THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

ADVOCATING FOR BRAILLE AT WORK OR UNIVERSITY

Matthew Horspool: This episode of Braillecast Extra is made possible thanks to a grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. For more information about the Trust, visit its website at wcmt.org.uk.

Welcome back. Coming up, getting the Braille you need at work and university, a session recorded on Tuesday, 9th March 2021 and introduced by Holly Scott-Gardner.

Holly Scott-Gardner: We're now looking at advocacy and how we actually get Braille and in this session, how do we get Braille when we're in work through the UK's Access to Work scheme and when we're a student through the UK's Disabled Students Allowance Scheme. Then next week we'll look at more general advocacy, how do we get Braille signage, Braille on buttons in lifts and things like that. So, join us again next week for that.

A quick reminder that we do offer some free equipment as part of our grant from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. We offer a Braille slate and stylus, otherwise known as a Braille writing frame, some samples of Braille paper, an abacus and a Braille learning block and if you want more information about that, you can check out our newsletter.

Now, to get onto some more very quick Braillists business before we start the session, just a reminder that we do run our book club on a Thursday, so if you interested in reading with some other blind people and really working on your Braille, we currently have an intermediate and an advanced group. If you're a beginner and you would like to join a beginners' group or set something up, let us know because we probably have some other beginners who might be interested.

For this session, we are joined by Mairead who works for AbilityNet and she's going to be talking to us about the Access to Work scheme specifically and then afterwards I will talk about Disabled Students Allowance.

Hi, Mairead, thank you so much for coming in and leading this session with me today.

Mairead Comerford: Thank you very much and thank you for the invite. It's a great pleasure to be here. Just to introduce myself, as you said I'm from AbilityNet and I'm the head of HR here. I've been here for ten years. I have quite a lot of experience with Access to Work for people claiming it when they work, so employed. We have four people currently within AbilityNet who use Access to Work regularly, so they have regular payments, and we have some people who've had their equipment supplied. Also AbilityNet do DSA assessments on a regular basis, not necessarily through Access to Work but we do have our own DSA assessments.

What I'm going to talk through with you mainly is Access to Work, when you're being employed. So, Access to Work can seem daunting but really it isn't at all. It's a grant to provide support if you have a disability, a health or a mental health condition. The aim is to help you start work, it's to stay in work or for you to be able to move into employment or even start a business.

The support will accommodate your individual needs and it ensures that all your reasonable adjustments you need to do your job to the best of your ability are put in place.

So, what support might you get? There's no amount for an Access to Work grant as the recommendations of support are very much to specific needs of an individual but the grants are capped at a very high number per person at £40,800. So, you can get quite a lot. I think last year we had somebody who needed some equipment and some training for dyslexia and they got about £10,000. So, it's a very good thing to access.

The grant you get can pay for things like a support worker and we use it for that, or a job coach to help you in your workplace. We have somebody who is visually impaired so he has someone to sit with him sometimes to look at a website if he's doing an audit of a website. So, he has support there.

There's a support service if you have a mental health condition and if you're absent from work or finding it difficult work, you can get the grant. There can also be adaptations to any equipment you might use, any special equipment such as Braille.

You can use it, which we do, for staff who require fares to and from work when they're using public transport such as taxis.

You can use it for a communicator to assist you at job interviews. You can also use it for the cost of moving your equipment if you change your job, because if you change your job and you've got some Access to Work equipment, then you can take that with you.

So, if we look at the eligibility for grants, it's available for anybody over the age of 16 and if your employer is based England, Scotland or Wales. It's different rules in Northern Ireland but they do have something similar. You must be about to start a job or work trial or already be in paid employment or self-employed. You can't get a grant for voluntary work.

Your disability or your health condition must affect your ability to do a job on a day to day basis or when you have to pay work-related costs, for example, a special computer equipment or travel costs such as public transport.

This is quite an important point. You can apply before you start a job and once a job offer is made, that is a good time to apply. You have to apply yourself, the employer can't do it on your behalf. If you apply within the first six weeks of joining, or you can apply before six weeks, then Access to Work will cover the full cost. After that six weeks that you've been employed, if you then apply, they will only cover partial costs, they won't cover all the costs. So, that's something to bear in mind.

You might not get a grant if you've already got certain benefits but that will be on the website and you can check that. I'll be sharing some links with the team later.

The money doesn't have to be paid back and will not affect other benefits you might have.

We do arrange Disabled Students Allowance here at AbilityNet but I'll let Holly cover that later.

