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Stop Changes to Access to Work

This report uses statistical and qualitative data to create a better understanding of the costs and benefits of the Access to Work (AtW) scheme in the UK. This research was conducted on behalf of the Stop Changes to Access to Work campaign group in response to the announcement of the National Audit Office's investigation into the AtW scheme in 2025. The research was carried out by members of the Movement Research Unit.

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Executive Summary

Access to Work (AtW) is a government scheme designed to support those with physical and mental health conditions / disabilities to get into and stay in work. It is a discretionary grant programme where support packages are agreed to and offered based on individual need. AtW intervenes beyond the scope of an employers' legal requirements to make 'reasonable adjustments' under the Equality Act for their employees (Disability Rights UK, 2026). The type of support offered varies, from the provision of specialist equipment to support workers to advocates who help employees in their job duties.

Since 2018, the number of people receiving AtW grants has increased by 97%[1]. Although government spending on the scheme has also risen, the number of applications awaiting determination from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has tripled since 2022.[2] Given the increase in demand for AtW's services, it is imperative that the programme is sufficiently funded. In doing so, AtW can continue in its capacity as a vital resource which facilitates meaningful inclusion for disabled people in the workplace.

The quantitative studies reviewed in this report show that there is little evidence of the impact of AtW on the ability of recipients to remain in work. Existing quantitative research shows that AtW is essential for some people to access employment. However, limited data and a lack of robust quantitative analysis means that it is unclear how generalisable these findings are for the whole disabled population. Without generalisable evidence, any policy decisions made by the government will have uncertain impacts.

The qualitative studies reviewed in this report demonstrate the varied benefits of AtW for employees and employers alike. Some of the positive impacts include financial stability, as well as improvements to psychological and social wellbeing. The literature also indicates that changes to the programme in recent years have reduced its efficacy; cumbersome administrative processes and poor case management are undermining AtW's ability to adequately support its users.

Based on this evidence, we suggest the following recommendations to the UK government:

1. **The UK government should stop changes to the support that people receive through AtW**

   The government cannot be sure of the impact of any change to AtW support because it lacks robust, generalisable evidence of the impact of AtW across the whole population. The limited existing quantitative evidence suggests that reducing AtW support would make work impossible for many recipients. Therefore, the government risks undermining its aims to increase the number of people in employment if it makes changes to AtW

[1] National Audit Organisation [NAO], 2026
[2] NAO, 2026

without fully understanding the extent to which AtW support enables people to remain in work.

2. **The government should commission quantitative impact and value-for-money evaluations of AtW**

   It is unclear how generalisable the findings from the qualitative studies identified in this review are to the whole population of AtW recipients and the quantitative studies that we identified have methodological limitations that mean they cannot reliably support national-level policy decisions.

   Therefore, the UK government should commission quantitative evaluations of AtW that improves on the validity of existing evidence. This evaluation should compare the experience of AtW recipients to a control group of people who are eligible for AtW, but do not currently receive it, to robustly identify the causal effect of AtW.

3. **The government should improve people's experiences of applying for AtW by reducing delays in AtW applications and supporting communication between AtW recipients and their advisors**

   Qualitative research on AtW demonstrates that growing waiting times, impersonal assessments and opaque processes mean that accessing AtW is difficult and people often do not receive support that they are entitled to. These difficulties mean that some people who could be in employment if they were supported are currently not able to work.

   The government could increase the number of people who are able to enter employment by improving these backend processes. For example, it could improve waiting times for AtW by removing the need for AtW recipients to reapply for their existing AtW support if their needs have not changed. Further training to advisors on the specific needs of people with certain conditions could also improve communication between people who require AtW support and public servants.

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Quantitative Review

Available data

Publicly available data provides limited information to estimate the impact of AtW on government tax receipts. There is data on government expenditure on policies that support employment. However, we did not find any data on the occupation or income of AtW recipients. This is important because it means we cannot reliably estimate the tax payments made by AtW recipients, or the tax receipts that would be lost if the government stopped AtW. Similarly, the impact of AtW on reducing benefits spending cannot be directly observed with available data.

A study by researchers at the National Centre for Social Research on the feasibility of evaluating the impact of AtW reached the same conclusion: there is currently not enough publicly available data to estimate what would happen if AtW were removed.[3]

The most relevant dataset available from the government is the DWP's "Access to Work Statistics" data. This provides data on the amount that the government spends on AtW broken down by demographic data (age and gender), region, type of AtW provision, specific challenges of recipient, and employer size.

