took part in this research will have first come into contact with AtW a number of years ago. Consequently, recall of how these respondents first heard about AtW, and their views on the nature and quality of the information available, is relatively poor in some cases.

2.1 Finding out about AtW

2.1.1 Customers

Customers were asked how they had first become aware of AtW and they reported that they had found out about the programme by a variety of means, including:

- by word-of-mouth (e.g. through friends, colleagues, family members etc.);
- from their employer (Human Resources (HR) personnel, occupational health personnel);
- via leaflets in Jobcentre Plus offices etc;
- through Jobcentre Plus advisers and DEAs;
- from charities and disability organisations;
- via their university;
- through press advertising;
- through their place of residence (those living in sheltered accommodation)

- from their GP or another health professional;
- via the internet.

Although customers first discovered AtW in a number of ways, there is no evidence that disabled people are being made aware of the programme in any systematic or routine way, particularly in their dealings with government officials or departments. In many cases, customers reported that they had found out about AtW almost by accident or serendipitously, for example, they had chanced upon a leaflet at the Jobcentre rather than being given a leaflet and an explanation of the programme by an adviser when making their benefit claim or when signing on.

Finding out about AtW was often, for disabled people, through word of mouth. Many AtW customers told us during their interview that they knew, or had come into contact with someone (e.g. a friend, family member or a professional) who had some personal experience of making an AtW claim or who knew of someone else who had. Several customers reported that if they had not found out about AtW through word of mouth then they feared they would never have found out about it.

'If it wasn't for my Dad I don't think I would have known about AtW and their services.'

(P17)

'I explained to a doctor there about my problems, he had heard of them [AtW] and said go to the Jobcentre and ask for AtW. My employers didn't know about it. They should have done. If they'd known about it, it would have saved time...He [the doctor] only knew about it because he'd met someone the other week. That could be improved.'

(P42)

Amongst those customers with a long-standing or existing disability and who had been out of work prior to applying for AtW, few mentioned that they had heard of AtW prior to starting work, i.e. they did not recall being told about it during their routine dealings with Jobcentre Plus or other the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff. Some customers confirmed that (general) Jobcentre Plus staff were not aware of AtW:

'I went to the Jobcentre and I told them I was on AtW and they didn't actually know what it was.'

(P9)

There were examples of customers who had found out about AtW from DEAs and many customers were very positive about the help their DEA had given them and the information they had available.

'The [Disability Employment] Adviser laid it out quite clearly to me. I think he basically said what I was entitled to when I started a job somewhere and the resources that would be available to me.'

(P17)

However, this did not seem to be a uniform approach as some customers reported that their DEA had not told them about AtW or did not know much about the detail of AtW:

'I spoke to Disability Advisers and they seemed to be sort of poorly equipped with what services were and what services weren't available.'

(P48)

Learning about AtW when already in employment is possibly even more problematic and a number of customers reported during the research that they had been experiencing severe and chronic health problems in work for some time before they or their employer found out about AtW and helped them to apply. People with progressive and worsening health conditions seem to have been more likely to have struggled in work for a while before finding out about AtW than most other customers. Some employed customers also told us that although they had heard of AtW, they did not think it could be used once you were already in work and so had not applied before.

'I've heard about people who've been working for a number of years and then they start to have hearing problems and because they're not going to the Jobcentre or anything, they're just at work, they don't hear what's available. They just try and struggle on.'

(P11)

'Some people have never heard of it and always been struggling for years, just getting by.'

(P22)

'I knew there was something "to" work but I didn't realise that stretched to 'in' work if you've got a problem.'

(P18)

Perhaps not surprisingly, those customers who were not in regular contact with Jobcentre Plus, and therefore particularly those who were already in full-time work and not in receipt of state benefits, did not seem to have (access to) any routine way of finding out about AtW. These customers were especially likely to have drawn on word of mouth to learn about AtW.

'People should just be able to know what the number is of AtW and it shouldn't just be those people who go to Jobcentre Plus. A lot of people don't go to Jobcentre Plus and want to work and don't know what's available for them if they do want work.'

(P3)

'If I hadn't been out of work I would never have known. If I'd been in employment, I would still be struggling. I'd be trying very hard.'

(P15)

2.1.2 Employers

During the interviews, we discovered that it was fairly unusual for employers to have heard of AtW prior to an application being made by their employee or new recruit, and this was particularly the case with small and medium-sized private sector employers. Larger companies, public sector organisations and charities (as employers) were more likely to have known about AtW but in most cases it was the AtW customer who had first made the employer aware of the existence of the programme.

'I think they need to be a bit more visible because it was [the customer] herself that instigated this. I think obviously now I am aware of it, it's something that I could recommend to other employees who may or may not need to do something. I think if she had not brought it to my attention then I probably would not have known about it.'

(P13)

Employers rarely reported having ever seen any marketing materials regarding AtW and those who had some existing knowledge of the programme had rarely found out about AtW in any systematic way. Where employers did have some prior knowledge of AtW, this had typically come about because they employed someone else who had made an application, or as a result of a previous job or role (for example, employers who had previously worked for a disability organisation or charity), or from personal experience (for example, having a disability themselves or knowing someone personally who has a disability).

'I think it could be raised more in the public eye because people need to know...it's a bit of a lottery.'

(P18)

'I found out about it because I used to work for RNID. There we would be instrumental in assessing and so I knew about it personally. It certainly wasn't any marketing that I had picked up on. I have never seen any marketing.'

(P7)

'I've worked with another company and we did have a young girl in a wheelchair and she got a special chair, foot rest and arm rest. I was aware that it's available.'

(P41)

Knowledge and awareness of AtW seems to have been slightly greater amongst larger companies with a dedicated HR function than in smaller companies. The main reason for this appears to be linked to these companies having a greater

number of employees and therefore a greater likelihood that someone will have made an application to AtW in the past. It was not evident that AtW was part of the general range of knowledge of an HR specialist. In fact one HR specialist interviewed took part in the research to find out more about AtW.

'One of the reasons I wanted to come to the meeting as well was to find out more about AtW and how we could get more involved. The HR team here haven't had much involvement with it.'

(P7)

This was echoed by one of the customers:

'Everywhere I've worked the HR department doesn't even know it exists. I have to teach my HR departments that it exists and you just think that most HR departments would know about it.'

(P9)

2.2 Sources of information

2.2.1 Customers

The research with customers and employers sought to explore how people had learned about AtW and, in particular, we were keen to know what materials or sources of information people had used. When trying to find out more details about AtW, customers told us that they used a variety of methods:

- looking at the website;
- looking at leaflets;
- asking their DEA or WORKSTEP provider;
- calling the AtW Business Centre;
- asking an Occupational Health professional or HR department.

Views on the written materials available regarding AtW and the website were varied. Few customers could remember seeing any leaflets about AtW and those who did had different views on how useful they were. Some customers reported along positive lines:

'I saw a leaflet which was very good.'

(P23)

However, a few other customers reported that the AtW leaflets they had seen had been 'dry and vague'. One customer commented that it would have been useful if the literature had included some case studies of people who had used AtW and if they had given fuller descriptions of the types of support available. He also thought the information was presented in an unnecessarily complicated format:

'With my education I could understand it, but I'm sure many others couldn't.'

Views on the website were similarly mixed, although more customers were able to recall that they had looked at the website than those who could recall seeing any written marketing materials. Some customers found the information on the website too basic:

'I think it [the website] is not very friendly, it's very job-centred and needs to be slightly more approachable...So I think that's something they definitely need to improve.'

(P9)

As we have discussed above, knowledge of AtW amongst employers, HR professionals, and even officials (such as Jobcentre Plus personnel) seems to have been patchy and so these avenues were not always a satisfactory source of information for customers. Having said this, all the customers who were included in this research had found out enough about the programme from one source or another to make an initial application. Moreover, customers who could recall having had some early contact with an AtW Business Centre were satisfied with the information they had provided about AtW (customer satisfaction with AtW Business Centres is discussed in further detail in Chapter 6).

Although (some) customers seem to lack a detailed knowledge of AtW, the most pressing concerns of customers seemed to revolve more around the lack of general awareness about the programme which meant that many disabled people and employers did not know of its existence.

'I mean if my friend had not told me I would be unemployed.'

(P12)

2.2.2 Employers

Employers seemed to be fairly satisfied with the information that was available to them about AtW once they were aware of the programme's existence, although they were often reliant on the employee for more detailed information. Employers were typically more involved at a later stage in the application process, for example once it was time to assess needs and purchase equipment or organise funding. Sources of information about AtW that employers were able to recall included:

- the Business Centre;
- colleagues who had been through the process;
- HR departments and Occupational Health departments;
- Jobcentre Plus;
- the AtW website.

Again, employers' views on the website were mixed although at least one employer commented on the lack of depth and clarity on the website.

'I don't think, through my own experience of looking at the website for AtW through the Jobcentre, I don't think it provides that much information. I think it could go into a bit more detail because there are a lot of things once you dig into it that they can provide that you wouldn't necessarily know about just by clicking on it and click off again because you think well that's not for me, if you're an employer. I think it needs to be a bit more detailed in that sense.'

(P44)

'Clearer guidance is required on how much employers can expect to contribute... without this information employers may be reluctant to employ disabled people.'

(P5)

2.3 Increasing awareness

Not surprisingly, there was an almost universal view amongst both customers and employers that AtW should be more widely marketed. They held this view largely because of how important and useful they felt the AtW programme was to disabled people and their employers or potential employers. In fact, when asked unprompted how AtW could be improved in general terms, customers and employers were very likely to talk about the need to increase awareness of the programme:

'It's a fantastic service. I think it should be publicised more to people like me who probably slipped through the net years ago.'

(P43)

'It's meant to be the government's best kept secret isn't it? It's just not marketed very well. Anyone who comes into our organisation is lucky because we know a lot about it...but other organisations may not.'

(P22)

Customers and employers gave a wide variety of reasons why they felt AtW should be publicised more widely, not least from an equality of opportunity perspective. Customers particularly felt that everyone should have the opportunity to apply for AtW but because they perceived that many people were unaware of the programme and the support that was available, it was felt likely that a lot of disabled people could be missing out on the chance to work. AtW is viewed, by many of those taking part in this research, as an incentive for disabled people to work or to help them to consider that it may be possible.

'If you were more aware of what's available then perhaps it would be a real incentive for some people returning to work.'

(P58)

Similarly, a number of customers and employers thought that some employers, who did not know about the help and support available from AtW, would be under the misapprehension that it was difficult or problematic to employ (or retain) someone with a disability. This was thought to be particularly so for small employers, who may associate employing someone with a disability with higher staff costs. AtW is viewed as playing an important role in breaking down barriers and stereotypes about employing disabled people.

'I think a lot of small organisations probably, there could be a lot more opportunities in the smaller businesses, maybe more people could be made aware. A lot of people feel they would not be able to afford it.'

(P29)

'In job applicants going for jobs, they need to be able to tell the employer, yes I am blind, but this support will be carried forward from the AtW scheme, it is not going to cost you any money.'

(P22)

Amongst people in work, a lack of awareness and knowledge of AtW was seen as a major problem, as for other people who were beyond regular contact with Jobcentre Plus. A number of AtW customers taking part in this research thought that awareness of AtW needed to be higher amongst employers so that they could prevent employees who become disabled whilst in their employ, or whose condition deteriorates, from suffering unnecessarily or from having to give up their job.

'It looks as if it is aimed at the unemployed rather than assisting people who are already in jobs but find themselves struggling and may even be forced or pushed or persuaded to do a different job within their work setting by their employer.'

(P47)

'[AtW] don't seem to push it. I mentioned it to one of the girls [at work], her husband has got a bad back and he struggles on a daily basis. When she came and saw what I had I think she got him to get in touch with them.'

(P30)

'If you are in a job you struggle to keep going despite whatever you have wrong with you on the basis that if you start to make a fuss you could lose your job.'

(P54)

AtW customers and employers had many suggestions for how awareness of the programme could be increased and who should be targeted. Interviewees highlighted a need to increase awareness amongst disabled people who were potential AtW customers, employers and HR professionals, and amongst other

professionals who may come into contact with disabled people. Suggestions for ways in which awareness could be increased amongst these groups included:

- seminars for employers and other professionals;
- mailings, for example, to people claiming Disability Living Allowance (DLA);
- Business Centre presence at events, such as, Graduate Fairs;
- an AtW newsletter to be circulated to employers and other professionals;
- more widespread circulation of the printed information available about AtW, for example, more posters at Jobcentre Plus offices and leaflets in doctors' surgeries;
- updating the AtW website and printed information to provide more detail, and to include case studies to help potential customers see how it could relate to them;
- press advertising.

Interestingly, a number of customers thought that other professionals outside Jobcentre Plus, and particularly health professionals who come into regular contact with disabled people, could be used to raise awareness of AtW.

'They need to link up with the benefits agency and health professionals because you may get a diagnosis of a disability and that's the first point where you should be able to get this information.'

(P10)

The varied knowledge of DEAs and other Jobcentre Plus staff, highlighted during the interviews with customers, suggests that a more uniform approach to raising awareness of AtW amongst these personnel is necessary, as this is one of the main routes through which unemployed customers could become aware of AtW in the current system.

2.4 Other stakeholders' views

We also interviewed a number of other stakeholders as part of this research, namely staff from Business Centres, Jobcentre Plus advisers including DEAs, NDDP and WORKSTEP providers and AtW assessment providers, and asked their views on awareness and marketing of AtW.

2.4.1 Business Centre staff

Business Centre staff supported many of the findings from the customer interviews, and agreed that awareness and knowledge of AtW amongst Jobcentre Plus staff generally was hugely varied. They felt that AtW has had a lower profile since the inception of Jobcentre Plus and that high staff turnover has made it difficult to have a strategy for keeping awareness among Jobcentre Plus staff at a constant level. Jobcentre Plus staff who have been in post for some time usually have

high levels of awareness of AtW, but for those who have more recently taken up post, even as DEAs, AtW has not been a priority. Business Centre staff have been taking action to improve this situation and AtW advisers regularly go out to speak to Jobcentre Plus colleagues about the programme. Advisers also reported attending events and disability forums, and visiting employers although these activities seemed to be fairly irregular and often in response to an approach by an employer or event organiser rather than being instigated by the Business Centre. Staff felt that AtW was a very effective programme that should be more widely marketed, but they also had concerns about funding and how they would cope with increased volumes of applications should it be more widely marketed.

'If we didn't have to worry about the money, we could go out and really market strongly. It's trying to choose. If we're approached we will definitely go out, but we haven't been as proactive.'

'Not only the money but the staff would have to be there as well.'

