



House of Commons
Work and Pensions Committee

Assistive technology: Government response to the Committee's Tenth Report

**Fifteenth Special Report of Session
2017–19**

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Work and Pensions Committee

The Work and Pensions Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Work and Pensions and its associated public bodies.

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Committee reports are published on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website and in print by Order of the House.

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Anne-Marie Griffiths (Clerk), Katy Stout (Second Clerk), Libby McEnhill (Senior Committee Specialist), Rod McInnes (Committee Specialist), Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Senior Media and Policy Officer), Esther Goosey (Senior Committee Assistant), Michelle Garratty (Committee Assistant)

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Fifteenth Special Report

The Work and Pensions Committee published its Tenth Report of Session 2017–19, [Assistive technology](#) (HC 673) on 19 April 2018. The Government response was received on 24 July 2018 and is appended to this report.

Appendix 1: Letter from Sarah Newton MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

I would like to thank you and members of the Committee for your report on assistive technology, which I know has helped to raise awareness of the vital role it can play in not only disabled people's employment prospects, but also their everyday lives.

As you heard from the range of experts who gave evidence to support the Committee in its work, assistive technology can provide crucial support to disabled people and remove barriers to employment in ways none of us might have imagined a decade ago. Not only that, but it can also make the difference in enabling truly independent lives: whether that's real-time transcription technology in the classroom, smart devices in the home, accessible transport, or managing the symptoms of a long-term health condition.

I am delighted to be Minister for Disabled People at such an exciting time, where I have been able to see first-hand how this new technology can change lives. I want to exploit all the opportunities offered by assistive technology, and I am pleased that colleagues across Whitehall are embracing these possibilities too.

The Prime Minister announced in May the first mission for the Ageing Society Grand Challenge, which is underpinned by £98m of investment: that we will ensure that people can enjoy five extra healthy, independent years of life by 2035, whilst narrowing the gap between the experience of the richest and poorest. The majority of long-term health conditions are acquired in adulthood, and with an ageing population as well as much greater awareness of health and disability issues, it is more important than ever for workplaces to be healthy and inclusive places that allow everyone to thrive and progress, and that can adapt to people's changing needs, such as working until later in life. Smart technologies that help people with a health condition to continue to lead a rich and fulfilling life will be part of the answer.

Since we submitted our evidence, I have continued to have conversations across Government, with disability charities and with the tech industry, and have become even more convinced of the importance of this agenda. During London Tech week, I attended a breakfast meeting at No. 10 with key players from the industry and disability charities, where we reaffirmed the opportunities here. Microsoft has been particularly supportive in the discussions we have had in the Disability Confident Business Leaders Group. There are obvious challenges too: making people aware of what assistive technology can do, and how much is now built in as standard to some hardware; tackling digital exclusion;

encouraging industry to ensure products and websites are accessible; and ensuring that Government leads the way, in its own services and in the way it procures services. We will continue to look across Government to identify the scope for further policy development.

In the meantime, your report contains some valuable insights about what we can do now. We agree, for example, that there is more to do to promote the benefits of assistive technology to employers and individuals, and we will consider how to include this in our work to improve the information and support available. This work is already exploring the benefits of digital solutions – such as our pilot project with Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LEP to develop a digital social hub for the local business community, which will leverage analytics and artificial intelligence to tailor interactive discussions and advice to employers' needs.

We also agree that Access to Work has the potential to deliver even more effective support for individuals and has an important role to play in supporting the Government's ambition to see one million more disabled people in work by 2027. I am pleased to have launched our new Access to Work Tech Fund – saving businesses as much as £2,000 per person compared with the previous arrangements.

Our response to the specific recommendations in your report is set out below.

We will continue to work with industry experts and with other interested stakeholders to ensure that disabled people are able to take advantage of the benefits assistive technology can bring.

Tuesday 24, July 2018

Appendix 2: Government Response

1. We recommend the Government create a fifth Industrial Strategy Grand Challenge on Assistive Technology and ensures this focus is reflected throughout its regional funding streams. This would cost nothing, but would send a clear signal that the Government recognises the vital role that assistive technology could play in closing the disability employment gap and revitalising the UK economy. It would also allow for funding the development of a broader range of assistive technology than is possible via the current Challenges. Once this Challenge is established the Department has a vital role to play as a convener. It should bring together a consortium of AT developers and entrepreneurs, users, employers and support providers to bid for funding, helping bridge gaps in provision and open up assistive technology to a much wider market.