There is also an EU dataset that looks at the amount that governments spend on different policies to support people to stay in, or find, employment called "labour market policy statistics". In this dataset, the amount the UK government spends on AtW is included in the total amount of UK government spending on "employment incentives" according to Eurostat. However, UK data is only available up to 2011 and it is difficult to draw conclusions about AtW from this data, because AtW expenditure is combined with expenditure on other policies. Nonetheless, this dataset could help to make international comparisons, if needed.

Previous quantitative studies on AtW-style policies and their effect on people's ability to remain in employment

There are very few quantitative studies of AtW or similar schemes. The studies that we were able to find all have methodological limitations, such as skewed samples or a limited quantitative analysis beyond basic comparisons between groups.

Studies of AtW

[3] Ashworth, K and Salis, S (2018) "Feasibility of evaluating the impact of the Access to Work programme", Department for Work and Pensions <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5bed52e5ed915d6a1c35ff3a/Feasibility_of_evaluating_the_impact_of_the_Access_to_Work_programme.pdf>

The most relevant quantitative study of AtW's efficacy in keeping people in work is Thorton et al's[4] survey of 628 AtW recipients' attitudes to the support that they receive. The survey questionnaire asked the extent to which survey respondents felt that AtW enabled them to stay in work, with 45% of respondents saying that they "could not work without it".

Table 1 gives a breakdown of respondents' answers to this question according to the different kinds of AtW support that they received. For all types of support, over 50% of respondents said that AtW either supported them "a great deal" or that they "could not work without it".

Thornton et al argue that the extent to which respondents felt that AtW was essential for them to remain in work was in part related to the kind of support that they received. Travel to work, and support workers, were seen as most essential. Other forms such as receiving communicator support at an interview were considered negotiable. However, the authors do not conduct any further quantitative analysis on this, beyond the percentage comparisons shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Respondent's rating of the usefulness of AtW by support element (Thorton et al 2001, pg 80).Question wording: "To what extent has support from AtW enabled you to work?"

Type of support[5]	**"Could not work without it"**	**"A great deal"**	**"Quite a lot"**	**"Not much"**	**"Not at all"**	**"Don't know"**
Support worker (n=193)	46%	33%	15%	5%	1%	0%
Travel to work (n=234)	55%	31%	10%	3%	1%	0%
Special Aids and Equipment (n=410)	42%	35%	14%	6%	1%	2%
Adapted premises and equipment (n=172)	47%	28%	18%	6%	1%	1%
Communicator support at	37%	19%	22%	16%	6%	-

[4] Thornton, P et al. (2001) "Evaluating the Impact of Access to Work: a case study approacUsers' Views Of Access To Work: Final Report Of A Study For The Employment Service. Research Report. Employment Service Research & Development Report," *University of York Social Policy Research Unit.* <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/73458/2/Document.pdff>

[5] Thornton, P et al. (2001) page 80.

interview (n=45)						
All types of support (n=628)[6]	45%	32%	14%	5%	1%	2%

A later study by Thornton and Corden from the University of York[7] uses a "case study" method (a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods). They conducted interviews with 87 people who received AtW and their employers, as well as 30 additional interviews with people who received AtW but were self-employed or whose employer could not be interviewed. The total sample of interviews was 117, of which 97 interviewees received AtW and were in full time employment.

Thornton and Corden asked all respondents to rate the likelihood of possible outcomes in the absence of AtW on a scale of 1 to 100, providing quantitative data that could be aggregated. Through this, they found that AtW helped people significantly, but many people said that they would still be in work without AtW. Of the 97 AtW users in full time employment, 22 participants (23%) answered with a score of 1, stating that they would "absolutely not" be in their current job without AtW. 18 respondents (19%) gave a score of 100, stating that that they would "definitely" be in their current job.

Similarly to Thorton et al, Thornton and Corden argue that this range in responses is due to the different kinds of support that people accessed through AtW. Their approach means that Thorton and Corden can better explain why these differences occurred through qualitative interviews. For example, people who used AtW to pay for travel to work were more likely to see AtW as essential for them to remain in employment, but people who used AtW to access hearing aids were more likely to believe that they could remain in work without AtW. Part of this variation stems from respondents' belief that they could pay for aids and equipment with their own salary, and so would remain in work, albeit with less disposable income.