There was a strong feeling among Business Centre staff that if there was to be further marketing to potential customers then this should be via health professionals rather than employers, to ensure that the knowledge reaches individuals who could most benefit from support. In this way, AtW support would follow the disabled person rather than being led by the employer. Staff at one Business Centre felt that any increase in marketing to employers should be targeted at small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) that seem to be in greatest need of information about the programme.

2.4.2 Jobcentre Plus staff

Specialist Jobcentre Plus staff (DEAs, Specialist Incapacity Benefit Personal Advisers (SIBPAs), Pathways Personal Advisers) reported that most of their customers did not know about AtW when it was first mentioned to them. Previous applicants to AtW tended to be the only customers who were aware of it.

'Most of the time they don't know about it. It's not something that seems to be advertised and when you say to someone "if you can't get the bus we could look at going to AtW and getting you help" they are really shocked there is something there that can help them. Ninety per cent of customers don't know it exists.'

Some of these advisers tended not to tell all of their customers about AtW, so as not to overload them, but told them when they thought it was appropriate, that is, when they were deemed to be job ready. If customers were already looking at employment in the near future, advisers were much more likely to go through AtW with them and provide leaflets etc. Some specialist advisers gave all of their customers a brief overview of AtW to ensure that everyone had the same information to make decisions about employment in the future.

Staff working as part of Jobcentre Plus mainstream services, for example Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) Back to Work advisers, were aware of AtW in a general sense but they would always refer customers to the DEA or another specialist adviser for any specific information about AtW and other disability-related programmes.

Use of the AtW leaflet was widespread among Jobcentre Plus staff. They felt the information it contained was basic, but fit for purpose and provided a good introduction to AtW. Again, they would not want to see too much information in it so as not to confuse the customer. Some staff said that they had found it hard to obtain copies of the leaflet and often when they ordered some they were out of stock. One DEA found she had to print the page from the website due to difficulty obtaining the leaflets.

Jobcentre Plus staff did feel that AtW could be marketed more widely, as they only had contact with a relatively small number of disabled people. This was seen as a difficult exercise in choosing who to target and how, as widespread marketing could prove costly and demand could be too high. Ideas for marketing included:

- mailing IB customers;
- making new IB claimants aware of AtW;
- placing leaflets in GP surgeries;
- putting up posters in Jobcentres.

Most of the Jobcentre Plus staff we interviewed felt that their knowledge of AtW was not fully comprehensive but that they knew enough to make a judgement as to whether the scheme was appropriate for the customer. They felt confident that they knew how to get further information if they needed it; largely this came from the Business Centres.

'I'm not an expert on it but I know enough to be able to point people in the right direction.'

Echoing some comments made by Business Centre staff, one DEA felt that AtW and Jobcentre Plus were too separate now and that there should be more links between them.

'There should be more liaison between the DEAs and the Jobcentres and AtW teams. There used to be. When we were all one team we knew what was happening and what contractors we used, but now we don't know it. We don't have contact with them anymore.'

One DEA had visited his local Business Centre when he had taken up the role and another had recently been visited by staff from the local Business Centre. These meetings were seen as hugely beneficial and some staff felt this should be more widespread.

Perhaps not surprisingly, those interviewed who were not DEAs, SIBPAs or Pathways advisers tended to have much less knowledge of AtW, and in some cases almost no knowledge, and tended to see it as the remit of specialist advisers only.

2.4.3 Other views

Representatives from a number of other organisations were also interviewed as part of this study including NDDP and WORKSTEP providers (some of whom were also disability organisations). Awareness and knowledge of AtW amongst these interviewees was fairly high as they tended to be more involved in applications for AtW than Jobcentre Plus advisers, sometimes taking the lead role in taking the application forward or 'hand-holding' the customer during the process. Due to their high level of involvement, they did feel that sometimes they needed to be more confident than they could be about the likely outcome of an application at the start of the process. They also thought it would be helpful to get a better idea of the help that someone would be able to secure from AtW prior to starting work in order to provide some reassurance to the customer and the prospective employer that the disabled person would be able to do the job. For this reason these types of organisation felt that they could do with more guidance from AtW before the application started which sometimes did not seem to be forthcoming when contacting the Business Centre.

'If you apply for a mortgage, you can then go searching for a new house. What is the problem with AtW coming into one of our candidates sessions, doing a quick assessment, say yes we will give you a letter of intent that we would support you with this if you got the job?'

They often expressed a desire for a closer working relationship with the Business Centre and felt that AtW could be more present at events and in local disability networks.

'I think sort of a bit more networking, you know, it would be useful to have a training course on what is available and what they can do.'

The customers and employers supported by these interviewees were generally not very aware of AtW and were quite surprised to learn of the help available. It was felt that more could be done to raise awareness as many people would consider going back to work if they knew about AtW. This is an interesting point: if people know that AtW is available it may encourage them to start looking for work, and the availability of AtW special aids and equipment and other support may help them to become job ready. These interviewees felt that information on AtW should be more readily available in Jobcentre Plus offices and not just accessible through specialist advisers (who may not discuss AtW until the customer is job ready). These respondents felt that information and marketing materials could also be more widely available, be available in a wider variety of formats, for example, a DVD, and that targeted mailshots could be made to claimants of Incapacity Benefit.

3 Application process

This chapter looks at the application process for Access to Work (AtW) in more detail. It explores the views of customers and employers regarding the process and identifies the nature of any problems encountered. Finally, the chapter considers the views of other stakeholders on the application process.

In some cases, recall of the application process was patchy and only very general comments were obtained from both customers and employers. It is also worth noting when reading this chapter that some of the procedures for applying for AtW have changed since the introduction of the AtW National Delivery Team. The applications being discussed by customers and employers in this study will have been made both before and after these changes.

3.1 Making the application

Applications for AtW should be made by the customer directly to AtW Business Centres and the applications made by our interviewees were almost always customer instigated and led. In a few cases, the customer had already made their initial application for AtW when the employer learnt of it. In some cases the employee had made previous claims to AtW and therefore was considerably more knowledgeable about the process than the employer.

'Because he has been in these circumstances for sometime and he's worked in very many other places where he knew the system so it was a lot easier. He knew who to directly contact and he did that pretty quickly actually.'

(P2)

It was common for employers to have very little involvement in the application process, particularly early on, where their involvement was often in 'signing off' an application or reviewing it before it was sent rather than actually filling in any of the application form.

'I don't think I [employer] was involved in advising her [customer] about forms or what to put on the forms. I think I just signed the forms if I remember rightly.'

(P27)

Employers, generally, seemed happy with customers taking the lead, feeling that the customer was better placed to understand their own condition and the support they needed. Employer involvement, when it did occur, tended to be later on in the process regarding funding and purchasing of equipment or being present at an assessment.

'I [employer] was involved in the application to a degree but it was mainly [the customer] who took care of the application. I was involved more heavily at a later stage when it came to actually dealing with the company who installed the chair lift and also in arranging payment.'

(P33)

There were a few cases where applications for support were organised by the employer: this usually happened when the customer was more profoundly disabled and typically occurred when the employer was a disability charity or organisation. In these cases, the application process may have also involved other parties such as carers, parents, WORKSTEP providers or support workers. The customer did still have some role in the process, however, often in helping to describe their disability and how it affected them. In one case a specialist disability charity had a dedicated AtW team who dealt with applications due to the high number of employees with some level of support need.

'I [employer] did all of the application. No actually I tell a lie, [the customer] did help with some of it. I passed it to her Mum to look through. I was concerned about the way that (the customer) would describe her visual impairment and Asperger's syndrome was the way that she [her Mum] would describe it.'

(P7)

3.2 Satisfaction with the application process

On the whole, both customers and employers were very satisfied with the process of applying for AtW. In most cases, very few comments were made, just simply that it was 'fine' or 'very straightforward'. For many people, applications had been made some time ago and the fact that there were few comments is a good indication that the process had been fairly smooth. Many customers were very vague about the process: many had just telephoned the Business Centre and their application had been taken over the phone; others recalled completing a form but none had found the process particularly onerous.

There were some more detailed comments about positive aspects of the application process. Some customers and employers were pleased with the simplicity of the process and how straightforward it had been. This was evident among those where the support required was fairly uncomplicated, e.g. travel to work only or where the nature of a disability was easy to explain and/or prove medically.

'It was simple actually, probably simpler than I thought it would be, perhaps that was because we had the information available for them because we were collecting it monthly anyway for our own records. They wanted to know distances between venues and mileage.'

(P18)

Customers and employers also appreciated the help given to them by Business Centre staff over the telephone, and particularly those who had been able to complete their applications in this way. In many cases, this had been invaluable, particularly for those who found reading or understanding text difficult, e.g. customers with a visual impairment or dyslexia.

'I basically spoke to a guy on the phone for a long time and said "I have never done this before, how on earth do I go about it?" He was great.'

(P7)

'I'm not good with forms. I'm a severe dyslexic. They did most of it, I just answered the questions. I was happy with that. They were very sympathetic. Great.'

(P39)

'They said they'd contact me within two days and within, I think, a day we had a conversation on the phone which was good for me because I am not good with filling in forms.'

(P43)

3.3 Problems with the application process

Those who did report some problems regarding the application process had usually experienced them in one of four areas:

- the nature of the impairment was hard to explain or not understood;
- practical problems with forms;
- issues relating to self-employment;
- the time it took for the process to reach completion.

3.3.1 The nature of the impairment

Some customers found it difficult to explain the nature of their impairment, how it affected them, and how this impacted upon their needs at work. Employers completing an application for a customer with a more profound disability also found this to be a challenge. In a few cases, customers felt that if an impairment was not easy to describe or understand this could have an effect on the assessment and the outcome. For example, in one case an application was made by someone

with Asperger's Syndrome and a visual impairment but the assessment did not consider at all how the Asperger's Syndrome could be impacting on the customer. In some cases, the disability itself could involve issues with communication and expression which could make it difficult to adequately convey the nature of a disability.

'It's very difficult to pinpoint what's dyslexia/dyspraxia and it's very difficult for me to explain all that. And there's a question, what supports you need. My question first is "What support's available?" You can't tell people all the time what you actually need and you've got to do that as part of the [initial] call.'

(P9)

'These forms are fairly standard except for when you've got certain conditions you fall down the cracks.'

(P48)

3.3.2 Forms

There were many comments about application forms and the format(s) they are available in. Just as phone applications had been one of the main areas that elicited positive comments, a lack of options other than a printed form was the main area to generate negative comments.

Some customers had not had the opportunity to complete an application over the phone and in some cases this had been problematic for the customer, particularly for customers with a visual impairment. Some customers had tried to obtain forms (as well as other written materials) in different formats but these had not been available. Other formats requested included plain-text versions, large print, recorded and electronic versions.

'The information doesn't come in large print, it wasn't on tape. I had to say: "Are there other ways the information can be gleaned?" Being a partially sighted person looking for support reading documents, it makes sense that if you send me something that isn't in large print, it's going to aggravate the situation. I asked for it to be sent by e-mail so I could get someone to read it. The process wasn't helpful or useful.'

(P10)

'Luckily I had a lot of help from Access for Blind People because I must admit I did find AtW sent me a lot of things in print. They knew I was registered blind and that was, I don't know what I would have done because I don't have family support so I would have really struggled without them.'

(P46)

This issue was also confirmed in one of the Business Centre interviews. Staff felt that although they were careful to flag up on an applicant's file that they had a visual impairment, and had put a lot of effort into producing documentation in formats other than printed, there were occasions where people slipped through the net.

3.3.3 Self-employment

There were a few problems experienced that related specifically to self-employment. One self-employed customer found the amount of documentation required by the Business Centre regarding his self-employment was burdensome and delayed his application.

'You'd ring up, "send a business plan". You'd send it and then ring back; they'd say "we want something else". You didn't tell me that in the first place. I could only go on what they were saying. I sent my business plan. They said they'd received it and they wanted a cash flow forecast as well. They didn't tell me that the first time I rang up. It happened once or twice. It wasn't a major setback. When they sent me forms to fill in there were bits missing.'

(P40)

One customer had difficulties explaining the nature of his job to the AtW team. It took some time for him to explain that he was self-employed as an actor and not employed by an organisation he did a lot of work for.

'Initially it was difficult to explain the sort of peripatetic nature of being an actor and how much work is done at home. But once that was explained it was a straightforward and smooth operation.'

(P4)

3.3.4 Time

The final area where customers and employers had experienced problems in the application process was in the amount of time it took for the application process to be completed.

A few customers commented on the time taken to process applications as some had experienced fairly significant delays. Customers in this situation stressed how important it was to get support in place in time to start a new job in order to avoid any further stress and embarrassment at an already difficult time.

'Because the first two, three, four, five weeks that person really wants to make an impression to the company: you took me on, you took the risk and I want to prove to you that it was a good move but you're not letting me do my work. You need to have the equipment there and then on the first day.'

(P15)

'It took forever... You come to work and you have actually got to be working, so you need those facilities, those supports, you needed them when you started work and they are not there so you've got to try and do what you can within those constraints... It took the chair arriving for the penny to drop, for them to realise what I was actually putting up with previously... to... facilitate the discomfort.'

(P2)

It seems that some of the delays in receiving support are due to the very bespoke nature of some of the special aids and equipment themselves. The customer quoted above required a specific desk and chair to be 'made to measure' which took around three months to manufacture. A subsequent delay, due to late authorisation of payment for the goods (by the employer) held the process up further, which has been a fairly common finding in this research. As we have seen above, another customer experienced delays because he had to prove that he was self-employed. In this example, the Business Centre took some considerable time to establish that he was not employed by a larger organisation that would have had some duties under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to put support in place. It is clear that some of the delays in getting support in place for customers are beyond the influence of the Business Centre. However, these delays can and do impact negatively on individual customers, on how they are able to carry out their job and importantly, on their health and well-being at work.

'I do feel that some of the problems I am now having in my back, my spine, is as a consequence of the months I've been doing this... If you turn back the clock I should maybe have insisted that I don't come to work until it is sorted out... maybe tell them; look you have offered me the job, when the facilities are here I will start working.'

(P2)

One customer felt that if delays were anticipated in relation to getting final support in place, Business Centres should be in a position to put in temporary measures to help disabled employees to do their job in the interim.

At least one customer felt quite strongly that the burden on employers should be minimised and questioned whether employers had to be involved in the application process at all.

'After the assessment... the employer has to order the equipment, so will put more work on the employer and then the employer has to claim the money back from AtW. It's a very long process and your employer has to be involved in that and it's not really fair on your employer because the thing is AtW is supposed to be about making you equal, supposed to be about making you equivalent to someone without a disability.'

