



REPORT

The Access to Work scheme

Department for Work & Pensions



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National Audit Office

The Access to Work scheme

Department for Work & Pensions

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

29 January 2026



Investigations

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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.

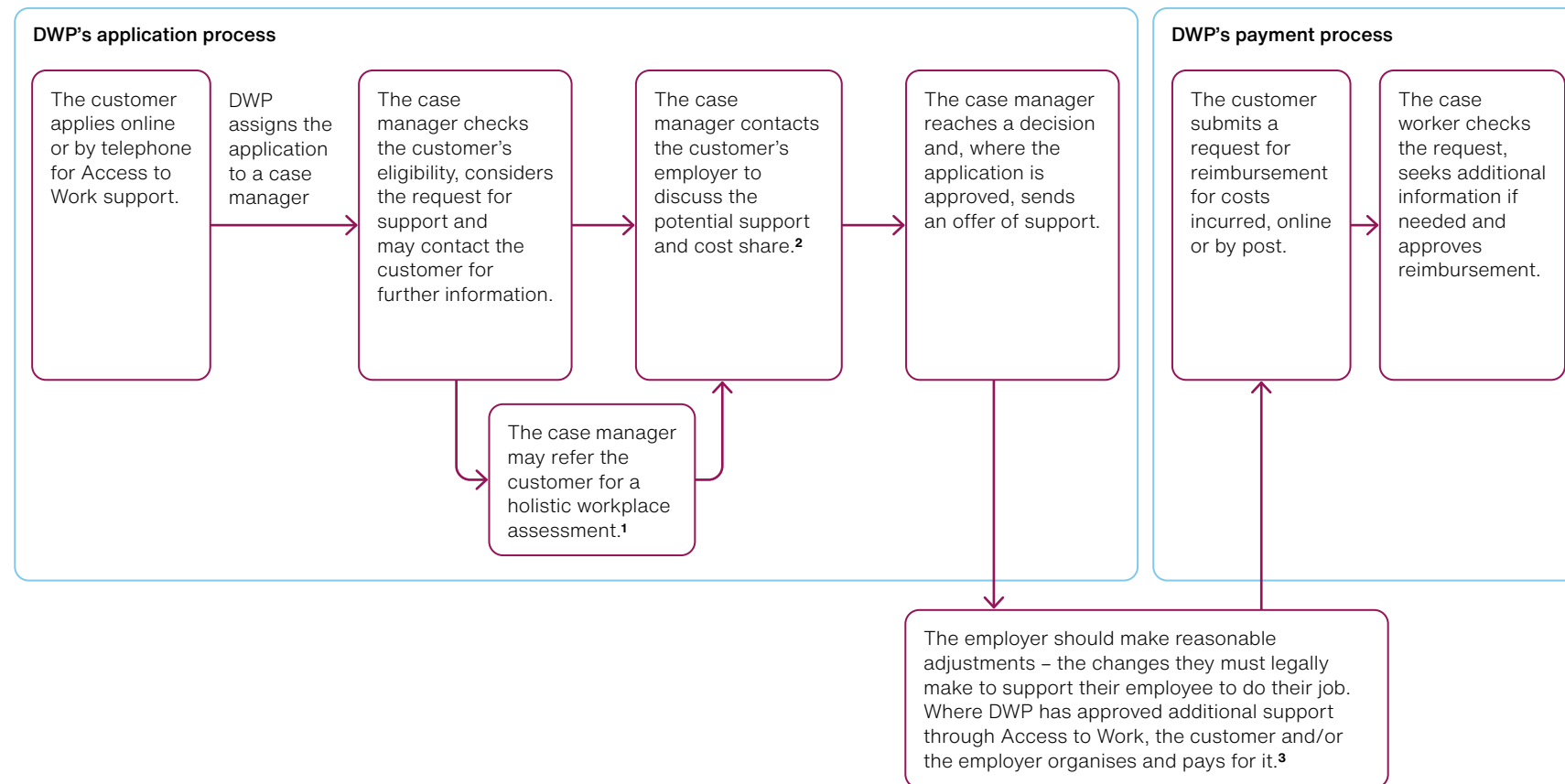
6 In light of these concerns, the purpose of our investigation was to provide transparency over DWP's operation of Access to Work and inform public debate about the future of the scheme. The report covers: the purpose of the Access to Work scheme (Part One); take-up of the scheme (Part Two); and how 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

- ¹ 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.
- ² In certain circumstances, an employer must contribute to the cost of any support approved by DWP through the scheme, known as a cost share.
- ³ 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.

Part One

Purpose of the Access to Work scheme

1.1 This part of the report sets out information about the Access to Work scheme and its benefits. It also covers concerns about how the scheme is working in practice and potential reforms to the scheme.

About Access to Work

1.2 Originally introduced in 1994, 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.² The scheme operates in Great Britain and is administered by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). DWP intends that the scheme provides support for individual needs within the workplace over and above an employer's legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments'. Under the Equality Act 2010, 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.

Eligibility for the scheme

1.3 DWP provides Access to Work support based on eligibility criteria (**Figure 2** overleaf).

² DWP makes Access to Work grants under section 2 of the Employment And Training Act 1973, which allows the Secretary of State to establish arrangements to assist people to select, train for, obtain and retain employment.

Figure 2

Eligibility criteria for the Access to Work scheme at November 2025

People applying for Access to Work support must meet eligibility criteria for their application to be approved

People can apply for Access to Work support if they:

- are disabled, have an illness or a health condition that affects their ability to work;
- are aged 16 or over (there is no upper age limit for support as long as employment is likely to continue);
- have the right to work in Great Britain; and
- are living in Great Britain.

They must also:

- be employed, self-employed or about to start employment; or
- have a contract of employment or be about to start a work trial; or
- be about to start a supported internship, traineeship or self-arranged work experience or be about to start young person's work experience; or
- be about to start or be undertaking an apprenticeship.

Note

- 1 Civil servants working for central government departments or for the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales are not eligible for the Access to Work scheme. Any support they receive is funded by their employer.

Source: Department for Work & Pensions information

1.4 In addition to the eligibility criteria, DWP has set out five principles which guide its decisions about the award of Access to Work grants. To be approved, support should:

- **be above and beyond a reasonable adjustment:** the support should complement but not replace or subsidise an employer's legal duty to make reasonable adjustments;
- **involve additional costs:** the support should be over and above what a non-disabled person would need to do the job;
- **consider the support required by a disabled person doing the job:** when determining whether there are additional costs or a business benefit, staff should not take into account the cost incurred by a non-disabled person doing the job;
- **meet minimum needs:** the support should allow individuals to overcome workplace barriers that arise from their disability; and
- **be value for money:** the support should meet an individual's needs in the most cost-effective way for the taxpayer.

Support funded by the scheme

1.5 DWP intends that the support funded through the Access to Work scheme is tailored to a worker's individual needs. It typically approves ongoing support for three years, up to a maximum annual total. The maximum was £69,260 in 2024-25 and 2025-26.

1.6 Before approving funding for support, DWP may commission a workplace assessment, carried out by a DWP contractor. The assessment is intended to consider all aspects of an applicant's condition, the barriers to work they face and how to overcome those barriers. Customers can also apply directly for DWP's mental health support service, which is provided by two contractors. This service provides support to help people manage their mental health at work, which may include a tailored plan and one-to-one sessions with a mental health professional.

1.7 On the basis of a customer's application and, where undertaken, an assessment, DWP may award funding for practical support. A grant may pay for:

- specialist equipment and assistive software;
- support workers, like a British Sign Language interpreter, a job coach or a travel buddy;
- the costs of travelling to work, if the customer cannot use public transport;
- adaptations to the customer's vehicle so they can get to work; or
- physical changes to the workplace (this can include changes to a customer's home if they work from there some or all of the time).

1.8 The support is usually paid for by the individual or their employer, and the money is reclaimed from DWP on the basis of invoices or receipts showing the costs of the support. In some circumstances, DWP may share the costs with the employer.

Benefits of the scheme

1.9 Access to Work has the potential to support economic growth by expanding the workforce and reducing economic inactivity due to disabilities and health conditions, as well as benefiting the individuals and employers involved in the scheme.

1.10 The organisations we consulted told us about the benefits of the scheme in helping disabled people secure and take up employment. One said: "Many disabled people are unable to take up a job offer until Access to Work has been guaranteed, because the cost of securing these adjustments would be too great for the individual themselves or their employer to cover." Another told us: "One individual who is deaf and uses British Sign Language to communicate said the scheme really helps them when they go for job interviews ... this gave them the confidence to navigate the conversation away from 'how much will this candidate cost us' to deciding if they are the best person to fill that job vacancy."

1.11 While the scheme clearly has benefits, DWP recognises that it does not know whether it provides value for money. There are a number of reasons for this.

- There is no business case or underpinning legislation to provide a reference point for assessing value for money.
- DWP has little evidence on the additionality of the scheme or on the difference that the funding has made. While it may commission a workplace assessment, DWP does not usually ask applicants to supply medical evidence or have their condition confirmed by a healthcare professional. It also does not check whether the support was of benefit.
- DWP has undertaken no quantitative assessment of the scheme's effectiveness. In 2018, it published research into the feasibility of evaluating the impact of Access to Work, which concluded that there were complex challenges to evaluation.³ These included establishing a counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of the scheme, the need for longitudinal data and a lack of sufficient administrative and survey data.

1.12 DWP has undertaken qualitative research on the scheme, which was published in 2018 and involved applicants, employers and delivery staff.⁴ The research found that nearly everyone felt the scheme offered invaluable support for individuals with health conditions or disabilities and their employers, often transforming difficult situations, for example where employees were struggling to continue in work or where employee-employer relationships were deteriorating.

