

Access to Work, United Kingdom

This case study presents an example of how people with disabilities can be supported in business creation with grants given through a mainstream support programme. The objectives of the programme are discussed and the rationale for providing this support is presented. The case study describes how the support works and how it can be accessed. Data on the results achieved are also presented. The key challenges faced in delivering this support are presented along with the conditions for transferring this approach to another context.

Objectives

Access to Work is a programme in the United Kingdom that is targeted to those whose health or disability affects the way they can do their jobs. It is designed for people with long-term health conditions or impairments who need extra practical support to gain or remain in work. The aim of the programme is to reduce inequalities between people with disabilities and those without in the workplace by removing the various barriers to work.

It has operated throughout the United Kingdom since 1994 (although some of its elements have existed much longer) and it continues to be available in England, Wales and Scotland. It provides a grant to help an individual (or an employer) pay for support or equipment if needed to start working, stay in work or start a business. Grants can be used by those working as employees, the self-employed or those seeking to start a business. For those interested in starting a business, Access to Work grants can be used together with New Enterprise Allowance (NEA), which provides a weekly allowance for 26 weeks to support the entrepreneur during the early stages of business development. The amount of the Access to Work grant depends on the circumstances. It does not need to be paid back and it does not affect other benefits that recipients may receive.*

Rationale

Self-employment rates among people with a disability are often higher than among people who do not have one because it can often provide the flexibility needed to manage the disability while remaining active in the labour market (e.g. Meager and Higgins, 2011; Pagán, 2009). This underlines the increasing labour market potential for participation by people who experience disability through facilitating self-employment. Access to Work intends to support labour market activity for people who experience disability, both

* However, if the applicant receives some other specific benefits, they may not be qualified for the Access to Work support at the same time.

employment and self-employment, and also supports self-employment and business creation through formal linkages with the New Enterprise Allowance.

The rationale for the Access to Work programme is that people with a disability may need to adjust their workplace (e.g. equipment) or work arrangement (e.g. working hours) to minimise the extent to which they are disadvantaged when doing their jobs. Depending on the nature of the disability, the options for adjustments include training opportunities, purchasing new equipment (e.g. special keyboard if they have arthritis), making physical changes to the workplace (e.g. installing a ramp for a wheelchair user) or improving workplace policies (e.g. own desk instead of hot-desking). Access to Work funds cost-effective solutions for both employees and the self-employed.

This programme is also consistent with broader social policies that aim to keep population groups who are at-risk of social exclusion engaged. The risk of poverty in the European Union is significantly higher for people with disabilities than for people without disabilities (21.1% vs. 14.9%), which is largely driven by low employment rates of people with a disability (Hauben et al., 2012).

Activities

Access to Work is a programme run by Jobcentre Plus. The scheme provides advice and practical support to people with a disability and their employers to help overcome work-related obstacles that result from a disability. As well as giving advice and information to people with a disability and employers, the programme pays a grant through Jobcentre Plus to cover the costs of providing “reasonable adjustments” to help implement workplace adjustments to address the disability-related challenge for employees or the self-employed (The Access to Work Scheme). More precisely, the programme can pay towards the following (Dewson et al., 2009):

- *Special Aids and Equipment Grants* to help people with a disability overcome disability-related barriers in the workplace.
- *Adaptations to Premises and Equipment Grants*, which help pay for the cost of making premises and equipment accessible.
- *Travel-to-work Grants*, which are available to meet the additional costs of travel-to-work or within work for people who are unable to use public transport.
- *Support Worker Grants*, which allows the applicant to use the services of a helper. Types of support at work 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) providing specialist coaching for a person with a learning difficulty or helping with personal care needs.
- *Miscellaneous Expenditure Grants*, 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.
- *Communication Support at Interview Grants*, which meets the full cost of hiring an interpreter to remove barriers to communication at a job interview.

