

Equity submission – The Access to Work Scheme

February 2026

About

1. Equity is the largest UK creative industries trade union with 50,000 members united in the fight for fair terms and conditions across the performing arts and entertainment. Our members are actors, singers, dancers, designers, directors, models, stage managers, stunt performers, circus performers, puppeteers, comedians, voice artists, supporting artists and variety performers. They work on stage, on TV and film sets, on the catwalk, in film studios, in recording studios, in night clubs and in circus tents.
2. Typically, Equity members work on short fixed-term contracts, on a self-employment basis for tax.
3. Equity is the only UK trade union to offer an in-house advice service specialising in tax, national insurance and in particular, social security law. We provide a helpline, casework and representation to our members. We frequently receive enquiries from members about difficulties experienced with the Access to Work (ATW) scheme.
4. Equity has a dedicated Deaf and Disabled Members Committee (DDMC). We are committed to the social model of disability and ensuring that Deaf and Disabled people lead on issues that concern them, including ATW. Dan Edge, Equity Deaf and Disabled Member Councillor, represented Equity on the DWP led ATW Collaboration Committee.

Summary

5. Drawing on evidence from Equity's advice service and DDMC, in this submission we provide evidence on the issues experienced by Equity members with the ATW scheme, including recent case studies (detailed in the Appendix).
6. Equity has given extensive evidence on ATW over the past decade, covering our members' experiences of the programme as well as our recommendations for reforms to ATW to improve its effectiveness and ensure that it functions to provide vital assistance that people need to access work.
7. In 2024, Equity gave evidence on ATW to the United Nations as part of their review on the UK's obligations under the Convention on the rights of disabled people. The Committee concluded that the UK continues to be in breach of their obligations under the convention, having, 'failed to take all appropriate measures to address grave and systematic violations of the human rights of persons with disabilities.'¹
8. In our evidence, we have consistently raised numerous issues with ATW, all of which remain unresolved. These include:
 - Unacceptably long wait times, which prevent Equity members from being able to take on work, or cause them to lose work that they already have.

¹ UN CRPD, *Report on the follow-up to the inquiry*, 2024

- Inconsistent application of eligibility tests - Equity members are often subject to the self-employment 'business viability test' in which they have to show a minimum level of earnings in order to access support. In contrast, rules for freelance workers are more flexible. Guidance in this area is applied inconsistently, and it is unclear whether the freelance category can apply to the self-employed.
- Application and renewal processes are labour intensive and inaccessible for those with additional support needs. For example, the online application portal is not accessible for visually impaired people who then need a support worker to help.
- Applicants do not have a single, consistent point of contact who knows their needs. This leads to applicants having to re-explain their support needs to new staff at each interaction which is unnecessary, draining and intrusive.
- Poor decision making and fettering of discretion results in applicants receiving incorrect information about support that they are entitled to and receiving inadequate support for the work that they are undertaking.
- Lack of clear process and timescales for reconsiderations and complaints.

Recent ATW deterioration

9. Research by Decode has shown that, for self-employed workers, the current wait time for an application to be referred to a Case Manager is 55 weeks.² Once referred to a Case Manager, a worker can then expect to wait a further 26 weeks for a final decision. If that worker wishes to appeal the decision, they can expect to wait a further 17 weeks. In total, a 98 week wait. This is an absurdly long timescale for anyone to have to wait for vital support to access work and has a particularly devastating effect on those, such as Equity's members, who rely on short-term, project-based work.
10. In addition, Decode found that 86.5% of applicants were awarded less than they were requesting in support and, at renewal, almost 9 in 10 people (89.5%) had their renewal request reduced from the previous year. On average, Disabled people had their grants reduced by 53%.³ Recent DWP statistics corroborate this, showing that the number of people who had any ATW provision approved decreased in the 2024/25 financial year for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Equity joins a range of organisations in raising concerns that this is the first indication of the effect of anticipated widespread cuts to the scheme.

² Decode, *The Realities of Access to Work in 2024-25*, May 2025

³ Ibid.