DWP's concerns about how the scheme is working

1.13 DWP has concerns about how the scheme has been working in practice – specifically that, because it has not designed the scheme in a prescriptive way or defined the rules tightly, grants have not always aligned with the policy intent and funding decisions have been inconsistent. DWP told us that senior officials became concerned, having observed the administration of the scheme and spoken to case managers. An internal audit in August 2024 found that DWP's guidance for Access to Work is high-level and limits what case managers can do to challenge applicants. In addition, DWP's concerns reflect the significant expansion of the scheme in recent years and the consequent budgetary pressures (see Part Two), which it considers risk making the scheme unsustainable.

1.14 Two areas where DWP has particular concerns are reasonable adjustments and support workers.

³ Department for Work & Pensions, *Feasibility of evaluating the impact of the Access to Work programme*, November 2018.

⁴ Department for Work & Pensions, *Access to Work: Qualitative research with applicants, employers and delivery staff*, November 2018.

Reasonable adjustments

1.15 In its 2024 employer survey, DWP found that 80% of employers were taking action to support disabled staff and staff with long-term health conditions, most commonly by offering workplace adjustments.⁵ DWP believes, however, that employers are not always meeting their legal responsibilities to provide reasonable adjustments, and that Access to Work funding may be filling the gaps, rather than going above and beyond.

1.16 DWP has identified that its award decisions may not have consistently taken account of reasonable adjustments made by employers. In 2025, it found that, of a sample of 40 employed customer cases, only four included a record to indicate that discussions about reasonable adjustments had taken place with employers. Also in 2025, DWP commissioned a consultant to examine the operation of Access to Work and options for the future. This work included reviewing 200 cases with DWP's case managers. It found that some 40% of support funded by the scheme should have been provided by the employer, the employee or the NHS, and that employers had failed to make reasonable adjustments in 18% of cases reviewed.

Support workers

1.17 DWP funds a number of types of support worker through Access to Work. Its published staff guidance gives details about the types of support worker and the amounts it can fund. Definitions of support workers in the guidance can be broadly interpreted.

1.18 DWP's spending on support workers increased by 125% in real terms from £101 million in 2018-19 to £227 million in 2024-25 (see Figure 6 on page 25). The largest increase in spending was for 'job aides', which rose, in real terms, from £6 million in 2020-21 to £64 million in 2024-25. Job aides work alongside the customer at work and may carry out parts of the role that the customer cannot do due to their disability or health condition. Where the customer is not performing their full role, and the job aide is in effect a replacement, funding is limited to 20% of the customer's contracted hours. DWP is concerned that the funding it provides for job aides may be covering some activities, such as administration and supervising a customer's work, that an employer should employ its own staff for.

1.19 There is inconsistency in DWP's approach to employed and self-employed customers. DWP has specified for employed customers that it will not fund overtime for support workers, but has not set limits on the working hours it will fund for people who are self-employed, which are self-declared. It believes this has led to self-employed customers claiming funding for support workers for numbers of hours significantly above those covered for employed customers.

5 Department for Work & Pensions, *DWP Employer Survey 2024*, May 2025.

1.20 DWP is also concerned about the role of third parties in securing Access to Work support in order to gain commercially through the scheme. For example, firms may advise customers on how to apply for the maximum available funding and then also supply the support workers whom DWP has agreed to fund.

Changes that DWP has made

1.21 In light of its concerns, DWP has made changes to how it administers the scheme. To improve its decision-making – in terms of both consistency and alignment with the policy intent – DWP introduced new training for its staff in 2024. This training included reinforcing the principles of Access to Work and the questions to ask customers, such as whether they already have support in place, including adjustments made by their employer. The training was also intended to build case managers' confidence in asking for additional evidence where required. In addition, in July 2025, DWP amended its published information for customers to clarify that Access to Work will not pay for reasonable adjustments that employers must legally make.

1.22 A consequence of DWP more rigorously and consistently applying its guidance is that some customers may have seen a reduction in their funding without any change in their circumstances. By way of illustration, DWP provided us with an example of a customer who had applied to renew their funding for a job aide. DWP told us that its case manager, adhering more rigorously to the scheme's guidance, determined that some of the support requested was for additional skills needed by the employer. It therefore approved only the administrative support the customer needed to carry out their role and, as a result, the amount approved was lower than that requested by the customer. The organisations we consulted also told us that some customers have received reduced awards when they have applied for funding to be renewed at the end of a three-year period.

Potential reforms to Access to Work

1.23 The government is considering changes to the design of the Access to Work scheme. In March 2025, it published a green paper setting out proposals to reform the incapacity and disability benefits system, making it more pro-work and sustainable.⁶ The green paper noted that the scheme had not changed significantly since it was established in 1994, but that since then there had been changes in the types of disability that people report and in the labour market and technology. The green paper 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. The government consulted on three potential future approaches, which were:

⁶ Department for Work & Pensions, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working*, CP 1297, March 2025.

- 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.

1.24 In October 2025, DWP published the government's response to the consultation, including a summary of the views received.⁷ It reported that the vast majority of those who responded to the consultation expressed strong support for the aims of Access to Work, with suggestions for a simplified, tailored and streamlined scheme that can deliver funding quickly.

1.25 DWP also established a collaboration committee for Access to Work to help develop potential reforms. The committee, which comprised people with lived experience of the policy area and other experts, was set up to collaborate with civil servants and provide discussion, challenge and recommendations.

1.26 In addition, in January 2025, the government set up an independent review, led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, into the role of employers and government in tackling health-related inactivity and creating and maintaining healthy and inclusive workplaces. The focus of the review was to examine what employers and government can do to increase the recruitment, retention and return to work of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, to ensure they have the skills to thrive in work and to discover how that is best unlocked and supported. The final report of the review was published in November 2025.⁸ It noted that Access to Work has several positive features and good intent but is not delivering effectively in practice, with long delays and delivery challenges and a lack of evidence on outcomes. The review recommended widespread adoption of a system of workplace health provision that integrates with schemes such as Access to Work.

⁷ Department for Work & Pensions, *Government Response to the Pathways to Work Consultation*, CP 1421, October 2025.

⁸ Department for Work & Pensions and Department for Business & Trade, *Keep Britain Working: Final Report*, independent report, November 2025.

Part Two

Take-up of the scheme

2.1 This part of the report covers how take-up of the Access to Work scheme has changed, who is receiving support and the type of provision being funded, and spending on the scheme.

Applications for support

2.2 The number of applications for support under the scheme more than doubled, from 76,100 in 2018-19 to 157,000 in 2024-25 (**Figure 3**). The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) told us it does not definitively know what caused this significant increase. It noted that societal shifts since the scheme was established in 1994 have changed the customer profile. It believes that the growth in demand is likely to have been driven in particular by an increase in the identification of mental health conditions and neurodiversity, although it does not have sufficiently detailed data to demonstrate this. New applications account for a growing share of total applications, up from 40% of the total (32,100 applications) in 2020-21 to 58% (91,100 applications) in 2024-25.⁹

2.3 Although the number of applications has increased, DWP considers that the number of individuals supported by the scheme is a low proportion of those who might be eligible. It does not know how many people are potentially eligible for support. In the *Pathways to Work* green paper, DWP pointed to the number of working disabled people in the UK – around 5.5 million.¹⁰ The Office for National Statistics estimated that, in the quarter June to August 2025, of the 2.8 million individuals of working age who were economically inactive due to long-term sickness, 718,000 wanted a job.¹¹ It is hard, however, to determine what level of take-up of the scheme is desirable since it is difficult to estimate how many people need support to work and, of those, how many are adequately supported through reasonable adjustments provided by their employer.

⁹ The total number of applications comprises new applications, applications for renewal of funding, applications for the mental health support service, and changes of circumstances. Data on the number of new applications are available only for 2020-21 onwards.

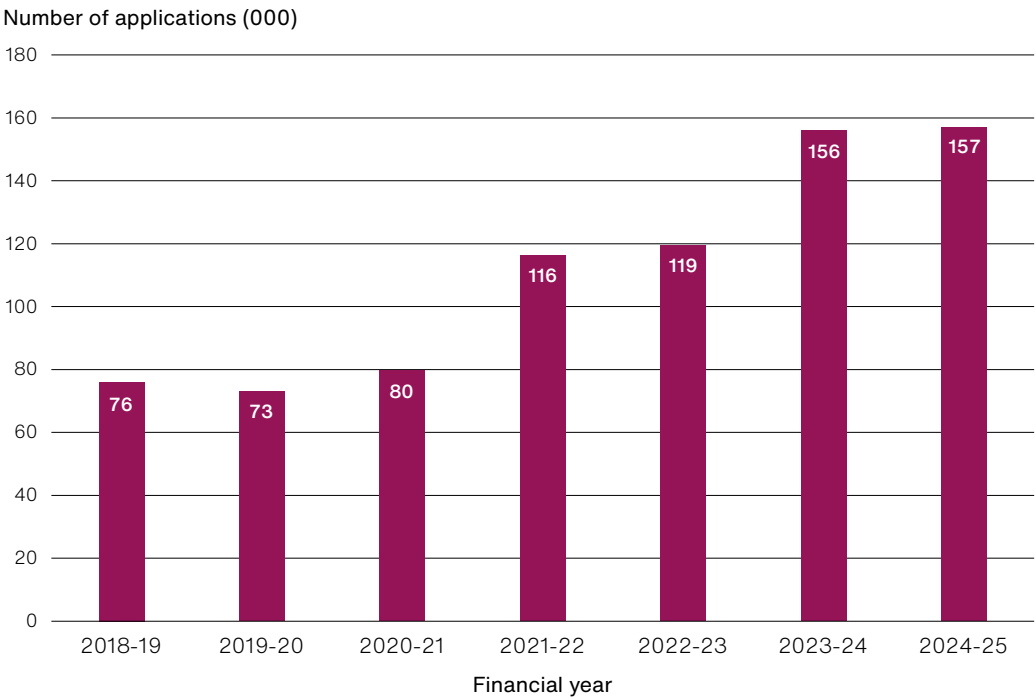
¹⁰ Department for Work & Pensions, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working*, CP 1297, March 2025.