Respondents felt less able to replace travel to work payments with their own income and many did not feel that they could rely on friends or family to provide travel assistance in the long term. However, interviewees' personal situations varied significantly and much of the variation on the impact of AtW on a person's ability to remain in work was driven by personal factors that were independent of the kind of support that they received.

[6] Some people received more than one type of support, so the sample sizes of individual rows sum to a number larger than the total sample of AtW recipients in the survey.
[7] Thornton, P and Corden, A. (2002) "Evaluating the Impact of Access to Work: a case study approach", *University of York Social Policy Research Unit*.
<https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/wae138rep.pdf>

Table 2: A breakdown of respondents' reported likelihood of "carrying on" with a job application without AtW by type of support is given in the table below (Thorton and Corden 2002)

Type of support[8]	0 "absolutely not" remain in work without AtW	100 "definitely" remain in work without AtW	Sample size[9]
Support worker	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	30
Travel to work	8 (36%)	1 (5%)	22
Aids and equipment	13 (18%)	18 (24%)	74
Alterations to premises	4 (30%)	3 (23%)	13
All types of support	22 (23%)	18 (19%)	97

It is important to note that the figures taken from Thornton and Corden's study cannot provide reliable estimates of the impact of different kinds of AtW support at the population level, because the sample is small and not representative of the UK population. However, they do show that many AtW respondents would not stay in full time employment if their AtW support was removed.

Thornton et al's results are more generalisable than Thorton and Cordon's, because they use a survey with a larger sample size. However, even this large-sample survey is not a perfect representation of the AtW population, because their sample is skewed to certain groups. Thornton et al conducted their survey by contacting people who reported receiving AtW in the census, which is not a reliable way to collect survey responses as it means the sample will be biased towards the people most likely to respond to a survey request. Indeed, Thorton et al's study does seem to be skewed. Women make up 56% of their sample and 89% of their sample identified as "White British", for example.

Apart from Thorton et al's 2001 study and Thorton and Corten's study from 2002, there is no good-quality quantitative evidence of the impact of AtW on employment. Older studies from the 1990s are referenced in a literature review on policies to support people to remain in work[10], but they are not available online.

[8] Thornton, P and Corden, A. (2002) pages 75-79
[9] Some people received more than one type of support, so the sample sizes of individual rows sum to a number larger than the total sample of AtW recipients in full time work, which is 97.
[10] Clayton S, et al (2011), "Effectiveness of return-to-work interventions for disabled people: a systematic review of government initiatives focused on changing the behaviour of employers" *European Journal of Public Health*, 22 no.3 <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckr101>

It is important to note that these studies are over 20 years old and that AtW provision, and people's experience of AtW, has changed significantly in this time. This is evidenced in our qualitative review below. It is unlikely that the findings from Thornton et al's and Thorton and Cordon's studies are applicable to the circumstances of AtW recipients in 2026.

International studies of similar policies

There are some international studies that examine similar policies to AtW (which we call "AtW-style" policies). However, these studies have several limitations, which we discuss below.

Clayton et al review three separate studies (two from Canada and one from Sweden) on the impact of workplace adjustments to support people who are disabled to remain in work.[11] The two Canadian studies found that receiving modified equipment, alongside other adjustments like flexible hours and "light duties", made people more likely to remain in work. The Swedish study found that greater "adjustment latitude" (workers' ability to choose between tasks and work hours) made workers more likely to return to work after long-term sickness absence. However, Clayton et al suggest that all three of these studies have methodological issues that make their results unreliable. The authors argue that it is not clear whether the workplace adjustments were given more often to specific groups such as people in specific job roles or to individuals with greater support needs.. Without controlling for these differences, these studies do not show a reliable causal relationship between workplace adjustments and people's ability to remain in work.

Some quantitative studies look at groups of policies across different countries that aim to support those with physical and mental health conditions in employment, rather than focussing on one policy in particular. This makes it hard to draw conclusions about AtW from previous studies, because their findings are too broad to be applicable to AtW specifically. For example, Reinders Folmer et al's study of policies to support disabled people to stay in work found no relationship between how much EU countries spend on activation policies (the umbrella under which the EU classifies AtW as a labour market policy) and the percentage of disabled people in employment.[12] However, the authors suggest that this finding does not necessarily mean that all activation policies have no impact on employment, because there is a lot of variety within the different kinds of policies that fall into this bracket. This variety means that some policies could have a positive impact on the employment of disabled people, but any positive effect is obscured by other policies included in their analysis.

