**Work and Pensions Committee Oral evidence: PIP and ESA assessments, HC 340**

**Tuesday 20 December 2017**

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**This section is from the end of the transcript, and includes all the discussion about ATW and the cap. The questions and answers about the cap (not just ATW) are in blue.**

Q434

**Heidi Allen:** They have offered to send through more details, so I can forward that on to you.

Just very quickly as a thought on mental health—sorry, I cannot help myself—we had a big debate and I am sure you have seen the previous sessions about whether the mental health professionals doing the assessments should be generic or doctors. From what we have heard, that reinforces to me at least that even if we do not believe that it should be GPs, and I am minded that perhaps GPs is not the answer, for physical health and mental health we have to split that and have specialists that understand one or the other. That seems to be an absolute no-brainer. Sorry, I had to say that.

Access to Work, everybody raves about it and think it is brilliant but not enough people get to hear about it. I have two questions. One, do you think it should be access to work experience, access to job interviews? Access to Work to me feels like you get the fuel for the car when you need it for the journey, not when you have reached your destination. People need assistance to get into work. Would you look at expanding the scope to that?

The second question is around whether the cap on Access to Work supports, for example, the deaf community, where we understand that the typical cost for somebody to help you with language interpretation, the cap does not cover that. It is two aspects.

**Chair:** Also, Sarah, those who are very, very disabled, who wish to work, whose package of help into work is huge but their numbers are not that great. We should be looking at those without any cap.

***Sarah Newton:*** Can I go back to the first question, which is around what support we are giving people with health conditions, whether they are mental health conditions or physical health conditions or a combination of the two, or disabled people into work? Access to Work, you are right, is a really successful programme. More people every year are supported, 8% growth from last year. We do have more money to invest in that.

It is important to note it is not the only thing we do. People who are going into the jobcentre on ESA, of course they have that £330 million of support package there that is available. The job coaches in the jobcentre have discretionary pots of money. We are, as you know, rolling out the work and health contracts. They came live from December and the rest go live in January. That is £500 million as well. There is a range of support, and that would be to go directly to your point, helping people even to get to interviews, all the support they might need, not only in terms of a CV, but practice interviews, supported work experience, having a coach, all of those things.

Q435 **Heidi Allen:** What about the money to get them there, the transport woes?

***Sarah Newton:*** Access to Work can provide funding to go to work. That is one of the things that can be funded. It is very discretionary. What we would like to do, though, is make sure that employers are stepping up and honouring their commitments to make reasonable adjustments, because all organisations have that responsibility. When somebody is applying to Access to Work we have a team of specialists who are looking at those applications and are often sometimes going back to employers and having those conversations about getting them to make reasonable adaptations.

Q436  **Heidi Allen:** That is after somebody has got a job. I am interested in the bit before they get the job offer.

 ***Sarah Newton:*** Yes. Then they can get either Access to Work or they can get funding from these other programmes that are specifically there in additional to Access to Work, through the work coaches and, if their contractors, providing support.

 **Heidi Allen:** That would cover taxis to job interviews, taxis to—

***Sarah Newton:*** Yes, taxis to job interviews. It could be clothes; it could be a whole range of things to help people get on whatever support they need. It is completely flexible. Then there is Access to Work.

Going back to the point you raised about the cap, the desire for the cap was to make sure it provided as much help to as many people as possible but it was also fair. It is set as a ratio to average income.

It is one and a half times the average income, so £43,100 is the cap that has been set.

People who had packages that were above that, they have had a transition period and they are being helped to look at, for example, technologies, different approaches to bring the cost down.

There is about 200 people affected whose packages are above the cap.

The Minister at the time when the cap was brought in said there would always be flexibility, there would always be a review as to what more we can do to support them.

I have met myself with people affected through British sign language. There are people who at the moment their packages are above that cap.

I have called a meeting in the Department and with MPs who have made representations with me on this, and with stakeholders, to look and see those affected by the cap and what more they can do to very much address the issue that the Chairman raised.

Q437  **Heidi Allen:** You are looking for alternative solutions? ***Sarah Newton:*** Yes.

 **Heidi Allen:** Thank you.