¹¹ The estimate is based on data from the Labour Force Survey, undertaken by the Office for National Statistics.

Figure 3

Number of applications for Access to Work support, 2018-19 to 2024-25

The number of applications received increased by 106%, from 76,100 in 2018-19 to 157,000 in 2024-25



Notes

- 1 The number of applications received includes new applications, applications for renewal of funding, applications for the mental health support service, and changes of circumstances.
- 2 The percentage is calculated using unrounded data.

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

2.4 Low take-up could be due to a lack of awareness of Access to Work. Of the eight organisations who responded to our consultation, four told us that awareness among both individuals and employers is limited. Two organisations shared findings from their own research.

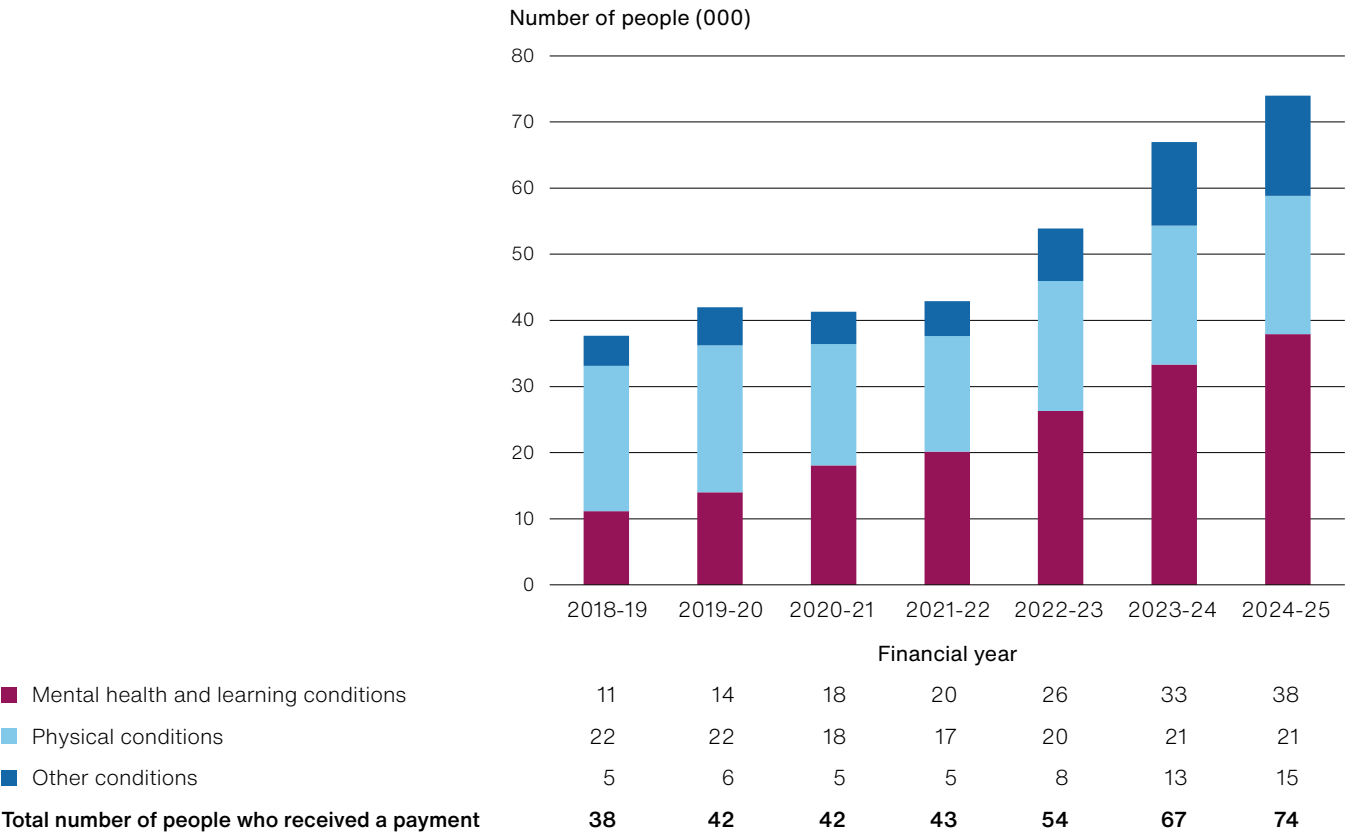
- A survey by the Federation of Small Businesses in May 2025 found that, of 892 small employers who responded, at least 35% were unaware of the scheme before completing the survey.
- A poll of 1,005 people with complex disabilities by Sense in January 2023 found that 50% of jobseekers were unaware of the scheme.

People receiving funding

2.5 As the number of applications has increased, so has the number of people who have received Access to Work funding. The number of customers who received a payment increased by 97%, from 37,700 in 2018-19 to 74,200 in 2024-25 (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4
Number of people receiving Access to Work payments by primary medical condition, 2018-19 to 2024-25

The number of people in receipt of an Access to Work payment who had mental health or learning conditions more than trebled, from 11,200 in 2018-19 to 37,900 in 2024-25



Notes

- 1 Mental health and learning conditions cover dyslexia, learning disabilities and mental health conditions.
- 2 Examples of physical conditions include or affect the following: arms or hands; legs or feet; back or neck; stomach, liver, kidney or digestion; heart, blood, blood pressure or circulation; chest or breathing; skin conditions and severe disfigurement; deaf or hard of hearing; difficulty in seeing; difficulty in speaking; progressive illness; epilepsy; diabetes; cerebral palsy; and spina bifida.
- 3 The Department for Work & Pensions has limited quantitative evidence of the breakdown of the 'other conditions' category. However, it estimates that a large proportion of people in this category have neurodivergent conditions such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which it advises its case managers to categorise as 'other'.
- 4 We excluded the category 'not recorded' from this figure. From 2018-19 to 2024-25, 1,590 individuals received payments but did not have their primary medical condition recorded.
- 5 Data may not sum due to rounding.

2.6 DWP publishes data on the support provided through the Access to Work scheme categorised by customers' primary medical condition. It uses a series of categories for physical conditions affecting the main areas of the body, organs and senses. Its categories are less detailed for mental health, learning and developmental conditions, and comprise learning disability, mental health condition and dyslexia. DWP also has an 'other' primary medical condition category and told us it thinks that, anecdotally, people with neurodivergent conditions, such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder – conditions where there has been an increase in prevalence – make up a large proportion of this category.

2.7 Although there are limitations in how DWP categorises primary medical conditions, its data suggest that, since 2018-19, there has been a shift in the balance of people funded by the scheme from those with physical conditions to those who have mental health or learning conditions (Figure 4). The number of people with mental health or learning conditions who received a payment 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.

2.8 The most common types of provision funded by DWP are the mental health support service, support workers and travel to work. Since 2020-21, the mental health support service has accounted for a growing share of the provisions paid for (Figure 5 overleaf). The number of people who received payments for:

- the mental health support service increased by 110%, from 10,600 (25% of people who received any payment) in 2020-21 to 22,200 (30%) in 2024-25;¹²
- a support worker increased by 98%, from 10,200 (27% of people who received any payment) in 2018-19 to 20,100 (27%) in 2024-25; and
- travel to work increased by 43% from 10,100 (27% of people who received any payment) in 2018-19 to 14,500 (20%) in 2024-25.

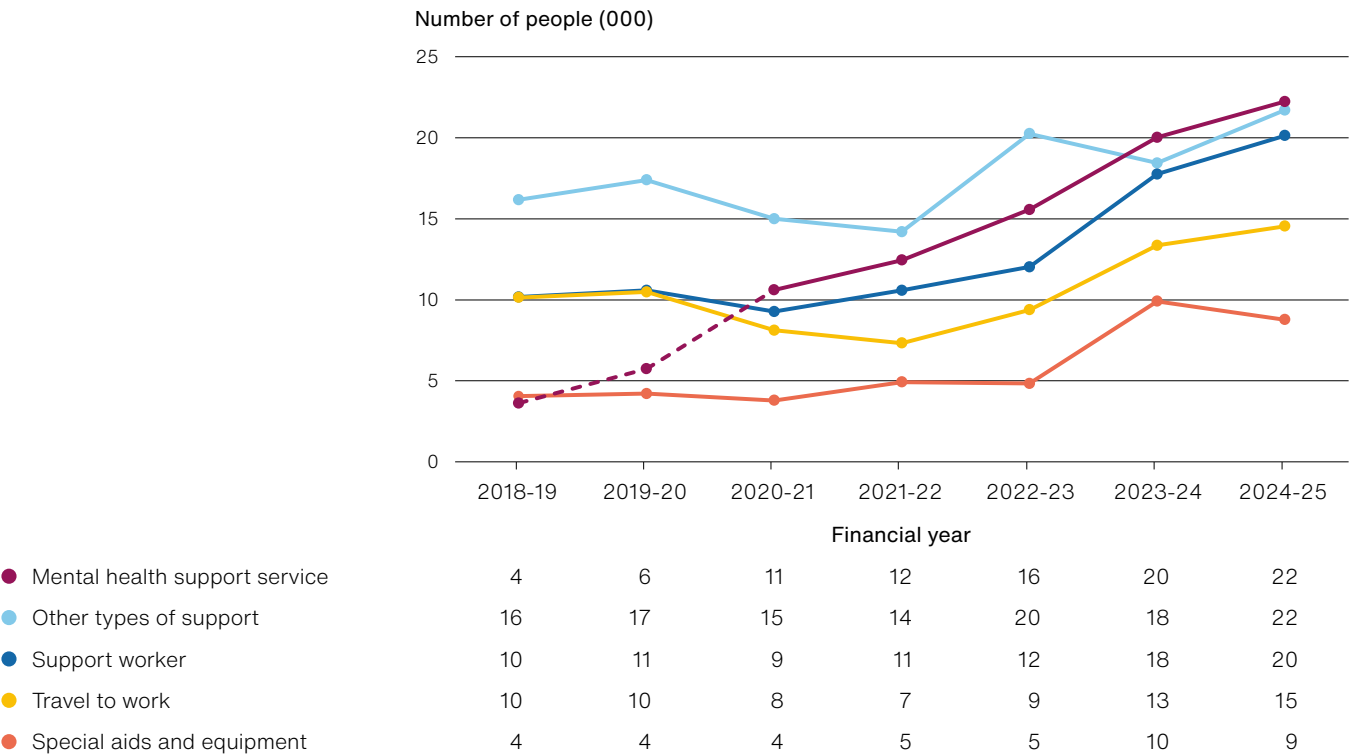
Spending on provision

2.9 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 (Figure 6 on page 25). DWP has forecast that spending may reach £517 million in 2029-30 (based on 2024-25 prices), which would represent a real-terms increase of 61% from 2024-25.