Once you've applied, an Access to Work advisor will contact you to discuss what help you could get. So, you've put in your application which is normally done online but there are other methods and you can get it in Braille as well. They'll talk through your application with you. They'll talk in detail about what support you need and what that means to you. They will maybe ask if they can speak to your employer or employer-to-be, but they won't do that without your agreement.

If they've signed it off and they've said , "Yes, okay, we think you probably are eligible but we're going to put you forward for an assessment," what they'll do is they'll give you details of the assessor to be contacted. You contact the assessor who will then arrange directly with you a date for an assessment. At that stage, the assessor, who should, and I'm sure they all do, we do, will go through in detail what the process of the assessment will be, because that can be quite daunting for people.

At the moment, it's a bit more difficult because not many are doing face to face, it tends to be remote. All of ours are remote at the moment, while we're still in lockdown, so we do it online.

They will go through the report with you in detail and they'll asses your needs. So, they will really try to understand what equipment you want or what support you need and why that is the case. You can say that you want a particular piece of equipment or software and they wouldn't argue with that, because they're not going to be experts probably on something like Braille, but sometimes by talking to you, they might find that something else would be of assistance to you as well and that could even be having more of a flexible working pattern, if you've got some mental issues or you're dealing with stress or workload. So, they can suggest those things as well.

The other thing that they do very often is make sure they assess your work station so that it's not just software. That makes sure you've got the right chair and the mouse and stuff to make it comfortable for you.

The report they write is quite detailed, especially for Access to Work. It's quite a hefty document. They send that back to the Access to Work person who's been appointed to you and then they'll read through it, see what the assessor has said. If they agree it, they'll come back and let you know that it's all been signed off, or they might say, "We're going to sign this off but we're not going to sign this off," and they'll give you reasons for that. There is an appeal process you can go through as well if you don't agree with them.

What happens then for us as an organisation, if you were employed, they come to us, they'll tell the person it's been agreed and they'll also let us know that it's all been signed off and we can go ahead and order the equipment, the support and how much it's for. We would then do that and then we would pay for anything that it costs and then we make a claim back to Access to Work.

Everything then is sent to you directly and it's owned by you then. So, once you've got it, you can take it to each job that you go to.

If there are any changes in your circumstances, your disability, your home address, if you've got a new employer or work pattern, you do have to let them know that. They'll give you a date, so I'm thinking about more of support. So, say you've got a support worker, they'll say, "Right, you've got £20,000 for the next four years," say, I think it's three years, and then you have to reapply for that up to 21 weeks before that date. Then you do the renewal process as you did from the start.

What I would say is once you start it, it's very straightforward. It's a very useful thing to take up and they're very understanding. We've had somebody recently who wanted to change some of the work done by his support worker, to use instead a particular app that helps him and they've allowed him to do that, even though the app is more expensive than the cost of the support worker.

What I would recommend, it might appear daunting but as long as you've got someone there to help you, once you've started, it's quite a good process to go through. You can get advice from your Disability Employment Advisor and that's from your local Jobcentre Plus office. Again, I've put a link here in my notes to pass on to the team so they can share that with you.

I think, the area where people get a bit nervous is when it comes to the assessment but if you've got a good assessor, they'll talk you through the process before you even get in the room with them or do it remotely online.

That is it, it's that basic. I've got some details about the Disability Students Allowance but I think Holly's going to cover that, aren't you?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, I will be.

Mairead Comerford: So, I won't cover that. I can take any questions now that anybody has.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're already getting hands raised. Thank you for that, very informative. I always find that Access to Work is one of those things, where I know that it exists but there are lots of intricacies that I wasn't quite sure about that you've gone over, so really appreciate that.

As a quick reminder, for anyone who wants to raise their hands, there are a few different ways you can do it. If you're on Windows, press Alt-Y. If you're on a Mac, you can press Option-Y. If you're on a mobile phone, if you're calling in via telephone, you can press star-nine. If you're on an iDevice, such as an iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch, you can press the More button which you'll find in the bottom right of your screen and then press the Raise Hand button. We try to give people a little bit of warning just before we come to them.

So we're going to come to Jeff first and then after Jeff we're going to come to [PHONETIC: Fola].

Jeff: Thanks, Mairead, for that. Firstly, do you think the scheme is variable over the country because you talked about links at various Jobcentre Plus offices? To be blunt, I can't believe they're all of the same standard or is the training so impeccable that they all do an ace job?

Mairead Comerford: The standards very much do vary and it very much depends on who you've got appointed to you. I've had some very good ones and I've had ones that struggle and they make the process so difficult, even for the employer. However, on the whole, I think the more we do, the more competent we get, as well as employers and push it along a bit.