A further issue with cross-national quantitative studies of AtW-style schemes is that they often rely on surveys of the whole population of a country to estimate the proportion of people with mental and physical health challenges in employment. Cultural and language differences can

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[11] Clayton S, et al (2011), "Effectiveness of return-to-work interventions for disabled people: a systematic review of government initiatives focused on changing the behaviour of employers" *European Journal of Public Health*, 22 no.3 <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckr101>

[12] Reinders Folmer, CP et al (2020) "Evaluating social investment in disability policy: impact of measures for activation, support, and facilitation on employment of disabled persons in 22 European countries" *Social Policy and Administration,* 54 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/spol.12579>

lead to survey respondents interpreting survey questions about disability differently across countries. Blekesaune shows that variation in the proportion of people reporting themselves as disabled varies significantly more than other indicators of a population's health needs that do not rely on survey methods, such as mortality rates.[13] As a result, international comparisons of AtW-style schemes are unlikely to be able to distinguish between the impact of policies to support disabled people to remain in work and random variation in the way that people report their disability in a survey because of different social and cultural attitudes towards disability.

Ultimately, the reason why there is a lack of good quality quantitative studies on the impact of AtW or similar schemes is due to a lack of good-quality data, which we discuss in the "available data" section above. Without this data, researchers are designing poor-quality studies that have inconclusive findings.

One example of how researchers have had to do their best with poor quality data is Compolieti et al's study of the impact of a training scheme to support disabled people to find new jobs in Canada (a policy that is significantly different from AtW, but still aims to increase the employment rate of disabled people).[14] Compolieti et al use administrative data, but can only study a specific 3-year period when the scheme was the only one available to support those with physical and mental health conditions to get back into work. Campolieti et al use a number of statistical methods to try and get around the limitations of the data, but ultimately do not find statistically significant results that are robust to sensitivity checks, which makes their findings unreliable and inconclusive. They conclude their article by arguing that without better data "policymakers and researchers must settle for making an evidentiary meal with whatever stray morsels the data and variation cupboard provides [...] perhaps persons with disabilities deserve better?".

Table 3 Previous quantitative studies of AtW or similar policies[15]

Title	Findings	Strengths	Weaknesses
Thorton et al (2001), User's Views of Access to Work	Close to half of AtW recipients say that they would be unable to work without AtW. The extent to which users feel unable to work without AtW depends on the kind	Specific study of AtW. Examines the impact of different kinds of AtW support. Large sample survey suggests generalisable	Sample size is skewed towards women and people who identify as "White British". No quantitative analysis beyond comparing

[13] Blekesaune, M (2007) "Have some European countries been more successful at employing disabled people than others?" *University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER)* <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/92134/1/2007-23.pdf>

[14] Compolieti et al (2014) "The effect of vocational rehabilitation on the employment outcomes of disability insurance beneficiaries: new evidence from Canada" *IZA Journal of Labor Policy*, 3 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/2193-9004-3-10>

[15] You can see the search method used for quantitative studies in Annex A: Search method for quantitative studies

	of support that they receive.	findings.	percentages between groups. Study conducted over 20 years ago.
Thornton and Corden (2002), Evaluating the Impact of Access to Work: A case study approach	Many, but not all, disabled people who receive AtW would not be able to stay in work without it. People who could remain in work without AtW would be less comfortable and would have to make additional efforts and expenditure to stay in employment.	Specific study of AtW. Examines the impact of different kinds of AtW support. In-depth studies of individuals' situations.	Findings cannot be generalised to the whole population who receive AtW. Selection of research participants is not random, so could have some bias. Study conducted over 20 years ago.
Clayton et al 2011,Effectiveness of return-to-work interventions for disabled people: a systematic review of government initiatives focused on changing the behaviour of employers	Workplace adjustments, particularly those provided through AtW, have a positive impact on the employment of disabled people. There is an international shortage of studies evaluating the impacts of policies supporting disabled people to remain in work. Quantitative studies do not control for confounding variables and are not as good as a full "evaluation" that uses experimental methods. There is more qualitative evidence than quantitative		