¹² In 2025, DWP changed its methodology for recording the number of people receiving a payment for the mental health support service, which affected the data for 2020-21 onwards. We have therefore reported the change from 2020-21, as data for earlier years are not comparable.

Figure 5
Number of people receiving Access to Work payments by type of provision, 2018-19 to 2024-25

The number of people receiving payments for the mental health support service increased from 10,600 (25% of all people receiving payments) in 2020-21 to 22,200 (30%) in 2024-25



Notes

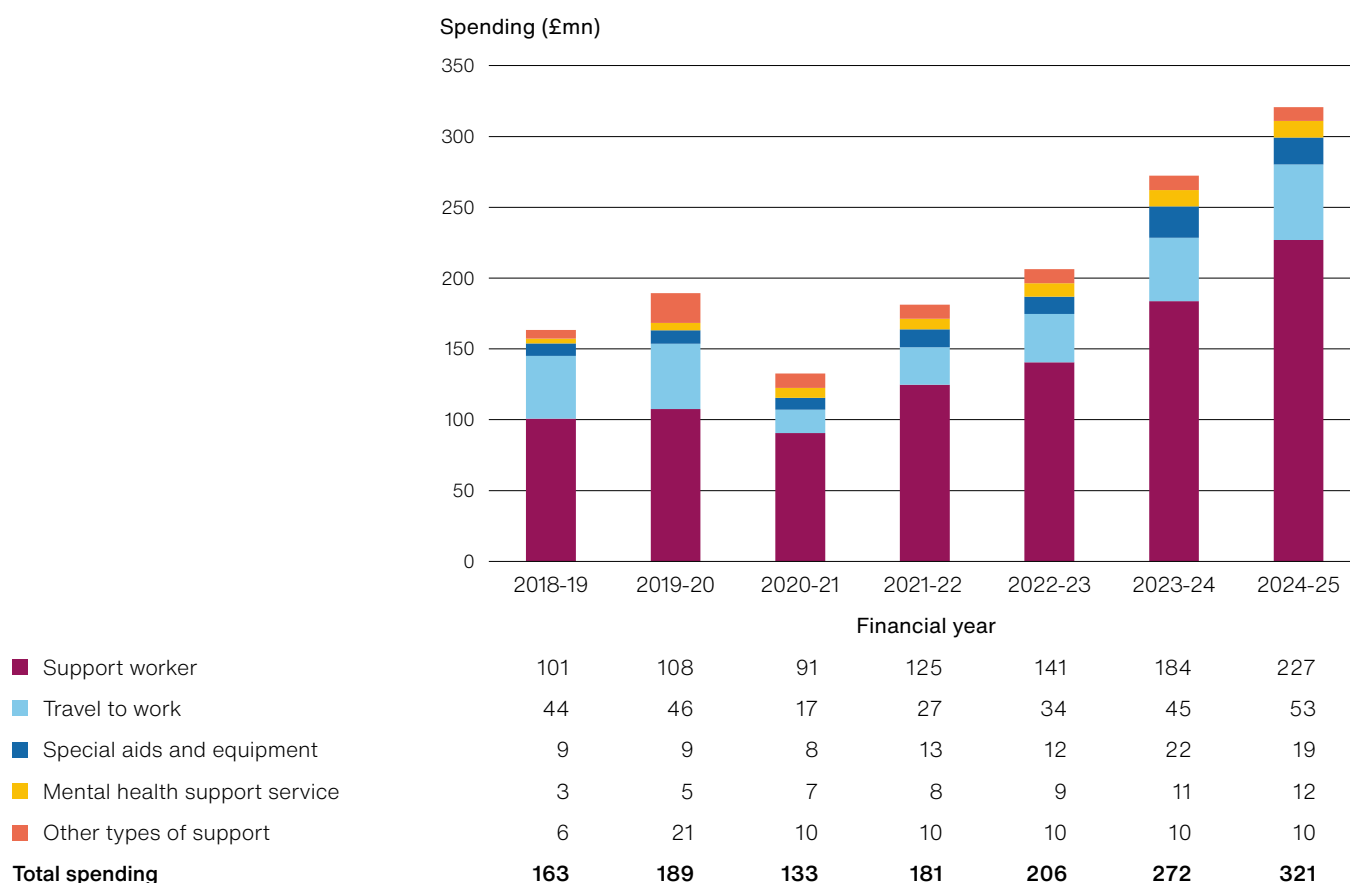
- 1 The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) may pay for more than one type of provision for an applicant, meaning applicants can be counted against multiple types of provision and the categories should not be summed to indicate the total number of people receiving payments.
- 2 In 2025, DWP changed its methodology for recording the number of people receiving a payment for the mental health support service, which affected the data for 2020-21 onwards. The data for years before 2020-21 are indicated by a dashed line.
- 3 Examples of 'other types of support' include Access to Work assessments (which account for over 88% of this category in each year), adaptations to premises and vehicles, communication support for interviews and funding for travel in work.
- 4 The percentages have been calculated using DWP's published statistical data, which are rounded to the nearest ten.
- 5 Data may not sum due to rounding.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Work & Pensions *Access to Work statistics 2025*

Figure 6

Department for Work & Pensions' (DWP's) real-terms spending on Access to Work by provision type, 2018-19 to 2024-25

From 2018-19 to 2024-25, total spending increased by £157 million (96%) in real terms, mainly due to a rise of £126 million (125%) in spending on support workers

**Notes**

- 1 Data have been adjusted to represent expenditure on Access to Work in 2024-25 prices, using HM Treasury's GDP deflators that were published on 1 October 2025.
- 2 This figure shows the four single largest types of Access to Work provision based on average expenditure from 2018-19 to 2024-25.
- 3 Examples of 'other types of support' include spending on Access to Work assessments, adaptations to premises and vehicles, communication support for interviews, and funding for travel in work.
- 4 The percentages have been calculated using DWP's published statistical data, which are rounded to the nearest thousand.
- 5 Data may not sum due to rounding.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Work & Pensions *Access to Work statistics 2025*

2.10 DWP 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%). In 2024-25, DWP spent £33.9 million (9.6%) less than the budget of £354.5 million. It is concerned that, if spending on support continues to rise, it could exceed its 2025 spending review planning assumption of £385 million by 2026-27. Although the scheme is demand-led, it is funded from DWP's Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) along with DWP's other programme and running costs.¹³ In this way, Access to Work differs from demand-led benefit spending which is classified as Annually Managed Expenditure (AME). DWP has to cover any overspend against its Access to Work budget by reducing funding for other areas of activity.

2.11 The rise in spending since 2018-19 has been mainly driven by an increase in spending on support workers (Figure 6). This increased by 125% in real terms from £101 million in 2018-19 to £227 million in 2024-25. As a proportion of the total, spending on support workers grew from 62% in 2018-19 to 71% in 2024-25.

2.12 At the same time as total spending on support workers has increased, the distribution of spending across different types of support worker has changed (Figure 7). Spending on job aides has risen significantly compared with other types of support worker (see paragraph 1.18). Spending on job aides increased in real terms from £6 million in 2020-21 to £64 million in 2024-25.

