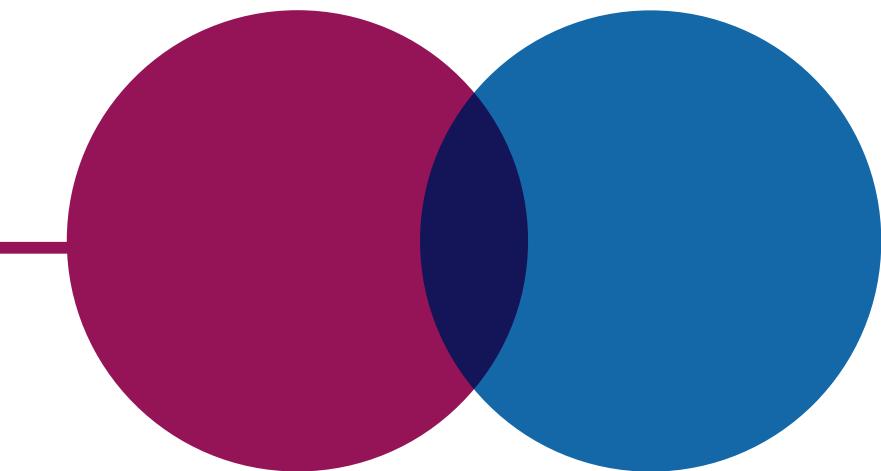




National Audit Office



REPORT

The Access to Work scheme

Department for Work & Pensions

SESSION 2024-2026
6 FEBRUARY 2026
HC 1644

Key facts

74,200

number of people who received Access to Work funding in 2024-25, compared with 37,700 in 2018-19, an increase of 97%

£321mn

the Department for Work & Pensions' (DWP's) spending on Access to Work provision in 2024-25, a real-terms increase of 96% since 2018-19

62,100

number of applications for Access to Work support waiting for DWP to make a decision at 31 March 2025, compared with 21,700 at 31 March 2022

£69,260

maximum annual total Access to Work funding available per individual in 2024-25 and 2025-26

157,000

number of applications for support in 2024-25, more than double the number of applications (76,100) in 2018-19

37,900

number of people with mental health or learning conditions who received funding in 2024-25, accounting for 51% of the total

£227 million

spending on support workers for Access to Work customers in 2024-25, a real-terms increase of 125% from £101 million in 2018-19

109

working days

average time taken by DWP to process applications in November 2025, compared with 66 working days in 2024-25 and 28 working days in 2021-22

588

number of DWP full-time equivalent staff working to administer the scheme in 2024-25, up from 247 in 2021-22

What this investigation is about

1 Access to Work is a demand-led grant scheme to help people get, or stay in, work if they have a physical or mental health condition or disability. Funding may pay for things like specialist equipment, support workers such as a British Sign Language interpreter, the costs of travelling to work and physical adaptations to the workplace. The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) typically approves support for individuals for three years, up to a maximum annual total, which was £69,260 in 2024-25 and 2025-26.

2 The scheme operates in Great Britain, and is funded and administered by DWP. **Figure 1** overleaf sets out the process whereby individuals apply for support and subsequently request reimbursement for costs incurred. DWP aims to tailor the support provided to address the barriers faced by each customer. Its case managers engage with the specifics of each case, meaning that the process is resource-intensive.

3 Demand for Access to Work support has increased significantly, with the total number of applications more than doubling, from 76,100 in 2018-19 to 157,000 in 2024-25. As demand has grown, there has been an increase in the number of outstanding applications and payments, and in the time taken to process applications.

4 In March 2025, the government published a green paper setting out proposals to reform the country's incapacity and disability benefits system.¹ This included proposals for the future of Access to Work in order to consider how public resources can generate the most value for the greatest number of people.

5 Concerns have been raised in Parliament and by stakeholders about the backlogs and delays, and the impact these may have on the employment of people with disabilities and health conditions. In its 2024 election manifesto, the Labour Party said it would tackle the backlog of Access to Work claims.