⁴ DWP, Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2025

What used to work

11. Members who used the ATW scheme prior to 2010 tell Equity that the scheme worked better for them when they had an allocated ATW caseworker with good experience in the scheme and with good knowledge of the needs of the recipients they work with. See case studies 3 and 5.
12. The DWP's International Evidence Review on In-work Progression found that in context of employment support strategies – 'participants who received sector-specific training were more likely to be employed and had higher earnings than those who received standard training.'⁵
13. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), who represent almost 50,000 workers administering the social security system, have called for DWP staff, including ATW staff, to be better paid and have an improved training offer. PCS highlight how thousands of their members who administer the system are paid so poorly that they require UC to top up their wages. Their roles are undermined by under-resourcing, a lack of time, and having to enforce rigid conditionality and sanction regimes rather than being able to offer tailored support.⁶
14. In setting out a vision for a supportive and effective social security system, PCS has called for the government to 'properly fund Access to Work.' PCS are clear that:

*'Successive governments have been attempting to cut Access to Work grants and have increased backlogs in the system in a form of rationing. This is counterproductive to the claims of successive government to want to get more disabled people into work and cur the disability employment gap.'*⁷

Impact of future cuts

15. Equity notes the growing concern around the impact of cuts to ATW being voiced by Disabled people's organisations and indicated in Decode and DWP's statistics.⁸ We are unequivocally opposed to any cuts to ATW that have already happened or are planned in the future.
16. The case studies in the appendix to this submission illustrate the disastrous impact that reduction of support has on disabled individuals. Put simply and irrefutably – cuts to ATW mean that disabled people cannot access work. If the government is to achieve its aim of supporting disabled people into work, it should increase investment in ATW instead of making cuts.

⁵ DWP, *International Evidence Review on In-work Progression*, 2024

⁶ PCS, *Social Security: An alternative vision for supporting our communities*, 2025, p.7

⁷ *Ibid*, p.10

⁸ Decode, *The Realities of Access to Work in 2024-25*, May 2025; DWP, *Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2025*

Recommendations

17. For ATW to be effective in providing the support that people need to access work, it must be **placed on a statutory footing** with clear rights and avenues for applicants to appeal against decisions made and a clear route of escalation.
18. Any reforms to ATW must result in more funding for the system, **reforms must not result in any cuts to funding at all.**
19. Any and all reforms to the ATW system must be designed and implemented **in collaboration with Disabled people and through the lens of the social model of disability.**
20. Applicants and recipients of ATW support should have a **single, consistent point of contact** who knows an applicant's needs, meaning that support can be tailored and provided according to different circumstances as the applicant engages with different work.
21. DWP should develop the ATW system to **allow support to be passported between jobs.** This is particularly important for Equity's members working in the creative industries who often engage in work at short notice, in different locations and with different engagers. The ability to passport support between jobs, supported by a single point of contact with knowledge of an applicant's needs, would enable them to accept work with confidence that they will have support that they need to undertake it.
22. DWP should improve pay, training and conditions for ATW staff to ensure that they are able to provide adequate and reliable support to claimants when it is needed.
DWP should ensure that ATW staff are **trained in specialist industries that they are supporting.** ATW staff must understand the reality of being a self-employed / freelance worker in the creative industries, currently the lack of specialist knowledge contributes to Equity's members not receiving the support that they need to access work.
23. ATW processes should be developed to **address the requirements of different industries.** For the creative industries, a fast-track service should be developed to cope with the last-minute demands of work in the industry, for example, wheelchair accessible accommodation for face-to-face auditions.
24. ATW guidance must clarify whether the freelance category can be used for the self-employed.
25. The business viability test should be removed. The test presents a barrier to support for low earners. This threshold for support serves to drive Disabled workers away from work as, if they do not meet the lower earnings limit, they cannot access support through ATW that they need to engage in work.

26. Support workers engaged through ATW must be paid on time, and at trade union approved rates. Support workers engaged for work in specific industries should be paid at a rate that reflects the specialist knowledge required to provide support in those industries.

Contact

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Appendix – Case studies

The following case studies illustrate the impact of delays and cuts to Access to Work for Equity members.

Case study 1: Poor decision making and delays = could not access work

A is a self-employed Circus performer and wheelchair user. In January 2026 he made an ATW claim for a specialist wheelchair that can be used on rough terrain in order to perform outdoors. A year on, he is still waiting and has not been able to access work.

Initially, ATW offered to pay for a basic wheelchair, stating it could be used in ways that the manufacturer categorically said should not be used. After he pointed this out, ATW offered to pay for the chair only if he made a £5k contribution. This was based on their decision that the chair would be used for both personal and work purposes, despite A making very clear that he would only be using it for rough terrain work and he would not, and could not, use it around the home due the nature of the chair and his disability. Nevertheless, a contribution was calculated on an assumption of the number of days he typically worked each week, even though he explained this would not be accurate as he has no normal pattern of work as an itinerant creative worker.

