

Written evidence submitted by Mr William Gomes (AWS0069)

Executive Summary

This submission provides evidence-based analysis of the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) administration of the Access to Work (AtW) scheme, drawing on National Audit Office findings, stakeholder testimony, and peer-reviewed research. The evidence demonstrates that whilst AtW remains a vital employment support mechanism, systemic administrative failures are undermining its effectiveness and threatening the employment security of disabled workers.

Key findings indicate that processing delays have increased nearly fourfold since 2020 to 2021, from 28 to 109 working days by November 2025, substantially exceeding DWP's 25-day target [1]. These delays, combined with reported reductions in award levels at renewal and inconsistent decision-making, are creating significant barriers to employment participation. The evidence suggests that administrative capacity has not kept pace with demand growth, and that current reform proposals risk further restricting access without adequate evaluation of scheme effectiveness or value for money.

This submission examines: (1) operational performance and administrative capacity; (2) decision consistency and quality assurance; (3) impacts on claimants and employers; and (4) reform proposals and evidence gaps. It concludes with recommendations for immediate operational improvements and evidence-based policy development.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope of Access to Work

Access to Work is a demand-led discretionary grant scheme established in 1994 to help disabled people secure or sustain employment by funding practical workplace support beyond employers' reasonable adjustment obligations under the Equality Act 2010 [2]. The scheme provides grants for specialist equipment, support workers (including British Sign Language interpreters), travel assistance, and workplace adaptations, with a maximum annual award of £69,260 in 2024 to 2025 and 2025 to 2026 [1].

In 2023 to 2024, DWP approved AtW provision for 67,720 people, with expenditure of nearly £258 million [2]. The scheme sits outside the welfare benefits system and is not means-tested, distinguishing it from other disability employment interventions [2]. Academic evidence indicates that workplace accommodation schemes can increase labour market attachment and reduce employment rate gaps for disabled workers, with accommodations eliminating employment differences for people with mental impairments when two or more adjustments are in place [3].

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1.2 Context for This Inquiry

Demand for AtW has increased significantly, with applications more than doubling from 76,100 in 2018 to 2019 to 157,000 in 2024 to 2025 [1]. DWP attributes this growth primarily to increased identification of mental health conditions and neurodiversity, with applicants citing mental health or learning conditions rising from 11,200 (30% of recipients) in 2018 to 2019 to 37,900 (51%) in 2024 to 2025 [1]. Spending has nearly doubled from £163 million in 2018 to 2019 to £321 million in 2024 to 2025, with forecasts projecting £517 million by 2029 to 2030 [4].

Concerns raised in Parliament and by stakeholders centre on processing backlogs, payment delays, and their impacts on employment security [1]. In March 2025, the government published proposals to reform AtW as part of the Pathways to Work Green Paper, prompting consultation on the scheme's future [1]. This inquiry provides a timely opportunity to examine whether DWP is delivering value for money and meeting the scheme's employment support objectives.

2. Operational Performance and Administrative Capacity

2.1 Processing Delays and Backlog Growth

The NAO report documents a dramatic deterioration in processing times. Average application processing increased from 28 working days in 2020 to 2021 to 66 days in 2024 to 2025, reaching 109 days by November 2025, which is more than four times the DWP's 25-day target [1]. Disability Rights UK reports that delays have since extended to 210 days in some cases [5].

These delays have occurred despite DWP doubling staffing levels from approximately 290 to 580 case managers between 2021 to 2022 and 2024 to 2025, and increasing administrative spending from £12.6 million to £24.4 million over the same period [1]. The NAO notes that DWP "does not expect the backlog to fall significantly in the short term" and is awaiting the outcome of the government consultation before committing to further improvements [1].

2.2 Complaints and Customer Experience

Complaints about AtW rose from 234 in 2022 to 2023 to 657 in 2024 to 2025, with 800 complaints recorded in the first six months of 2025 to 2026 alone [1]. The majority relate to processing delays [1]. Stakeholder evidence indicates that administrative barriers extend beyond processing times to include inaccessible communication methods, with new requirements mandating postal communication rather than digital sharing of applications and documents [5].

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Survey evidence from the Access to Work Collective found that seven in ten (67%) disabled respondents stated they probably or absolutely could not have attended job interviews, secured employment, or remained in work without AtW support [2]. However, the same research documented severe delays exceeding six months for assessments, approvals, and payments, with disabled individuals forced to cover costs upfront, incur debt, or decline job offers due to delayed support [2].