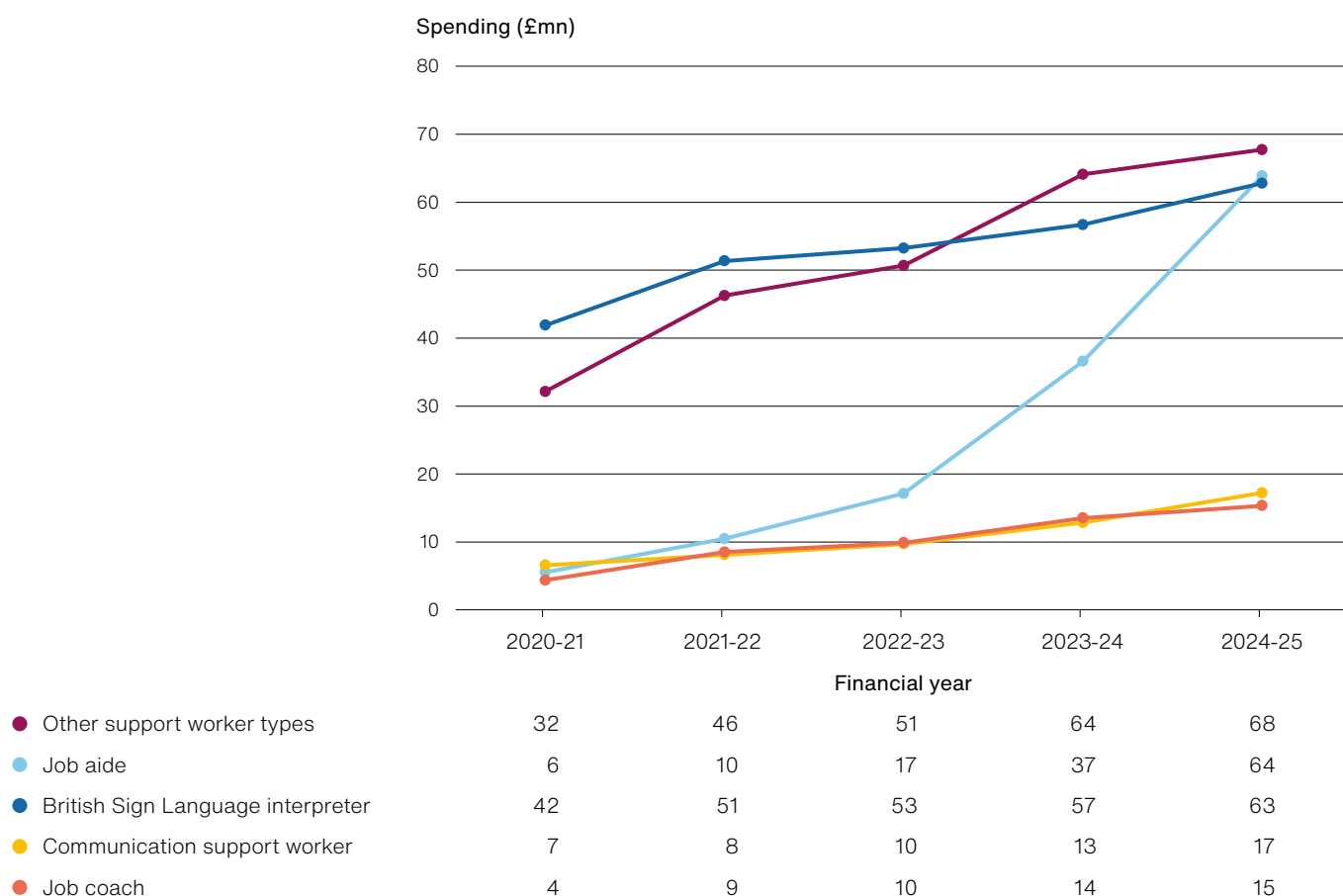
2.13 Analysing spending by customers' primary medical condition, the largest single category relates to people who are deaf or hard of hearing (Figure 8 on page 28). Spending on support for this group increased by 58% in real terms from £57 million in 2018-19 to £90 million in 2024-25, which represented 28% of total spending. Spending on support for people with mental health conditions, the next largest category, increased in real terms from £6 million to £39 million over the same period, accounting for 12% of spending in 2024-25.

¹³ Government spending is categorised as Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) or Annually Managed Expenditure (AME). DEL is spending that it is assumed departments can control and is subject to multi-year limits set in government spending reviews. AME is spending that is difficult to predict or control as it is spent on programmes that are demand-led and is not subject to the limits set in spending reviews.

Figure 7

Access to Work real-terms expenditure on support workers by type of support worker, 2020-21 to 2024-25

In real terms, expenditure on job aides increased from £6 million in 2020-21 to £64 million in 2024-25

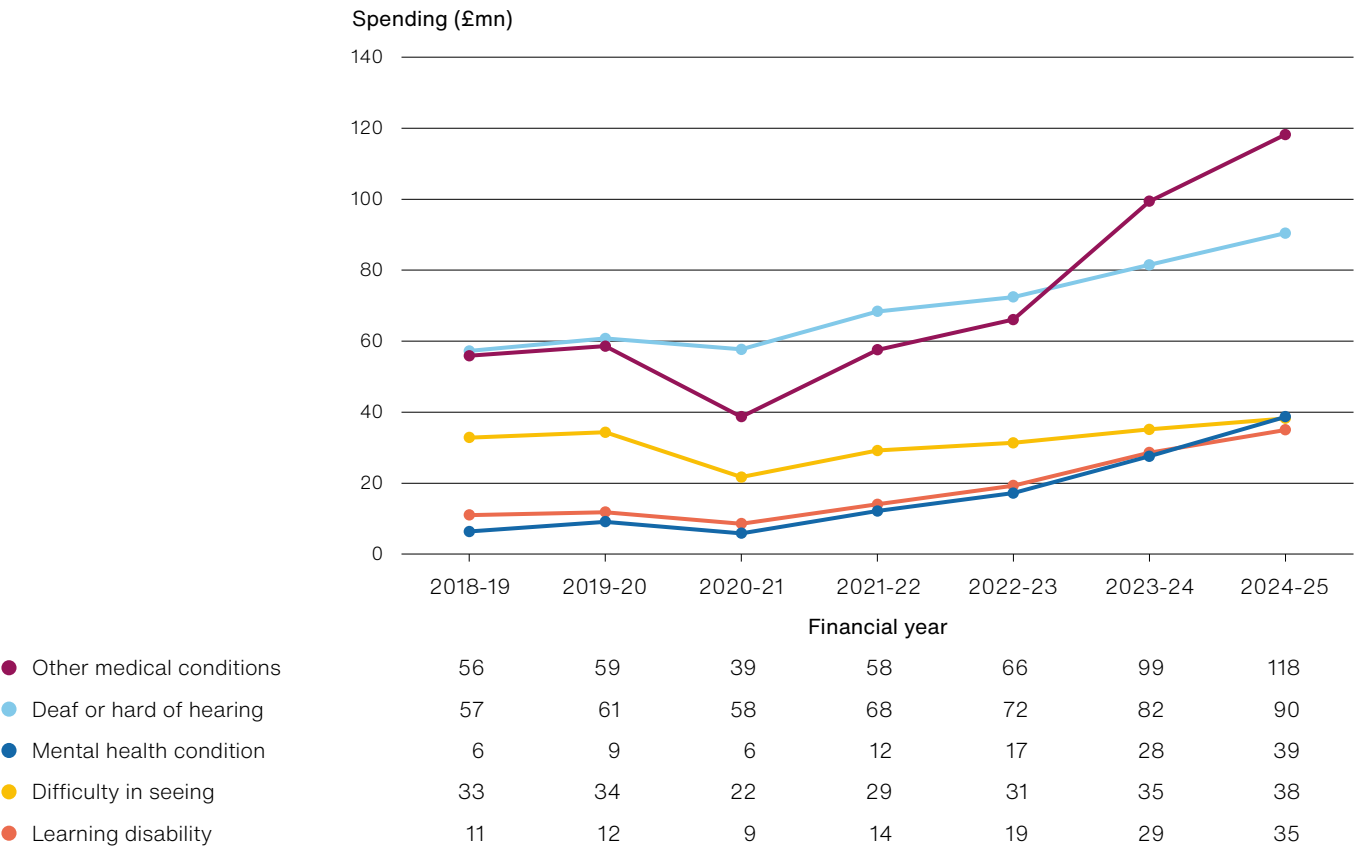
**Notes**

- 1 Data have been adjusted to represent expenditure on Access to Work in 2024-25 prices, using HM Treasury's GDP deflators that were published on 1 October 2025.
- 2 Data categorising expenditure on support workers by support worker type are available only from 2020-21 onwards.
- 3 This figure shows the four single largest elements of support worker expenditure for Access to Work based on average expenditure from 2020-21 to 2024-25.
- 4 Examples of other support worker types include advocate, carer, counsellor, driver, mentor, note-taker, personal reader and travel buddy.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Work & Pensions *Access to Work statistics 2025*

Figure 8
Access to Work real-terms spending by customers' primary medical condition, 2018-19 to 2024-25

Spending on support for customers who are deaf or hard of hearing is the largest single category and increased by 58% in real terms from £57 million in 2018-19 to £90 million in 2024-25



Notes

- 1 Data have been adjusted to represent expenditure on Access to Work in 2024-25 prices, using HM Treasury's GDP deflators that were published on 1 October 2025.
- 2 This figure shows the top four single medical conditions that received the largest amount of Access to Work expenditure based on average expenditure from 2018-19 to 2024-25.
- 3 Examples of other medical conditions include or affect the following: arms or hands; legs or feet; back or neck; stomach, liver, kidney or digestion; heart, blood, blood pressure or circulation; chest or breathing; skin conditions and severe disfigurement; difficulty in speaking; progressive illness; dyslexia; epilepsy; diabetes; cerebral palsy; spina bifida; and condition not recorded.
- 4 In 2024-25, the Department for Work & Pensions' (DWP's) 'other' category accounted for 48% of spending of the category 'other medical conditions'. DWP estimates that a large proportion of people in its 'other' category have neurodivergent conditions such as autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. DWP does not record these conditions separately.
- 5 The percentage has been calculated using DWP's published statistical data, which are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Work & Pensions *Access to Work statistics 2025*

Part Three

Managing the increased take-up of the scheme

3.1 This part of the report covers the scale and impact of the delays and backlogs that have arisen in processing Access to Work cases, and the action that the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) has taken to manage the increased take-up of the scheme.