Jeff: Sure. If I might just follow up with another very quick one, I couldn't work out, does AbilityNet funnel the application for the whole country or just for a little bit of it?

Mairead Comerford: So we do the whole country.

Jeff: Thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Fola next and then we're going to come to Jane.

Fola: I had a bad experience with AbilityNet a few years ago. I'd just changed my job and my employer wanted me to have an assessment. So I phoned up, I was looking at the site and the person I spoke to kept telling me that they don't do assessments. So, I kind of gave up and stayed away from them and luckily I had my equipment supplied by my employer. But now I'm learning Braille and I'd like to acquire a Braille note taker but I've been with my employer for close to four years. Can you give me an idea of the kind of ratio, the contribution that they'd make?

Mairead Comerford: I think it can be anything between 60% and 90%, so it can still be quite high.

Fola: That Access to Work would pay?

Mairead Comerford: Yes, so even after you've been there quite a long time. Again, sometimes it does depend on who you're talking to. I've had someone who's been working with us and they've had 100% funding. So, sometimes it depends on who you're dealing with but it's still very good.

Fola: Thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Good to know. We're going to come to Jane next and after Jane, we're going to come to Alan Dyte.

Jane: I was wondering, if you're self-employed and you only do 16 hours a week, would you be able to get Access to Work?

Mairead Comerford: Yes.

Jane: Thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Alan Dyte, you are now unmuted.

Alan Dyte: I'm wondering if the rules for Access to Work have changed. Whilst I was receiving Access to Work, my employer had to pay a certain amount of money and I lost my Access to Work because the employer refused to pay it one time. What is the situation now?

Mairead Comerford: For a bit of clarity there, Alan, were you with the employer for quite a while or was it within the first six weeks of applying?

Alan Dyte: Oh, no. What had happened is I'd been working at the BBC and it takes some time to become a producer so I went for Access to Work when I was given my own job to do, running my own programme.

Mairead Comerford: Were you self-employed or employed by BBC?

Alan Dyte: I was employed by BBC as a producer.

Mairead Comerford: Right, so if you're employed by the BBC and you'd been there longer than six weeks, then, yes, there's still a percentage as I just said earlier, there is a percentage that the employer then has to pay and it can be up to 40% they'd have to pay. It's a bit disappointing if the BBC didn't pay that extra little bit.

Alan Dyte: Yes. Can I ask a supplement? I wasn't allowed to take my equipment with me, it stayed in my BBC office.

Mairead Comerford: Well, it does belong to you but you do have to ask the employer if you can take it with you. What equipment was it, Alan?

Alan Dyte: It was computers, all technical stuff.

Mairead Comerford: But the BBC didn't pay for it?

Alan Dyte: They paid a percentage towards it and when I went to leave, they wouldn't let me take it. I had an Inkjet printer, a computer, a scanner, all sorts and it stayed, I had to leave it behind.

Mairead Comerford: Well, Access to Work will say to you that you can take it with you but just ask your employer, but I would say, why would the BBC keep that really, if it was given to you as part of your Access to Work, something that you needed? That, again, is down to different employers.

Alan Dyte: It's water under the bridge. I was just clarifying it to let people know that these things might occur.

Mairead Comerford: Yes, good point.

Ben Mustill-Rose: So we'll come to Matthew next and then we'll come to [PHONETIC: Kaled] next.

Matthew Horspool: I actually have two questions. The first one, when I filled in my PIP application form, it was pages and pages long and there were about, I don't know, 12, 14, something like that, questions, and you basically had to give a massive great essay for every one of these questions about how your disability affects you and this was a really daunting form. By comparison to that, what does the application form for Access to Work look like?

Mairead Comerford: To be honest, I'm not sure I can answer that, because I don't get involved that stage. I don't fill out the form. It has to be done by the individual. The employer can't get involved at the stage. If you go onto the government site on Access to Work, it's a really good site and there's a link there and there's a link to the form of what you'd need to fill out. I think it will be detailed, thinking about the government and how they work and if I think about the Access to Work report they do, compared to what we would do, it's very long. So, I think they like lots of detail, just to back themselves up that that's why they're giving the money.

Matthew Horspool: But possibly not many questions, possibly two or three detailed questions, rather than 20 detailed questions?

Mairead Comerford: I'm not sure. I think there might be more than two or three.

Matthew Horspool: The second one is that there is some quite specific equipment that I want. I want a Braille display but I don't just want any old Braille display, I want a Humanware Braille display and I want the 40 cell version of it, so in the assessment process, to what extent do I need to be justifying my choice? Or will the assessor just listen to what I have to day?