Any help received from Access to Work is in addition to the reasonable adjustments made by employers in accordance with the *Disability Discrimination Act*. To be eligible for Access to Work, people must meet the definition of a person with a disability under the *Disability Discrimination Act* or have a disability that affects them at work (Thornton and Gordon, 2002; Dewson et al., 2009). The programme is available for those 16 years old or

older with a disability and based in England, Scotland or Wales and about to start a job or work trial or in a paid job or self-employment. Although majority of the support goes for companies that employ people with a disability, the support is also available for self-employed and those starting a business. Access to Work provides grants to individual people with disabilities or their employers to reimburse for approved costs, and is flexible in meeting individual needs. The grant, however, is not given for voluntary work.

The disability or health condition needs to affect the applicant's ability to do a job or mean that the applicant has to pay work-related costs. If the applicant receives some other benefits, such as Incapacity Benefit, Employment and Support Allowance, Severe Disablement Allowance, Income Support or National Insurance Credits, they may not be qualified for the Access to Work support at the same time. The Access to Work grant is transferable also when changing jobs.

Access to Work supports the self-employed and those setting up their business particularly through specialised equipment, support workers and travel costs. The goal is that people with a disability have the same choice to start a business as everyone else. Access to Work aims to further boost the number of people with a disability who are self-employed, which is approximately 500 000 people, or 15% of working age people with a disability, relative to 3.2 million people without a disability who are self-employed.

There is no set amount for an Access to Work grant – the amount depends on the individual circumstances (e.g. duration of the employment, the size of the employer, support needs and whether self-employed). The precise level of cost sharing is agreed between the employer (or self-employed) and the programme adviser. A grant to reimburse the cost of support can be up to 100% of the approved costs in the case of self-employed and business start-ups (Access to Work, 2014).

Disability Employment Advisers within local Jobcentre Plus offices provide advice when applying for the programme. The applicant can also contact regional Access to Work contact centres to check the eligibility. Operational Support Units deliver the Access to Work administrative function (Dewson et al., 2009).

Project financing

The Access to Work budget is managed within Department of Work and Pensions departmental expenditure limits. The budget has increased from GBP 14.6 million (approximately EUR 21.9 million) in 1997-98 to GBP 69 million (approximately EUR 78.3 million) in 2008-09 and it remains at that level. (Access to Work, 2014).

Challenges encountered

Access to Work suffers from fairly low awareness among its potential beneficiaries. It is not promoted widely and many beneficiaries found out about the programme serendipitously or “by accident”, usually through unofficial sources or from disability organisations. Larger and public sector organisations and charities were more likely to be more aware of the programme than small companies and the self-employed. Furthermore, evaluations have suggested that the materials to market the programme both in written form and the website, could be improved by providing more details on the type of support available and for whom by using real-life case study examples. In addition, concerns have been raised about the flow of information between Access to Work and other Jobcentre Plus officials, as well as other professionals (e.g. medical professionals). The findings suggested

that these crucial lines of communication need to be prioritised to ensure that staff who come into contact with the clients are able to direct them to the programme.

Although the majority of programme beneficiaries commented positively on the application process, they have raised some concerns (Dewson et al., 2009):

- Difficulties in explaining or making the officials understand the nature of their impairment(s) or employment status. This is particularly difficult for the self-employed.
- Application forms are somewhat inflexible and not available in alternative formats. People with learning difficulties encountered the greatest difficulties with the programme's bureaucratic procedures.
- Delays in completing the application process and getting support in place.

In general, clients with multiple impairments faced the greatest challenges with the process. The same holds for the assessment procedure. Dissatisfaction with the assessment process, albeit relatively uncommon, was experienced by those whose support needs were complex or multiple. In addition, in the evaluation some reported concerns about the objectivity of the assessment as well as the uniformity of the decisions made across officials and regions. The key message was, thus, the need for improving the communication among all parties involved in the assessment and decision making process in order to secure that customer's needs are fully taken into account when proposing solutions. Finally, some users reported difficulties when they required a review of their support needs due to changes in their circumstances, for example due to their worsened health condition, changing job or because they needed help with the maintenance and upkeep of their Access to Work support. Again more intensive communication between the officials and customers as well as after-care services was suggested as a solution (Dewson et al., 2009).