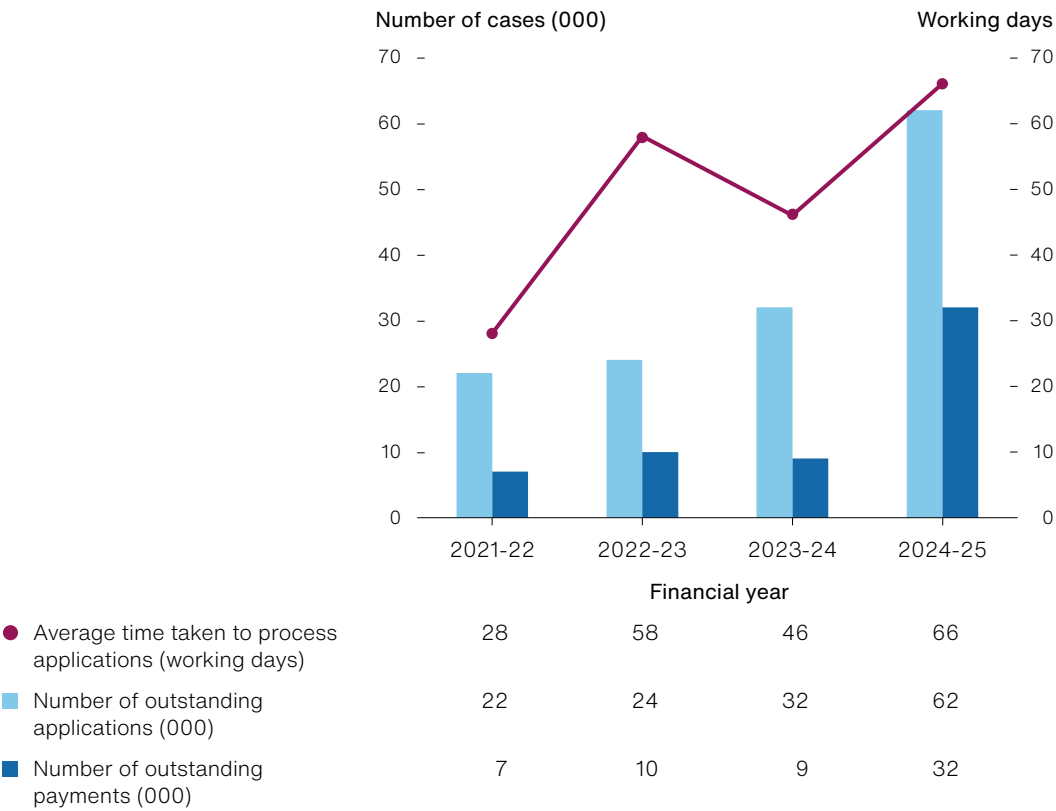
Scale of the delays and backlogs

3.2 The increase in the number of applications for Access to Work support has led to significant processing delays and backlogs (**Figure 9** overleaf).

- 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. DWP's assessment was that, if the scheme was operating efficiently, it would have expected to have 16,900 cases awaiting a decision at March 2025.
- The number of outstanding requests for payment more than quadrupled, from 6,900 at 31 March 2022 to 31,700 at 31 March 2025. DWP does not collect data on the average time taken to issue payments.

Figure 9
Time taken to process applications for Access to Work support and number of outstanding applications and payments, 2021-22 to 2024-25

Since 2021-22, the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) has taken longer to process applications and there have been significant increases in the number of outstanding applications and payments



- Notes**
- 1 DWP defines the time taken to process an application as the time from the date it receives the application to the date it makes a decision. The average time taken is measured in working days for each financial year.
 - 2 Outstanding applications are applications where DWP has not made a decision. The number of outstanding applications is at 31 March each year.
 - 3 Outstanding payments are payments that have not been reimbursed to individuals who have submitted a claim. The number of outstanding payments is at 31 March each year.
 - 4 DWP does not collect data on the average time taken to issue payments.

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

3.3 There is substantial variation in the time it takes DWP to process applications (**Figure 10** overleaf). Key findings from our analysis of DWP's data – covering 188,106 applications completed from October 2023 to November 2025 – included the following.

- There were two peaks in the distribution of how long it took DWP to process applications. It completed 75,224 applications (40.0%) in zero to 39 working days and 57,142 (30.4%) in 140 to 199 working days. DWP told us that the first peak reflects its policy of prioritising new applications where customers are due to start work within four weeks, by allocating these to case managers ahead of other applications.
- DWP processed a third of cases (63,653) within its target time of 25 working days.
- On average, DWP took 97 working days to process applications, with 142 cases taking longer than 359 working days – the longest recorded time taken was 507 working days.

3.4 We were unable to use DWP's data for more detailed analysis, for example to identify where in the process cases are most commonly held up. This was because the data are not sufficiently robust as the manual input of large volumes of data by case managers increases the risk of inaccuracies. Also, DWP does not record information on all parts of the process, either at all or in a way that is susceptible to analysis (for example where case managers use free-text fields).

Impact of the delays and backlogs on individuals and employers

3.5 The processing delays and the backlogs of applications and payments may have adverse effects on the individuals seeking support from the scheme and on their employers. Four of the organisations we consulted said that application delays and late payments have affected employees' job security. One noted that in some cases delays have resulted in people having job offers withdrawn. Another told us that the delays can result in people going into debt while they wait for financial support.

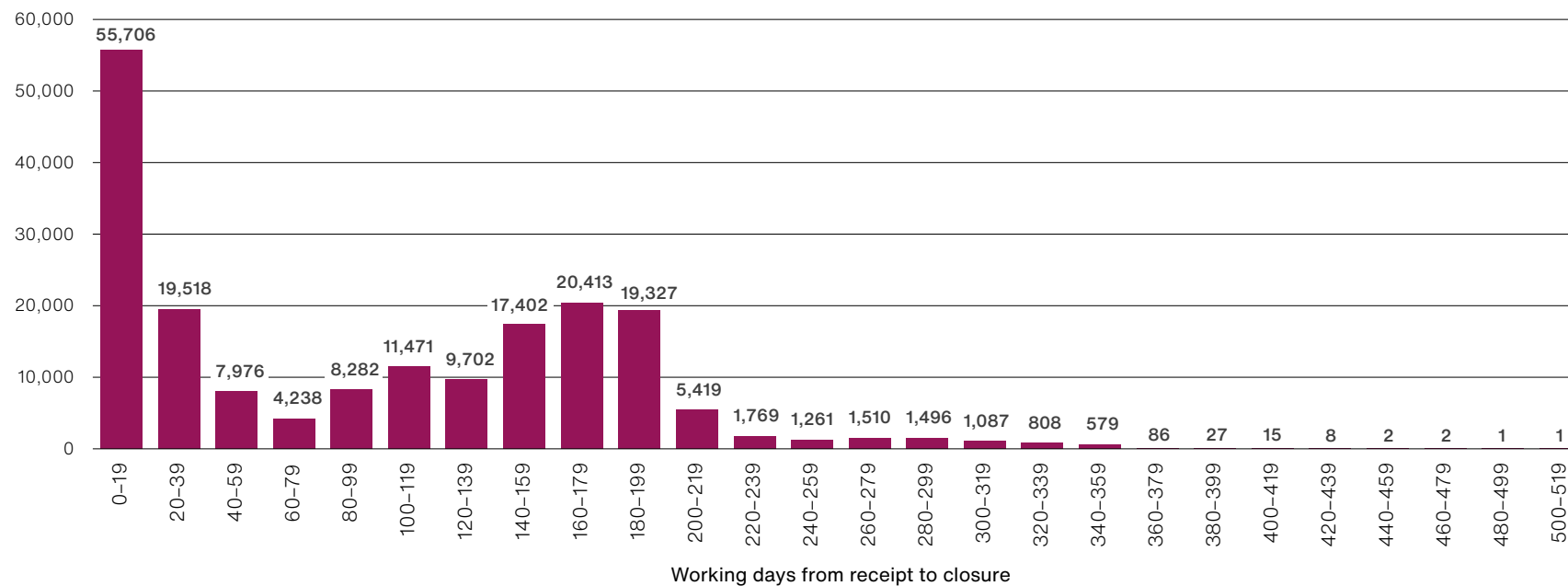
3.6 Late payments also have an impact on employers. Three of the organisations we consulted commented that payment delays were leading to cashflow problems, noting that delays were particularly damaging for small businesses who may rely on alternative sources of funds to provide the extra support that individuals need. Two organisations noted that payment delays can create financial risks for employers in hiring candidates who require additional adjustments to begin work. As a result, the delays may discourage inclusive recruitment and engagement with the scheme.

Figure 10

How long it took the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) to process Access to Work applications, for cases that were closed, from October 2023 to November 2025

DWP processed 75,224 (40.0%) applications in fewer than 40 working days

Number of cases closed

**Notes**

- 1 This analysis is based on data for 188,106 applications taken from DWP's case management spreadsheet, which is updated manually by DWP case managers and records information for the end-to-end customer journey. These data are unpublished and the manual input of large volumes of data increases the risk of inaccuracies.
- 2 The analysis starts at October 2023 as DWP told us its data were recorded consistently from this time, allowing for like-for-like comparison.
- 3 The analysis excludes applications that customers made directly to the mental health support service, a contracted-out service, which DWP introduced in 2011 to offer support for people who are at risk of losing their jobs due to mental health conditions.
- 4 DWP has a target to process applications within 25 working days.

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

3.7 DWP has received a growing number of complaints about Access to Work from customers, with the largest number of complaints relating to the delays in processing 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. In 2024-25 and the first six months of 2025-26, DWP “took too long” was cited as the reason for 51% of the complaints received.

DWP’s response to the increased take-up

Staff numbers

3.8 To help process the growing number of cases and tackle the backlogs, DWP has increased the number of staff working on the scheme, from an average of 247 full-time equivalents in 2021-22 to 588 in 2024-25. It has recruited new employees and moved staff from other activities such as administering benefits. By October 2025, DWP had 593 full-time equivalent staff administering the scheme. 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 2024-25.¹⁴

3.9 Despite DWP increasing the number of staff working on the scheme, the number of applications awaiting a decision has not fallen (**Figure 11** overleaf). From January 2023 to November 2025, the number of full-time equivalent staff working on the scheme increased by 186 (46%). By way of comparison, from 31 March 2023 to 31 March 2025, the number of outstanding applications increased by 160% (38,200) and the number of outstanding requests for payment increased by 233% (22,200).