(P9)

There were a few concerns raised about the Business Centre not being responsive and this causing delays, although generally customers and employers had been

satisfied with the responsiveness of the Business Centre. Some customers did feel that the Business Centre could have provided more help and assistance in encouraging employers whose inaction was delaying the process.

'I got no recognition that my application was being processed. I had to chase constantly. I managed to get a lady's name and I spent literally two weeks on the phone chasing them to get it done. Because all you could get out of them was "Well, you're in the queue".'

(P48)

'I was saying to my AtW person "You must be able to make the employer hurry this process up?" "No, we can't tell employers what to do, they can get it when they like." They offered limited support, at one stage I got into an argument with the person on the phone even though I was just asking for what was due to me.'

(P60)

3.4 Other views on the application process

3.4.1 Business Centre staff

Business Centre staff were also happy with the application process overall. They felt that being able to carry out the applications over the telephone was seen as cost effective for the Business Centre and also preferential for customers. They did have the option to visit the customer if necessary but, for the most part, applications were carried out over the phone. A high proportion of applications were from customers who had already made a claim to AtW in the past and so the process was very simple.

The main problem reported by Business Centre staff taking part in the research with regard to the application process was the benchmarks that have been set to ensure that support is put in place. Benchmarks were introduced by Ministers to speed up the delivery time for AtW and are monitored by local managers and Senior Managers. For customers who require special aids and equipment, Business Centres have 40 working days to get the application form processed, the customer's needs assessed and the support in place. The benchmark is that 75 per cent of customers should get this support within 40 days. Staff working in Business Centres and who took part in this research felt that these particular applications for AtW often took substantially longer than 40 days, despite figures showing all benchmarks, including this one for Special Aids and Equipment, were met in 2007/08 (and continued to be met throughout 2008). Achievement of the target was perceived to be largely out of their hands, particularly as they had no control over when employers would act and get support put in place.

'It's out of our control...I think that's how we feel about it. They've set this target, it's unrealistic, can't be achieved, not through any fault of our own, but because of delays in employers ordering equipment and supply of equipment.'

The Business Centre staff we interviewed also found their role in chasing-up tardy employers problematic. They felt they spent a lot of time following up employers because of the 40 day target: some staff were concerned that they would no longer be perceived as supporting employers but rather as harassing them.

'We're putting on a lot of work and a lot of time and we're not getting anywhere because none of them are within forty days anyway. So we're spending so much time following up for no results. That's the frustrating part.'

'There is a line between follow up, gentle persuasion because we have absolutely no power, none whatsoever and what turns it into harassment, and to do the levels that they want us to realistically we have to harass. You really have to be chasing people and chasing a lot of the time. Now that's time that we don't have. There's a limit. We can't stretch to cover everything.'

The issue of delays in putting support in place is revisited in Chapter 6.

3.4.2 Other Stakeholders

New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) and WORKSTEP providers and representatives from disability organisations often had substantial involvement in the AtW application process, in some cases taking the lead when customers were in need of high levels of support.

Most of these interviewees were happy with the application process overall, though in some cases it was seen as too complicated and overly-bureaucratic. For example, one NDDP adviser thought that having to supply three quotes for a simple Travel to Work (TtW) application seemed excessive. Most of the comments about the application process revolved around the support received from Business Centres and the application forms themselves.

In some cases, NDDP and WORKSTEP providers, and representatives from disability organisations, were working with profoundly disabled people or people who typically faced more barriers than those self-referring to AtW or those who came to the programme via a Disability Employment Adviser (DEA). Some of these AtW customers, in particular, seem to have experienced more problems with the procedures and rules relating to the application process. NDDP and WORKSTEP providers, and representatives from disability organisations, have reported that Business Centre advisers seem to have different capabilities for dealing with these issues in a customer focussed way. For example, some AtW advisers would insist on speaking to the customer during the application even if the customer was not able to express themselves fully. Interviewees felt that it would be more appropriate for another party, such as the NDDP adviser, to speak to the Business Centre in order to ensure the customer's needs were adequately explained: in many cases, there is no other advocate available to speak for these customers. Some Business Centre advisers were more willing to work flexibly in this situation than others. In the main, NDDP and WORKSTEP providers felt that some advisers needed to think more of the person as an individual and not how they fitted into the official criteria.

'I find some of the advisers are not helpful and not prepared either to, not go outside the box and think of the individual and that specific case. The learning disability criteria seems to be so vague...so there's inconsistencies there.'

The forms used in the application process were also seen by some NDDP and WORKSTEP providers and representatives from disability organisations as too complicated for people with learning disabilities or with literacy problems.

'A lot of our clients would never be able to access half the forms without support from us. They're not user friendly in that respect.'

Again, being able to complete application forms over the telephone was welcomed and was seen as a much better option than paper forms. However, when forms are required they should be available in a wider variety of formats, as highlighted in the customer comments.

4 Assessment

In this chapter, we look at the assessment procedures for Access to Work (AtW) customers, employers and key stakeholders, particularly assessment providers. The aim here is to establish respondents' views on the assessment process and its relevance and utility to the customer's needs for workplace support. Once again, we should stress that recall may be an issue with some of the customers and employers taking part in this study. In many cases, customers will have applied for AtW up to three years earlier and they may never have had a formal assessment for support because the help they required (for example, help with travel to work) did not deem a workplace assessment necessary.

Before we discuss respondents' views of the assessment process, it is worth briefly describing how the process is designed to work before exploring how customers, employers and assessors experience the process. Following the completion of the application form by the customer, Business Centre advisers contract external providers to undertake a workplace assessment wherever it is appropriate, and most especially when special aids and equipment, and adaptations to premises and equipment may be required by customers to allow them to do their jobs. Business Centres then instruct assessors to assess the needs identified by the customer on the initial application and to identify the appropriate AtW solutions: assessors would normally only look at the needs identified by customers unless they feel that an important issue or support need had been overlooked, for example a personal care need that had not been disclosed. In these instances, assessors would go back to the Business Centre for them to follow up. The contracts held between Business Centres and assessment providers now require an assessment to be undertaken and a report with support recommendations to be completed and returned to the Business Centre within ten working days. As part of the recommendations, assessors are required to cost the AtW support packages and to source equipment suppliers.

4.1 Customers' views

In the main, customers reported that assessments for AtW had been arranged and carried out very quickly following their initial application, which indicates that

assessment providers usually meet their ten-day targets. In addition to speedy assessments, customers also seemed to be very happy with the assessment process overall and reported that the process had been easy for them:

'I didn't really have a great deal of need I didn't think, but I was offered a work station assessment at my first job because it was such a big thing for me to go back to work after that time off but the assessor...identified whatever needs I had and it was all very easy.'

(P1)

Customers also reported in the main that their assessments had been carried out thoroughly and comprehensively. This seems to be particularly the case for customers who were new to AtW, and possibly, who were newly disabled. Assessments had provided the first opportunity to look at how disabled employees could work better and in ways which could alleviate pain and discomfort and make their job easier. To illustrate, when asked if they were happy with the way the assessment had been carried out, these customers said:

'Oh yes, most definitely yes. Because it was all new to me, some things I didn't think I that I needed, not until they started talking about things. And once they started suggesting things, how we could do things, then yes, it all made sense, it was all like a jigsaw coming together.'

(P50)

'I wouldn't be able to work. The chair, the door intercom. I can answer the door – it's brilliant. They recommended that.'

(P39)

'The lady I was talking to said you should be able to get your equipment, a talking computer, but I didn't know about it until she said. I thought, we'll see. Nothing ever comes my way, it's always been hard. I didn't want to get my hopes up. But it's been the best thing I've ever done. [...] I don't go anywhere without my laptop and software. It's good. I think if more people knew about it (the equipment), especially the older end like me, I'm sure they'd take it up.'

(P43)

Indeed, a couple of customers had experience of other in-company assessments and felt that the AtW assessments were more thorough than their in-house occupational health assessment had been.

'My employer did one as well and then AtW did one that was much more comprehensive than the occupational health one.'

(P1)

Often, assessors themselves had a particular expertise, or indeed similar disabilities or health conditions to the person they were assessing and were able to fully understand the customer's situation and this seems to have been very positively received by customers. Assessors were able to use sign language, and alternative communication formats when working with customers and had also taken along pieces of equipment which customers were able to test in the workplace for appropriateness and ease of use etc.

'The man that came to assess me was able to sign, so he was able to make himself very clear when he was talking to me. He was also very understanding of my needs and communicated to me very clearly.'

(P17)

The assessment itself can include a discussion and observation of the working day and tasks to be done, an assessment of the work station, testing or trying out pieces of equipment as appropriate, photographing and measuring the work station, assessing the wider physical environment, discussions with line managers and employers about the job role, and engaging in broader discussions about disability in the workplace. Assessors often went beyond the remit of an AtW assessment with customers and employers. They suggested disability awareness training for other members of staff to educate and inform them of the issues of working in an inclusive environment, or on general health and safety issues. Once again, where customers raised this as an example of the help they had received from assessment providers, it was viewed very positively. Employers echoed these statements and seemed to have learned a lot from external assessors.

Many customers reported that they felt very much a part of the assessment process, something that involved them rather than something that was purely being done to them. Customers were also happy with the way in which their employers were included in the assessment process. Assessors discussed the needs of individuals with employers as part of the assessment which customers found helpful. These discussions were not just specific to AtW help and support but included:

- explanations of the particular health condition or impairment in greater detail (where assessors have expertise);
- discussions of non-AtW solutions or looking at alternative working arrangements, for example, for an employee with a hearing impairment, showing employers and employees that moving the position of an employee's desk to another part of the office can often combat noise disturbance rather than using AtW to provide a piece of equipment to do so etc.

Most of the interviews with customers revealed a good deal of satisfaction with the assessment process and with the assessment providers as well, and most felt that they had sufficient time with assessors to discuss their needs. There were only a couple of instances where customers felt that their assessments had been rushed or handled unprofessionally. These appeared to be one-off cases rather than being indicative of any deep-rooted causes for concern.

A few concerns were raised by respondents with regards to the objectivity of the assessments. Some customers, although generally satisfied with their assessments and AtW overall, felt that some of the solutions identified by assessment providers were not necessarily the best, or the most appropriate ones, and that the support package identified was often constrained by resources rather than being totally driven by the needs of the customer. With regard to the assessment, one customer said:

'On a scale of zero to ten I would put it at between seven and eight. I wasn't totally happy with it...I wasn't totally completely satisfied with it. I actually had this feeling that they were actually working within parameters and they weren't mine...I wish I had more technical knowledge of computers and all because I would have been able to deal with it more effectively. I have friends who are computer experts and it's a pity I couldn't get them to come along when the assessments were being done. The assessor should be working to assess your needs and that should be the focus. [The costs] shouldn't occupy their minds at all.'

(P2)

A few other customers noted that AtW assessments were more relevant and useful where health conditions were fairly stable and obvious, and particularly those relating to physical impairments. For customers whose needs were more complex and variable, the support packages identified by assessors were not always seen to be the most appropriate.

'They specifically focused on physical impairment, wheelchair mobility aid impairments and what they don't focus on is invisible impairments, not just mental health. It comes with a lot of long-term illnesses, they're not visual until the person has a huge flare-up. Today, although I'm feeling pretty rough, I would say I'm quite well. I still need support in my work. I still couldn't do a complete day so the assessments themselves [require] a lot more flexibility and a recognition of cultural needs as well as multiple impairments and a strong look at mental health impairments which is missing in AtW. They focus too much on the physical elements.'

(P3)

Another customer raised the possibility of using specialist equipment to help with the assessment. Rather than basing the assessment and thus the support package on a verbal discussion of needs alone, this customer, who has a hearing impairment, said that his assessment could have been improved by using some form of information technology:

'Ordinary hearing is selective but because I have my volume turned up I hear other noises you can't hear and that is the problem when you are deaf so the assessment, whilst it is good, it often doesn't give the best interpretation of an individual's hearing. I think the assessment should be more technologically based to give a better understanding of what levels people are picking up.'

(P54)

Some customers, albeit a minority, reported that a formal assessment by an external agency was unnecessary as they already knew what support they needed to help them in the workplace. This seems to have particularly been the case amongst customers whose needs were fairly stable, and who had received help from AtW in the past and knew what support was most useful to them. In one instance, a customer reported that the assessment had prolonged the whole process which caused him further distress in a new job that was already stressful.

'There's the additional anxiety of having to catch up and wait for these workplace assessments then have to wait for the equipment to arrive. It's a long drawn-out process... What would be helpful [would be] if [AtW] asks the person what they need. I was able to say these are the things I need. Having a workplace assessment, getting someone to come along and say whether or not they agree with that is adding to a process. It's different if you say "do you know what support you need? Do you need someone to come and assess that?" That could save a lot of time.'

(P10)

Having said this, at least one customer received help from the assessment provider in the interim, i.e. before their own package of support was put in place, and was loaned some equipment to tide them over:

'Yeah, it was excellent. They loaned me some software, some Supanova software. I think they had a licence agreement so that they could do that for their clients and they lent me a CCTV with video magnifier thing that I was telling you about.'

(P32)

Another customer also commented that he was an expert on his own needs but that this was not always taken into account during the assessment.

'I know what I needed. I know what I need. The problem with a lot of these people is they don't listen to the customer...I'm a little bit more difficult to look at... and assess what I need. But I've got a big mouth in my head and I know what I need and on what condition and these people need to listen to the customers. When I was making the argument she didn't listen to what I wanted and to what I felt I needed...obviously with her being [an approved assessor, she got] the say on the matter.'

(P48)

4.2 Employers' views

Some employers who we interviewed were more involved with the assessment process than others although nearly all were aware that an assessment had been carried out even though they may not have been involved in it directly. Having said this, few employers were able to describe the assessment process in any kind of detail. Some employers were able to recall being involved in the discussion

of workplace needs with the assessment providers and their employees. These discussions involved employers confirming what the job role and requirements were, and discussing how potential solutions and workplace support would fit with the organisation and organisational systems. The feedback on this level of interaction between assessors and employers was very positive. Employers generally found assessment providers to be professional and knowledgeable.

Employers reported high levels of satisfaction with the assessment process and believed that assessment providers had a very clear understanding of the needs of their disabled employees in relation to how they carry out their jobs.

'A hell of a lot relies on the person who comes and does the assessment and on them being the right person and he was, he was excellent. That is really where the success lies because the understanding between him and [the customer] is the absolute key.'

