

Briefing on ...

Access to Work

What is Access to Work?

The Access to Work (AtW) Scheme is a Government scheme run by the Disability Service that is part of the Employment Service. It was set up to provide practical help to overcome the barriers that disabled people face at work. The aim of the AtW Scheme is to improve the opportunities of disabled people in finding and keeping a job. It does this by funding some or all of the additional costs that employers may have when employing a disabled person.

There is a widespread lack of knowledge about the AtW Scheme amongst employers. Whilst as trade unionists we know that the legal responsibility for ensuring that disabled peoples' needs are met in the workplace rests with the employer, a knowledgeable representative familiar with the AtW Scheme will often be viewed as an asset by both fellow workers and employers alike.

Who can get assistance from Access to Work?

The Employment Service states that disabled people who are either employed or unemployed can get assistance from the AtW Scheme. It further claims that disabled people who are unemployed will be given priority; this may start with the provision of facilities for a job interview.

- This also specifically includes those who are blind or partially sighted and those with Cancer, Multiple Sclerosis and HIV.
- Need support to start, keep or progress in their job because of their impairment
- Be resident in Great Britain with a job or an offer of a job in Great Britain
- Not be claiming Incapacity Benefit, Sickness Benefit or Severe Disability Allowance or will stop claiming benefit once they start work.

It is the responsibility of the employer to ensure that any reasonable adjustments that are required prior to appointment are made. The AtW Scheme will not pay for transcription of application forms, job descriptions, etc. into clear print, electronic formats or Braille. Employers often overlook their duties to ensure that interviews

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- The person applying for assistance from the AtW Scheme must meet the AtW Scheme's definition of being a disabled person which is broadly the same as the definition contained within the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), i.e. a person has a disability if s/he has a physical or mental condition that has a substantial and long-term adverse affect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

are held in accessible places, recruitment materials are accessible and interview procedures don't discriminate against disabled people when consulted about recruitment, selection and related procedures.

Stewards and branch officers should push to ensure that employers adhere to best practice by making sure in advance that all appointment procedures meet the needs of disabled potential job applicants.

Is the assistance for the disabled person or the employer?

Both. The Scheme helps employers to meet their obligations under the law by funding or part funding the cost of some "Reasonable Adjustments" that employers need to make in order to accommodate disabled employees. The Scheme is however targeted towards disabled people and should be designed to meet the needs of individuals. The disabled person and not the employer is viewed as being the customer/client by the Disability Service.

Some less scrupulous employers may view use of the AtW Scheme either as a way of making necessary improvements without paying for them or as the only action they need to take in order to meet the needs of their disabled staff. The AtW Scheme is intended to be a supplement or top up to meet the needs of disabled people at work. UNISON members need to be watchful; look out for employers who may seek to avoid meeting their obligations or abuse the rights of disabled employees in this way.

Access to Work (AtW)

UNISON has been a strong supporter of AtW and we have welcomed the increase in its funding. Access to Work has been an employment lifeline for many of UNISON's disabled

members. For them, the existence of this financial support has helped remove barriers to the working environment and has been an invaluable aid to negotiating satisfactory and equitable working conditions.

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Action for Branches:

The 2009 National Disabled Members Conference passed a motion on AtW to raise the profile of this important form of funding and to establish the level of awareness amongst branches and activists in order to promote this valuable service.

In the current climate where organisations are looking to streamline or reduce its workforce, disabled staff are potentially the first place employers will look to make efficiencies.

Branches are asked to highlight this service to our disabled members and share examples of good practice.