	evidence.		
Reinders Folmer et al 2018, Evaluating social investment in disability policy	There is no relationship between the amount of money a country spends on "activation policies" and the share of disabled people in employment.	Covers the UK in its analysis.	The term "activation policies" encompasses a range of policies to support disabled people in work. Therefore, this study misses significant differences in the policies adopted by individual countries, which means we shouldn't apply its findings specifically to AtW or the UK context.
Blekesaune 2007, Have some European countries been more successful at employing disabled people than others?	High investments in "activation policies" and spending more on disability benefits has a positive impact on the percentage of disabled people in employment.	Covers the UK in its analysis.	The author only uses correlations to test their research questions, which does not control for the impact of author factors that could influence the relationship between the amount a country spends on activation policies and the employment of disabled people. The author shows that their survey data is not a reliable measure of disability, but proceeds to use it in their analysis without making any significant changes.
Compolieti et al, 2014, The effect of vocational rehabilitation on the employment outcomes of disability	"Vocational rehabilitation" schemes improve employment opportunities for disabled people	NA - this study's data is very poor and its findings are not robust.	The findings reported in the study have very small effect sizes and are not always statistically significant (i.e. it's

insurance beneficiaries: new evidence from Canada			unlikely that these findings are not just a reflection of randomness in the data). The “vocational rehabilitation” scheme in this study is very different from AtW, so cannot provide a direct comparison for the UK context.

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Qualitative Synthesis

Aims

While the quantitative scoping reveals a lack of numerical evidence regarding the benefits of AtW, several qualitative studies have explored its impact. This section synthesises the available literature to evaluate the potential advantages and shortcomings of the programme from the perspectives of recipients, employers and the state.

Method

This study employed a convenience sampling strategy, selecting online audits, evaluations, and research articles that assessed the impact of AtW. Adopting a thematic synthesis approach, data was coded and subsequently categorised into overarching themes. A team of four researchers independently coded the documents to develop descriptive codes and summaries for each article; these findings were then collaboratively reviewed to generate the themes presented below.

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Details of Studies Synthesised

Author	Year Published	Sample Size	Participant Recruitment Approach	Information Available Regarding Access Need	Data Analysis
Institute for Employment Studies commissioned by DWP	2009	- 60 AtW customer interviews. - 36 AtW employers - Staff not applicable	Multiple streams: - AtW database, - Sample of 4 job centres, - Recruitment of AtW staff at national level.	N/A	N/A
Royal National Institute of Blind People	2017	Study 1: 155 Study 2: Not available Study 3: 200, stage 1/ 47, stage 2.	Study 1: Online survey Study 2: Focus Group Study 3: National Survey	Study 1: 110 Blind, 45 Partially Sighted Study 2: Not available Study 3 Not available	N/A
Social Policy Research Unit, University of York commissioned by JobCentre Plus	2002	117	Respondents of a previous survey by Thornton et al., 2001)	21 support worker 37 travel to work support 19 alterations to premises users 85 aids and equipment receivers	N/A
Holland,Molyneux & Winstanley	2025	- 60 AtW - 25 employers	- Social media - Newsletters - Businesses contacted	Arthritis: 10, Mobility Impairment: 8, Neurodivergent: 6, Deaf: 1, Visual impairment: 2, Mental health: 2, diabetes: 2, Other Chronic Illness: 5	Thematic analysis
Department for Work & Pensions	2018	- 60 interviews with AtW staff, 25 in-depth interviews with employers, 2 focus groups with assessors, 2 telephone interviews with AtW staff	Not available recruitment strategies.	N/A	No information given
Department for Work and Pensions	2025	37 total; - 8 case managers - 15 employers - 14 recipients	- Participants selected samples provided by DWP - individuals involved in both Phase 1 and 2 of AtW+ - Case managers approached by email - Employers sent a letter	Physical disability: 3 Learning disability: 5 Mental health condition: 1 Other: 5	Framework approach
Royal National Institute of Blind People	2022	N/A	N/A	Visually impaired	N/A

Theme 1: AtW Benefits

1.1. Employee Benefits

The benefits for employees from these six papers can be divided into three categories.

First, financial stability: Access to Work (AtW) not only enables individuals to enter the workforce but also helps them remain employed while reducing personal work-related costs.