Mairead Comerford: They'd listen to what you say, because you're more the expert on that and as long as you say the reason you want that is because of X, Y, Z. With us, when I've had someone who's done it internally, she specifically put into her report to Access to Work the actual equipment or the software she needed. So, you can do that.

Matthew Horspool: Okay, that's wonderful. Thank you very much.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you for that, Matthew, and last for now, is Kaled.

Kaled: My question was just about if you move to another employer, so, if you change your employer and you go to your employer, does the new employer then have to pay a contribution or is it the case that you basically have to set up a new claim with Access to Work? Especially if you already have the equipment from the previous employer, so it might just be the travel costs that you need to be done, do you still have to raise a new case with them?

Mairead Comerford: You would have to let them know that you've moved jobs and what your new work address is and who your new employer is. It works slightly different in two ways. So, if you've got the equipment and, say, it's a piece of Braille equipment or a piece of software and they should let you take it with you. If you take that with you then it's done and dusted. If it's an ongoing payment such as travel and they're paying travelling costs, if they're paying it 100% and there's no conflict, then really your new employer doesn't have to do anything. What Access to Work will do, is just ask you to fill out a form to say who your new employer is and who the contact is and that's all.

If it's something that they're not paying the full amount for and the employer's paying part of the cost, then that new employer would have to take on that cost.

Kaled: Okay, thank you.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We have another hand raised and we're going to Tim.

Tim: Just on Matthew's question about the form, I did it a year ago and I don't remember it being half the involvement of the PIP form. It was much easier and I had similar experiences to what's been discussed in terms of being able to define what equipment I needed and explain why I needed it and the assessors were very amicable towards that and Access to Work agreed with their recommendation. I would actually say that the assessors, to a large extent, prefer it if you know what you need. While they're there to try and guide, they don't have the same level of experience as you will in the equipment you need to support yourself.

I did have one small question as well. As I said, my Access to Work was approved a year ago. I'm now at a stage, thanks to the Braillists, where I would like to use Braille. Is that just a case of contacting Access to Work and seeing if they will support me with a Braille display or is there any experience in changing it midway through a case?

Mairead Comerford: So, you've probably got a contact at Access to Work, haven't you?

Tim: Probably somewhere in the depths of my email, I seem to remember I had to escalate to their manager because they weren't performing. But I've probably got their manager's contact somewhere.

Mairead Comerford: I would start there first. I don't know if you've noticed this, but sometimes there's quite a bit of turnover in staff at Access to Work. So, that person might have gone. But you have an Access to Work number, they would have given you at the time, so if you can find that, that's the number for them. They'll probably ask you some details and they'll say two things. They'll either say, "Okay, we'll set up an assessment for you, see what you need," or they might say you'll have to redo the process and go in and apply for it.

Tim: Okay, thank you for that.

Ben Mustill-Rose: One more hand has just sneaked in. We have Claudia.

Claudia: I know you said there's a 60 to 90% chance of funding, so it's something like a DSA so there is a chance that you might not get what you ask for?

Mairead Comerford: Yes, and they might do that, but it's quite unusual. I've never come across it, if the assessor has approved it. For the Access to Work to then make a judgement against that report is very unusual. They would probably approve it at that stage. Especially in DSA, there are very strict guidelines of what they can and can't give you, so if assessor says that you could have something, the Student Finance could say no, it's not part of what's been approved but you would normally get it. When I say 100%, if it's about employment, you'll definitely get 100% if it's within the first six weeks of working for an employer. After that the employer has to pay some money.

Claudia: Okay, so the sooner the better, I guess.

Mairead Comerford: Yes, and once you've got a job offer, that's the time to apply. And just let your employer know that you're applying, I would, you don't have to but that's what I would do because they'll probably get some contact from Access to Work.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Mairead, I'm aware that we're taking up quite a bit of your time but we have Tim with his hand raised again. Are you happy to take more?

Mairead Comerford: Yes, I'm fine.

Tim: I just wanted to check on understanding of contribution. My Access to Work has only been around equipment. My employers, I've been with them eight years now and because of the size of the company, they've had to contribute up to £1,000, I think it was the first £1,000 and then 20% of all costs after that. So, it hasn't been a challenge in getting them to support me with the costs, even though they're a large company and I've been there a long time.

Mairead Comerford: It can be costly if you're quite a small company. I think that's where they struggle.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you to everyone for all of your great questions. I'm going to bring Holly back in now.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thank you so much for answering all these questions and thank you to everyone who has asked questions as well. This has been incredibly helpful and I know I've learned a lot.

Thank you to Mairead for sharing your expertise and your experiences with the Access to Work process.

Mairead Comerford: You're welcome.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I'm going to talk a bit about DSA, unless you have anything else on the Access to Work front that you want to share.