2.3 Productivity Standards and Quality Trade-offs

DWP has sought to address backlogs by setting productivity standards requiring case managers to process an average of 2.4 cases per day [4]. However, stakeholder testimony suggests that efficiency drives may be compromising decision quality. One case involved a blind psychologist whose award was reduced from 37 to 24 hours, with a calculation error only identified at the second appeal stage following intervention by the Royal National Institute of Blind People [4]. The claimant questioned how due diligence and appeal processes could fail to identify such errors, describing the outcome as "abysmal" [4].

Academic research on disability benefit administration highlights that organisational disruption and administrative delays can materially affect programme outcomes, with short-run negative impacts from reform processes that may take several years to resolve [6], [7]. Evidence from the Personal Independence Payment rollout found that processing delays coincided with sharp falls in benefit onflows, demonstrating that administrative timing can substantially affect measured outcomes independently of eligibility changes [7].

3. Decision Consistency and Quality Assurance

3.1 Variability in Decision-Making

Stakeholder evidence documents significant inconsistency in AtW decision-making, with similar requests receiving vastly different outcomes and limited explanation [2]. The Access to Work Collective reports that renewals are increasingly being treated as new applications, with existing awards overturned by case managers despite unchanged circumstances [8]. Survey respondents described decisions as "arbitrary or poorly communicated" and noted that case managers were not consistently following recommendations from DWP-appointed holistic workplace assessors [2].

Academic evaluations of AtW from earlier periods found broad user satisfaction with assessment processes and the range of supports funded [9], [10]. However, these studies also noted variability in awareness and in the scope of what would be funded, with limited published metrics on inter-assessor consistency or formal national quality assurance audits [9], [10]. The current evidence suggests that decision consistency challenges have intensified as demand has grown.

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3.2 Reported Reductions in Award Levels

Multiple sources document substantial reductions in AtW awards at renewal stage since early 2024, despite no formal changes to published eligibility guidance. Investigative reporting by The Big Issue found that awards were being "slashed by 60% to 70%" at renewal, with disabled workers and advocates describing these as "stealth cuts" aimed at cost reduction [8]. Whistleblower testimony reported to the Access to Work Collective indicates that internal restructuring is underway, including: a 20% cap on enabling support; cuts to assistive technology and equipment; new restrictions on support delivery; and support worker wage allocations falling below minimum wage [8].

Case studies illustrate the impacts. Accessibility consultant Sassy Wyatt had her visual support funding, which was approved for three years, abruptly cancelled by a new caseworker at renewal, forcing her to turn down work and leaving support workers thousands of pounds out of pocket [8]. Entrepreneur Rachel Parker, whose AtW-funded support worker enabled her to run an award-winning bakery, was deemed "non-compliant" when she could not participate in telephone assessments without reasonable adjustments, resulting in closure of her renewal application and subsequent business failure [8].

DWP has stated that "the rules haven't changed," but stakeholder evidence indicates that applications are being rejected, support hours cut, and equipment denied in ways that represent a material departure from previous practice [5]. The disconnect between official guidance and operational reality raises serious questions about transparency and accountability in scheme administration.

3.3 Quality Assurance Mechanisms

The NAO recommends that DWP "update guidance so it aligns more closely with the scheme's objectives and supports caseworkers to make consistent decisions" [1]. This recommendation implies that current guidance may be inadequate or misaligned with policy intent. Academic research on marketised disability employment programmes highlights that contracted delivery models can create perverse incentives, with providers prioritising participants closer to employment and disadvantaging those with greatest support needs [11], [12]. Whilst AtW is not directly contracted out, the evidence suggests that internal performance pressures may be producing similar targeting effects.

The NAO also recommends that DWP improve data quality on case progress and use analytical techniques such as process mining to identify and resolve bottlenecks in the customer journey [1]. The absence of robust quality assurance data limits DWP's ability to demonstrate that decisions are consistent, evidence-based, and aligned with the scheme's employment support objectives.

4. Impacts on Claimants and Employers

4.1 Employment Security and Job Retention

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The NAO report states that four organisations consulted noted that application delays and late payments have affected employees' job security, with one reporting that delays have resulted in job offers being withdrawn [1]. Academic evidence demonstrates that workplace accommodations support retention and reduce absenteeism [3], [13], implying that delays in providing adjustments reduce or postpone these employment benefits. The combination of documented accommodation effectiveness and administrative delays creates a plausible pathway from processing failures to poorer employment outcomes.