Second, several papers highlight the health benefits associated with AtW. These include improvements to physical health related to specific disabilities and enhanced overall well-being stemming from greater independence and higher morale.

Finally, one study noted that participants developed new skills through the programme. Staff felt more supported in work. This led to improved job performance and a greater sense of pride in their work, and allowed members to feel like they were making a contribution to society.

1.2 Employer Benefits

The findings across the reviewed papers highlight several key benefits to employers. A primary advantage is cost efficiency; AtW improves staff retention by ensuring recipients are less likely to leave their roles, which significantly reduces recruitment and training expenses. Without this support, the high costs of necessary workplace adjustments would often force employers to make difficult financial sacrifices in other areas of the business. Furthermore, AtW increases overall productivity. By providing essential tools and support, the programme enables staff to work more effectively, benefiting the employer's bottom line.

For many organisations, the financial burden of these adjustments would be prohibitive without external funding, potentially making it unfeasible to hire individuals with disabilities. AtW therefore serves as a vital resource that helps hiring processes comply with legal obligations, such as the Equality Act.

Finally, employers noted that AtW fosters a more inclusive environment. When staff members feel properly supported, they become better integrated into their teams, leading to a more collaborative and positive work environment.

1.3 Additional Benefits

Beyond the immediate impact on employers and employees, the research identifies significant advantages for families, the government, and the wider community. For families, AtW alleviates the financial and time-intensive burden of providing personal support. Furthermore, the improved morale of the individual creates positive externalities, enhancing the overall well-being of the household.

From a macro perspective, AtW was suggested to contribute to a reduction in government

expenditure. By sustaining employment for participants, the programme was said to prevent taxpayer costs associated with unemployment benefits. Additionally, the health and well-being improvements reported by recipients reduce the long-term pressure on NHS health and mental health services. Additionally, many recipients noted that AtW allowed them to function with a level of parity alongside able-bodied colleagues, removing the financial disadvantages often associated with the challenges they face. While not always stated explicitly, this suggests that AtW helps the government fulfill its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Community-level benefits are also prominent. AtW was said to foster a sense of empowerment at a community level, demonstrating that recipients can be productive, integral members of society. The visibility of these employee's success was said to help encourage others with similar challenges to pursue employment.

Simultaneously, the programme educates broader communities on challenges of the recipient, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse needs and increasing social acceptance. This exposure is vital for dismantling the prejudices that often hinder the recruitment that prospective recipients of AtW may face.

Theme 2: Changing AtW

2.1 Changing Framework

More recent papers suggest AtW has undergone significant changes over the years, often for the worse. In support of this assessment, the earlier assessments of AtW included in this review tended to be more positive than more recent publications.

These shifts have affected the processes of assessment and reassessment as well as the underlying rationale for how they are conducted. Consequently, this has been perceived as reducing the overall level of support available to applicants and recipients.

Participants across these papers attribute this decline to broader budget cuts, which have fundamentally altered the ideological framework of the program. While the original intent of AtW was said to be rooted in providing essential professional support, it is argued that the model has now shifted toward a framework more closely resembling charity, with participants describing an expectation that they be grateful for what they have received. This resulted in what was perceived as a less person-centred support package.

2.2. Negative Externalities

The changes that have occurred in AtW are said to have increased inefficiencies within the system, thereby making it less effective than before. For example, in taking a generalist approach, there is less specialised insight into specific disabilities which is compounded by insufficient training that leaves many participants in the position of having to educate their own assessors during the process. Even when staff possess the necessary expertise, a lack of

continuity, due to a reduction in case workers, often forces applicants to deal with multiple AtW staff on a single case. This results in conflicting advice and the exhausting need for individuals to repeatedly re-explain their circumstances.

A greater level of inflexibility has brought with it practical barriers throughout the application process. For instance, the insistence on physical signatures, reported by some participants, created an immediate exclusion for many visually impaired applicants.

Furthermore, a rigid focus on cost-cutting can result in the provision of ineffective equipment or the hiring of less proficient support workers, such as cheaper signers who cannot meet a Deaf user's requirements. Such decisions are often made without a full understanding of the client's specific needs, leading to recommendations that are ultimately inappropriate and wasteful.

Cuts have also increased severe operational delays. Long waiting times and administrative backlogs mean that people often wait months for both assessments and the actual delivery of support. Rather than AtW supporting them in work, these delays may jeopardise their employment the longer they are drawn out. This slow, complex nature is increasingly incompatible with the pace of modern recruitment and does not adequately cater to the needs of self-employed individuals or those on short term contracts.