The four Industrial Strategy Grand Challenges were identified after working with experts – including the Government Office for Science, UK Research and Innovation (the Research Councils and Innovate UK), the Council for Science and Technology and the national academies – and through evidence gained from the Industrial Strategy Green Paper consultation. We will look across all of government's levers to support the Grand Challenges, including innovation funding. For example, we have announced over £1.5 billion through the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, much of which will go towards supporting the Grand Challenges. As explained in the Industrial Strategy White Paper, progress on the Grand Challenges will be regularly reviewed to ensure that government is focusing on the correct opportunities, and is aware of any changes in the UK's advantages.

The existing Grand Challenges are relevant to, and will likely support the development of, a wide range of assistive technology. For example, through the Ageing Society Grand Challenge we are considering how ageing populations will create new demands for technologies, products, and services – including assistive technology. During London Tech Week, No. 10 hosted a breakfast of key players in assistive technology to reaffirm the opportunity both to support disabled people, and for UK firms to lead the way in developing the technology.

The Prime Minister recently announced the first mission of the Ageing Society Grand Challenge to ensure that people enjoy an extra five years of healthy and independent living by 2035, while narrowing the gap between the richest and the poorest. Delivering on this mission will help people to remain independent for longer, continue to participate through work and within their communities and stay connected to others. New advances in technology offer more opportunities than ever before.

We will also capitalise on our £98m Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund investment in Healthy Ageing by growing the market for innovative products and services that support people to maintain independence and quality of life.

2. We recommend the Department dedicate a section of its Disability Confident portal to assistive technology. This should include information on types of assistive technology; case studies of how they can help; promotion of mainstream, low-cost assistive technology; and signposting towards resources for helping individuals and building compatible systems. The Department should run a publicity campaign alongside the launch of the portal, highlighting the business benefits of assistive technology at work.

To help achieve our goal of seeing 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027, we want employers of all sizes and sectors to be able to easily access improved advice and support – to help them recruit, retain, and support disabled people to make progress in their workforce, as well as to manage sickness absence appropriately. We are currently working with employers to identify potential solutions for improving access to information, and will ensure that information on assistive technology is included in any solution. We will also update the information we make available about Disability Confident to promote the benefits of assistive technology.

3. We recommend the Department introduce specific criteria on assistive technology to Disability Confident. As part of this, employers at Leader level should procure accessible systems. The Government should commit to doing this for all new IT procurement from April 2019. To drive improvement, the Department should create a central standard for accessible systems in government departments. It should then produce and publish an annual report on compliance via Disability Confident, ranking departments from most to least accessible.

It's important that the Government shows leadership in this area and that we use the levers we have. The Disability Confident scheme already highlights the value of assistive technology in supporting disabled staff. We will strengthen the guidance and provide more linked examples and case studies that employers can learn from.

We have created a Disability Confident Business Leaders Group, comprising senior representatives from major employers, to work with us on driving knowledge and take-up of Disability Confident amongst business and to advise us on how best to ensure Disability

Confident meets the needs of business. Microsoft is a member of the Group and is a strong contributor on the issue of assistive technology, and other members, such as GSK and Channel 4, are also very knowledgeable users of it. At a recent meeting of the Group we considered how existing and emerging assistive technology can help with recruiting, retaining, and developing disabled staff, with the aim of creating more case studies and guidance and disseminating this information to other employers.

We are now providing quarterly specialist themed events, where Disability Confident Leaders provide information, guidance, and case studies on specific topics to other organisations, usually running over a fortnight about once per quarter. Previous topics have included mental health, workplace adjustments, and recruitment techniques. We will design and deliver specialist themed events on assistive technology at the earliest possible opportunity.

The material is mainly delivered via on-line webinars, blogs, and tutorials. Links to this material will be retained by our delivery partners (we use different delivery partners for each quarterly event) and remain available after the fortnight is complete.

Accessibility is a well-established requirement of the service standard against which Government Digital Service (GDS) assesses central government digital services. To support Departments to meet the accessibility requirements, GDS provides detailed guidance on accessibility (which includes the use of assistive technology), and that guidance has recently been enhanced.

The accessibility standards require that services are built that:

- meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 to level AA;
- are tested with users with disabilities; and
- are compatible with the most commonly used assistive technologies.

GDS also ensures that all of the common components which it provides to teams across government are accessible by design so they provide a robust basis on which to build online services.

To develop a culture of accessibility within Departments, GDS has set up a network of 22 senior accessibility champions across Government accountable for accessibility within their Department. This compliments an accessibility community of over 800 members from across the public sector which provides a mechanism for those working on services to get support and ideas from their peers.

In DWP specifically, we're committed to using new technologies to make DWP a fully inclusive place to work, and have a dedicated Accessibility Advocate who works across the Department to strengthen accessibility compliance. Our arrangements include a central Accessibility Hub, where our employees can trial a wide range of accessibility tools. We aim to provide a solution which meets their specific needs within 24 hours.