Mairead Comerford: Not from me, thank you.

Holly Scott-Gardner: We've talked a bit about Access to Work which provides funding for support in work, whether that's human support or equipment and I'm going to talk about DSA which is Disabled Students Allowance.

Now, some of the things I talk about, I think, have applications to Access to Work, in that I'm going to speak about justifying why you need specific pieces of Braille technology, so hopefully this will be useful to everyone.

Firstly I'm going to quickly overview the DSA application process. So, you apply for Disabled Students Allowance through Student Finance. If you've applied for a student loan, you can tick on your form that you're a disabled student and they will direct you to apply for DSA.

You can also apply for DSA if you haven't applied for a student loan, if you're funding your course yourself, and you can go to the Student Finance website to download the forms for that.

Unfortunately Student Finance does still require people to fill out paper-based forms or they will really, really push you towards that. Now, there is a number and an email address where you can get the form in Braille or in a Word document but they do ask you to then fill in the paper-based form.

Now, you do have the right to both receive and complete the form in an accessible format of your choosing. So, if they tell you that you can't, you can actually challenge them and that is your right under the Equality Act. I'm not going to go into that too much but public sector organisations do have a duty to make their web-based content accessible so if they're pdfs as well and not accessible, they should be.

Once you've filled in that application and your DSA application has been approved, you'll be directed to book a DSA assessment which will take place at an assessment centre near you. So, your needs assessor will chat to you about your needs as a disabled student and this covers all kinds of things, from how are you going to read text books, to how you're going to write essays, to time management, to how you're actually going to get from your accommodation to the university. At that point they'll produce a report with recommendations which will be sent to Student Finance.

You do have the right to ask to receive a draft of that report and I would recommend it because it's always good to know what they've specifically recommended.

Now, it used to be that there was a separate budget for equipment and for non-medical support, so things like support workers or transcription but those budgets for both undergraduates and postgraduates have now been merged, so you have one budget for the whole thing, which is great if you're a blind person who wants a more expensive piece of technology and less non-medical support because it used to be that the technology budget was quite small.

Some parts of the DSA package will be funded by your university and others by Student Finance. So, Student Finance makes the decision about what you get but they don't fund all of it. Your university can't just refuse to fund it, so it's okay. You don't have to worry about that. Technology does come under Student Finance, so if you're requesting a Braille display, they would be funding that.

The most important thing when you go into your DSA needs assessment, and I think this also links into Access to Work really nicely, is to know why you need the specific things. So, know why you need a Braille display and why you need a screen reader. If you have a preference for Braille display, you've got to be able to justify why the one you want is necessary. So, for example, the Mantis Q40, and I use this example because this is what I got as a postgraduate, has a QWERTY keyboard and I justified that it would be easier to work on group projects and things like that because I could pair my Mantis with something like an iPad and everyone could type on it.

Now, COVID really put a stop to that, but those kinds of justifications are perfectly valid and you're well within your rights to ask for that. So, it's worth thinking about, for example, if you want a Focus, does it do something that another Braille display doesn't? Do you already know how to use it? Are you familiar with it? Do you struggle to learn a new piece of tech and that would be better? So, knowing things like that really helps you but it also helps your assessor because your needs assessor should be on your side. I'm very fortunate, I like to say that my needs assessor is the best ever. I don't know if she technically is and I'm sure other people will argue that theirs is but she's been wonderful and I think working as a team is really ideal, but you can't rely on your assessor to know the ins and outs of every Braille display. Most of them will admit that they don't because their job is to work with disabled people with a whole range of disabilities, so what they know really well is the Student Finance criteria, they know what Student Finance has historically funded but they don't necessarily know which is the latest Braille display Humanware has released. That's not what they do.

So, they can recommend Braille but they might not know why you need a specific Braille display. What I do is I go into the assessment with a clear idea of two things. Firstly, why I need Braille and that sounds obvious but you've got to justify these things in reports or your assessor has to and if you can give them a perfect one-liner, then that helps them. So I go into this and say, "Well, I need Braille because I'm a blind person, Braille is my medium of reading and writing and I can get information through Braille that I can't get through speech or that I can't get so easily through speech, such as layout, italics etc." We can argue that, you can get those through speech but actually they're much easier for me in Braille. You've got to bear in mind that this is a personal thing.

You can also say things like, "Well, I'm expected to deliver a lot of presentations as part of my degree," or if you're going for Access to Work, as part of your job, "and I want an ears-free solution so I don't want to be plugged into a headset all the time and Braille gives me that."