The consequences of these increasing inefficiencies are profound. While waiting for support, recipients may lose their jobs or be forced to rely on unpaid assistance from friends and family to navigate the complex system. After experiencing the friction and delays of the current model, some employers may become less willing to hire individuals who rely on the programme in the future, creating a cycle of exclusion. Recipients describe how the process has become increasingly stressful. As a result some individuals describe being less willing to seek work themselves again in the future if experiences are poor, therefore abandoning the labour market.

2.3: Cost and Benefit

Despite changes to the programme, many recipients still describe it as transformative. Success stories highlight the benefits available when the system functions as intended. Some studies say that criticism by those with experience of AtW is rooted in frustration, given they recognise its immense potential and are disheartened to see it fall short of that standard.

Negative experiences illustrate how a narrow focus on cost-cutting can create unintended consequences that lead to a more wasteful use of resources. This often manifests in funding inappropriate recommendations and discouraging both employers and prospective applicants from engaging with the scheme. Ultimately, a poorly resourced version of the programme may produce outcomes that run directly counter to its fundamental mission, with potential long term costs that exceed the amount spent on the programme.

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Recommendations

Both the qualitative and quantitative scoping demonstrate that AtW brings a variety of benefits to people's experiences of work. These include increased job security, financial security, improved wellbeing and better learning at work. Some studies even show that without AtW, many people would be unable to continue in work.

However, due to limited data availability, it is unclear what proportion of total AtW recipients experience which benefits, or how important these benefits are to them remaining in work.

Therefore, it is difficult to estimate the potential impact of changes to AtW on the employment rate of the whole disabled population, without further research to determine the extent and saliency of the different benefits that AtW can provide.

Based on the evidence reviewed above we make the following recommendations.

1. **The UK government should stop changes to the support that people receive through AtW**

   The government cannot be sure of the impact of any change to AtW support. Any changes that reduce available support, or make it more challenging for people to access support through AtW, risk making work uncomfortable, unsafe or inaccessible for disabled people.

   While the quantitative evidence base is poor, qualitative evidence suggests that reducing AtW support would make work impossible for many people. Evidence from existing qualitative studies shows that even a small change in AtW support can have an outsized impact on someone's experience of employment and cause them to be insufficiently supported at work.

   In this context, the government risks undermining its aims to increase the number of people in employment if it makes changes to AtW without fully understanding their implications beforehand.

2. **The government should commission quantitative impact and value-for-money evaluations of AtW**

   It is unclear how generalisable the findings from qualitative studies identified in this review are to the whole population of AtW recipients. Similarly, the quantitative studies that we identified have methodological limitations such as skewed samples or limited analysis that does not reliably identify causal relationships between AtW support and measured outcomes.

Therefore, the UK government should commission a quantitative evaluation of the impact of AtW that improves on the external validity (the extent to which findings can be generalised from a research sample to the population) of the existing qualitative research and improves on the quantitative methodologies that previous studies have used.

In order to robustly identify the impact of AtW on people's experiences, this evaluation should compare the experience of AtW recipients to a control group of people who are eligible for AtW, but do not currently receive it. This would enable researchers to identify the causal effect of AtW from random variation in the sample. One way of achieving this could be to follow the approach that Ashworth and Salis (2018) suggest, whereby the government commissions a bespoke survey to identify people who receive AtW and a control group of people with comparable disabilities who do not receive AtW.

The government could also evaluate the costs and benefits of AtW by calculating the income tax payments that would be lost if AtW were reduced. The government could measure the income tax paid by AtW recipients, by linking AtW recipient records from the DWP, with income tax payment data from HMRC, to better understand the value-for-money of AtW.

3. **The government should improve people's experiences of applying for AtW by reducing delays in AtW applications and supporting communication between AtW recipients and their advisors**

The qualitative research on AtW provision demonstrates that people's experiences of AtW are worsening over time. Increasing waiting times, impersonal assessments and opaque processes mean that accessing AtW is difficult and many people do not receive support that they are entitled to. Such administrative issues create negative outcomes for people that often mean they have to stop working entirely.

Therefore, resolving issues with backend processes, while retaining current levels of AtW support, could increase the number of people who are able to enter employment. The studies reviewed above suggest several approaches that the government could take to achieve this.