(P7)

Employers generally found the assessments helpful, and especially the written reports, which provide a list of suppliers from whom they can procure the necessary workplace support. They were also impressed with the level of detail contained within the reports:

'It was very, very detailed and it was very good...We were really pleased when we got it through because they went into so much detail, even in terms of when you write to [employee] you need to make sure you use this font, this size, you need to use yellow paper because her eyes can't cope with the white paper, she has to have blinds etc. We got quite clear technical specifications for the equipment so we knew exactly what was needed, we got costs, [and] how much support we would get from the financial side.'

(P44)

4.3 Assessors' views

4.3.1 The role of assessment providers

Business Centres engage with a number of assessment providers as part of the AtW process. Some of these providers are specialists in one sort of impairment only, for example, they provide assessments for people with visual impairments only or they undertake only ergonomic assessments, whilst other organisations are able to draw on a range of assessors (who are often employed on a sub-contracted or self-employed basis) with different specialisms, e.g. ergonomic assessors, technical assessors, physical and sensory experts etc. As we noted above, many of the assessors we interviewed for this research had similar disabilities or health conditions to the AtW customers they assessed, which they believed enabled them to have a much greater understanding of the issues facing these customers.

Assessors go through the workplace needs of AtW customers by working with them and their employers to identify the most appropriate package of support in

terms of equipment, software, support workers etc. Most assessments take place at the customer's place of work although one provider included in this study had a demonstration area to which customers had to travel, that housed various pieces of ergonomic equipment for the customer to try out. This seems to have worked well, with positive feedback from AtW customers who had had contact with this provision, and their employers (some of whom took part in this research).

Some assessment providers stressed the importance of including as many people as possible from the employing organisation in the assessment process, in order that the AtW solution identified is the most workable:

'If you're working with a big company and there's an IT person or an IT department and the recommendations we're making might have some sort of IT issues [we]...ask to meet the IT person, sort it out, so you sometimes speak to three or four people in an effort to make our recommendations as practical and feasible and do-able.'

(A3)

One assessor described well the role they play:

'One of the...important things is to observe and test, to test out reading tests, to trial pieces of technology with people while we're there in the workplace. So our assessors carry a whole range of adaptive technology, either on their own laptops or smaller items like ergonomic mice, keyboards etc., to give people the opportunity, if it looks as if a particular item might be of use, to try. Of course it's not just...conducting an effective assessment, isn't just about recommending kit and equipment. It's about getting under the skin of the job that the person has to do. Sometimes it comes down to coping strategy, the person being able to prioritise their work in a different way or organise the filing system differently so they can use it with their particular disability. If they can't see very well then they might need it organised in a different way. If they have dyslexia they might need it organised in a different way. It's having an underpinning knowledge...as to the effects that particular disabilities have and being able to incorporate both low and high tech solutions into the eventual outcome of the assessment. That's key.'

(A2)

The package of support that assessors ultimately identify as the most appropriate may also include a period of training for the customer to allow them to become accustomed to new equipment or software. A number of assessment providers reported that they often include in their recommendations a return visit to the workplace to install or fit equipment with the customer and provide a more 'end-to-end' service, and this seems to have become more common practice over recent years. Many other assessment providers would welcome the opportunity to provide a more wrap-around service:

'Looking at things from the customer point of view, I think it would enormously improve delivery of service if there was some sort of follow-up from the assessor but I do understand it will cost more so maybe it's balancing...cost as opposed to the benefit...But we do get a fair amount of queries to say "Oh I've got this mouse [but] it's not quite working...can you just come and check?" and then "No, we can't because...that's not part of the service".'

(A3)

4.3.2 Costing solutions and value for money

Assessment providers are responsible for costing the options or potential AtW solutions and, depending on the likely cost of the support, they will include up to three quotes in their report back to the Business Centres. Business Centres make the ultimate decision on what will be funded and send out copies of this to customers and, as appropriate, and in agreement with the customers, a copy or summary is sent to the employers as well.

'We want to find the best possible solution for that client at a cost-effective price, that is going to fit in with what AtW are prepared to fund.'

(A1)

There is some evidence to suggest that assessments may sometimes be shaped by what is likely to be funded through AtW, or perhaps more accurately, what is perceived to be most likely to be funded by AtW. We have discussed above that some customers feel that they have not always received the most appropriate, or state-of-the art, help and support, that is, they feel that they could have received something better or a better fit to their needs. Some assessment providers commented that their recommendations are shaped by what they know (or possibly interpret) that AtW will fund. One provider, who noted that what AtW will fund has changed over time, stated:

'We know the format that AtW like to report in and, you know, we also now generally know what's acceptable and what isn't in terms of recommendations, you know, taking into account...the goal post moving. But generally speaking, we know exactly what is required and therefore we are able to provide that to AtW.'

(A1)

Not all assessment providers are clear about what is and is not allowable under AtW, or what might fall under the jurisdiction of health and safety or the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). At least one provider felt that it would be useful to have clearer guidance from the Business Centres about what support does and does not fall under AtW which would improve the quality of their recommendations.

Another assessment provider went on to explain their approach further:

'Really, what one has to do, and this is written down, you have to ensure the client has minimum requirements to enable them to do their job. You're giving them minimum requirement tools that they need to do their job. You're not giving them Rolls Royce solutions, not a wish list or a shopping list. It's an assessment based on actual needs not wants...'

(A2)

Having said this, another assessment provider went on to report that they do recommend a 'Rolls-Royce solution' if it is deemed the most appropriate solution:

'I try and encourage [assessors] to recommend what's best for the customer rather than focus on price. It's a false economy to go for a cheaper product if it's not going to do the job for the customer. Although some of the stuff we recommend might be quite expensive, it's usually reliable. The chairs don't break. You're not without it for two weeks...for repair...Generally, you're getting value for money. You're paying for extra features that will help someone manage better at work.'

(A6)

When making their support recommendations to Business Centres, assessors generally appeared to be taking value-for-money into account in its broadest sense. Thus, they looked not only at the likely cost of the support package but also took into account other factors such as the after-care support that equipment or software suppliers were able to offer etc. (which can be of crucial importance to customers using that support) and supplier delivery times. Cost and value for money are the primary drivers, but speed of delivery, customer service and the effectiveness of provision are all key factors taken into account by assessment contractors when making their recommendations. One provider reported:

'They'll obviously look at price, they obviously look at timescales now...so if one company offers to deliver it faster than the other one then they'll go with that company. And I think they just go for quality of service, they know who will do a good job and deliver it.'

(A4)

4.3.3 Quality and consistency in assessments

One national employer (and charitable organisation) did raise some concerns about the transparency and uniformity of assessment decisions, given a lack of common quality standards or control.

'One of my biggest bugbears is external assessments, quality of assessments. There doesn't seem to be any common standards.'

(P22)

Having said this, staff in the Business Centres did not seem to share these concerns. The introduction of the national AtW delivery team in April 2007, with

overarching responsibility for all the Business Centres, has, in their view, improved working practices and a standard operating model has been established. Business Centre advisers have a wealth of experience and work closely with colleagues within the centres to ensure that their and their assessors' decisions are common and consistent, and that customers with similar needs receive similar levels of support. Business Centre advisers work in close proximity to each other and case conference regularly to ensure that their decisions are common.

With regards to the quality and consistency of assessments, most providers told us that they have their own internal guidelines on how to carry out assessments rather than conforming to any industry standard (which does not exist). Some assessors have checklists that they go through with customers when doing an assessment to ensure that they are covering all the issues and, certainly, the customers' views suggest that assessments are very comprehensive. Some providers reported that they also have internal audit systems. They go back and check on completed assessments with a number of customers to ensure that all needs have been taken into account, and that customers' needs have been approached in the same way, (that is, across different assessors), and importantly to make sure that customers are satisfied with the service they have received.

4.3.4 Problems experienced by assessment providers

Assessment providers did have a few minor concerns with regard to the assessment process and these focused on:

- time limits set by Business Centres;
- paperwork.

Assessors are required to complete a written assessment report within ten working days. However, many of the delays in getting assessments done within this timeframe, set by AtW, are due to circumstances outside their control. The majority of delays relate primarily to AtW customers or their employers being on holiday or on long-term sick leave. In addition, we have already noted that assessors often require a number of people to be involved in the assessment in order to arrive at the most appropriate and workable solution for customers. However, this in itself can cause problems:

'If you are working with big bureaucracies...trying to get a union rep, an IT person, our assessor, the client, the line manager together within ten days, can be difficult.'

(A2)

Communication support may also be required for the assessment and this can sometimes take time to organise and put in place. Assessors stressed that in these cases, it is important to keep the Business Centre informed as these delays affect the achievement of their targets.

A further issue raised by assessment providers is the amount of paperwork involved in the assessment process, particularly the toing and froing between the Business Centre and the provider. Because of data protection regulations and the transfer of information, most of the paperwork has to be faxed or posted between these organisations rather than sent via email which can cause significant time lags in the system. This is particularly the case in complex applications for AtW which are, arguably, already likely to take the longest time to process.

4.4 Who decides?

Assessors provide Business Centre advisers with a detailed report for each customer which includes recommendations and costs or quotes for the most appropriate (package of) support. We have seen above, that assessors believe that they do consider value-for-money when making their recommendations, but go on to stress that value-for-money also needs to take into account how quickly support can be put in place, the locality of suppliers and the follow-up service that may also be available to customers to assist them to use the equipment or support in the most effective and efficient way.

Business Centre staff told us that they take the lead from assessment providers when making their decisions on the final package of support they will make to AtW customers. Advisers have also been quick to stress the importance of taking a range of factors into account when deciding on the AtW final award and these are in line with those discussed by assessors. Cost is clearly the prime consideration and advisers aim to get the best value for money, that is, the best possible solution at the lowest price. However, price is not the only determinant and advisers reported that they also looked at delivery times, and suppliers' after-care and customer service offer when making their final recommendations. Advisers told us that they often searched the internet and supplier catalogues etc. to ensure that the assessors' recommendations were competitive. They seemed to have a wealth of experience of making these decisions and were very familiar with the likely cost and source of support packages.

Importantly, Business Centre advisers are also charged with checking that the recommendations made by assessors are fit for purpose and are in line with AtW guidance. It was clear from the interviews with advisers that they will challenge assessments if they think it is necessary. One adviser clarified their role:

'I think we've two evaluations at once. We've got one about the actual sort of quality and accuracy of the actual recommendation itself. Is that the right piece of equipment, or is that the right number of support worker hours? And then within that, you look at the value for money of the cost of the support.'

Advisers believed that they had the experience and the skills to make these decisions, and could draw on each other's expertise as and when required. Team Leaders within the Business Centres and Managers gave the final authorisation on the AtW award which provided another layer of objectivity to the process.

4.5 Who pays?

Customers rarely have to contribute to their AtW support package, the exception being that if they receive help for travel to work, they normally contribute a proportion of the travel costs that equates to the normal costs of getting to and from work. All customers who had received this form of AtW were happy with these arrangements and thought them reasonable. One employer also contributed to his employee's travel to work support package but this was because there was an element of travel attached to the job role which their contribution covered. In nearly all other travel to work cases, employers stated quite firmly that they would not, under normal circumstances, contribute towards the cost of an employee's travel to work expenses.

Employers are, however, expected to contribute towards the cost of in-work AtW support, such as special aids and equipment, or adaptations to premises. The guiding principles with regard to employer contributions and cost sharing are:

- for customers (or disabled employees) who apply for AtW within six weeks of starting their new job, AtW can meet up to 100 per cent of the costs of support;
- for customers who have been in their current job for more than six weeks, prior to making an application, AtW can meet up to 80 per cent of the total cost of support over £300. AtW can meet up to 100 per cent of all support costs over £10,000.

Voluntary contributions over and above the cost sharing arrangements above are often sought from employers, although this is left to the discretion of Business Centre advisers. Some advisers told us that they enter into cost sharing negotiations with employers by asking how much they are prepared to contribute towards the cost of support, i.e. they ask how much they are willing to pay rather than starting the negotiation by stating how much they are mandated to pay. In this way, Business Centres can secure additional contributions from employers in excess of those that are mandatory. One Business Centre had secured significant savings in this way and advisers were happy to enter into these discussions with employers. It is worth noting that training in negotiating skills had been provided to staff at this Business Centre to help them to engage with employers in this way.

During the research, we found employers fairly amenable to the idea of making a financial contribution to their employee's support package (with the exception, as we have said above, of travel to work expenses). One SME employer said:

'There was no issue about if we would or we can't or anything like that. We just thought, we've got to find the money because we know we have to be supportive. We're just glad that it wasn't more.'

(P2)

Employers seemed to generally feel that it was reasonable to be asked to make a contribution; many said their employees were valued members of staff and that

they needed them and that contributing towards the costs of their support needs was clearly something they would do. In fact, many of the employers who took part in this research could not remember if they had made a contribution or not. Some of this was probably a recall issue as a number of these applications for AtW would have been made some considerable time ago, but for others it appeared that employers were not really concerned about having made a contribution; they were not bothered one way or the other. This example from a small employer is typical:

'I think we were [asked to make a contribution] and did make some. I think we got a letter with all the equipment [employee] needed and me and [employee] had a conversation that if we needed to contribute to it, was it a problem? No it wasn't. I can't remember whether we did.'

(P54)

One small employer noted that it had found it difficult to pay for the upfront costs of AtW support because of limited cashflow:

'The only problem was that we had to pay for all the equipment up front and claim back which took quite a number of weeks. We were a very small company and our cash flow was restricted. That did cause a problem for a while. In total it was £6,000.'

(P41)

Some type of staged reimbursement from AtW to cover the costs of individual items of support, as and when they arrived, would have helped this company enormously, rather than being required to wait until the whole order or all the equipment had been delivered. This same employer said that she would have covered the costs of the AtW support but that, as a new company, they did not have the financial capacity. Start-up companies or those with a smaller cash flow may be unable, albeit willing, to fund AtW-style help and support.

5 Outcomes

This chapter looks at the support that people have received from Access to Work (AtW) following the assessment process. It explores the views of customers and employers in relation to the adequacy and quality of the support they have received and examines how suitable the support has been in terms of meeting needs. The chapter discusses any problems that have arisen with AtW support. It also looks at the process for reviews and ongoing support.

5.1 Support received

As we know, AtW customers are able to receive a broad range of help and support from the programme. Customers taking part in this research received all different types of support including help with:

- travel to work;
- support workers;
- communication support, e.g. British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters;
- IT and specialist aids and equipment, for example, voice recognition software, text phones etc;
- ergonomic equipment such as bespoke and specialist desks and chairs;
- wheelchairs;
- adaptations to office premises, e.g. chair lifts;
- adaptations to vehicles.