Productivity

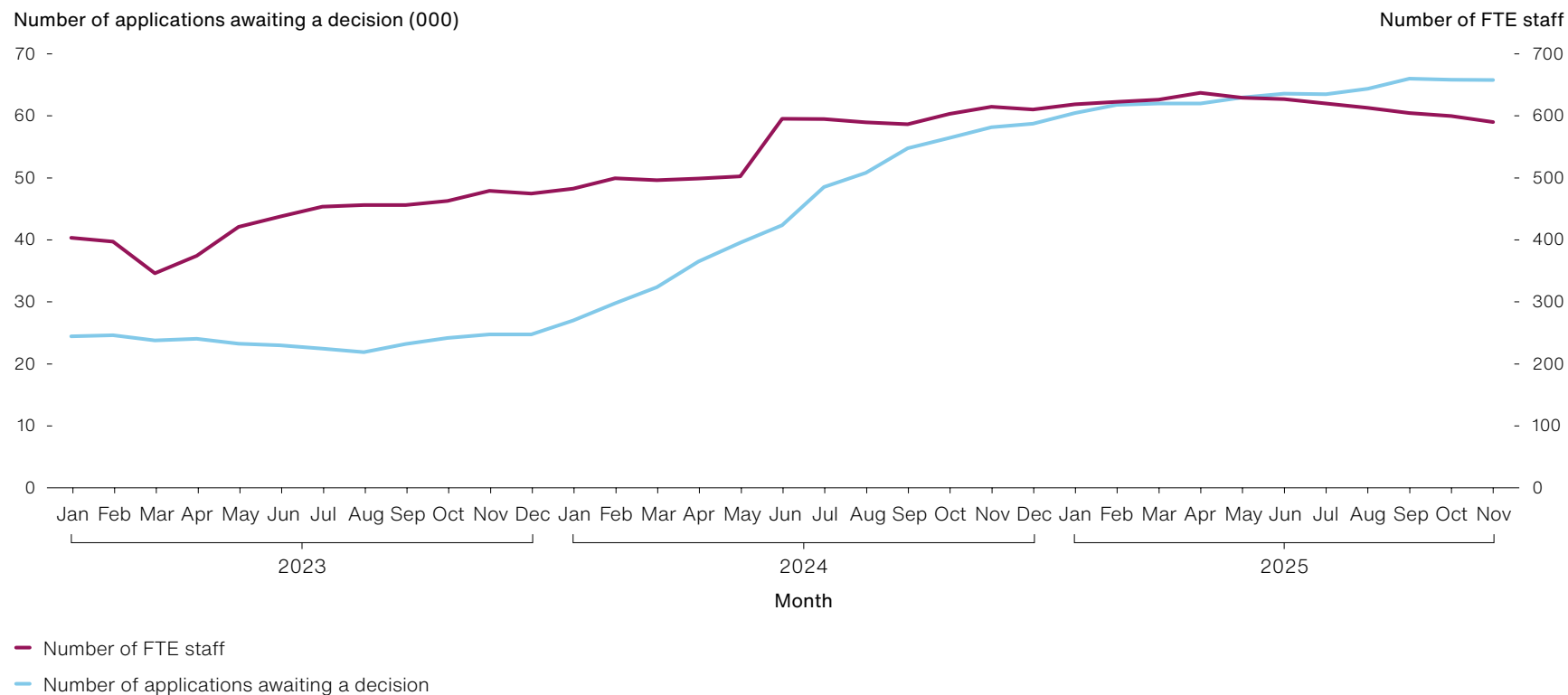
3.10 DWP has also been seeking to improve scheme administration and reduce backlogs by increasing the productivity of its case managers. Based on a work study it carried out in 2021, DWP expects its case managers to be able to process an average of 2.8 cases per day. Since May 2023, case managers have processed fewer cases per day on average than this standard (**Figure 12** on page 35). DWP is seeking to improve productivity to an average of 2.4 cases per day, but does not consider the standard of 2.8 to be achievable. It 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.

¹⁴ These data represent the direct staff costs for administering the Access to Work scheme. Estates and other overhead costs such as digital, human resources, finance and policy teams are excluded.

Figure 11

Number of applications awaiting a decision and number of Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) staff working on the scheme, January 2023 to November 2025

From January 2023 to November 2025, the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff working on the scheme increased by 186, while the number of applications awaiting a decision increased by 41,100

**Note**

1 The number of staff is measured in FTE.

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

Figure 12

Average number of cases processed per day by the Department for Work & Pensions' (DWP's) case managers, January 2022 to November 2025

Since May 2023, DWP's case managers have processed fewer cases per day on average than the standard of 2.8 cases

Average number of cases completed per day



- Average number of cases completed per day
- DWP's target (2.8 cases completed per day)

Notes

- 1 The data in this figure cover all the different types of activity that case managers undertake (new applications, changes of circumstances and renewals) in relation to Access to Work cases.
- 2 Based on a work study that it carried out in 2021, DWP expects its case managers to be able to process an average of 2.8 cases per day.

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

3.11 DWP has introduced several measures aimed at increasing productivity and helping case managers to process cases more quickly. It has focused on lessening the administrative workload of its case managers in three key areas by reducing the supporting material that customers have to provide and case managers have to review.

- For travel-to-work applications, DWP removed the requirement for applicants to provide medical evidence about their disability or health condition. It made this change permanent, following testing, in October 2022. Case managers may still request medical evidence for applications where they consider it is needed. In February 2023, DWP also removed the requirement for claimants to provide quotes when applying for travel-to-work funding.
- For special aids and equipment applications, in March 2023, DWP removed the requirement for a workplace assessment for those customers who know what support they need, or where customers need updated software or replacement equipment.
- For support worker applications, in April 2024, DWP introduced banded rates for case managers to use to determine funding instead of quotes provided by customers.

3.12 DWP has assessed, through data comparison and surveys of its case managers, the impact of some of the changes it has made. It concluded that:

- changes relating to travel-to-work applications increased case manager productivity and reduced customer journey times, with over 80% of case managers surveyed agreeing that decisions on these applications could be made more quickly; and
- for the changes relating to special aids and equipment applications, nearly 60% of case managers surveyed agreed that the new process had enabled them to make decisions more quickly.

However, it should be noted that, while the measures may have reduced the administrative workload associated with processing applications, reducing the amount of supporting evidence that customers have to supply will also weaken DWP's control framework and increase the risk that grant awards are not aligned with the policy intent of the scheme.

3.13 At the same time, the productivity of DWP's case managers has been negatively affected by the growing number of requests for reconsiderations. Customers who do not agree with the level of their award can ask for it to be reviewed by a different case manager. The number of reconsiderations increased from 194 in 2021-22 to 385 in 2023-24, with a more significant increase to 1,575 in 2024-25. On average, case managers spend 241 minutes processing a reconsideration, compared with 115 minutes for a new application. The more reconsiderations there are, the fewer resources there are available to tackle the backlog of outstanding applications.

3.14 DWP recognises the challenge of maintaining productivity levels while bringing in large numbers of new staff to administer the scheme. It takes time for new case managers to become fully effective. The induction and training process for new staff takes around six months and requires more experienced staff to take time out from processing cases to provide training and review the quality of the work of new case managers. In July 2025, DWP started a small-scale trial of a 'standardised operating procedure' to apply better ways of operating for teams in order to improve productivity, including calls to customers. It expanded the trial into four more teams in December 2025 and will continue to monitor the impact.

3.15 In addition, DWP's Access to Work data systems hamper productivity – they 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. For example, DWP uses one system for customers to submit online applications and a separate system for case managers to process cases. We saw during our site visit that case managers have to transfer information manually from one system to the other and that they maintain management information on the full customer journey on separate spreadsheets. Case managers use a different system to find out information about customers, including details of other support they may be receiving from DWP. DWP also has a separate system it introduced in 2023 – a digital portal – for customers to submit claims for reimbursement online rather than using paper claim forms.

Progress in addressing the backlog of applications

3.16 Given its staff numbers and the productivity measures in place, DWP did not expect the backlog of applications awaiting a decision to start to fall until spring 2025. 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. At the time of our work, in November 2025, the backlog of applications stood at 65,700 and DWP was forecasting that the backlog would fall to 61,598 by the end of 2025-26 (**Figure 13** overleaf).

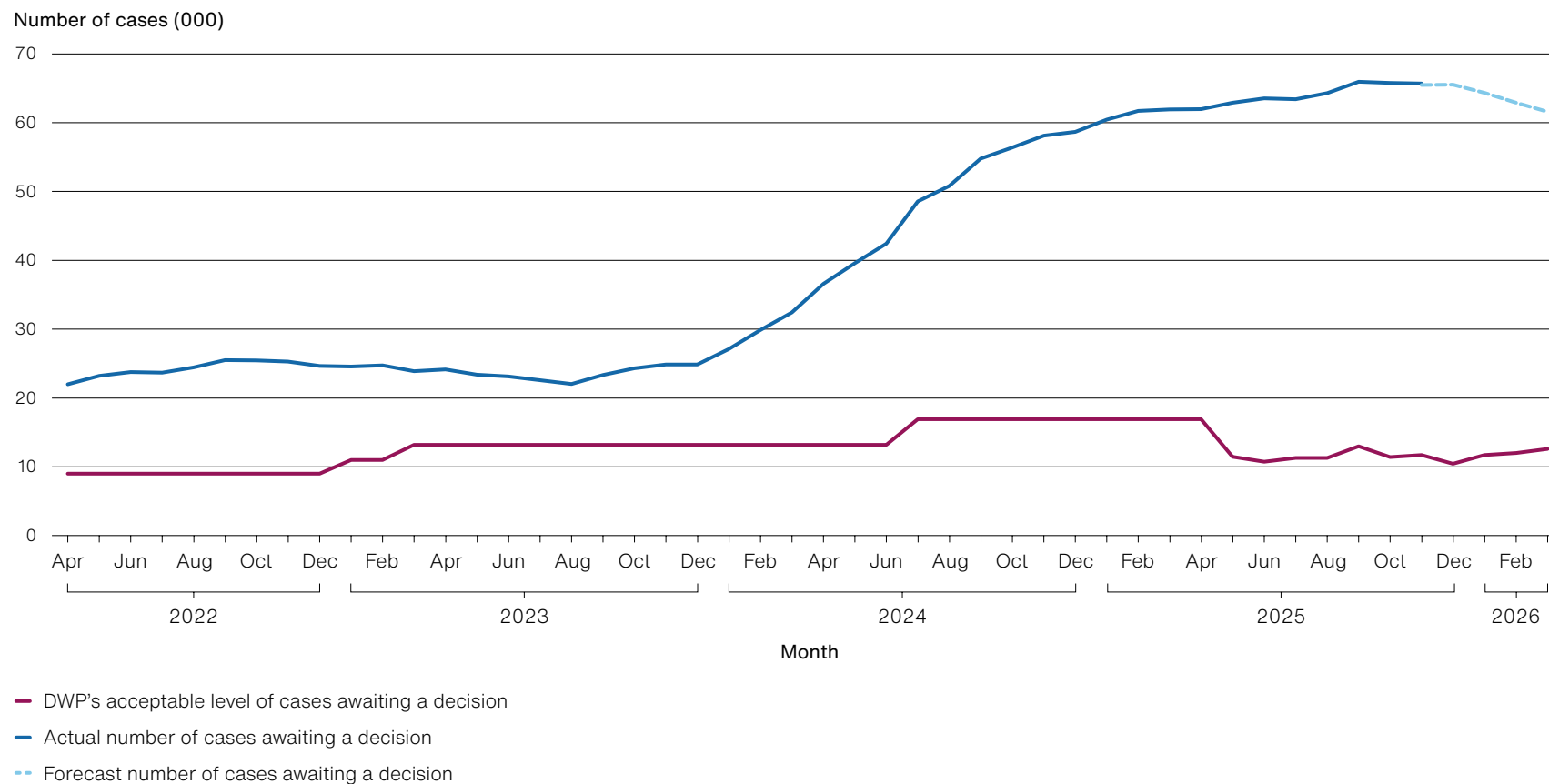
3.17 With the growth in the backlog of applications having slowed and the backlog forecast to fall, DWP told us it is currently seeking to manage the backlog within the budget for the scheme. This means it does not expect the backlog to fall significantly in the short term. Although it could allocate more staff to process applications, DWP is concerned about the budgetary implications that would result from decisions to award funding, in many cases for a period of three years. It noted that it needs to balance the demand for Access to Work with its other priorities and commitments.

