

Letter from Mr Mark Harper MP, Minister of State for Disabled People to Dame Anne Begg MP, Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee

Thank you for your report of December 19th. I have considered the findings of the Committee at length and am very grateful for your detailed analysis of the scheme.

I want to continue to improve the customer service standards, transparency and accessibility of the scheme. It is also a longstanding aspiration of the Department to increase the number of customers supported by Access to Work in a way that offers Value for Money to the taxpayer. Therefore, I will be asking my officials to make substantial changes to Access to Work policy and operations.

Owing to the time constraints created by the later than anticipated publication of the report and the dissolution date of March 30th I have not yet finalised the policy changes that DWP will be implementing to reflect some of your recommendations and my ambition to deliver the best possible service to disabled people. I will outline some of these in a Written Statement tomorrow. As it will not be possible to offer a full response to the committee before the end of the current Parliament, a response will be given in the next Parliament.

Thank you again for your recommendations.

11 March 2015

Letter from the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee to the Minister for Disabled People

Thank you for your letter of 11 March about the Department's response to the Work and Pensions Committee's Access to Work Report, which was published on 19 December 2014. My Committee has considered your letter alongside the changes to the Access to Work programme set out in your Written Statement of 12 March. We agreed that I should write to you setting out some serious concerns, both about your approach to responding to our Report, and the substance of the announced changes.

Firstly, we are very disappointed that the Department will not formally respond to our Report before Dissolution. As you know, it is a well-established convention that Government Responses should be provided to select committee reports within two months. The reason you give for being unable to do so on this occasion—"later than anticipated publication of the report"—is simply inaccurate. The timetable for our inquiry, and for the publication of our Report, was made known to the Department at any early stage, and was adhered to; indeed, you made clear in oral evidence at the end of October that you understood the report would be published "just before Christmas".

Even allowing some flexibility to take account of recesses, your formal response is now significantly overdue and we can see no valid reason for the Department not to have engaged with select committee scrutiny in the agreed and long-established way on this occasion.

Secondly, you announced substantial changes to the Access to Work Programme in your Written Statement to the House. Many of these changes were directly relevant to recommendations made in our Report; and yet neither the Statement nor the accompanying DWP press release acknowledge this at all. We welcome your *de facto* acceptance of a number of our proposals. However, it is unacceptable that the Department chose to ignore the Committee's work in its public announcement of the changes to AtW (although your letter to me does acknowledge this).

Lastly, but most importantly, we are concerned that you have decided to impose a monetary limit on Access to Work support equal to one and a half times average annual salary; this is directly contrary to the conclusions and recommendations set out in our Report. It is particularly concerning that you should proceed with this change without first responding to our carefully reasoned arguments against this approach. We expect the eventual Government Response to address the arguments in full, and to set out how the Department intends to monitor the impacts of the change on the relatively few people whose employment support needs happen to be high-cost.

The Committee agreed that our concerns should be made public; your letter and this reply will be published on the Committee's webpages.

I hope that our successors in the next Parliament will pursue these important issues affecting disabled people with the new government, as a matter of urgency.

18 March 2015