The most common types of support amongst customers in our sample included help with the costs of travel to work, and special aids and equipment. Fewer customers taking part in this research had received AtW to help fund support workers and fewer still had experienced adaptations to premises or other miscellaneous types of support. However, the interviews with customers revealed a broad spectrum of experience in relation to AtW.

Not surprisingly, it appears that the type or range of support that AtW is funding, as illustrated by our sample, has changed over time and no doubt in line with recent legislation. A number of customers noted that their employers had made some adjustments to their workplace or workstation because of health and safety regulations and/or the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), without recourse to AtW.

'The thing is [AtW] have made some changes in that, certain things that they paid for before they wouldn't do it again because they said it was health and safety so like the footstool I asked for, they said it was health and safety so your employer has to get one which is what they got for me.'

(P29)

Assessors and staff working in Business Centres have confirmed that they regularly discuss with employers their responsibilities with regard to health and safety, and to a lesser extent the DDA, before going on to discuss the type of support that AtW is able to provide. Assessors and Business Centre staff are more reluctant to engage with employers in directive discussions about the DDA, other than pointing to its existence and the requirement that employers make 'reasonable adjustments', because there is no legal precedent or case law to go by.

5.2 Satisfaction with support

Overwhelmingly, the majority of all customers and employers who had received help from AtW were satisfied with the support they had received, regardless of the type of support they had received. During the interviews with customers and employers, we asked about their satisfaction with AtW and most customers reported that they were happy with the level or amount, and the quality of support that they had received from the programme. It was not unusual for customers to tell us that the funding and/or support they had received was *'terrific'*.

Customers, whose applications to AtW were fairly simple, were most likely to report high levels of satisfaction. Thus, customers who received ongoing support to help them with travel to work costs, for example, were very happy with the outcome of the application and found the process to be responsive, quick and very helpful. In these cases, an assessment was rarely required and their applications were dealt with in a matter of weeks.

Customers who required the help of a support worker were also very satisfied overall with the outcome of their application to AtW. Although these applications usually took more time, primarily because of the need to undertake an assessment for the amount of help required, customers reported a high degree of satisfaction with the help they received.

Customers whose needs are more complex, or whose needs require more complex and varied solutions, are the most likely to have experienced problems with their applications for AtW. Having said this, the majority of these customers still reported that they were very happy with the help that they had received, although they may have had some difficulties securing this help.

Only a couple of customers (from a total of sixty) reported that they were unhappy with the AtW support package that had been put in place, or were unhappy with the assessment or recommendations put forward by the assessors. Moreover, one or two customers interviewed had been turned down for (elements of) AtW support and voiced considerable dissatisfaction to us about this subject. On closer inspection, some of the requests for AtW were turned down because the support needs would have most likely fallen under the 'reasonable adjustments' requirements placed on employers, for example, to provide laptop or palmtop computers for employees to enable them to be more mobile and less desk-bound. In other instances, the support needs had been specific to the workplace, for example a motorised wheelchair for use at the employer's site. In this example, the customer complained that they were unable to get the chair into a taxi and home although presumably this support would have been provided by AtW for work use only. Another customer felt that her cultural needs (to keep her family and working space separate) had not been taken into account when she was assessed for AtW help. In these examples, the main issues appear to be that customers did not fully understand the responsibility placed on employers by the DDA, or that they were not fully aware of the help and support that AtW could and could not provide. It is interesting to note that no-one had made an official complaint to AtW about these decisions.

5.3 Problems experienced

Although in a minority, some customers experienced problems with their AtW or expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with the quality of AtW support they had received. The key issues here seem to centre on the following:

- a belief that AtW solutions are inferior in some way;
- the usability of the AtW solutions is questionable;
- delays in getting support in place;
- getting the paperwork right.

5.3.1 Inferior solutions

AtW is intended to fund the minimum amount of suitable and effective support required by individuals to help them to do their jobs (over and above that required by law under the DDA) but it is not intended to provide a 'gold standard' or 'state-of-the-art' solutions: these would usually be too costly and would normally offer more than the minimum level of support. It appears that not all customers understand this important point and a number of customers have reported a belief that the support they could have received from AtW could have been a better quality, a better match for their needs or more state-of-the-art. On not getting the support that she wanted, one customer said:

'I asked for WebCapTel but [AtW] said to me it was too expensive so I've been using the screenphone [provided by AtW] but I just use it as a text phone. I might as well have just had any text phone because all I do now is use it for text phone. I don't use it for what it's supposed to be for...Also, might sound strange but just to use it as a normal telephone, I find it very echoey. I find my home phone works better with an amplifier whereas this one is specifically for hard of hearing people yet I find it echoey and very strange. Perhaps it's not very compatible with my cochlear implant.'

(P11)

It is worth noting in this case that the customer had received other support from AtW which had helped enormously – this was just one element of her support package that did not work very well for her. The customer noted that the screenphone that she had received was fairly state-of-the-art equipment and good quality but that it just did not suit her. At the time we interviewed her, she had not contacted AtW to discuss these concerns – she was on a short-term contract and did not think it was worth making a big deal out of it. She concluded:

'I think [AtW] could maybe just give a trial period and maybe come back and visit you after you've got the equipment...and see if you're happy with it.'

Another customer, who also had a hearing impairment, wanted a more proficient sign language interpreter to assist him in his job but these were more expensive to use (and more costly than his AtW award allowed), in much greater demand and therefore harder to book. Because of this combination of factors, he tended to use interpreters who were qualified to a lower level (but cheaper to employ) in order to get the number of hours of support he needs which he has found frustrating. This same customer had also applied to AtW for a very new, IT-based online interpretation service but reported that he was turned down by the Business Centre on the grounds of cost.

5.3.2 Usability of solutions

A number of customers and employers discussed their experiences and problems relating to using AtW support. Some customers reported that when the AtW-related IT equipment arrived at their company they required in-house support from their employers to help with the installation but that this had not been forthcoming. This is clearly out of the hands of AtW Business Centre staff or assessors, even though recommendations were made by them to employers to ensure that this additional company-led support was in place. It is clearly difficult to get (some) employers to comply with (all) the AtW recommendations and to do so in a timely fashion.

'It took quite a long time to get all the different bits together. Our IT people wouldn't install it until all the components had arrived and then when they came to install it they struggled to get the system to work and it transpired that the additional memory that my computer needed to run the system hadn't been added. It had been part of the recommendation when the assessor had made her recommendation but for various reasons, I think because my manager had changed or whatever, had been overlooked and it hadn't been done.'

(P6)

The importance of an ongoing dialogue between the Business Centre and the employer in these instances cannot be overstated although this may not be sufficient to secure a satisfactory and rapid outcome for the customer.

Another issue raised by some customers was the need for specialist IT training to use the specific computers and software awarded by AtW. Some customers reported that although the support had been put in place, they felt they were ill-trained to use it or deal with any issues or problems that arose. In addition, staff working in the IT departments of AtW-supported employers/employees, often were unable to help with any technical problems because they did not have the expertise, or indeed found that their own operating systems were incompatible with the specialist software.

There are some examples whereby assessment providers have come back in to help install or set up specialist equipment with AtW customers and train IT staff and this has worked well. Not surprisingly, employees and employers have appreciated this specialist support.

Importantly, a number of customers and employers also noted how assessors have tried, wherever possible, to draw on local suppliers when making their recommendations in case anything goes wrong with their equipment and it needs to be returned for servicing or repairs. By using local suppliers, customers and employers are (hopefully) inconvenienced for as short a time as possible.

During the research we also uncovered a few cases where AtW support had been put in place but did not work very effectively, customers did not know how to use it properly or, in some cases, why they needed it. In these instances, customers have just not used the support rather than sending it back or requesting further help from AtW. One customer, for example, had been awarded a trolley from AtW although she was not entirely sure what she was supposed to use it for or how. When the trolley arrived, it had no instructions and had to be assembled by the employee's manager. The customer went on to tell us that some parts of the trolley seemed to be missing and that it wobbled, and consequently she did not use it. Clearly this non-use is a waste of AtW resources and may cause the customer some discomfort in the long-term if she does not use it. This example suggests the need for some sort of routine follow-up call or visit (from Business Centre staff or assessors) to customers to check that the support is being used and to discuss any problems. Another customer told us:

'They've loaded Dragon onto my computer but they don't know how to use it to make me use it so it's sitting there. I can't use it because you've got to train the person on how to use it each time...I might as well not have it. All of [this] specialist software, designed in such a way that AtW meets the person with disabilities' needs, but the issue around that is, although they meet the needs, they've got to be set up...and I obviously don't have the skills...They've given me loads of equipment but I can't use it.'

(P9)

An important point made by this customer is that putting the support in place is really only the beginning.

'It's not just about "Well, here's the adjustment, get on with it". It's also about how that changes how you work and then your relationship with your employer and stuff...Obviously it is a much longer process or period to actually adjust your job around the adjustments that have been made...[It] is a wider issue about the relationship with your employer and whether AtW would want to get involved in that wider issue, I don't know.'

(P6)

One employer also reported that his disabled employee was unsure of how to work with his support worker, and required some sort of training to help him to do so:

'He doesn't quite know what to do with the support worker because it's something he's never had before...Now he's working with [a support worker] who doesn't seem so experienced and he's got to take a step backwards and look at it all again and it is a skill actually working with another colleague but making sure that you're still totally in charge of the work is quite a complicated skill.'

(P22)

This employer suggested there was a need for some sort of induction training for customers who were new to working with a support worker to train them in how best to use that assistance.

5.3.3 Delays in getting support in place

Whilst a few customers experienced delays in making their applications and getting assessed, by far the majority of customers who experienced delays in getting AtW support in place had done so because their employers, who were responsible for ordering the support and then claiming reimbursement from AtW Business Centres, had internal procurement procedures to follow which could be bureaucratic and lengthy (particularly in large companies or the public sector). We have seen more than one example of employers taking several weeks if not months to order AtW equipment for their employees. One employer reported that it was not clear whose responsibility it was to order the recommended equipment which led to support taking some considerable time to arrive. This employer was

under the impression that AtW would order the equipment and so was waiting for it to arrive:

'From what I have been told he made it out as if he was going to order it all and sort all of that side out so we didn't have to do anything but we were the ones who had to make the phone calls and get the chair ordered, which was a palaver.'

(P56)

Another employer claimed that the whole process could be improved if AtW Business Centres ordered the support:

'The only way it could have been possibly streamlined to be fair is if AtW had phoned us up and said: "This is what you need, there's your list and do you want us to order it for you?" That would be the only thing from a company's point of view that could have been done better.'

(P53)

The following example illustrates the severity of the delay that customers can experience once the employer becomes responsible for putting the support package into place. AtW assessors and Business Centre staff remain a key stakeholder and try to help and support employers in getting the support package in place without having total control over the process:

'We were ordering from different companies...but that shouldn't make a massive amount of difference but there were two or three different companies who were supplying the different components. So we had the initial delay of getting the financial authority and then the whole ordering process, then the wrong software, sending it back, getting it replaced and getting the IT people to install it and then discovering it wouldn't work because they hadn't put the extra memory on...It was August when I applied...the whole system wasn't up and running and working until I think the 18th or 19th December.'

(P6)

In all, it had taken nearly four months to get this customer's support in place because of in-company delays.

The impact of waiting for support to be put in place can be great on customers' health and well-being, and ultimately their employment situation. We have discovered a few examples where delays have resulted in worsening health conditions and job losses. The following example is extreme, and raises questions about the employer's liability under the DDA, however, delays in getting AtW support in place contributed to a very poor outcome for this customer:

'A twenty-week wait for the equipment had already done the damage, because in that period I think I'd taken all the time off on holiday off ill, and then in addition ten days, because I was in that much pain. I was taking a day and a half off a week, because I just couldn't sit.[...] There's no allowance for the fact that you're disabled. They looked at the amount of time you'd had off and the woman who was dealing with it didn't know that I was ill and she was saying, "enough is enough, you've got to go". So I'm realistic about the fact that they've got a business to run, and as a risk assessment for their business they can't risk me being off any longer through ill-health, so I was asked to leave.'

(P48)

We also spoke to another customer who reported that he had waited so long for his employer to put AtW support in place that he decided to retire rather than wait any longer. Again, this example might raise a number of legal issues but it does illustrate that AtW is not always able to overcome the employment barriers, nor address potential discrimination in the workplace, which some members of the customer group experience.

Other customers told us how much pain they had experienced whilst they were waiting for the support to be put in place.

'I think part of the problem is that I have to do it, like I have to come to work and I have to sit in a chair, because there is no other chair to sit in. So what I said was, I cannot work here, you have to provide me with this before I come to work, but I am contracted to work so I'm working.'

(P2)

'When I first came here, every day I went home in pain. You're sitting there and you know you've got to keep taking painkillers to get through the day because the chair's not adequate for you. You can't focus on your job.'

(P55)

5.3.4 Paperwork

A number of respondents (both customers and employers) raised the question of paperwork and the need to complete forms and collect receipts and then claim monies back from AtW. Some respondents found this process difficult (in one case, the employer had to pay for travel to work expenses and claim them back from AtW as they were so high, in others customers who are visually impaired found collating the receipts very difficult) and required a fair amount of help from staff at the Business Centres to 'get it right'.

'I try and get my support worker to help me with [the paperwork] if I can and then you need to make sure that the taxi driver fills out the receipt properly and AtW have told me a couple of times that they are not filling it out properly and you need to make sure they do. I ask them, but I can't see whether they have or not and some of them just say to me "Well you fill it out, I can't write English" and it's all a bit of a nightmare, and I'm always so out of pocket with it, which is a real difficulty to manage.'

(P46)

'I'm satisfied with the service [employee] has received. It could be improved and it's all about timing...The...thing I could think definitely on the employer's part, particularly for organisations like ours which are so small, if there was... advice and support at least doing the forms. It took one hour discussion between accounts and my team...'

(P2)

Another customer said that they required more help (and hours) from their support worker in order to complete the required forms:

'The more I needed the support to help me it was more around getting the paperwork right all the time.'

(P3)

5.4 Satisfaction with Business Centres

Customers and employers generally reported high levels of satisfaction with the service they received from AtW staff working from the Business Centres and for the most part, customers found staff to be approachable, reassuring and helpful. Customers seem overall to be very happy with the help they received from staff at the Business Centres.

'I do know that if there are any problems to give them a ring and they will talk me through it. I think that is quite reassuring really.'

(P1)

Contact with staff working out of the AtW Business Centres was mainly via telephone and e-mail and this seemed to work well, although following the completion of the application process and once support was in place, this contact (where it took place) was normally restricted to the completion of claim forms.

'I have to say they are very good. They will answer your questions, if they can't help you they will get someone to ring you back and help you. Overall, I think they provide a very good service.'

