Response to the Work and Pensions Committee's Inquiry on Assistive Technology in Employment

1. About Business Disability Forum

We are a non-profit membership organisation which exists to improve business performance by increasing confidence, accessibility, productivity and profitability. We do this by bringing business leaders, disabled people, and Government together to understand what needs to change to increase the life chances for disabled people in employment, economic growth, and society in general in a way that also benefits business. We provide practical, evidence-based solutions for businesses to recruit, retain and provide inclusive products and services to disabled people. We also lead a Technology Taskforce, a network of specialist IT and assistive technology experts who work to develop and promote the use of inclusively design and accessible technology.

2. Question: What role can assistive technology play in removing barriers to work and helping disabled people to stay in work?

2.1 Enabling a wide range of people

Members cited a range of conditions and impairments for which their employees use assistive technology (AT) solutions to get to work and perform well in their jobs. These include: upper limb conditions; rheumatism; learning disabilities; visual; hearing; cognitive; musculoskeletal; speech; severe mobility; and dyslexia and other 'neuro diverse' conditions. We heard many stories of how AT had been, in one employee's words, "transformative" for them in the workplace. Another employee said that assistive technology means that she can "work quicker and more confidently" which ultimately helps her "contribute meaningfully" to her organisation. A senior civil servant who has been an AT user for ten years described how her adjustments are not purely about fulfilling each component of her job description, but they have been provided to the extent that she can *exceed* the expectations of her role, can contribute proactively and creatively to discussions at her senior level in a critical role, and she can also volunteer as a senior member of a Civil Service disability board.

2.2 Challenges experienced by employees

Each employee we spoke to said that, although AT was a huge "enabler" for them, there were various challenges that come with being an AT user. Employees said that although

AT itself removed barriers, barriers exist in getting the software in the first place. These comments fell into two categories:

2.2.1 The Access to Work process

Access to Work assessors often make recommendations which are incompatible with an organisations IT infrastructure. One employer said that they had received an Access to Work report for an employee and immediately had to "cross out" almost every IT related recommendation that was made. Business Disability Forum supports our Members and partners in requesting that the Access to Work assessments necessarily involve relevant members of the business to ensure the work environment and IT infrastructure in which an individual is working in is adequately understood so that fit for purpose recommendations can be made.

2.2.2 Security

Security is a huge issue for our Members, particularly in the Civil Service. Civil servants told us about occasions where their AT had been purchased but the length of time security checks take often meant that equipment or software was sat on a desk its box for some eighteen months. Others cited similar lengths of time, and one employee said he was even put on gardening leave for a period of time while this was happening because he could not work without AT. By this time, an updated version is often available before the employee has permission to use the version that was first purchased for them.

2.2.3 Home working

Many employees told us that the process for getting AT for their office computer was difficult enough; but many also work from home for part of the week. Many employees said that their employer has not managed to get their AT on the laptop they use when working from home. This means working from home days are often less productive, even though working from home is sometimes part of a reasonable adjustments or essential due to lack of office space.

2.2.4 IT infrastructure in the Civil Service

Civil servants shared their frustration with how IT systems are not standardised across the Civil Service Departments. The impact of this is, as many Civil Servants often move roles every two to three years or so, they find their AT is compatible in one Department but not in another. This also hinders cross-Departmental working for civil servant AT users as well. One employee told us that this effectively means that AT users are "not often using the latest version [of software]; they are using the latest version *that is compatible with the IT in that Department*", and this could often be a significantly old version. Civil Service employees generally felt that the Government should be leading by example in its approach to IT for its own workforce.

2.3 Tailored solutions: AT is not the 'only answer'

Many of our Members agreed that, while AT is a key way they support employees to be productive and reach their potential at work, it must not be seen as the "only answer". One Civil Service Department said that they consciously ensure AT is not an automatic 'go to' for their employees, and that an individual approach to finding the right solutions is crucial. This is also important when we consider different impairment types; for example, United Response said, "Assistive technology does not replace the need for intensive staff hours. Indeed, the very use of innovative technology often requires intensive staff support. To improve the quality of life in supported living with technology requires greater investment in a climate of crisis in maintaining even current levels of social care funding". Another of our Partners supported this by saying that is important to find solutions that are sustainable rather than just saying, "We'll buy some kit".