For the self-employed these challenges are more apparent. It has been challenging for Jobcentre Plus to reach small businesses and the self-employed particularly. This is often done through intermediaries such as accountants, lawyers, and chambers of commerce. Jobcentre Plus staff have been trained and given more information on the programme to be able to market the programme to smaller companies and self-employed (Access to Work, 2014).

Impact

In 2012, Access to Work helped over 30 000 people with disabilities keep or get jobs, including 4 500 working in small businesses. Research also shows that 45% of clients would be out of work if they did not receive support through the scheme (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). Based on the evaluations, there is clear evidence that the types of support provided by the programme have led to some positive employment outcomes.

The Support Worker Grants were essential to take up a job and sustain employment. The evaluation also suggests that for self-employed people a Support Worker could be the key to running a company in the way open to a person without disabilities. Having a Support Worker demonstrated to colleagues and customers that people with disabilities can work on an equal footing and helped to reduce prejudice. In addition, using a Support Worker brought significant health gains that made the difference between staying in work and giving up. However, recipients are less likely to use this support than other supports such as Special Aids and Equipment Grants (Dewson et al., 2009).

Despite the potential for Access to Work to support the self-employed, take-up is quite low and evaluations therefore do not focus on these clients. In 2012, there were approximately 8 000 Access to Work clients who created a business using the New Enterprise

Allowance (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013). Examples of businesses created include a mobile dog grooming business, a fine chocolate company and a tapas restaurant.

Clients are generally satisfied with the support that they receive (Thornton and Corden, 2002; Dewson et al., 2009). Clients with less complex needs, e.g. help with travel to work costs, were most likely to be satisfied whereas the ones with more complex needs likely reported some dissatisfaction with the Access to Work programme (Dewson et al., 2009). The application process was mainly considered speedy, responsive and professional and the applicants reported having received a high level of support during the process via telephone, for example. Similarly, the assessment process was considered to be thorough and comprehensive. Assessors were widely regarded as experts in their field and customers were impressed with the level of detail and professional service they provided. Many beneficiaries reported that they 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 available solutions (Dewson et al., 2009).

When assessing the impact of Access to Work, it is important to consider its deadweight costs. The evaluations demonstrate that different types of support within the programme vary in their deadweight loss. Travel to Work support provides an example of almost full additionality indicating that the support provided would not have been provided otherwise, by employers for example. Partial deadweight is fairly common in Access to Work because the support would have been available for people with a disability but it would have taken longer or it might not have been as comprehensive as the support provided by Access to Work. In the Access to Work programme, no full deadweight was reported, indicating that the support always had some value-added for the clients (Dewson et al., 2009). Overall the programme is considered cost-effective and provided a clear return on investment to the Treasury: GBP 1.48 for every GBP 1.00 spent on the programme (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013; Access to Work, 2014).

Conditions for transfer

The following key success factors are likely to be important to an effort to adopt a similar approach to assisting people with disabilities to become self-employed:

1. *Secure substantial financing.* In addition to funding the various components of the programme, financing will be needed for outreach and for adjusting the application forms for various disabilities.
2. *Communicate widely and leverage other support programmes for awareness.* Based on the evaluations, it seems that Access to Work has not been exploited to its fullest potential by people with disabilities as well as employers, and there is even more unexploited potential among the self-employed and small businesses. In general the reason behind low penetration of the programme is modest and patchy awareness of the programme due to insufficient marketing and communication among stakeholders.
3. *Make payments up front.* Small businesses and (potential) entrepreneurs are likely to face cash flow problems in paying the costs of equipment, support workers and travel upfront prior to the grant. In order to meet the support needs of this particular target group with the programme (or alike) the reimbursement procedure needs to be reconsidered.
4. *Combine with other supports for self-employment.* This experience has demonstrated that it can be useful to combine equipment, support workers and travel grants with other schemes (e.g. NEA) to support business creation for people with disabilities.

5. *Train programme staff*. It was reported that programme staff had difficulties understanding the different forms of disability, which made the application and evaluation processes difficult for many applicants, especially those with multiple disabilities. Providing some sensitivity training for front-line staff can help address these difficulties.

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