(P11)

Customers who had a named contact at the Business Centre, and who always spoke to the same person, seemed to be particularly satisfied with the levels of

service they had received, whereas those customers who spoke to different advisers seemed less likely to be so. Many advisers at the Business Centres reported that they had been in post for long periods of time, and seemed to have built up expertise and good relationships with their customer caseloads. The allocation of customer cases to specific advisers was welcomed by customers who reported a high degree of satisfaction with such an approach. One customer commented:

'It is nice to know that there is someone fairly local as well. I know that they are based in...not that it makes any difference, but you speak to the same people whenever you ring and I think that makes a difference.'

(P1)

Not surprisingly, some customers felt that staff changes and difficulties getting through on the telephone caused them a degree of frustration. Customers felt it was important to be made to feel like a person and not just another case although there were some examples where this had not happened.

'You often get passed from pillar to post, it's very difficult to really talk to someone...You do get through to the contact person eventually.'

(P9)

One customer said he had noticed changes over time in his dealings with the Business Centre and he observed that the service he received had become more personal and communication improved which was very welcome.

'It feels more personal now than it did then. But maybe because I am more familiar, I don't know.'

(P2)

5.5 Employers

Employers' views on the level of service they had received from Business Centres echoed those of customers and overall, they had found Business Centre staff to be very helpful. Employers also welcomed having a named contact who was easy to reach:

'I've found that when we call them, apart from the odd time when they're busy which I understand, that they always respond and are helpful.'

(P5)

Some national employers felt that different Business Centres offered different levels of service or different decisions, although this was acknowledged to be changing over time.

'There was a lot of inconsistency between the different Business Centres, because I deal with a national company and deal with all the Business Centres. I think the consistency is getting better but still not there yet.'

(P22)

During the interviews, we asked respondents if they had noticed any changes in the service they had received from Business Centres during the last few years, in order to gauge any early impact of the introduction of the national team.

One employing charity noted:

'Some things have improved. We went through a big stage of getting things rejected...there was a lot of inconsistency between the different Business Centres. I think the consistency is getting better but is still not there yet. Speed, possibly has speeded up over the last few years but again that's not consistent: some we get within a week, some we still wait a month.'

(P5)

Employers had generally not used Business Centres to get general advice on helping their disabled employees although some felt that they may use the centre as a starting point in the future if they had any queries.

5.6 Reviews and on-going support

The degree to which AtW provides ongoing support to customers depends on the type of support that they are receiving. Customers who receive ongoing support such as travel to work, a support worker or communications support, are usually awarded AtW support for a maximum period of three years at which point in time their needs are automatically reviewed. Often however, and particularly if the support has fairly recently been put in place, the Business Centre will review AtW support within the first three to six months of the application to ensure that it is working well and that the customers needs are being met. This is entirely at the discretion of Business Centre Advisers, perhaps with an additional recommendation from an assessment provider, and it seems to work well. One assessment provider summarised:

'Things that are one-off purchases like one of those CCTV viewers are much more straightforward. Where it becomes more difficult for AtW and for us and for assessors is where it's an ongoing cost, like for instance, a deaf person needs a communication sign language person for meetings...that's a long-term ongoing cost. So what they tend to do is the assessor will recommend a given amount of time and say: "I suggest this is put in place for six months and let's review it in six months".'

(A1)

Customers who receive this kind of support remain in regular contact with Business Centres as they continue to put in claims for payment to cover the costs of their AtW. In this way, they maintain a regular dialogue with the AtW team. Customers seemed to be generally satisfied with the official three year review period and most felt it was appropriate to their personal situation.

Other customers who receive one-off types of support under AtW, such as wheelchairs, computer hardware and software, or adaptations to premises,

normally only have contact with Business Centres whilst their application is going through. Once they have received AtW support, the contact with the Business Centre usually comes to an end. If these customers have any concerns or problems with their support, it is up to them to be proactive and contact the AtW Business Centre for further help.

'I think that is fine so long as your condition remains the same. I think they leave a lot of responsibility to individuals, that's how it works. So it is up to individuals to contact them if the situation changes.'

(P12)

'I do believe that I'm receiving ongoing support. If I need anything or if there's any issues at all, I've got an adviser's name and number, I go directly to the adviser, just contact them, so I do feel that they are there on an ongoing basis.'

(P50)

Some customers were less sure about what to do if their needs changed. When asked if he had contacted the Business Centre to discuss his altered situation and to see if AtW could help, one customer said:

'I haven't actually no, because I didn't know I could still use AtW. It's not something I have thought of...I thought you were only allowed to use them for a certain amount of time and I thought my time had expired, if that makes any sense.'

(P41)

A few customers reported poor experiences when they needed a review of their AtW support. In some cases, customers required a review because their health condition had worsened or they had had a stay in hospital. In these cases, customers often struggled to get back to work and felt that AtW had not really helped them. One customer had had to take time off from work for a serious operation and then returned to the workplace over a period of time:

'I asked them to review and the whole process took so long...I asked then if I could have things like a hands-free phone – reaching out for things was really difficult...I didn't get it. They just seem disorganised.'

(P3)

Some customers experienced difficulties when they moved to a different employer. On the one hand, the old employing organisation had often purchased, or made a contribution to the purchase of, specialist equipment and were reluctant to let it go with the employee/AtW customer to another company as they had incurred the original expense. On the other hand, the equipment or support was specific to the needs of the employee or individual. One customer described his unease at having to ask to keep his AtW equipment:

'I felt a bit like a piggy in the middle trying to ask, can I take this laptop please to my new job? And it all felt a bit awkward really. But I did manage to bring my equipment with me which was great because it was one less thing to worry about.'

(P46)

Another problem though is the fact that some individuals do take their support with them to their new employer but they are unable to work with it in the new setting; this seems to particularly be the case with IT equipment and software. One customer told us how they had been assessed as requiring a particular piece of software and had gone on to receive training in how to use this software by the assessment provider.

'[Assessment provider came out at] a later date to install the equipment and help train me on it. But then moving jobs you've got to take the equipment with you, but because it's specialist equipment no-one at your new workplace can help install it. So it would be great if you could get help installing the equipment at every new job but you can't...It's just sitting in my drawer. I've got this equipment and I can't use it anymore. My [new] colleagues have been unable to install it.'

(P9)

Reviews are much more common and frequent for people who have an ongoing need for support, e.g. for a Support Worker or an interpreter, than for customers receiving one-off forms of help such as software or a wheelchair. Review dates are often recommended by assessment providers in order to check that the amount of help they have specified is appropriate to the needs of the customer.

Assessment providers often provide an informal aftercare service for AtW customers to assist them with any issues or problems that arise in the workplace and with the support that they have received. This type of follow-up help may not be solely concerned with helping customers to use particular pieces of AtW-funded equipment properly but may also involve supporting some customers, for example, who have changed jobs within their employing organisation after a period of time and are unsure whether they can simply transfer their support to the new job role. Assessors reported that in cases such as this, they would discuss the new job role with the customer and then advise whether a further approach to AtW is necessary or more appropriate because the need has changed significantly. In instances such as this, it is the goodwill of assessment providers that covers the cost of aftercare:

'I think the scheme could be better organised in that, you know, [AtW] could build in some provision whereby they would say: "Well, okay, over and above your fees for the assessments...we will agree to pay...if you'd like to do your second visit or you're going to do a bit of support for the client or... if you spend time with them on the phone, we will give you some financial reimbursement for that", then you know, that will make things easier.'

(A1)

Assessment providers also reported that they are able to provide ongoing support to employers as necessary although this was much less frequent than ongoing support to customers, and was usually at the instigation of the employer. The main reasons that employers seemed to have approached assessors were to request bespoke training on software and equipment and, in one or two cases, to ask them to source equipment on their behalf. This has particularly been the case when employers have needed a number of items from different suppliers, and it has been easier for them to hand the responsibility to a third party.

Some Business Centres follow up customer applications with a satisfaction survey or customer service questionnaire to ascertain how happy people are with the support they've received. One Business Centre Manager reported:

'The questionnaire gives us feedback and if any derogatory comments or complaints are made that would be passed generally to me, for me to take that up with the advisers as to what's happened, to pursue it and I would write to the customer to find out more or to try and resolve the issue.'

It is unusual though, for Business Centres to receive many complaints and certainly our interviews with customers have revealed a high degree of satisfaction with the AtW service generally, and Business Centre staff in particular. No-one included in our sample had made a formal complaint about their AtW application.

Business Centres do not routinely offer or fund an aftercare service and this was cause for some concern for a minority of customers and employers. Once again, this often related to the general maintenance and upkeep of software and equipment. Because no-one is funded to provide this specialist support, it can go neglected. One employer explained:

'The only area of concern is the long-term support. This chair is expensive. It's also quite complicated so it can go wrong...Software gets out of date... One of the other concerns is that someone's got an interactive bit of equipment... [and the] chair, it needs to be looked after and he's not very careful with it. He didn't buy it and he hasn't got a lot of incentive to look after it... That's perhaps one of the weaknesses of the process. It might depend on whether the individual's been through the application process themselves and feels ownership through arranging it and responsible for looking after it.'

(P8)

This problem may again be one of communicating to all parties who is responsible for the maintenance of support and equipment. However, the issue is compounded by the fact that AtW awards are made to individuals but that the financial contribution (usually) comes from the employer.

6 Impact

In this chapter, we look at the impact that support from the Access to Work (AtW) programme has had on customers' health and well-being, and their employment. Our aim in this chapter is to ascertain the benefits of receiving AtW for both customers and employers. In this chapter, we go beyond discussions of the actual help that customers have received (the outcomes) to explore what sort of a difference this help has had on them and on their employers. The chapter also addresses the important issue of deadweight; that is, the extent to which employers would have provided the support themselves in the absence of AtW.

6.1 Customers' views

When customers discuss the impact that AtW has had on them, they list a host of positive hard and soft factors, including:

- reducing sickness absenteeism and improving attendance;
- providing a level playing field in employment;
- retaining employment;
- improving work skills, particularly those relating to computing and IT equipment;
- financial gains from reduced expenditure (on travel) and better employment;
- providing a stepping stone to employment;
- being more in control at work and more autonomous;
- improved health and wellbeing;
- feeling supported;
- gaining a sense of independence.

These factors are, of course, interdependent. A number of customers reported that AtW has enabled them to secure employment, which has improved their sense of well-being, self-esteem and their confidence, thus making them feel more independent.

6.1.1 Gaining employment

Customers told us that AtW was an important tool that enabled them to secure employment, and that it provided the means to raise the issue of their disability or health condition with their employer and come up with solutions in a positive way.

'I think it's general wellbeing really, you know there is a pride in being able to do your job, you know that you can do it, the help that I've had has enabled me to do that. In the first place it has enabled me to get off Incapacity Benefit which was the big thing for me because it was quite a risk. I didn't know how I would manage with it and I started on quite low hours, but knowing that I've got that support there I think gave me the confidence to try it in the first place. As I say it was a bit like a safety blanket really. You just feel that you've got a bit more support behind you. I still got a lot to give even though I've got health problems doesn't mean to say I can't do the job, and that lets me do my job.'

(P1)

'It is very difficult to know what you say at an interview. They will say you should [disclose] because there is no discrimination, but you feel that if you do say something that is a problem [AtW] will come back...and will assist you on that side.'

(P19)

'[AtW] had the bonus that it's made them... my employers have recognised that I have got a disability, because they don't recognise because it's completely hidden.'

(P9)

For several customers AtW was very simply, the difference between working and not working:

'[AtW] has given me my life. When you are educated and you have always worked, if you work for an organisation for 30 years and then you don't work at all, it would be a big blow. My child is at university [...] he works part-time but with university it's difficult. If as parents we can't support him then he can't study.'

(P12)

AtW also helped disabled people to set up their own businesses. The programme can be used during the early period of test trading and a number of customers reported that this help has been invaluable.

'There's no way I'd be running my own business. [Without AtW] I'd probably be stacking shelves.'

(P20)

6.1.2 Retaining employment

AtW provides a means of staying in work. Many AtW customers become ill or disabled whilst in employment and the programme has enabled these employees to retain their work status, often gained over a number of years.

'I feel it is quite good enough and I am grateful to have it. If it wasn't for that I wouldn't have been able to stay in the job. I would have had to get another job, which would have been quite terrible I think.'

(P26)

'It has helped me stay in employment. It's taken all the worry out of not being able to see scripts which is such a vital thing in this profession. I never thought I would end up doing so much radio work and it has all led directly to that. The fact that it's in my hands and under my control has helped.'

(P4)

In addition to retaining employment, AtW also appears to have helped some customers to gain better work, either with their existing employer or by facilitating a move to a different job with better prospects.

'I thought I'd still be doing exactly the same job and not getting paid that much for doing it. Whereas, at least with this job, you know, it is only a small company, but there is the prospect of going to college, learning all about the financial stuff...'

(P49)

'[Without AtW] I think I wouldn't have been able to do what I've achieved. I certainly wouldn't have gone in for my Assessors, I know I wouldn't, that's so I can teach young cadets. For me to be able to teach them I'd have to have gone through the course. That was a full, monthly, full-on 12 month course, plus you have to be able to show the evidence. That wouldn't have happened.'

(P43)

Customers have also been able to keep up-to-date with changes in technology as a result of help they have received from AtW. This customer, who is self employed, would have been unable to pay for such state-of-the-art technology without the help of AtW:

'[Without AtW] I might have found out about stuff as it has all happened in parallel with advances in technology, so I might have eventually caught up with all that and been able to afford...it's a chicken and egg thing when you're self-employed. If you're not earning enough money when you start to be able to afford the computer equipment then you are held back so it was a fantastic leg up at the time and it was timed very well.'

(P4)

6.1.3 A level playing field

Customers also identified that AtW provided them with a level playing field with regard to employment. They reported feeling 'normal' in the work environment and able to hold their own against colleagues:

'I feel like anybody else around me. No one's going to point a finger at me: "look, he's different". One of the biggest things with me was that I wanted to be as normal as everybody else. And with the equipment that I've got, I do feel normal.'

(P50)

Support workers, in particular, seem to enable AtW customers to carry out their day to day work functions, as would other non-disabled colleagues. These customers have been able to carry on and undertake manual tasks regardless of their physical impairments:

'I can't go on a ladder – that is another thing I can't do. But that doesn't affect me much in the job [anymore] because all that physical aspect is done by somebody else [the support worker] now.'

(P26)

'I have a support worker which is great because they take that pressure off me and obviously my body...the silly things like lifting and carrying. Also I have issues with plugs and sockets because my physical strength isn't that of a non-disabled person and also gripping things to my hands, so they help with all the computer system things. So if there was anything wrong they would do it pushing things in or unplugging things.'

