

House of Commons: Written Statement (HCWS372)

Department for Work and Pensions

Written Statement made by: **The Minister for Disabled People (Mr Mark Harper)**
on 12 Mar 2015.

Access to Work

Access to Work plays a key part in building a Disability Confident Britain. In 2013/14 Access to Work spent £108m to help 35,540 disabled people enter or remain in work, over 4,000 more than in 2012/13. I want to build on this by continuing to improve customer service, increase the numbers of disabled people helped, improve choice and control and reach out to under-represented groups such as those with hidden impairments including mental health conditions, learning disabilities and autism.

In December 2014, I announced operational improvements to the Access to Work Scheme. The transformation of Access to Work operations is starting to bear fruit and I am pleased to announce that we are now meeting service standards.

This gives a platform for further reform. In 2015/16 we will start a process of offering personal budgets for those with on-going awards for travel or support. This will give users more freedom over how they use their awards.

We also aim over time to transform the way disabled people interact with the service. A new project is underway to re-engineer Access to Work as a digital service, building on the email channels opened up before Christmas. We also intend to offer a Video Relay Service option for BSL users later in 2015/16.

In 2013/14 the average Access to Work award was around £3,000, and half of users have awards below £1,000. However, 1% of users with awards over £35,000 per annum account for 15% of the budget. I want to ensure that Access to Work can help the most people it can in future. So as of October 2015, Access to Work will provide awards up to a limit set at one and half times average salary (a limit of £40,800 per person per year at October 2015). This will be updated annually in line with the level of average salaries. I believe it is right that there is this explicit link to the labour market.

Anybody with an award higher than this level as of October 2015 will not be subject to that limit until April 2018. This is to help them and employers adjust to their new level of support. Specialist teams will work in partnership with these individuals and employers, for example advising on reasonable adjustments and greater use of technology. These individuals would also be invited to take advantage of a personal budget to help them manage their support in more tailored and efficient ways to meet their needs.

DWP has also been working closely with Deaf Access to Work users and the Crown Commercial Service to develop a framework for translation services including British Sign Language. This will guarantee quality standards and set transparent rates from Summer 2015. We will build on this by working with Deaf people and stakeholder groups to undertake a market review of BSL interpretation provision to explore long term improvements in the market.

In this context, I can announce the removal of the currently suspended "30 hour guidance" from April 2015 which these wider reforms will render unnecessary.

Over 30% of Access to Work spending is on taxis for customers with mobility problems. This is a

transformative service for customers and I want to ensure that improvements to customer service, reliability, value for money and accessibility standards for wider society can be driven by Government using its buying power to drive quality and performance. Starting early in 2015/16, we will look to pilot contracted services for customers across our largest towns and cities.

Self-Employment is a flexible option for many disabled people. I am now able to announce that I have recently established a further specialist team to provide expert advice and support to disabled people who want to run their own successful businesses. Furthermore, to ensure disabled people have a clear understanding of how they can be supported to maintain their business and continue in self employment, from October 2015 eligibility will be based around the Universal Credit rules. These balance allowing a reasonable period for businesses to establish themselves, with ensuring that taxpayers money goes to support legitimate and viable businesses, offering Access to Work a more consistent and objective basis for awards.

I want Access to Work to continue to help more people with mental health conditions. The Disability Confident Campaign is raising the profile of Access to Work's Mental Health Support Service and DWP is exploring how referrals to the Mental Health Support Service could be more straightforward. We have also highlighted the mental health support provided by Access to Work by changing the pre-employment eligibility letter to reassure employers of the help available. This help includes not just the Mental Health Support Service but mainstream Access to Work support such as communication support at interviews, help with travel and awareness training for colleagues to combat stigma.

Finally, as part of my commitment to improve transparency, to complement the detailed scheme guidance published following my last statement in December 2014, we will publish summaries of the guidance for customers, including in easy read and BSL formats, and also illustrate good practice to employers with case studies to help them in becoming more Disability Confident in supporting disabled employees early in 2015/16.

We have invested an extra £15m in Access to Work since 2012. User numbers are rising steadily. I hope that these changes to Access to Work will help many more to join them in staying in and getting into work with help from the programme in future.