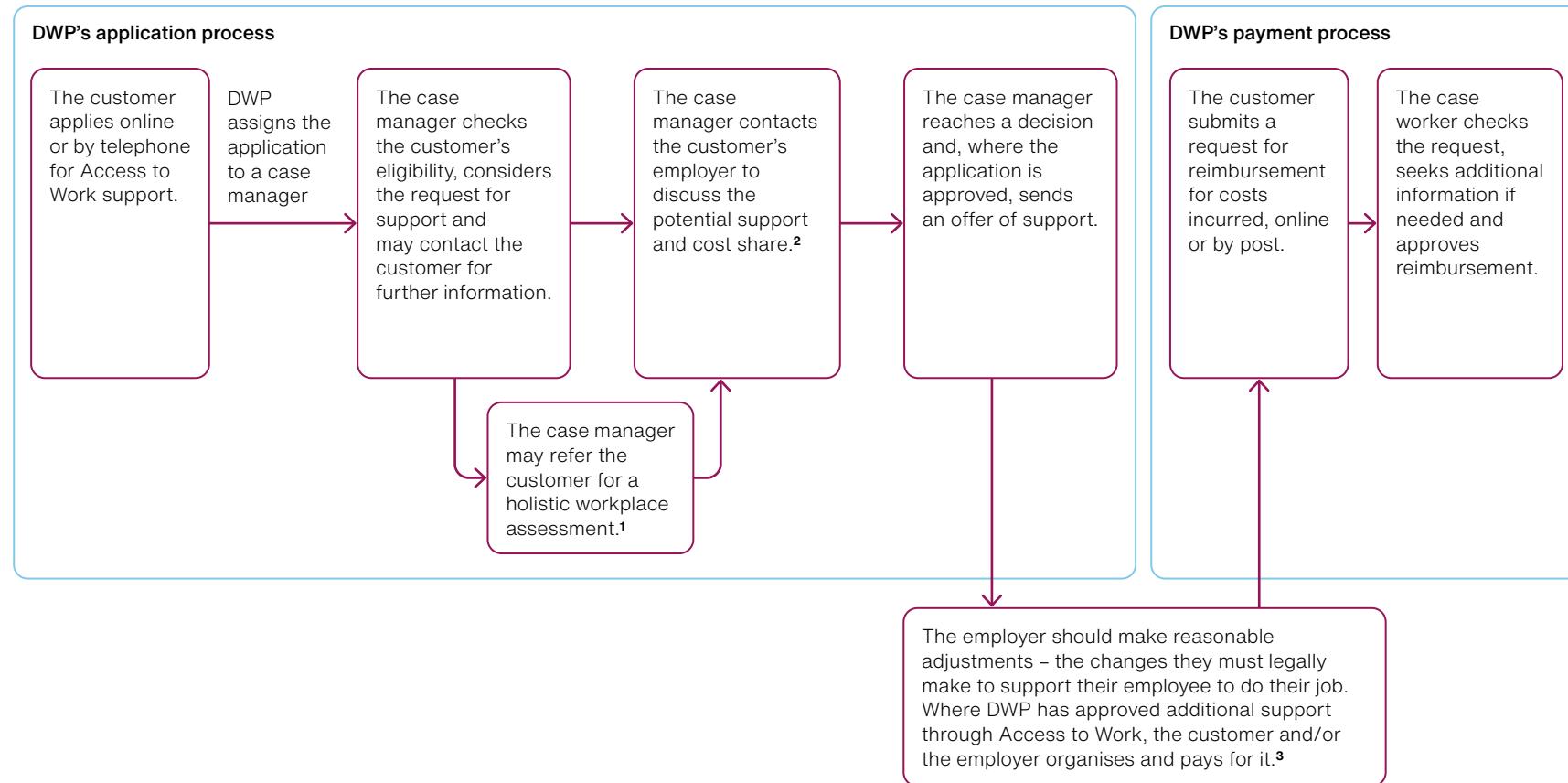
6 In light of these concerns, the purpose of our investigation was to provide transparency over DWP's operation of Access to Work and inform public debate about the future of the scheme. The report covers: the purpose of the Access to Work scheme (Part One); take-up of the scheme (Part Two); and how DWP is managing the increased take-up of the scheme (Part Three). Details of our approach are set out in Appendix One. Our work was not designed to assess whether Access to Work is providing value for money.

¹ Department for Work & Pensions, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working*, CP 1297, March 2025.

Figure 1

The Access to Work customer journey

There are several steps in the process whereby customers apply to the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) for support and subsequently request reimbursement for costs incurred

**Notes**

- If it is not clear how a customer's disability or health condition affects the way they can or will do their job, DWP may commission a specialist workplace assessment, carried out by a DWP contractor.
- In certain circumstances, an employer must contribute to the cost of any support approved by DWP through the scheme, known as a cost share.
- It is for the customer and their employer to decide if they want to proceed with the support DWP has offered through the scheme.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Work & Pensions information

Summary

Key findings

Purpose of the scheme

7 The Access to Work scheme is intended to provide support for people's needs within the workplace over and above an employer's legal duty to make reasonable adjustments. Employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that workers with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, are not substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs. DWP has set out five principles which guide its decisions about the award of Access to Work support. These include that the support provided should meet the minimum needed to allow individuals to overcome workplace barriers that arise from their disability, and be value for money (paragraphs 1.2 and 1.4).