(P29)

Communications support from interpreters, funded by AtW, had also helped customers to function fully in the workplace.

'I need an interpreter for my job. I live in a deaf world. Some hearing people make an attempt [to use BSL] but it's too difficult. Hearing people don't know BSL enough to be able to use it so I need an interpreter.'

(P5)

And training provided by assessors had helped AtW customers and their colleagues to work more effectively together:

'I think had I not done that [disability awareness] training it would have been a slower process in my colleagues getting used to working with somebody with a hearing impairment. Having somebody come in and say some of the things that I should do in my workplace was extremely useful.'

(P17)

Ergonomic equipment paid for by AtW had also allowed customers to get on with their job and contribute like any other colleague which was important to them.

'Once I got the chair, it made me decide I could actually go to work and feel comfortable at work and get on with my job without sitting there, well, I'm in pain anyway, but without the additional pain and discomfort normal chairs can create.[...] It made it so that I just felt part of the team and I could just get on with the job having the equipment. Whereas before that I was in constant pain, I was up and down like a yo-yo, I couldn't sit still, I was taking painkillers like it was Smarties.'

(P48)

'They sorted me out a desk which actually means I can stand up and do my work, the desk goes up and down, a chair and stuff that I can use when I am working. If I hadn't got it I would not be in work.'

(P30)

6.1.4 Financial savings

Customers also reported that they had gained financially as a result of receiving help from AtW. This was particularly the case for customers who received financial help with the ongoing costs of transport. As one customer summarised:

'The problem I had in the past was that I could go wherever it might be to work, but it would cost me more each week to get there than I was actually going to earn... It's a Godsend. I can now work like anybody else and not be financially disadvantaged.'

(P21)

A number of customers told us that they would not have been able to cover the financial costs of putting support in place themselves, and that their employers would have been unwilling to do so on their behalf. Thus, the financial contribution from AtW for equipment had been essential:

'It's made going back to work very, very easy. We all make adjustments, but I can't see me paying the sort of money for a chair that's been paid for me, for the specialist keyboard, the headsets, something like that. If I worked at the Call Centre they make you buy that, so without AtW I would find it very, very difficult to be in the position I'm in.'

(P50)

'Being able to actually get software that will enable me to do a job is a good thing because if that wasn't provided by AtW then I would be looking for an employer to provide it and unless you are in permanent work an employer is not going to do it. I am a consultant so none of my employers are going to pay, so that was a benefit to me.'

(P10)

6.1.5 Well-being

Most customers taking part in this research felt very supported by AtW (and Business Centre advisers) and reported that this gave them more confidence in their day-to-day working environment. We have seen that communication between advisers and customers drops off after the application has been concluded but clearly (many) customers felt that they have the ongoing support of the AtW team if they needed it.

'My disease is ongoing. I would say probably yes, they have helped, because your confidence goes up a lot more. There are days when you think, you know, it is a bit of support that I think if I am unsure there is somebody there to talk to.'

(P19)

Some customers discussed the impact of AtW in terms of general well-being. These customers told us that the quality of their working lives had improved as a result of receiving support from the programme.

'I think it's general wellbeing really. You know, there is a pride in being able to do your job, know that you can do it. The help that I've had has enabled me to do that.'

(P1)

'I tell you something, it's fundamental. If you take away this stuff, I could do the job but I would be suffering.'

(P2)

'To be able to go out and socialise, to be financially independent...those are the important things that I missed for two and a half years. It's given me life back. It sounds crazy, but...'

(P50)

One customer's mother told us:

'It would be an absolute disaster if he wasn't working. Because it gets him out, it gets him amongst different people. Gives him a sense of worth, providing for himself. He has his own money, he can go on holiday, do basically what he likes.'

(P28)

Support to cover the costs of travelling to work enabled some customers to get out and meet others in the work place which has reduced their sense of isolation.

'You work from home on your own all day. You can't walk anywhere. I'm not able to drive. My entire world became my house and the shop over the road if I needed some milk. That's as far as I ever got, you know, for a long time. And then I got this job now and, you know, I would never be able to do this and be able to get out of the house. [AtW] made a huge huge difference, it really has.'

(P49)

6.2 Employers' views

When discussing the impact of funding with employers, we aimed to explore how important the service they received from AtW had been and to ascertain what sort of a difference they felt it had made to their employee(s) and to their business.

Employers reported that the main impacts arising from their involvement with AtW included:

- increasing their understanding of the needs of disabled staff;
- increasing the well-being of their staff;
- increasing the productivity of disabled employees;
- improved retention of disabled employees;
- increasing recruitment rates for disabled people.

6.2.1 Understanding needs

We have seen in the earlier chapter on awareness of AtW that employers often did not know what support or help was available for their disabled employees. In relation to impact, employers have reported that AtW had often been instrumental in helping them, via staff at the Business Centres and during workplace assessments, to understand more fully the nature of their employee's needs, and offering suggestions as to how they could be better supported.

'AtW has the specialist knowledge for the assessors to come and say that's what you need.'

(P13)

'It's nice knowing that they are there so now that I know more about them I can use them for other things, like I said I had a lady that was depressed so it was actually very nice using them rather than sending her to occupational health where she may have felt intimidated by the whole thing, she actually had a chat with them which was nice. So what has helped me is knowing that there is an organisation out there and that if I need them for anything that I can direct people to them.'

(P19)

6.2.2 Improving well-being

In the same way that customers identified that AtW support had eased their work situation and improved their well-being, employers too have noted that their employees seem to have become more confident and independent.

'She has a job, she has her own money, and she stands on her own two feet, so yeah I think it is good for that. Quality of life.'

(P16)

'It's allowed him to be more mobile and, in a sense, be "normal", he can go to breaks, move from one job to another...it's helped him to integrate better into the normal environment.'

(P8)

6.2.3 Increasing productivity

One of the key business benefits that employers identified as a consequence of employees receiving support from AtW is an improvement in the way people are able to do their jobs. As one employer has commented:

'She would not have been able to do the job without it...Everyday things like filing, she needed a pocket viewer to see the tags on the sides of the files so she knows where things are going. Without it, everything would have taken her three times as long.'

(P41)

Another employer noted the essential role that a support worker had played with one of his employees.

'I think there's a hell of a lot she wouldn't be able to do if she didn't have the support worker.'

(P29)

When asked if the company would have recruited this employee without the support worker this employer said:

'It would have been hard because of the limitations.'

(P29)

It seems, in many cases, that employers have also been quicker to put support in place with the help of AtW than they might otherwise have been. It is likely that the provision and installation of AtW support will have made employees more able to do their jobs more efficiently, and more quickly.

'We would have employed him anyway. I don't know if he would have been able to do his job as quick and efficiently as he does. I'm sure of that actually.'

(P59)

6.2.4 Improved retention

One of the key policy aims of AtW is to improve the retention of disabled employees and people with long-standing health conditions. There is a clear indication from the interviews with employers that this aim is being achieved. We have seen many examples in which employers have been able to retain valued employees as a result of the AtW programme:

'It's allowed us to keep someone in employment who has very good skills and expertise...[Without AtW] I suppose there are several options, a) that her employment wouldn't have continued and [she would have been] made redundant, or b) that she may have been offered another post which probably doesn't utilise all of her skills, which is not good for [employee] really.'

(P18)

'He's recently been diagnosed, I believe it's a form of epilepsy, so he can't drive now and was all ready to hand in his resignation and we said hold on a minute. There may be some support for you there.'

(P21)

'I don't think she would have been able to come back to work if it hadn't been for the report because she needed all the equipment that they suggested. I suppose if we were sign-posted directly to the RNIB we would probably be in the same situation now it's just that we'd have had to pay full bill, quite honestly we would have done that.'

(P44 (Employer))

One employer doubted whether the programme could have a similar impact on the recruitment of disabled people.

'Whether one would do it for someone who came to you on your doorstep asking for a job with a disability, I don't know. If you have someone that has worked for you for a long while you feel obligated to rehabilitate.'

(P25)

6.2.5 Improved recruitment

There is some evidence, however, to suggest that AtW is enabling employers to recruit disabled people and a few employers told us that this has been the case. It does not seem as though employers are making any exceptions for disabled people, rather that AtW is (as some customers believe) providing a level playing field and allowing them to compete for jobs in an open labour market.

'It enabled us to give [customer] a job. Without it we wouldn't have been able to offer her an admin job. We're a very busy office and we're small. We have no time to sit still and need somebody who can get on with the job. We can't baby-sit people. It enabled her to do it. It's only her sight that stops her, she's able-bodied every other way. Initially, we just gave her a short-term contract of three months to see how it would work. She ended up staying two-and-a-half years before she moved on to a better paid, full-time job. It's helped her develop tremendously.'

(P41)

6.3 Deadweight or additionality?

One of the objectives for this research was to examine the factors surrounding deadweight in relation to AtW, and we explored this important issue during our interviews with employers. Obviously, we have been unable to quantify deadweight in any way, nor in any statistically valid sense have we been able to prove its existence. Instead, because of the qualitative nature of this study, we asked employers to tell us what they think would have happened in the absence of AtW funding and support and we observed a variety of responses. Essentially, working along a continuum, we have identified four possible points:

- **Full additionality.** In this scenario, AtW has provided support and assistance to customers which would not otherwise have been put in place or funded by employers. In this example, AtW will have had maximum impact.
- **Partial deadweight.** In this instance, employers would have funded and put support in place but the support would have been in some way inferior to AtW (for example, of a poorer quality or a lesser amount etc.) or the support would have been put in much later. The additionality that AtW provides in these cases is a better and speedier solution.
- **Full deadweight.** At this point on the continuum, employers would have funded and put in exactly the same support as AtW in exactly the same timeframe as AtW. In other words, the solutions put in place by employers would have matched those of AtW.
- **Deadweight plus.** At this point on the continuum, employers would fund and put in place solutions that exceed those of AtW either in terms of the quality of the support package, the amount of support provided, or in a much quicker time frame. In this situation, the outcome with AtW is 'worse' than it would have been in its absence.

In addressing this issue, we have looked at some of the factors that might be expected to influence an employer's position on the continuum. The starting point here has been to look at how the type of support required, and the employment sector and company size might affect the likelihood of employers supporting their employees directly.

6.3.1 Type of support

The type of support that employees require seems to be directly linked to an employer's attitude to funding AtW-type support. Overwhelmingly, for example, employers told us that they would be very unlikely to cover the travel to work costs of their disabled employees, which is very much in line with the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) 2002 evaluation of AtW. With very few exceptions, employers believed that it is up to the individual to arrange for transport to and from work themselves.

'She doesn't drive...her vision, she can't see like she used to. She is diabetic also, so I...the opportunity would have been there for her, had she found her own way here. Do you know what I'm saying? That would have been left to her own devices to find her way here. You can't tell someone they can't have a job because they can't find their way to work, but she would probably have left because she wouldn't have had a way to work.'

(P16)

'It would have been difficult because we would not have been able to support her getting to work. If she could have found a way of getting to work, that would have been on her. We'd already supported her on the transition, and a lot of the staff. We couldn't have carried that on. It's difficult. I think it would have been very difficult.'

(P27)

Just one employer intimated that he would have found some way to cover an employee's transport costs. Interestingly, this employee was retained in employment following illness. We have found no similar examples amongst customers who had been recruited into new employment.

'To be fair we didn't have to go that far because we got the support. If that hadn't have happened we would have then had to find some way of getting him here because I wanted to give him every chance. Because of his initial inability to work full days it would have been inconvenient because we normally start at half past seven and finish at five. [The customer] initially came in at eight until eleven while he built up his strength.'

(P25)

Travel to work costs seem to be the only support type where employers have been so emphatic in their reluctance to pay. Travel to work would thus appear to provide a good example of full or nearly full additionality in relation to AtW.

6.3.2 Sector and size

Employment sector and company size do not, however, appear to be strong determinants of additionality or deadweight. One assumption that we might make is that the public sector and charitable organisations would be more likely to pay for workplace support and assistance than employers in the private sector.

We might also expect that larger employers would be more able and willing to pay for workplace support than smaller employers. However, we have found that this is not always the case. Asked if they would have bought the equipment if AtW had not, one charity explained:

'Yes, but obviously as we are a charity and we are non-government funded then every little bit helps. So we are more than grateful for whatever they were going to give us.'

(P19)

Other charities said:

'It would have been too big a hurdle if we hadn't had some support.'

(P8)

'I am not in accounts but I get enough discussion about cash flow. I can't have this and I can't do that because of cash flow. I can only imagine that if we didn't have AtW, I don't know how we would have been able to meet any of his needs. I think the furniture alone was over £1,000, which is a lot of money for a company that doesn't have any money.'

(P2)

Some public sector employers have also said they would be unlikely to be able to cover the costs of workplace support (largely because of tight budgetary controls) whereas the private sector gave a more mixed response. One very large public sector employer reported:

'No. I'm sure that funding would not be available. I wouldn't have thought so as we're strapped for cash. I know in the past AtW has supported various adaptations for computers and all sorts of things. Its been really good. I wouldn't have been able to fund that from my normal budget because every penny is precious. It's sad, but you could argue that it should be there for everybody – all disabled people should be able to have it from the budget. And you'd expect that from a large organisation like [...] you should be able to do it. But it doesn't work like that. We have to make savings all the time, like everywhere else.'

(P27)

In contrast, one small private sector employer said:

'Really pleased that AtW helped him get the equipment. We would have done it anyway as [the customer] is family but it has made it a lot more manageable.'

(P39)

However, another large, private-sector employer said:

'The equipment has been fine and has allowed [...] to do her job. We would have paid for the equipment without AtW funding but we may have had to get it in stages or not been able to get the most suitable equipment or gone for a cheaper option. She might have had more of a struggle to get it approved which may have delayed the process.'

(P30)

6.3.3 Partiality

The points raised by this last employer are much more pertinent to the issue of deadweight in AtW generally. In many ways, the research has found that many employers said that they would have put support in place in the absence of AtW but that this support may have been of a lower quality, or would have been put in place less quickly (and we are unable to corroborate whether they would indeed have done so). The following examples illustrate well the extent and nature of partial deadweight in the AtW programme.

'They may have been able to get the chairlift installed without AtW but it would have taken them a lot longer to factor it into their cash-flow than it did with AtW.'

(P33)

'It is certainly instrumental timing wise, no doubt about it, it acts as a catalyst to get things done. I think our organisation suffers from not having an organisation wide policy on this and it was down to me as a concerned manager to push it through and contact AtW.'