Survey evidence from the Access to Work Collective found that 86% of disabled people reported that AtW had a major impact on their ability to stay employed or work for themselves, whilst 100% of employers surveyed stated that disabled staff could not perform their jobs without AtW support [2]. These findings underscore the scheme's critical role in enabling employment participation. When support is delayed or withdrawn, the employment consequences can be severe: stakeholder testimony documents cases of disabled workers experiencing mental health crises, business closures, and prolonged unemployment following AtW failures [8].

4.2 Financial Impacts on Employers and Support Providers

Late payments create cashflow problems for employers, with the NAO noting that delays are "particularly damaging for small businesses" [1]. Three organisations consulted by the NAO commented that payment delays were causing cashflow difficulties [1]. Survey evidence indicates that 78% of employers stated that AtW enabled them to hire disabled people by covering workplace adjustment costs [2], suggesting that payment reliability is essential to employer confidence in recruiting disabled workers.

Support providers, including interpreters, support workers, and specialist suppliers, are also affected. Stakeholder evidence reports that providers are ceasing to work with AtW clients due to late payments and unsustainably low rates that fall below minimum wage [2]. This erosion of the supplier market threatens the scheme's long-term viability and may reduce the range and quality of support available to disabled workers.

4.3 Administrative Burden on Claimants

Disabled claimants report spending substantial time managing complex paperwork and chasing missing responses, with some spending more time on AtW administration than on their actual employment [2]. This administrative burden is particularly problematic given that many claimants have conditions that affect executive function, communication, or information processing. The requirement for postal rather than digital communication introduced in recent guidance [5] exemplifies how administrative processes can create additional barriers for disabled people, contradicting the scheme's inclusive intent.

Academic research emphasises that administrative design and processing efficiency are critical mediators of programme effectiveness [6], [7]. Where administrative barriers are high and processing is slow, even well-designed support schemes may fail to achieve their intended outcomes. The evidence suggests that AtW's administrative processes require

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fundamental redesign to align with the needs and capabilities of the disabled people the scheme is intended to serve.

5. Reform Proposals and Evidence Gaps

5.1 Consultation and Proposed Changes

The government's Pathways to Work Green Paper consultation on AtW closed in June 2025, with ministers considering how to "rework the scheme" [4]. Minister Stephen Timms stated publicly in February 2025 that "fairly significant reforms" would be necessary and that the "current style... is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term" [8]. However, the NAO notes that DWP is "waiting for the outcome of the Government's consultation on the future of the scheme before committing to plans for further improvements" [1], suggesting that operational improvements are being deferred pending policy decisions.

Whistleblower evidence indicates that a phased internal restructuring is already underway, with Phase Two (scheduled for September 2025) potentially removing entire categories of support including job aide roles, assistive technology, and specialist equipment, leaving only limited coaching and British Sign Language interpretation [8]. If enacted, stakeholders warn, this would "effectively strip Access to Work of its ability to meet the needs of the vast majority of disabled workers" [8].

5.2 Value for Money and Evaluation Evidence

The NAO explicitly states that its investigation "was not designed to assess whether Access to Work is providing value for money" [1]. This represents a significant evidence gap. Academic research on workplace accommodation schemes documents consistent user-reported benefits for retention, absence reduction, and enabling work, but notes that rigorous quantified value-for-money estimates are limited and methodologically challenging [14]. The literature emphasises that robust VfM assessment requires tailored approaches including counterfactual construction and costing of long-run effects, rather than simple metrics [14].

DWP lacks comprehensive data on AtW's employment outcomes, cost-effectiveness, or longer-term impacts on benefit dependency and tax revenues. The NAO recommends that DWP "address gaps in administrative and survey data and implement any scheme changes in a way that allows evaluation of effectiveness and value for money" [1]. Without this evidence base, reform proposals risk being driven by short-term cost containment rather than evidence of what works to support disabled people into sustainable employment.

5.3 Self-Employment Support

Official statistics do not disaggregate AtW recipients by employment status, obscuring the scheme's role in supporting disabled entrepreneurs [2]. The proportion of disabled workers who are self-employed has decreased from 15.7% in 2013 to 13.0% in 2023 to 2024, compared with a smaller decline from 13.5% to 11.9% among non-disabled workers [2].

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Stakeholder evidence emphasises that AtW is uniquely important for self-employed disabled people, who cannot access employer-funded reasonable adjustments and face "serial inequities" in accessing business support [2].

Academic research on self-employment support for disabled entrepreneurs is limited, with insufficient peer-reviewed evidence to draw firm conclusions about intervention effectiveness [15]. This evidence gap is concerning given that self-employed disabled people represent a significant proportion of AtW users and make substantial contributions to entrepreneurship and innovation. Reform proposals must ensure that self-employment support is maintained and evaluated, rather than being deprioritised in favour of employed workers.