3.18 DWP told us that 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.

Figure 13

Access to Work cases awaiting a decision, April 2022 to March 2026

At December 2025, the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) forecast that cases awaiting a decision would fall to around 61,600 in March 2026

**Note**

- 1 DWP's acceptable level is the number of cases it would expect to be awaiting a decision at any point if the scheme was operating efficiently. It represents the level of work at which DWP assesses its timeliness standards should be met based on actual and expected numbers of applications.

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

Appendix One

Our investigative approach

Scope

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. The scheme operates in Great Britain, and is funded and administered by the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). DWP intends that the scheme provides support for people's needs within the workplace over and above an employer's legal duty to make reasonable adjustments.

2 Demand for Access to Work support has increased significantly. Concerns have been raised in Parliament and by stakeholders about backlogs of applications and processing 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. In March 2025, the government published a green paper setting out proposals to reform the country's incapacity and disability benefits system.¹⁵ This included proposals for the future of the Access to Work scheme.

3 Against this background, we designed our work to set out the facts about the Access to Work scheme in order to provide transparency over DWP's operation of the scheme and inform public debate about the future of the scheme. Our work was not designed to assess whether Access to Work is providing value for money. The report sets out:

- the purpose of the Access to Work scheme, including information about the scheme and its benefits, concerns about how the scheme is working in practice and potential reforms to the scheme;
- information about take-up of the scheme, including how take-up has changed, who is receiving support and the type of provision being funded, and spending on the scheme; and
- how DWP is managing the increased take-up of the scheme, including the scale and impact of the delays and backlogs that have arisen in processing Access to Work cases.

¹⁵ Department for Work & Pensions, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working*, CP 1297, March 2025.

Methods

4 In compiling our findings, we drew on a variety of evidence sources as described in the paragraphs below. We conducted our fieldwork between August and November 2025.

Interviews with DWP

5 We interviewed officials from DWP, including staff responsible for policy relating to the Access to Work scheme, operational delivery, and analysis and evaluation. We conducted all interviews online. We used these interviews to develop our understanding of the design of the Access to Work scheme, how the scheme operates and its challenges, and to explore and ask questions about data and evidence provided by DWP.

Document review

6 We reviewed a range of DWP documents.

- Published documents such as announcements and statements, policy papers, operational guidance, answers to Parliamentary Questions and evidence provided to the Work and Pensions Committee.
- Unpublished documents such as policy papers, documents on the operation of the scheme, training materials, governance papers, evaluation reports, risk assessments and performance reports.

We used the document review to inform further discussion and follow-up with DWP, to determine audit findings and to triangulate findings from other sources.

Site visit

7 We visited DWP's Access to Work service centre in Harrow. The visit included meetings with managers and operational staff, and observations of staff as they carried out their work. The purpose of the visit was to:

- understand and observe how application and payment processes work;
- discuss with DWP staff their experience of administering the application and payment processes; and
- discuss with DWP staff the benefits of the scheme, the challenges of operating the scheme and the changes made to address the challenges.

Quantitative analysis

8 Where data were available, we conducted quantitative analysis for the period 2018-19 to 2024-25 in order to have a baseline from before the COVID-19 pandemic and to cover the period during which there has been a significant increase in demand for the scheme.

9 In addition to the grant-funded support provided through the Access to Work scheme, we included the following categories in our analysis as we could not reliably exclude them from all datasets:

- Access to Work assessments (specialist workplace assessments carried out by DWP contractors);
- transitional employer support grant (a flat-rate grant payment for employers who previously delivered the Work Choice programme which closed for new applicants in September 2023); and
- Access to Work plus (a DWP trial that ran from May 2022 to March 2024 to provide enhanced financial support for employees needing to make significant adjustments).

Financial data

10 Where we have presented financial data in real terms, we used DWP's data in nominal terms and adjusted these using the GDP deflators for 2024-25 published by HM Treasury in October 2025.

11 We analysed DWP data published in October 2025 to establish spending on Access to Work provision from 2018-19 to 2024-25 in total, by type of support, by type of support worker and by primary medical condition.¹⁶ We have presented the results of this analysis in Figures 6 to 8. We also examined DWP's spending on Access to Work provision compared with budget.

12 We analysed unpublished DWP data to establish the direct staff cost of administering the Access to Work scheme. Estates and other overhead costs such as digital, human resources, finance and policy teams are excluded.

¹⁶ The data can be accessed at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-to-work-statistics-april-2007-to-march-2025. These data are official statistics in development.

Data on take-up of the scheme

13 We analysed data on take-up of the Access to Work scheme from 2018-19 to 2024-25 and have presented the results of this analysis in Figures 3 to 5.

- We analysed published data on the number of claimants who received a payment from Access to Work by primary medical condition and the type of support.¹⁷
- We could not analyse published data on the number of claimants who had support approved, as DWP reported in November 2025 an issue with the reliability of these data. DWP published revised approvals statistics in January 2026 but this was too late for us to include these data in our analysis.
- We analysed DWP's unpublished management information on the total number of applications. We used these data to establish the number of new applications received each year.

Data on the scheme's application and payment processes

DWP's management information

14 We analysed DWP's unpublished management information on the operation of the scheme's application and payment processes, and have presented the results of this analysis in Figures 9, 11 and 13. We analysed the following data, which were available for the period 2021-22 to 2024-25.

- Number of applications awaiting approval, including new applications, renewals and changes of circumstances. Outstanding applications are applications where DWP has not made a decision. The number of outstanding applications is at 31 March each year.
- Number of requests for reimbursement awaiting payment. Outstanding payments are payments that have not been reimbursed to individuals who have submitted a claim. The number of outstanding payments is at 31 March each year.
- Average (mean) time taken to process applications. DWP defines the time taken to process an application as the time from the date it receives the application to the date it makes a decision. The average time taken is for each year as a whole and is measured in working days. DWP does not collect data on the average time taken to issue payments.

¹⁷ See footnote 16.

DWP's case management data

15 DWP provided us with data on 363,817 applications for the period October 2023 to November 2025. The data were taken from its detailed unpublished Access to Work case management spreadsheet, which is updated manually by DWP case managers. We excluded from our analysis data for:

- 93,147 cases that were received before 1 October 2023 as DWP told us its data were recorded consistently from this time, allowing for like-for-like comparison;
- 29 cases where the date of allocation, first contact or closure was recorded to be before the date that the application was received;
- 76,177 cases, which were recorded as a 'direct referral' – these cases do not form part of DWP's case management process because they go directly to the mental health support service, which is managed by two external contractors; and
- 6,358 cases that had not been closed at November 2025.

16 We analysed the data on the remaining 188,106 cases to identify patterns in how long it took DWP to process cases. These data are unpublished and the manual input of large volumes of data by case managers increases the risk of inaccuracies. We have presented the results of this analysis in Figure 10.

DWP data on the productivity of case managers

17 We also analysed DWP's unpublished data on the productivity of its case managers, measured as the average number of cases that case managers processed per day for the period January 2022 to November 2025. We have presented the results of this analysis in Figure 12.

Stakeholder consultation

18 We wrote to 12 stakeholders who deal with, or represent the interests of, Access to Work customers, inviting them to provide their views on any or all of the following questions.

- What are the benefits of the scheme for claimants and employers?
- How effectively is DWP managing and operating the scheme?
- What challenges with the operation of the scheme have you and those you represent experienced?
- What has been the impact of any challenges with the scheme on claimants and employers?
- What are your views on DWP's progress in addressing challenges with the operation of the scheme?

19 In selecting the stakeholders, we aimed to get a cross-section of views from those representing different types of stakeholder, including disability bodies and employer organisations. We met and/or received written submissions from eight stakeholders:

- the Access to Work Collective;
- Action on Disability;
- the British Chambers of Commerce;
- the British Disability Forum;
- Citizens Advice;
- the Federation of Small Businesses;
- the Royal National Institute for Deaf People; and
- Sense.

20 We reviewed the responses and identified key themes relevant to the scope of our work. The findings presented in the report reflect the range of views of the stakeholders who responded to our consultation.

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