A European Standard – EN 301 549 – is already available to help public procurers identify the accessibility requirements of systems they might purchase; and the GDS Service Manual (<https://www.gov.uk/service-manual>) offers practical guidance on how Government can design and develop accessible services.

4. We recommend the Department update training for front line Work Coaches to include mandatory training on assistive technology. This should include emphasising the wide range of conditions that AT can help manage, and encouraging Work Coaches to make referrals at the earliest point of contact. We further recommend the Department undertakes an assessment of existing and potential suppliers of assistive technology support to inform development of a more consistent, extensive market linked to the Flexible Support Fund. The support that is available should be publicised, on a rolling basis, to Jobcentre Plus staff and claimants.

Given the regular contact they have with claimants, Work Coaches are critical to helping raise awareness of the help which is available. Specific training is currently delivered in the foundation learning undertaken by all Work Coaches on Access to Work with reference to the assistive technology which is available to support customers. We do not believe that additional specific training is required, but we will ensure that we routinely share up to date information on Accessible Technology with Work Coaches and all other staff in customer-facing roles. Work Coaches can also access support from people in our specialist roles such as Disability Employment Advisers and Community Partners, who cover all Jobcentres and are experienced in advising other colleagues on the latest technology available and what is likely to be appropriate for individual circumstances.

We are also removing financial disincentives for employers taking up technology-based solutions. Previously, special aids and equipment might have attracted a mandatory 'cost-share' while alternative approaches, such as support workers, would not – even though a technology-based solution could cost the taxpayer less in the long-run and allow the member of staff to be more independent at work. The new Access to Work Tech Fund changes this by removing the 'cost-share' requirement for technology-based solutions to make them more attractive to employers.

The Flexible Support Fund can already be used to fill gaps in provision to support claimants to move closer to or into work, which may include advice on assistive technology. We will review what is currently available and consider next steps.

5. We recommend the Department introduce a new finance scheme for the daily living component of PIP. Claimants should have the option of a low interest loan to buy or lease assistive technology products. Users of the scheme should be offered a consultation before buying equipment, with expert assistive technology advisers, to ensure they are buying the most appropriate and cost-effective equipment. The Department need not administer the scheme, but should ensure that whoever company does so works in line with the principles of providing a public service.

We absolutely share the ambition of improving access to assistive technology for disabled people and are committed to supporting them to live independent lives. We do however have concerns about the specific recommendation made regarding the introduction of a new finance scheme as the way to do this; this is a complex area and there are a number of issues regarding the provision of loans to claimants that would need careful consideration before taking the proposal further, including:

- the level of interest charged to claimants;
- the commercial model (e.g. using an independent, profit-making organisation);

- value for money, and determining whether there would be a cost saving for claimants; and
- the provision of financial advice to claimants to ensure vulnerable claimants were not put at risk.

As you are also aware, the National Audit Office are currently starting work on their Section 6 review of Motability. In light of the concerns outlined above and the ongoing NAO review, we want to reflect on the findings of the NAO before considering this specific recommendation further and coming to a view on what the most appropriate options are for improving access to assistive technology for PIP claimants.

6. We recommend the Department review and update training for Access to Work assessors to emphasise that mainstream AT is, in many cases, at least as appropriate as specialist provision. To ensure assessors' knowledge remains up-to-date, the Department should also introduce a framework of regular quality assessment for assessors.

It's important that Access to Work advisers provide up-to-date advice on all relevant technological solutions, which is why our recently issued contracts for independent holistic workplace assessments specify that the contractor should provide suitable qualified assessors with appropriate impairment expertise. Assessors must have a minimum of one year's relevant experience delivering the service in a vocational setting. The contractor is responsible for providing continuing professional development which will include up skilling in this area. The contracts have now been in place for about a year, and we believe that as more people have the new assessments, they will feel the benefit of this approach.

The contracts have a more rounded approach compared to the previous contracts which focused on ergonomic needs. The assessments are conducted face to face at the customer's place of employment, assessing their entire in-work needs. The assessment is conducted in discussion with the employer to ensure there is full understanding and buy-in from the employer. The assessor will consider all options focusing on enabling independence. These contracts are continuing to establish themselves and we will continue to monitor the improvements and outputs.

7. We recommend the Department introduce an "Access to Work (training)" stream within Access to Work. This should provide specialist-led training on using AT, including mainstream, built-in and app-based technologies. It should not be linked to receiving particular equipment, but should be available as a free-standing component of an award, including for equipment the user already owns.

Access to Work is a flexible personalised discretionary grant system that looks to provide a contribution towards the disability related workplace needs that a person still has after their employers have fulfilled their statutory duties to make reasonable adjustments. As such, grants to pay for training to get the best use out of a technological solution are already within scope of Access to Work if such a solution is identified as being beneficial. We will undertake to raise awareness of this offer and explore demand for it.