6. Conclusions

The evidence demonstrates that Access to Work is failing to deliver timely, consistent, and adequate support to disabled workers despite its critical role in enabling employment participation. Processing delays have increased fourfold, decision-making is inconsistent, and reported reductions in award levels are threatening employment security. These failures are occurring despite substantial increases in staffing and administrative spending, suggesting systemic rather than simply resource-related problems.

DWP's response, which includes deferring operational improvements pending consultation outcomes and implementing undisclosed internal restructuring, risks further undermining the scheme's effectiveness. The absence of robust value-for-money evaluation and outcome data means that reform proposals are not grounded in evidence of what works. Academic research indicates that administrative delays and organisational disruption can materially harm programme outcomes, and that marketised or performance-driven delivery models can create perverse incentives that disadvantage those with greatest support needs.

The Committee's scrutiny is essential to ensure that DWP addresses immediate operational failures, establishes transparent quality assurance mechanisms, and develops reform proposals based on rigorous evaluation of scheme effectiveness rather than short-term cost containment.

7. Recommendations

The Committee should require DWP to:

- 1. Implement immediate measures to reduce processing backlogs and delays, including:**
 - o Publishing monthly performance data on processing times, backlog levels, and complaint volumes;
 - o Setting and monitoring interim targets for reducing average processing times to the 25-day standard;

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- o Ensuring adequate staffing and case management capacity to meet demand sustainably.
- 2. **Establish transparent quality assurance mechanisms for decision-making, including:**
 - o Publishing clear, accessible guidance on eligibility criteria and award calculation methodologies;
 - o Implementing systematic inter-assessor reliability audits and publishing results;
 - o Requiring case managers to provide written justifications for decisions that depart from workplace assessor recommendations;
 - o Establishing an independent review mechanism for disputed decisions.
- 3. **Halt undisclosed changes to award levels and eligibility criteria pending completion of consultation and publication of reform proposals, ensuring that:**
 - o Any policy changes are formally announced, consulted upon, and subject to equality impact assessment;
 - o Existing awards are honoured for their approved duration unless circumstances change;
 - o Renewals are processed consistently with original assessments unless claimant needs have materially changed.
- 4. **Commission rigorous evaluation of AtW effectiveness and value for money before implementing reforms, including:**
 - o Longitudinal tracking of employment outcomes, earnings, benefit dependency, and tax revenues for AtW recipients;
 - o Counterfactual analysis comparing outcomes for AtW recipients with similar disabled people who do not receive support;
 - o Cost-benefit analysis incorporating long-run economic impacts and wider social benefits;
 - o Evaluation of support effectiveness by impairment type, employment status, and support category.
- 5. **Improve administrative accessibility and reduce burden on claimants, including:**
 - o Enabling digital communication and document sharing as a reasonable adjustment;
 - o Simplifying application and renewal processes;
 - o Providing accessible information and guidance in multiple formats;
 - o Ensuring that administrative requirements do not create barriers for people with cognitive, communication, or sensory impairments.
- 6. **Ensure reform proposals are co-designed with disabled people and stakeholders, including:**
 - o Meaningful consultation with disabled workers, employers, support providers, and representative organisations;
 - o Transparency about the evidence base and policy rationale for proposed changes;
 - o Equality impact assessment of reform options;
 - o Piloting and evaluation of changes before national rollout.
- 7. **Maintain and evaluate support for self-employed disabled people, including:**
 - o Publishing data on AtW recipients disaggregated by employment status;
 - o Ensuring that reform proposals do not disproportionately restrict access for self-employed claimants;
 - o Commissioning research on the effectiveness of self-employment support and barriers faced by disabled entrepreneurs.
- 8. **Address supplier market stability and payment integrity, including:**
 - o Ensuring that support worker wage allocations meet minimum wage requirements;
 - o Improving payment timeliness to support providers;

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- o Monitoring supplier market capacity and sustainability;
- o Establishing fair and transparent procurement processes.

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About the Author

William Gomes is a York-based doctoral researcher, Director of The William Gomes Podcast, and a disability rights campaigner with professional and lived experience of disability and access barriers in employment support systems. His work focuses on equality, administrative justice, and the practical conditions required for disabled people to secure and sustain employment. He submits this evidence in a personal capacity, drawing on published audit findings, stakeholder evidence, and peer-reviewed research.

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