If A were employed, according to ATW rules, a contribution would be sought from the employer depending on the employer's means – for example, a small company of up to 49 employees would not be expected to contribute. It is unclear why A, with limited means, cannot be treated the same, especially as ATW guidance states they will consider paying grants of up to 100% for self-employed people (see [Access to Work factsheet for employers - GOV.UK](#)). He has been told that the £5k contribution may be refunded by the Motability scheme but this can only be confirmed once he has paid out the money. Even if A had the money to do this, the lack of certainty here is unacceptable.

A requested a reconsideration of this decision in line with ATW processes however has not received one to date. He has made numerous complaints and received a final complaint response upholding the decision. It is the reconsideration that should have been prioritised.

At every step of the way A has faced considerable bureaucracy, delays, lack of information and poor decision making. All of this had a detrimental effect his physical and mental health. He states - *'my health has deteriorated and I am having more flares which has meant more time off and lost quality of life.'*

Case study 2: Business now under threat as a result of ATW cuts and poor decision making; deterioration of ATW administration = resulting in mental breakdown

Over the past 10 years, B has built a profitable business teaching drama, improvisation, and public speaking skills. In their latest ATW renewal (October 2025) they note a significant deterioration in the quality of the administration and decision making:

'You can't speak to the person working on your case now – you used to be able to. You used to be able to have a productive discussion about your needs. This time, after a very short conversation, my renewal was immediately sent to an outsourced workplace assessment provider. There was no follow-up discussion with ATW staff. Communication was usually short, sometimes rude and in terms of the resulting cuts - brutal.'

Although the assessment recommended their support package remain the same, the ATW decision was a) to reduce their support worker package from 11 to 2 hours a week, b) refusal to pay for essential transcription and work support software that had previously been approved, c) provide only half of the equipment required.

B immediately requested a reconsideration which they describe as taking a huge amount of their and their support worker's time to put together, additional expense and detriment to their health. It was sent in November 2025 in addition to an urgent enquiry from their MP. To date B has not received a written acknowledgement from ATW. B had to wait an hour on the phone recently only to speak to someone who couldn't provide formal confirmation of receipt of the reconsideration request or give a time frame for response. They also told them that the general ATW email account had been closed because there was such a backlog.

B explains that the episode has caused them to have a mental health crisis. They were put on medication as they were feeling suicidal because of the strain of the process of applying for renewal and the subsequent reconsideration request along with the fact that ATW's decision has put the business they have strived to create over the last 10 years in jeopardy. They love their work and it is key for their wellbeing:

'My capacity for work and coping with running my business has been drastically reduced due to the downturn in my mental and physical health. Also, I have to turn away business because I don't have the necessary support or equipment/software. I can't do anything new or innovative and am now at risk of losing my whole business.'

B now has recently been diagnosed with new health issues and requires more support. They are taking personal loans in order to pay for a few additional hours for their specialist support worker who has temporarily agreed to work fewer hours and lower pay, however this is unsustainable. B fears their business will go under and says 'my life is ruined.'

Case study 3: never been able to get ATW support due to delays/poor decision making

C is a professionally trained actor, dancer and theatre maker and disability access consultant. She works in TV, Theatre and Film. A decade ago, she became disabled. Throughout this time, she has never been able to obtain ATW support. She describes her experience as follows:

'In order to get Access to work, I have to go through yet another disability assessment. Over the last 18 months I have had to go through 6 different lengthy and bureaucratic social security, social care and housing assessments just to try and live independently and work.

This on top of managing my actual medical needs, is beyond exhausting. It is unnecessary and you feel stuck in an over complicated system that makes you lose your identity and self-worth. There have been many times I have just wanted to give up.

I have attempted to apply for Access to Work five times and each time have been denied. I have since been advised that I should have qualified for support according to Access to Work rules.

Because I am working on short term projects, I have no time to go through the considerable bureaucracy required. Nor can I wait for approval before I take work.

My work is usually intensive. I have to prioritise it, and then when it is passed, move on to other work. This leaves no room for fighting for Access to Work support.

Therefore, I am usually meeting costs off my own back, at the expense of my pay, e.g. hardly receiving any money for work as it has been used to pay for support workers.

My experience as a working person is that ATW is impossible to access. In order to claim in its current state, I would need additional administrative support in order to make applications, and access to independent advice to make sure the decisions were correct and/or challenged as needed.

The impact this has on my mental health as well as physical is huge, and constantly makes me question why I am working, especially if I end up losing 80% of my wage on my support needs.'

Case study 4: no adjustments for severe sight impairment, deterioration in administration.

D is a professional actress and speech and drama coach who has severe sight impairment. She has claimed ATW for a support worker and taxi costs since 2009. Her needs have not changed throughout this time, however she notes the marked deterioration in ATW administration.