But then the second layer to that is, well, why this specific device and I touched on that with my example about the Mantis with the QWERTY keyboard, but, again, you might chose something like an Orbit and say, "I actually need a lightweight device or a smaller device because I have a physical disability as well," or whatever your reasoning is. Or, "I need this Braille device because it provides a one-handed mode."

It's perfectly okay to come in with these kinds of justifications and actually your assessor wants you to do that because they really want you to get the right pieces of tech and if you know what you need, then that helps them.

Now, if you don't know what Braille display you want, that's also okay. I would say that DSA has a pretty established history of funding Brailliants and Focus displays, so Brailliants from Humanware, the Focus line of displays from Freedom Scientific. You're likely to get one of those and I say likely, it doesn't mean you necessarily will but they tend to be the standard ones that are issued when you say you want Braille but don't say anything else.

When I was an undergraduate, I said, "I want Braille," and I hadn't really thought about the ins and outs of displays, foolishly, and I got given a Focus, which didn't work for me. Now, there are lots of people who love the Focus and it's a good display, it just wasn't right for me as an individual. So, I really always stress to people, if you can, get demos from the big tech companies like Humanware, like Freedom Scientific, talk to the RNIB possibly about Orbit demonstrations. I'm not sure if that's something they'll do but it's worth reaching out and talking to all these people and asking for a demonstration. Let's say you want to know about the new Braille Notes or something, you can ask if you can try one, because it will give you a much better idea before you go into your needs assessment, as to what device you want.

Now, what happens if you get denied? So, it isn't often that a blind person outright gets denied Braille but you might get denied the specific device you want and that usually happens in DSA because your assessor is asked to supply several quotes and it might be that they decide that one device is cheaper, in Student Finance's infinite wisdom, and they will tell you that you can have this display but not that display.

Now, there are procedures you can follow. The first thing is to go back to your needs assessor. You're a team. They aren't employed by Student Finance to work against you. They usually work for access centres, so maybe a local university or a school or through an organization like AbilityNet. Their job is really to help you. They're on your side. So, go back to them and tell them that you really need this specific device and what they can do is they can help put a plan together and they can go back to Student Finance with that information and ask why they haven't accepted this part of the report. Student Finance should then give them an actual reasoning for that and they can produce a more advanced and more length justification for why that specific product.

Now, again, this often happens if it's a new piece of tech to the market, or, I would say, happens more often, because you're the first blind person who's requested it and Student Finance might be confused. There is a process your assessor will follow and they should be familiar with that. Now, if it's denied again, your assessor can escalate that, so then that goes to a higher body within Student Finance to review.

If that gets denied one more time, and this doesn't tend to happen with Braille, but stranger things have happened, there is a Student Finance complaints procedure, which you can follow as an individual and I would recommend doing that if you do get denied multiple times.

There's also a dedicated email address for DSA which I'll include in my portion of the handout and you will usually use this address when you're applying for DSA in the first place, so before you go to needs assessment. There's a big push at the moment, which is very new, to assign blind students, in particular, with a dedicated case worker so you're only dealing with one person. This doesn't always work but if you are a bit of a pest, it tends to work and I know this because I was a pest and I got assigned a specific individual and that actually worked really well, because it meant that they knew who I was, they knew the ins and outs of my application and I knew them.

So, hopefully, if you've been assigned someone like that, if you contact this main DSA email address, you can put "attention of" and their name. If you don't have a specific person, you can just send it to the DSA address. Although they deal with applications, they can also help you escalate DSA complaints and it gives you an in into Student Finance.

So what happens if you're a year into your course and you realise you need Braille? That's okay. You can go back to your needs assessor and you can call them up and you can ask for a review of your needs assessment. They will often need a completely new assessment. What they'll do is chat to you over the phone and they might submit an amendment to your report. They might issue a new report but what it will do, it will contain all the stuff you already have, which Student Finance will pre-approve, and then that additional support.

I did this, not with Braille, but when I went on a year abroad because I needed drastically different support in South America than I did in the UK. So, again, most assessors are very familiar with that kind of thing and that will not come as a shock to them. If you haven't used up all your budget, which you shouldn't have, you can get the equipment and there are ways of getting around it, even if you have.

So, don't think because you didn't ask for it in first year, you'll get denied. You won't.

Now, what happens if you're going from undergraduate to postgraduate? Very briefly, usually they will expect you to keep your equipment and they will issue the same support. This tends to happen if you go straight from third year into a Master's degree. I didn't, I took a year out in between and when I went back, I had a completely new assessment because I also said that my needs had changed because it was a completely different course.