2.4 AT is not just about workplace solutions

Although we recognise the remit of this inquiry focuses on the use of AT in the workplace, it is important to recognise that many AT users are not only AT users 'at work'. This reflect Texthelp's words that "AT is here and now"; we all use it for entertainment (gaming, Netflix, Prime); personal efficiency (think 'Amazon's 'Alexa' and iWatches); fitness and leisure (Fitbits); communications (apps on phones); and social (every from apps to social media). For those who don't just use AT through choice, but *rely* on it for a disability or condition related purpose, AT solutions are "transported" around with them. United Response gave further examples: "Some people we support with PMLD [Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities] are supported to use 'microswitches' to indicate preferences and control in their environment (for example, operating the TV or microwave). Other people are supported use 'MyChoicePads' to deliver language development via tablet computers". In one employee's words, "It's how I live". For another employee, this also meant that the AT he has purchased himself to use at home is much better that the AT provided for him at work.

3. Question: How should the Government support the development of this technology, and are there any particular innovations it should look to support?

3.1 Inclusive IT infrastructures

KPMG, a high performer in our Disability Standard and a member of our Technology Taskforce, said the following: "We all know that in an ideal world all technology would be accessible to everyone – but this is not what happens today, and AT is essential to allow our staff to feel included". Other Members said that AT essentially removes IT and communication barriers which employers should not allow to be there in the first place; therefore, if there were whole organisational strategies towards truly understanding the barriers in a workplace, *and action was taken to remove them*, the workplace would need much less AT, especially since many Members told us the difficulties they have with AT taking up so much storage memory. In this way, one Member said that AT is an "add on" to IT to make it accessible. We therefore believe that, instead of thinking how we can

consider developing and funding more AT, we should instead be equipping employers to inclusively design and deliver and IT infrastructure that works for everyone.

3.2 Further research and resources are needed

Some of our Members suggested that the Government should, in one employer's words, "support research through grants, much like other areas of science and technology". A Civil Service Department also suggested that Government should have a dedicated team working on such initiatives. One of our Partners also recommended that the Government should form a fit for purpose advisory group on innovations and funding options.

3.3 AT "on subscription"

Texthelp suggested that moving towards providing AT via a "subscription" model can mean that users always have the latest version of what they are using and could have sight of other latest options, instead of being offered the same restricted range of products. The idea of AT provision as a "service" is something Texthelp are seeing is increasingly "expected" of clients. Nasser Siabi (Microlink) emphasised this importance of ensuring employees are of all potential options available to them. Both employees and employers we spoke to agreed with this. Many employers, along with Siabi and Texthelp, were keen that the Government does more to 'promote' all options available and educate employees and employers about a range of options, such as seminars or 'roadshows'. Siabi and Lexxic were also keen to see the Government run more pilots with employees to 'showcase' and raise awareness of alternative AT options.

3.4 Innovations for people with learning disabilities

Business Disability Forum are keen to see such pilots and research (mentioned in 3.3 and 3.4 above) to address the needs of a wide range of impairment types, particularly those who are less represented in the UK labour market. United Response pointed towards the *Bercow Report*[1] which highlighted the role AT could have in help people with Special Education Needs (SEN) to "realise their full potential", although a lack of funding had prevented such developments. United Response gave an example: "Once a person starts their job, introductions and training must be appropriate from the outset. Technology could be used to make this easier. For example, having an app which scans QR codes around the workplace which link to videos that explain health and safety protocols. A timetabling app could also help the person plan their day and keep track of what they have completed each day. This would supplement support from job coaches so as to increase support to help people with learning disabilities get into and remain in work." The Government should look at involving people with learning disabilities and employers in piloting such innovations.

3.5 Innovations are also attitudinal

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[1] *Bercow Review of Services for Children and Young People (0-19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs* (2008).