For example, the government could improve waiting times for AtW by removing the need for AtW recipients to reapply for their existing AtW support if their needs have not changed. This would reduce the number of applications that it needs to process, allowing for a better allocation of resources.

Providing improved training to advisors on the specific needs of people with different disabilities could also improve communication between people who require AtW support and public servants. Many studies surfaced examples of AtW recipients repeatedly

having to educate their own advisors on their needs, due to a lack of understanding of people's experiences and support requirements among AtW advisors

While the overall impact of AtW on people's ability to stay in work is poorly evidenced, there is ample evidence that people's individual experience of AtW has deteriorated in recent years and the government should act to correct this.

MOVEMENT RESEARCH UNIT

Annex A: Search method for quantitative studies

We adopted a snowball approach to our quantitative literature. We identified relevant studies through Google Scholar and used the references in these studies to find further examples of quantitative research into the benefits of AtW.

We supplemented this snowball review with a dedicated search of academic databases, mostly Lens. We conducted this dedicated search to find examples of quantitative studies of policies that are similar to AtW (AtW-style) from other countries, when our initial literature did not surface enough examples specific to the UK.

The method for our search of Lens, and the key terms and AtW-style policies that we searched for, are outlined below.

Search strategy for finding empirical studies and reviews of costs and benefits of AtW-type policies

NB: the costs of AtW are fairly well known, since the payments from the DWP are recorded and publicly shared. Therefore we are more interested in the benefits.

Below is the search strategy for Lens (https://www.lens.org/lens/search/scholar/structured), but similar strategies can be used for other academic search engines that allow for Boolean and Wildcard searching. The AtW-type policy terms and the fiscal and economic benefit search terms are joined with AND.

Fields: Title, Abstract, or Full Text

Publication type: Journal Article, Conference Proceedings Article, Book, Book Chapter, Dissertation, Report

Date range: from 01/01/2006 to today (my choice for the start date is arbitrary)

Field of study: Political science, Sociology, Economics, Economic growth, Social science

AtW-type policy terms:

"Access to Work" OR
"Employment Assistance Fund" OR
"Work and Access" OR
"Modification Grant" OR
"Public Employment Service" OR
"UWV Disability Support" OR
"Active labour market polic*" OR
"Disability employment polic*" OR

(Workplace AND (adjustment OR accommodation) AND polic*) OR
“Demand?side employment support” OR
“Supported employment” OR
(Vocational AND (rehabilitation OR “return-to-work”) AND polic*”)

Fiscal and economic benefits search terms:

(tax* OR economic OR fiscal) AND (contribution* OR pay* OR benefit* OR receiv*)

“Tax contributions”

Combined search term:

("Access to Work" OR "Employment Assistance Fund" OR "Work and Access" OR "Modification Grant" OR "Public Employment Service" OR "UWV Disability Support" OR "Active labour market polic*" OR "Disability employment polic*" OR (Workplace AND (adjustment OR accommodation) AND polic*) OR "Demand?side employment support" OR "Supported employment") OR (Vocational AND (rehabilitation OR "return-to-work")) AND ("tax contribution")

("Access to Work" OR "Employment Assistance Fund" OR "Work and Access" OR "Modification Grant" OR "Public Employment Service" OR "UWV Disability Support" OR "Active labour market polic*" OR "Disability employment polic*" OR (Workplace AND (adjustment OR accommodation) AND polic*) OR "Demand?side employment support" OR "Supported employment") OR (Vocational AND (rehabilitation OR "return-to-work")) AND ("tax contribution") AND (tax* OR economic OR fiscal) AND (contribution* OR pay* OR benefit* OR receiv*)

Key terms associated with AtW-type policies

- Active labour market policies (ALMPs)
- Disability employment policy
- Workplace accommodation/adjustment/reasonable accommodation policy
- Demand-side employment support
- Supported employment
- Vocational rehabilitation/return-to-work policy

Comparator programmes to AtW in other countries

Country	**Programme name**	**Available since (if known)**
Australia	Employment Assistance Fund (EAF)	2010
Ireland	Work and Access suite	2024

New Zealand	Modification Grant (Job Support Funds)	~2015
Sweden	Public Employment Service grants	~2010
Netherlands	UWV disability support/voorzieningen	~2009