So, if you're going from English undergraduate to English postgraduate, they'll probably reasonably expect your support to be the same, but if you're going from something like Chemistry undergraduate to Public Policy postgraduate , then you might need completely different support. I did this going from languages to social policy, so it's okay to go back and tell them that you need a completely fresh DSA needs assessment and start again.

I hope that's given you an overview of DSA and specifically in relation to Braille. I will take some questions. We've got just under 15 minutes.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Holly. I wish I'd known that information when I was at university, because navigating this on your own can be a bit daunting, but I feel like you've given us some great information there.

We've got Jeff with his hand raised so we'll come to Jeff first. As a quick reminder, anyone who'd like to raise their hand, it's Alt-Y on Windows, Option-Y on Mac, star-nine if you're dialling in on a telephone or if you're on an iDevice like an iPhone, iPad or iPod Touch, you can press the More button, which you'll find in the bottom right of your screen, and then press the Raise Hand button from there.

Jeff, you are good to go.

Jeff: Holly, thank you very much for that and thank you all of the folk at the Braillists Foundation for your dedication, commitment and professionalism, but what I'd like to highlight is, yes, Braille displays are great up to a point but don't forget there are other reasons why you want Braille and you might want it in hard copy. One of my particular things is tactile diagrams. So, there are services that will produce these diagrams. They're not the cheapest, but if you're doing something like economics, etc, tactile diagrams are key.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, that's a really valid point and I should have touched on that actually. Transcription is something that you can get funded through DSA and I'm very fortunate that I'm at a university with a transcription centre so mine isn't funded through DSA, I get it just by being a student here, which is very rare. Transcription is something you're entitled to and transcription can cover Braille transcription and it can cover production of accessible documents, if you're doing a lot of research.

You're also totally right about diagrams. Some people will want hard copy books, depending on what they're studying. Economics is a great example, mathematics as well, the sciences, you might want more mathematical concepts in hard copy, or certainly very well produced BRS where you really need the Braille production to be accurate.

One thing I can think of in a non-science field is languages. You might want really good Braille in the language that you're studying, particularly if you're studying something like Arabic where, yes, you can read it using a screen reader but particularly if you're coming to it from an English background, you might have better luck in Braille. So, that's a very good point.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great question, Jeff. No hands for now but I have a quick question. I don't know if this has changed but thinking about all of this technology, we can talk about the latest Braille display, latest screen reader, whatever you like, but what things are available for someone who maybe thinks that they want to use Braille, that's what they're comfortable with, but they're not necessarily comfortable with how to use the products? So, when you get your equipment, in your needs assessment report, can there be scope for training?

Holly Scott-Gardner: Yes, absolutely, and that's something that your assessor should discuss with you and if they don't, you can bring that up as well. Usually training is provided by organisations, not usually by the product manufacturer, though that can vary. Usually it could be someone like, for example, Sight and Sound and I throw them out, because they provide DSA equipment and things. That doesn't mean you'll get them, but what happens is your needs assessor will advise that this person needs however many hours training on X, Y and Z. So, it might be on their screen reader, on their Braille display, on their software, and then they will go and gather quotes from these training providers and then Student Finance will pick one of the quotes. I don't want to say it usually comes down to money but it does, from their perspective.

So, yes, you are absolutely entitled to training. Again, if you get your equipment and you haven't asked for training, but you realise you're really struggling, it's okay to call your assessor and ask for training. It's also a right to put training in your assessment, not knowing if you're going to use it or not. That's something I did. I just allocated eight hours of training which seemed reasonable. That was then budgeted for and then I got the contact details of the training provider and then it's just up to me to call them whenever I feel like I need that training.

That also reminds me of something, what Ben just said and what Jeff said, actually making a check list can be useful before you go into your assessment because even in this I've forgotten a couple of things to say. As a student, you're under this immense pressure to know everything, so make a check list before the assessment and bring that with you, of anything you might want to bring up. Also sometimes you might want to bring someone with you who can prompt you, particularly when you're an undergraduate or doing this for the first time. I brought my father with me because I knew he would think about things that I hadn't even considered. That was really helpful. There are things we take for granted as blind people and forget to ask for because we're so used to them just being built into our lives.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Definitely, and lastly from me, because it's been a while since I applied, in your experience, is this still a process that can take some time? I know, I applied for mine in August and I didn't get my equipment until February.