8 While the scheme clearly has benefits, DWP recognises it does not know whether the scheme provides value for money. The organisations we consulted highlighted the benefits of the scheme in helping people to secure and take up job offers. DWP does not, however, have evidence to assess value for money – for example, it has little evidence on the difference that the funding has made and does not check whether the support was of benefit. DWP has undertaken no quantitative assessment of the scheme's effectiveness, although qualitative research in 2018 found that nearly everyone who took part felt the scheme offered invaluable support for individuals and their employers. Also in 2018, DWP published research which concluded that there were complex challenges to evaluating the impact of Access to Work. These included establishing a counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of the scheme and a lack of sufficient administrative and survey data (paragraphs 1.10 to 1.12).

9 DWP is taking steps to make its decision-making more consistent in order to address its concerns about how the scheme has been working. DWP has concerns that, because it has not designed the scheme in a prescriptive way or defined the rules tightly, awards have not always aligned with the policy intent and funding decisions have been inconsistent. Examples include the following.

- **Reasonable adjustments:** DWP believes that employers are not always meeting their legal responsibilities to provide reasonable adjustments, and that Access to Work provision may be filling the gaps, rather than going above and beyond. It has also identified that its award decisions may not have consistently taken account of reasonable adjustments made by employers.
- **Funding for support workers:** Definitions of support workers in DWP's guidance can be broadly interpreted and DWP is concerned about the role of third parties in securing Access to Work provision. For example, firms may advise claimants on how to apply for the maximum available funding and also supply the support workers whom DWP has agreed to fund.

To improve the consistency of its decision-making, DWP introduced new training for its staff in 2024, which included reinforcing the principles of Access to Work and the questions to ask customers. As a consequence, some customers may have received reduced awards when they applied for their funding to be renewed without any change in their circumstances (paragraphs 1.13 to 1.22).

10 The government has consulted on options to reform the scheme. In March 2025, the government published proposals to reform the incapacity and disability benefits system, including Access to Work. It consulted on three potential future approaches: supporting employers directly to make workplaces accessible and inclusive, consistent with their legal responsibilities; providing targeted funds to individuals to pay for workplace adaptations, beyond what could be considered reasonable adjustments; and shaping the market for aids, appliances and assistive technology, to reduce their cost and spread their adoption. In October 2025, DWP published a summary of the responses to the consultation. It reported that the vast majority of those who responded expressed strong support for the aims of Access to Work, with suggestions for a simplified, tailored and streamlined scheme that can deliver funding quickly (paragraphs 1.23 and 1.24).

Take-up of the scheme

11 Demand for the scheme has increased significantly, with the number of applications for support more than doubling since 2018-19. The number of applications for support increased from 76,100 in 2018-19 to 157,000 in 2024-25. DWP told us it does not definitively know what caused this significant increase, but believes the growth in demand is likely to have been driven by a rise in the identification of mental health conditions and neurodiversity across society. Although the number of applications has increased, DWP considers that the number of people supported by the scheme is a low proportion of those who might be eligible. Low take-up could be due to a lack of awareness. A survey by the Federation of Small Businesses in May 2025 found that, of 892 small employers who responded, at least 35% were unaware of the scheme before completing the survey (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.4, and Figure 3).

12 DWP's data suggest there has been a shift in the balance of people supported by the scheme, from those with physical conditions to those who have mental health or learning conditions. There are limitations in how DWP categorises primary medical conditions – it uses a series of categories for physical conditions, but its categories are less detailed for mental health, learning and developmental conditions. In total, the number of people who received a payment from the scheme rose by 97%, from 37,700 in 2018-19 to 74,200 in 2024-25. Of these, the number of people with mental health or learning conditions increased from 11,200 (30% of all customers receiving payments) in 2018-19 to 37,900 (51%) in 2024-25. The number of people with conditions categorised by DWP as 'other', which it believes includes those with neurodivergent conditions, has also increased (paragraphs 2.5 to 2.7, and Figure 4).

13 DWP's spending on Access to Work provision almost doubled in real terms from 2018-19 to 2024-25, driven by an increase in spending on support workers. DWP's spending on Access to Work provision increased by 96% in real terms, from £163 million in 2018-19 to £321 million in 2024-25. DWP has forecast that spending may reach £517 million in 2029-30 (based on 2024-25 prices). It exceeded its budget for Access to Work provision in 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2022-23, by an average of £3.6 million (2.8%). Although the scheme is demand-led, it is funded from DWP's Departmental Expenditure Limit and DWP has to cover any overspend against budget by reducing funding for other areas of activity. The rise in spending has been mainly driven by an increase in spending on support workers, which rose by 125% in real terms from £101 million in 2018-19 to £227 million in 2024-25. In 2024-25, spending on support for people who are deaf or hard of hearing was £90 million and accounted for 28% of total spending on Access to Work provision (paragraphs 2.9 to 2.13, and Figures 6 and 8).