D explains that the online ATW portal through which claims are made and maintained is inaccessible for her. She explains how a recent change to it means she requires a gov.uk log in with initial face recognition to access it. She was not able to use this without a support worker and, in general, her ATW administration has increased to the point that she requires more ATW support worker hours to deal with the administration. This was not the case when she had a designated ATW worker.

'I used to be able to speak to a designated staff member who a) understood the creative arts, b) understood self-employment and c) understood visual impairment. Now it is a new person every time. If I could walk away from this [ATW] I really would. It's that bad.'

With ATW email communication being closed she now has to communicate by post and phone. Documents sent months ago and received recorded delivery have not been uploaded to the ATW portal. She does not receive updates from ATW and instead has to call – waiting up to 50 minutes at a time and *'being cut off repeatedly.'*

She describes how all her taxi claims for July to Dec 2025 were initially rejected. She was not made aware, she had to phone to get this update. They have now been approved (again she had to chase by phone to find out) but not paid. There has been no decision on her support worker costs, and she has lost her support worker as a result.

She had an ATW assessment over the summer (2025) and was told she was approved for a laptop and but given no instructions as to how to get a refund. This information is not on the portal. She describes how you can no longer ask for a transfer to speak to a manager, instead you have to ask for a call back – *'I'm currently waiting on call backs from last year.'*

D has been caring for elderly parents, one of whom died last year. She describes that her business has been affected and that *'I only just made the business viability test.'* But ATW advised her that her renewal period was set to two rather than three years because of this.

Case study 5: repeated ATW delays/maladministration; effect on reputation as actor

E has been working as a professional actor for 8 years. She has autism and mobility impairment. She has applied for ATW four times since 2022. Her testimony is as follows:

'I first applied for ATW in 2022 post-covid for some help towards mobility assistance and accessible accommodation for performance work at a theatre. It had to be submitted three times before it was accepted. In all it took 18-20 months for it to be approved.

I then applied in 2023 for work in another theatre. Again asking for some help towards taxis and accommodation, which was no more than £600 in all. The claim was rejected half way through my contract, disrupting my ability to work.

The next time I applied, it was for costs for a support worker for a 3-4 month contract for performance work. I had never used a support worker before and it made a phenomenal difference to my ability to work for the duration of the contract. It took 12 months after the contract was completed for ATW to approve the claim.

Most recently, I applied for a support worker again for a 4-5 month contract. It took 10 months after the contract had ended for ATW to approve claim.

It takes a lot of admin time on my part to get my ATW applications in on time for when I start the work (because I can't put an advance claim in). The lack of response on approval and delays on payments cause me considerable anxiety and financial hardship during the work. I often think it's not worth it because of the impact on me. Should I forgo my access needs and burn out so that I can't work, or just not do the job? Issues with not having support on the job affect my reputation and in this industry reputation means everything. I haven't had offers of work from these theatres to date – is it because of the difficulties caused by access to work?'

Case study 6: Delays in ATW award = could not access work

F is a self-employed actor who had ATW provision for some time, including a support worker for 10 hours each week. In 2024, F was offered a part in a tour of a successful production and she asked for increased support worker hours. Delays in ATW processing her request meant she lost the part so lost 9 months of work. In 2025, the same tour producer invited F to join the cast for a few months at the end of the tour. F again asked ATW to cover the additional hours. In response, rather than increase her hours, ATW removed her entire provision, meaning F had to stop work altogether and could not attend auditions for future work.

Case study 7: Delays, lack of understanding of own guidance and industry work

G is a professional actor who has Multiple Sclerosis. He first applied for ATW online in Feb 2024. It was not until May 2025 that his claim was accepted. He recalls having to chase his claim continually throughout this time, taking considerable time and energy. He states that he was lucky he had read through the ATW staff guidance prior to discussing his claim with an assessor because *'they were not following their own guidance.'* He was surprised that the assessor did not understand there would be any background work to his performance, for which he would need support, e.g. researching and rehearsing, travel and networking – *'there's a lot more to it than just standing in front of a camera.'* Although his ATW claim was eventually approved, he explains that the 20 working day wait between invoicing for costs and payment means that he would find it difficult to keep a support worker. He is shortly to be re-assessed – *'my fear is that I will again have to wait over a year for approval and won't be able to work in the meantime.'*

For further case studies, please see evidence gathered by the National Association for Welfare Rights Advisors (NAWRA).⁹

⁹ [NAWRA, Access to Work case studies from NAWRA, 2025](#)