Holly Scott-Gardner: I would strongly suggest applying as soon as Student Finance applications open because it can take time. My application was delayed, not by waiting for equipment, but actually by an inaccessible application form. You've got to look at it from that point of view, before you even get to the assessment. Delays with equipment happen. I've had really good experiences. I think I've been very fortunate that my assessor is extremely efficient and I've obviously just got lucky with the companies I've had providing my equipment but it can take time. Try to be really efficient and get your report in as early as possible. If you apply for Student Finance and DSA in March, get your DSA approved in, say, April, you could be having your assessment then, which gives you five months before you're starting university and hopefully you'll get your equipment well in advance. Unfortunately sometimes that can't happen but try to do it early and it shouldn't take that long.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We've now got a couple of hands .So, we have about five minutes to go and we're going to come to Alan Thorpe first and then we're going to come to James.

Alan Thorpe: I wanted to make a couple of points relating to Access to Work. An Access to Work application is not necessarily arduous. It can be done over the phone, so you can actually talk to them initially. They will fill in the form, post it to you for signing, by conveniently also putting a bump on where you need to sign, so it's all considered, return the form and then that starts the process and it is only a couple of pages and you don't have to write anything apart from your signature.

Something else about equipment, more around what Alan was saying, Access to Work will not fund a printer and they will not fund a PC, if the job requires it. If a full sighted person was able to do that job and they would be using a PC, they would expect the company to provide that, but they will provide the software and things for you to access it. So when Alan was talking about his PC and printer at the BBC, that probably wasn't provided for him through Access to Work and was still the BBC's property.

It is a very painless process and I've had quite a bit of experience of doing Access to Work assessments. It is a good way forward for people to maintain and gain employment.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, Alan. We're going to come to James Bowden next and then Sandra Kane.

James Bowden: This is a question I should have asked earlier. Mairead, I see you're still here. I wonder if you could talk about if Access to Work and, Holly, DSA, will cover upgrades and servicing costs.

Mairead Comerford: Do you mean upgrades of your computer?

James Bowden: No. So, for example, upgrades of a screen reader or servicing an embosser or whatever, that kind of thing.

Mairead Comerford: I'm not sure. I don't think they would do the servicing but I think they would do the upgrade and that would be contacting them to advice them that you need the latest one and why, what has it got that you haven't got currently.

Holly Scott-Gardner: DSA tends to be quite restrictive because they envision you'll only be at university for a fairly short amount of time. My JAWS license didn't come with upgrades. It was one JAWS license and they want me to have this version. I do think if there's a specific reason why you need an upgrade, for example with a Braille display where the latest version can handle PowerPoint presentations, you could probably use that as a justification to get an upgrade. It's tricky territory in DSA because Student Finance is funny about spending more money than they have to.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thanks for that, James, and we're going to come to Sandra next and then [PHONETIC: Kawal].

Sandra: It's a question to you, Holly, about DSA waiting times. I started an MA back in 2014 and I did all the right things. I got my form in on time and I got my doctor's evidence, but Student Finance told me categorically that I couldn't have an assessment until I'd actually started the course. Is there any way of challenging that? I went through my Student Disability Services and they told me that some people had had earlier assessments but couldn't give me any advice on how I could make that possible in my case.

Holly Scott-Gardner: You absolutely should have had your assessment before you started the course. I can't even fathom why they would have told you that because it is so wrong, but it's like any organisation, if you get the wrong person, you get the wrong information. The way I would challenge it would firstly be to respond with probably quite a terse email. If you look at the information on the website, it does suggest that you get your assessment as soon as possible so back up your email with their own words. Then, these days, we're quite fortunate that there's a lot more advocacy services we can reach out to, so Thomas Pocklington Trust have a student support service so I would reach out to them. I believe Disability Rights UK have also done stuff around disabled students so they could help. If that fails, I would then go through the complaints procedure of Student Finance England or whichever country and make an official complaint. Save all your emails as well and keep a record of everything.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to go quickly to Kawal.

Kawal: I just wanted to make a suggestion as to James's question because I did this once and he asked about whether he could get Access to Work to upgrade his screen reader and I remember on one occasion when I had problems with my equipment, I actually asked Access to Work whether or not I could get funding for a screen reader upgrade and the way I did it was to say that my technology wasn't working with my setup anymore.

Holly Scott-Gardner: Thanks, that's really good to know.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We are running over time now so sorry if we've missed your question. I'm going to hand it back to Holly to wrap up.

Holly Scott-Gardner: If you have questions, then email help@braillists.org and these questions can then be forwarded to whoever knows the answer.

Also I will be uploading a handout along with the recording and that will include links to information about Access to Work and DSA and various different websites you can go to for more support.

I just want to say as we wrap up, thank you again to Mairead for joining us and speaking about Access to Work and I hope that this session on Access to Work and DSA has given all of you some really valuable information and that you can go forward and get Braille in your workplace or education, whether that's hard copy Braille or through a display because we really want to see people getting the Braille they need.