Managing the increased take-up of the scheme

14 The increased take-up of the scheme has led to significant processing

delays and backlogs. The average time taken by DWP to process applications more than doubled, from 28 working days in 2021-22 to 66 working days in 2024-25, and has continued to increase. In November 2025, the average time taken was 109 days compared with DWP's target of 25 days. The number of applications waiting for DWP to make a decision almost trebled, from 21,700 at 31 March 2022 to 62,100 at 31 March 2025; and the number of outstanding requests for payment more than quadrupled, from 6,900 at 31 March 2022 to 31,700 at 31 March 2025 (paragraph 3.2, and Figure 9).

15 The processing delays and backlogs have had a negative impact on individuals

and employers. Four of the organisations we consulted said that application delays and late payments have affected employees' job security, and one noted that in some cases delays have resulted in people having job offers withdrawn. Late payments can also have an impact on employers. Three of the organisations we consulted commented that payment delays were leading to cashflow problems, noting that delays were particularly damaging for small businesses. DWP has received a growing number of complaints about Access to Work from customers, with the largest number relating to how long it took DWP to process applications. The number of complaints rose from 234 in 2022-23 to 657 in 2024-25 and 800 in the first six months of 2025-26 (paragraphs 3.5 to 3.7).

16 To help process the growing number of cases and tackle the backlogs,

DWP has increased the number of staff working on the scheme. The number of staff rose from an average of 247 full-time equivalents in 2021-22 to 588 in 2024-25. DWP has recruited new employees and moved staff from other activities, such as administering benefits. Due to the increase in numbers, the amount that DWP spent on staff administering the scheme rose in real terms from £12.6 million in 2021-22 to £24.4 million in 2024-25 (paragraph 3.8).

17 DWP has also been seeking to improve the productivity of its case managers.

DWP has introduced several measures to increase productivity and help case managers to process cases more quickly. It has focused on lessening the administrative workload by reducing the supporting material that customers have to provide and case managers have to review. Based on data comparison and surveys of case managers, DWP concluded that the changes it has made have increased case manager productivity and reduced customer journey times. There are further opportunities to improve productivity. For example, DWP's Access to Work data systems are inefficient for case managers to use and do not provide them with an integrated view of all the information that DWP holds on customers. DWP is seeking to increase the number of cases that its case managers process to an average of 2.4 per day, but does not consider its standard of 2.8 to be achievable. Since May 2023, case managers have processed fewer cases per day on average than this standard. DWP told us it intends to update its work study and revise the productivity standard to reflect the current operating context once policy decisions have been taken about the future design of the scheme (paragraphs 3.10 to 3.12 and 3.15, and Figure 12).

18 DWP has reduced the rate of growth in the number of people waiting for a decision about their applications, but the backlog has not started to decline.

The growth in the backlog of applications accelerated in January 2024, with an increase of 2,245 cases that month, and peaked in July 2024, with an increase of 6,140 cases. Since March 2025, the monthly growth in the number of applications awaiting a decision has averaged 442 cases. With the measures it has taken, DWP forecasts the number of applications awaiting a decision will fall to 61,598 by the end of 2025-26. DWP told us it is currently seeking to manage the backlog of applications within the budget for the scheme, but this means it does not expect the backlog to fall significantly in the short term. It noted that it needs to balance the demand for Access to Work with its other priorities and commitments. It does not expect to be able to reduce backlogs to the level consistent with an efficient operation – which it currently estimates to be 11,300 cases awaiting a decision at any time – without policy changes, additional budget and further productivity improvements. It is waiting for the outcome of the government's consultation on the future of the scheme before committing to plans for further improvements (paragraphs 3.16 to 3.18, and Figure 13).

Recommendations

19 As the government looks to improve the Access to Work scheme with a view to generating the most value for the greatest number of people, we recommend that DWP take the following actions. It can act to strengthen how it administers the current scheme, while also planning for improvements that can be implemented in the future.

On assessing the impact of the scheme:

- a** Address gaps in administrative and survey data in order to assess the benefits of the current scheme.
- b** Implement any changes to the scheme in a way that enables evaluation of whether the scheme is meeting its objectives and achieving value for money, and undertake such evaluation.

On decision-making:

- c** Amend its guidance to align more closely with the government's objectives for the scheme – both now and after any changes – to support case workers to make consistent decisions.

On processing cases:

- d** Improve the quality and comprehensiveness of the data that it collects about Access to Work cases as they progress.
- e** Use these data to undertake analytical techniques, such as process mining, to identify trends, patterns and bottlenecks in how the customer journey process operates, and use these insights to improve the administration of the scheme.

On productivity:

- f** Carry out its work study to establish a new productivity standard as a basis to develop and implement improvement activities.
- g** Create an action plan for meeting the revised productivity standard, incorporating innovative approaches to support the work of case managers.