(P7)

'Trying to work out if the AtW wasn't there would we have shopped around 'til we got cheaper equipment, I don't know. Got some more advice on the technical spec, but without question we just went ahead and ordered that, but possibly if it was not supported financially then we might have done a bit more shopping around.'

(P44)

Another important point to make here is the importance employers placed on the advice and guidance they received on workplace supports and adjustments and particularly the help they received from assessment providers. The following examples suggest that there is a degree of full deadweight in AtW but that employers may not have been able to put the support in place without a (free at the point of delivery) specialist assessment.

'I suppose in the long-term we would have bought the chair or something of that nature but the AtW has the specialist knowledge for the assessors to come and say that's what you need. If you don't have the specialist knowledge then you are very much at prey to Orthopaedic chair salesmen, which may or may not be a good thing.'

(P13)

'We would have supported her in school anyway, if the funding wasn't available. If somebody had come out and done the assessment and there had been no funding we would still have done the work.'

(P17)

Finally, and not surprisingly perhaps, this research has found no examples of 'deadweight plus'. We might assume that employers who have put such solutions in place for their disabled employees, or who are in a position to do so, have no recourse to the AtW programme.

7 Conclusions

This research has examined the Access to Work (AtW) programme at a number of levels. At the customer level, the primary aim of the research has been to explore the customer's experience of AtW, to examine the service they have received and to ascertain the quality of that service and their satisfaction with it. At another level, the research has sought to explore similar themes with employers but it has also examined the important issues of additionality and deadweight. The research has also explored the role of assessment providers and AtW Business Centres in the delivery and administration of the programme and these interviews have provided another dimension to the study. This chapter draws together these findings and identifies the key conclusions arising from the study.

7.1 Marketing and awareness

AtW does not appear to be widely marketed and awareness of the programme seems to be fairly low. Many AtW customers found out about the programme serendipitously or 'by accident', and usually via unofficial sources, such as friends and family members, or from disability organisations. The research findings suggest that people who come into regular contact with Jobcentre Plus, for example those on benefits, were more likely to find out about AtW than those people in work, but even in these cases, it was often more by luck than design. Disabled employees often struggled in work before finally learning of AtW and making an application. Employers too were unlikely to have heard of AtW before being told about the programme by their disabled employees.

There is almost universal agreement that the AtW programme should be more widely marketed than it is at the present time. Disabled people, their employers, assessment contractors and other stakeholders including New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP) and WORKSTEP providers who work closely with disabled employees, all reported that awareness of AtW needed to be raised. Business Centre staff also felt that more could be done to increase awareness of the programme although this view was tempered as more awareness is likely to increase demand, which would put a strain on already-tight resources.

On a more practical level, users of the service believed that the materials that are currently available to market AtW, including written literature and the website, could be improved. Customers and employers, and other stakeholders taking part in this research, thought that marketing materials could be easily improved by providing more details on the type of support that is available from AtW and for whom, and by giving some case study examples of the help that has been received. The research has also raised questions about the flow of information between AtW and other Jobcentre Plus officials (and possibly other professionals, such as those in the medical profession). The findings suggest that these lines of communication need to be prioritised to ensure that staff who come into contact with disabled people (and thereby potential AtW customers) are able to signpost them to the programme.

7.2 Application process

Customers and employers have generally commented positively on the AtW application process with most respondents feeling that it was speedy, responsive and professional. Customers, in particular, have welcomed the opportunity to complete a large part of the application form with Business Centre staff over the telephone.

The main problems that some customers experienced in relation to their applications for AtW seemed to centre on:

- difficulties in explaining or getting Business Centre staff to understand the nature of their impairment(s) or their employment (this was particularly true for some self-employed customers);
- application forms being somewhat inflexible and not available in alternative formats; and
- delays in completing the application process.

Other stakeholders (most notably some NDDP and WORKSTEP providers) also voiced similar concerns about the application process. These organisations wanted greater authority and flexibility to assist with applications from their own customer groups, particularly those people with learning difficulties who, they felt, encountered more problems with AtW processes and bureaucratic procedures.

7.3 Assessment

The assessment process for AtW was widely viewed by customers and employers as a successful one and respondents repeatedly described their assessments as being carried out thoroughly and comprehensively. Many respondents (both customers and employers alike) had learned a lot from assessment providers, both in terms of the health conditions or impairments they were facing, and also with regard to the solutions that were available to them, which included a range of AtW and

non-AtW solutions. Assessors were widely regarded as experts in their field and customers and (particularly) employers seemed impressed with the level of detail and professional service they provided. In many ways, employers seemed to have gained the most from the advice and guidance they received, and particularly from the assessments that have been carried out with their employees.

A few concerns were raised during the research about the objectivity of AtW assessments with some customers and their employers believing that the solutions recommended by assessors were not always the best or the most appropriate ones for their needs. Some other stakeholders also raised concerns about the uniformity of decisions across Business Centre advisers, and indeed across regions. Business Centre staff however, did not share these views, although they were open to challenging assessments if they felt it was necessary and had done so in the past. The final decisions about AtW support are made by Business Centre advisers based on the recommendations coming from assessment providers, and on the basis of their own (often lengthy) experience and knowledge of the impairments concerned. Business Centre staff believed that they secured common solutions for customers that met their needs and that offered (financial) value-for-money, coupled with speedy solutions and adequate customer care. Advisers did not always opt for the lowest cost solution if it could not be put in place within an adequate time frame and/or without appropriate after-care support.

Dissatisfaction with the assessment process, albeit relatively uncommon, was normally experienced by AtW customers whose support needs were complex or multiple. The key issue here appears to centre on effective communication and ensuring that all parties involved in the assessment and decision making process understand fully the customer's support needs and the proposed AtW solutions. It appeared that some of the difficulties that (some) customers experienced during the assessment process could have been addressed by improved communication between the customer (and/or their advocate), the employer, the Business Centre and/or the assessment provider.

7.4 Outcomes

Customers taking part in the research received a broad range of help and support from AtW, much of which was regular ongoing help with the costs of travel to work and one-off help with special aids and equipment. Fewer customers participating in the research were getting help from support workers and fewer still had experienced adaptations to premises or equipment, or other miscellaneous types of support. It appears that the types of support that people are receiving have changed over time with more customers reporting that their employers had made adjustments to their workstations or premises as a result of health and safety requirements and/or the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

Overwhelmingly, customers and employers reported high levels of satisfaction with the support they had received from AtW and it is clear from this research

that the programme is extremely well regarded. Customers whose needs were simple, for example they required help with travel to work costs only, seemed to be the most likely to report that they were very satisfied with the service they had received. Some customers with more complex needs were however, more likely to report some dissatisfaction with the AtW programme.

The main problems that customers had experienced with regard to AtW centred on:

- the quality of the AtW solutions;
- the usability of the solutions;
- delays in getting support in place; and
- paperwork.

As discussed above, some customers felt that their AtW solutions could have been of a better quality, or could have provided a more comprehensive package of support. Other customers had experienced problems using their AtW support and many of these problems related to incompatible IT systems and software, or inadequate support in the workplace to install and help customers to use their AtW support. Although the research uncovered examples of assessment providers and suppliers providing after-care support, which AtW had paid for, this was not standard procedure. Clearly customers sometimes need additional support to help them to use their support and there are a number of examples of AtW support lying dormant because customers did not know how best to utilise it. After-care is an important issue here and many customers and employers questioned why it was not routinely available, even if it was simply a phone call from the Business Centre to check how the support was working. These problems highlight again the importance of clear and ongoing communication channels between Business Centres and AtW customers. Some customers had not spoken to AtW advisers since their support had arrived or had been put in place, and many had not voiced their concerns. If Business Centres are unaware that customers are experiencing problems, they are unable to help resolve these issues.

A further problem experienced by a number of customers was the sometimes significant delays in getting AtW support in place. The majority of these delays were caused after an assessment had been undertaken and the AtW recommendations made, and most of them can be attributed to procurement delays within the employing organisation. This is beyond the control of AtW Business Centres and is a source of frustration for staff at the Centres as well as for customers. At worst, these delays have been implicated in the loss of employment and worsening health conditions. It is difficult to identify ways in which to overcome, or lessen the impact of, delays caused by employers although the research found some examples of interim support measures being put in place which had helped some customers. An extension of interim support measures for those experiencing delays may warrant further consideration by policy makers. A number of employers stated that they were unaware that they had to order AtW support themselves, which

had led to the delays, and this may again point to the need for better (or repeated) communication with employers on this issue.

The final issue that had caused some problems for AtW customers concerned the completion of paperwork in order to claim reimbursement of funds (usually those for travel to work and support worker expenses). Customers often appeared to find these onerous and difficult to complete, and particularly those customers with a visual impairment or with learning difficulties.

Customers and employers were generally very satisfied with the level of service they had received from AtW Business Centre staff whom they reported to be approachable, reassuring and helpful. Customers who received ongoing support were particularly likely to be satisfied with their relationship with Business Centre advisers and they welcomed the allocation of customers to specific advisers (i.e. the caseloading approach). Some customers had experienced a few difficulties when they required a review of their support needs due to changes in their circumstances, for example because their health condition had worsened or because they were changing jobs, or indeed because they needed help with the maintenance and upkeep of their AtW support. These may be issues that could be addressed once more by better communication and after-care between Business Centres and customers. However, some of these concerns also relate to employers and the issue of ownership of AtW support. It seems in these cases that no-one is clear about who is responsible for what, which suggests the need to make the roles and responsibilities of all parties more explicit.

7.5 Impact

Customers and employers reported a number of very positive impacts arising from the receipt of AtW. Many of the benefits to customers included a range of 'hard' and 'soft' impacts, such as:

- reduced sickness and improved attendance;
- experiencing a level playing field when seeking employment;
- retaining employment;
- improving work skills, and especially IT skills;
- making financial gains;
- enjoying greater autonomy and independence;
- improved health and wellbeing; and
- feeling supported.

Many customers reported that AtW had quite simply made the difference between being in or out of employment. They felt that AtW had allowed them to compete with others for jobs by providing them with a level playing field and had helped

them to stay in work. Customers also reported increases in confidence and wellbeing: AtW had given them a sense of pride and independence, which was invaluable.

Employers listed a not dissimilar range of business benefits as a result of being involved with AtW, including:

- increasing the productivity of disabled staff;
- improved the retention and recruitment of disabled staff;
- increasing the wellbeing of staff; and
- increasing their understanding of the needs of disabled employees.

AtW seems to have been particularly key in enabling employers to retain disabled staff and whilst it seems to have had some impact on the recruitment of disabled people, this appears to have been to a lesser degree (an issue which in itself may be related to low levels of awareness of AtW amongst disabled people and employers generally).

The research has identified four possible 'levels' of deadweight in the AtW programme. Full additionality is observed when the support put in place by AtW would not have been provided by employers in any way. Travel to work support appears to provide a good example of full (or nearly full) additionality: AtW has had maximum impact in relation to this type of support. Partial deadweight is observed when employers would have put some sort of support in place but this would have been at a substandard level (for example, the quality of support would have been lower or support would have taken longer to put in place). Partial deadweight appears to be fairly common in AtW: many employers reported that they would have put (some) support in place but that it would have taken longer, or that it may not have been as good or as comprehensive as the support provided by AtW.

Full deadweight occurs when employers would have put exactly the same amount and quality of support in place, and in exactly the same timeframe as AtW. The research has found no firm examples of full deadweight in the AtW programme. Similarly, the research found no evidence of the fourth type of deadweight, that is 'deadweight plus'. In this scenario, employers would put in support measures that exceeded those of AtW either in relation to the quality, speed of response or the amount of support available. It is unlikely that any disabled people who are employed in an organisation with this approach would have need of AtW. Somewhat surprisingly, there was no clear indication from the research that particular types of employers, for example large or small, or private or public sector employers, would be more or less likely to put in bigger or better, or indeed worse, solutions than those funded by AtW. These key employer characteristics do not seem to have a strong bearing on additionality or deadweight in the AtW programme.

The research found that employers generally felt that it was reasonable that they should contribute towards the cost of their employee's support package, and in many cases, employers were unable to recall if they had done so or not. Some smaller employers and new business start-ups found it difficult to pay all the support costs upfront because of cash flow problems although they were happy to do so in principle.

Appendix A

Customer details

Table A.1 Customer details

Customer	Employment status	Company size	Type of support received				
			Special aids and equipment	Travel to work	Support worker	Adaptation to premises and equipment	Other
1	Employed	Large	✓	✓			
2	Employed	Small	✓	✓	✓		
3	Self-employed	Micro	✓	✓	✓		
4	Self-employed	Large	✓				
5	Employed	Medium			✓		
6	Not employed	Large	✓				
7	Employed	Medium	✓				
8	Employed	Medium	✓				
9	Employed	Medium	✓	✓			
10	Employed	*	✓	✓			
11	Employed	Medium	✓				
12	Employed	Small		✓			
13	Employed	Medium	✓				
14	Not employed	Large	✓				
15	Employed	Medium	✓		✓		✓
16	Employed	Medium		✓			
17	Employed	Medium			✓		
18	Employed	Large		✓			
19	Employed	Medium	✓				
20	Self-employed	Small			✓		
21	Employed	Large		✓			
22	Employed	Large	✓		✓		
23	Self-employed	*	✓		✓		

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

Customer	Employment status	Company size	Type of support received			
			Special aids and equipment	Travel to work	Support worker	Adaptation to premises and equipment Other
24	Employed	Large				
25	Employed	Small		✓		
26	Employed	Large	✓		✓	
27	Employed	Large	✓	✓		
28	Employed	Medium		✓	✓	
29	Employed	Micro	✓	✓	✓	
30	Employed	Large	✓			
31	Employed	Large	✓		✓	
32	Self-employed	*			✓	
33	Employed	Micro				✓
34	Employed	Large		✓		
35	Employed	Large		✓		
36	Self-employed	*		✓		
37	Employed	Small		✓		
38	Employed	Large		✓		
39	Employed	Micro	✓			✓
40	Self-employed	Micro	✓			
41	Employed	Large	✓			
42	Not employed	*	✓			
43	Employed	Large	✓			
44	Employed	Large	✓	✓		
45	Employed	Large	✓			
46	Employed	Large	✓	✓	✓	
47	*	Large	✓			
48	Employed/ self-employed		✓			
49	Employed	Micro		✓		
50	Employed	Large	✓			
51	Employed	*	✓			
52	Employed	Large	✓	✓		
53	Employed	Micro	✓			
54	Employed	Small	✓			
55	Employed	*	✓			
56	Employed	Small	✓	✓		
57	Not Employed	*	✓			
58	Employed	*				
59	Employed	Medium	✓		✓	
60	Employed	Small	✓			