



Merton Centre for Independent Living
Vestry Hall
336 London Road
Mitcham
CR4 3UD

12 November 2025

Dear Dame Siobhain McDonagh,

Access to Work

Merton Centre for Independent Living (Merton CIL) is a pan-disability, user-led Deaf and Disabled People's Organisation (DDPO) which has been working with Deaf and Disabled adults in the London Borough of Merton since 2008. The definition of a DDPO is that at least 50% of staff and at least 75% of trustees are Deaf and/or Disabled.

We operate within the Social Model of Disability, which holds that disability is not an attribute of an individual, but created by societal barriers. Our overarching aim is to decrease marginalisation, isolation and inequality, and to increase inclusion, companionship and equity.

Our main offering is an AQS-accredited Information and Advice Service and a Speaking Up Service. The former provides assistance in a range of areas – welfare benefits, adult social care, housing, concessionary travel, and low income. The latter supports people to navigate healthcare services and address other factors affecting their health.

Further to this, our policy and campaigns work focuses on welfare benefits, adult social care, housing, concessionary travel, and – chiefly through a group of Disabled residents who volunteer as Access Champions – the accessibility of a variety of public services and the built environment.

Additionally, monthly Craftivism and Chat sessions aim to help people to build skills, increase confidence, and feel more connected through art and conversation.

Because we serve Deaf and Disabled people in Merton, employ Disabled people, and have Disabled Trustees, we feel obliged to respond to the current cuts to Access to Work, and urge you to use your position as a Member of Parliament to protect and adequately fund the scheme. In its current form, the scheme has its shortcomings. However, defunding it is not the solution.

Current Problems with Access to Work

1. **Inaccessible forms and processes.** Systems are overly complex and thereby create barriers for applicants/claimants. For example: the requirements and different stages of the application process should be made clearer; every applicant/claimant should have one case manager, as the involvement of multiple case managers makes processes slow and disjointed; and the phone line should be more efficient and other methods of communication, such as a Universal Credit-style online journal, introduced, as it is not unusual to wait for about 45 minutes to speak to someone.
2. **Delayed payments.** Payments for equipment, transport, support workers, BSL interpreters, and so on should be made on time. Late payments make it difficult or, indeed, impossible for people to pay for what they need to be able to do their job to the best of their ability, which can, in turn, lead to debt, demotion, and job loss, as well as create massive precarity for support workers and British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters.
3. **Partial or unclear travel reimbursements.** Sometimes, travel costs are not reimbursed in full, when they are supposed to be, and it is difficult to challenge this because no breakdown of what has been paid or excluded is provided. Greater transparency is needed.
4. **Lack of flexibility.** Measures should be taken to ensure that the scheme better supports jobs that fall out of the traditional 9-5 model, hybrid working, and freelancing. Also, only two approved postcodes are allowed, limiting reimbursement for mobile work.
5. **Portal and system failures.** There needs to be an overhaul of the technology used by the DWP, as portal and system failures lead to missed submission deadlines and unreimbursed expenses.

6. **Delayed processing of changes of circumstances.** The scheme needs to handle changes of circumstances more nimbly than is currently the case. Lengthy waits for responses from the DWP leave staff unsupported for long periods.

Cuts to Access to Work Will Worsen Problems and Make Disabled People Less Likely to Work

Access to Work is not a luxury. Despite the issues outline above, it is what makes work possible for Disabled people in Merton and beyond. In offering assistive technology, support workers, BSL interpreters, specialist travel-to-work arrangements, and mental health support, it provides support that goes beyond what employers are legally required to offer under the Equality Act. Without the scheme, many Disabled people would be unable to fulfil certain responsibilities as employees or remain in work. At Merton CIL, we help many service users who need the scheme, and who would be forced to resign if it did not exist.

Making cuts to Access to Work conflicts with the Government's goal of getting more Disabled people into work. Cuts mean that many will be forced out of employment, and employers will struggle to recruit and retain Disabled staff.

What the Government Should be Doing, and What You Can Do to Help

We are asking you to use your position within the Government to push for the protection of the vital support provided by Access to Work. If the Government is serious about supporting Disabled people into work, it must:

1. pause the current operational changes and cuts that are already leading to catastrophic loss of employment;
2. increase funding for the scheme, or prioritise it properly within the DWP budget, so that it can meet demand instead of pushing people out of work;
3. co-design improvements with Disabled people in order to ensure that the scheme is accessible and based on the Social Model of Disability;
4. analyse and publish the return on investment of Access to Work, including the wider economic and social benefits of keeping Disabled people in work.

Access to Work is not a cost; it is an investment. Every pound spent helps Disabled people work, pay taxes, support families, contribute skills, and participate fully in society. Growing demand should be seen as a success, not a burden.

We are asking you to urgently raise this issue with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Treasury, and to confirm what action the Government will take to stop job losses and protect this lifeline.

Thank you for taking the time to read our letter. We look forward to your response and would be more than happy to answer any questions that you have or meet you to discuss the matter. Your point of contact is our Policy and Campaigns Trainee, Amelia Knipmeijer. Her email address is amelia@mertoncil.org.uk and her phone number is 07444764922.

Yours sincerely,

Merton Centre for Independent Living