Nasser Siabi (Microlink) suggested that "the barriers that exist for disabled people are things that will improve things for everyone", and AT should therefore be repositioned as enhancing productivity rather than being seen as 'adjustments for disabled people'. We have seen this work very well at the University of Kent where "adjustments" is a term rarely heard from the Accessible Information Team; instead every student and member of staff is pointed towards a suite of "Productivity Tools" for each individual to find and rate what works for them and how they like to work. Members agreed with this approach which sees AT as "mainstreamed" and "normalised" in everyday work life to emphasise the different ways of working to suit individual need and preference.

3.6 The 'life journey' of an individual should be mapped

Many AT users we spoke to said that they had been using AT during their university study, before they came into the workplace. However, differences between the bespoke, tailored approach to solutions in the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) and the "catalogue style" of recommending AT in Access to Work assessments came up among Members on a few occasions. Nasser Siabi (Microlink) said there is currently "no bridge" between DSA and Access to Work to make the transition personally or financially effective; for example, one employee said they needed all the same equipment when they left university and went straight into their work role, but everything was bought for them again, even though their software that had been obtained within the last year through their DSA award was still up to date and in good working order. Therefore, there are two things the Government could initiate:

3.6.1 'Final year' intervention

Nasser Siabi (Microlink) suggested a "final year intervention" for university students who are AT users and in their final year at university, whereby there is something (seminars or coaching, for example) to prepare them for how to transition from university to working life as a disabled person and/or an AT user. Business Disability Forum would support this, as we regularly hear from managers through our Advice Service that new graduate recruits have said they use adjustments in a specific way during their university courses, and the employer is now saying these cannot be replicated in professional working life.

3.6.2 AT should be part of school curricula

Jo-Ann Moran (Home Office) suggested that if we are serious about fully included disabled people and developing inclusive IT for use in society wider than just in employment, education on inclusively designed IT and AT needs to begin at school age and be a necessary part of the curriculum.

4. Question: Is Access to Work the most effective mean of providing access to assistive technology? Should other funding models be considered?

4.1 Access to Work is not an effective funding model

As per sections 3.1 and 3.2 above, the Government should be moving employers on from providing 'add on' solutions to wider inaccessible infrastructural issues. The Government

instead needs to mandate that employers design and implement fully accessible IT infrastructures and systems. While Access to Work funding may support AT solutions in the short term during this shift, it is not a sustainable solution. It is not sustainable because the issue needs to be addressed in the IT infrastructure of each organisation, but it is also unsustainable because of the Access to Work process for getting AT.[2] For example, one Civil Service Department told us that they do not use Access to Work assessments because the assessors are consistently recommending equipment which is not compatible with their IT infrastructure and security restrictions. This employer said, "It is not fair on the individual, it causes angst and time delays, and it also causes distrust between the employee and the organisation". Some Members said ineffective recommendations are made by Access to Work partly due to assessments for dyslexia, for which AT is often recommended, are carried out remotely meaning there is little visibility of the employee's work environment or how the organisation is structured in terms of its IT.

4.2 Keep Access to Work assessors up to date with AT

Many of our Members agreed with Texthelp's concern that Access to Work need to have a robust process in place to ensure their assessors continuously have access to the latest updated information on what is available and the latest software updates and changes. Members also agreed that AT is a "fast paced" area to the extent that some changes are made before an employee gets their software in place (also see section 2.2.2 above).

5. Organisations, groups, and individuals who contributed to our response

Atos

Business Disability Forum Central Government Network

Business Disability Forum disabled employees

Business Disability Forum Technology Taskforce

Crown Prosecution Service

Environment Agency

HM Passport Office

HM Prison and Probation Service

Home Office

Home Office Dyslexia and Dyspraxia Network

HSBC

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[2] There were frequent concerns that Access to Work, or an equivalent funding options, may be needed for SME employers. However, Business Disability Forum would hold that SME employers should not be exempt from mandatory guidelines to provide inclusive IT.

Joanna Wootten (Solutions Included, Business Disability Forum Associate)

KPMG

Land Registry

Land Registry Disabled Employee Network

Lexxic

Microlink

Microsoft

National Crime Agency

Royal Mail

Simon Minty (Sminty Ltd, Business Disability Forum Associate)

Texthelp

UK Immigration and Visas

United Response

University of Kent

Working with Dyslexia

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