I’ve been on the Work Program for since September 2014. I applied for a paid internship opportunity because I was hopeful it would be the next step in my journey towards recovering enough to go into more substantial long-term employment. I was giving up a volunteering placement which had been running very successfully to do this.

I have a generalised anxiety disorder and once I get anxious about things (whatever the trigger, and no matter how minor they seem to other folks) this becomes increasingly difficult to manage and I engage in self-harming behaviours and have persistent overwhelming suicidal thoughts which are very difficult to cope with. I also get very upset and very agitated very easily which is difficult for others to cope with. It takes ages for me to regain some sort of equilibrium. To have made the move from doing voluntary work to sustaining this paid internship I really needed things to go smoothly. I also have a vestibular condition which means I can be badly affected by certain types of movement and activity on computer screens.

I wanted to get Access to Work help for equipment to help me with my vestibular condition, which means I really need an especially wide screen so that I have enough space to have everything on screen rather than swapping between windows all the time. Unfortunately my Work Programme advisor did not seem to really know anything about applying for Access to Work. With the support of the internship project staff I got an application started and was hoping for a quick assessment that would get the equipment I need. In order to make it easier for me I attempted to authorise ATW to communicate with the support staff member from Inclusion Scotland on my behalf.

However, it turned out that my claim could not be processed until DWP reset a flag on my benefit claim, which was to say that the internship could be seen as Permitted Work and would not affect my benefits (I Work 12 hours a week and earn £7.85 an hour). Because the application was not proceeded they didn’t process the third party permission form so I had to deal with them directly. There had to be a process of the permitted work being approved by a different decision maker in the DWP, separately to both my Work Programme advisor and my Job Centre Plus advisor.

Communication between them all did not go smoothly at all and was very stressful, at one point even leading to one member of DWP staff saying they would be submitting a complaint about another’s handling of the matter. When I asked my Work Programme advisor about support for me to sustain this internship and said that his role was mainly to ‘signpost’ me to funding streams. He seemed, however, not to know about Access to Work funding.

By the time it was sorted out, over six weeks had passed since I began the placement. Not only did this mean a long period of me trying to manage without the right equipment and support I needed, but it meant we missed the normal six week
time-frame for applying to Access to Work. This could mean that Project Scotland (the hosts for my internship) could end up footing some of the bill for any equipment their assessors recommend, or at least there would be negotiations with Access to Work about it. I have been very anxious about causing Project Scotland additional costs in this way.

I have been off sick because my anxiety has been so bad recently, and this issue regarding the equipment has been a major barrier to me returning to work. Both the actual difficulty in getting the right equipment and the anxiety I have felt about causing an expense/difficulty to Project Scotland. It is not at all Project Scotland’s fault that this has happened.

I did also want Access to Work to fund a support person for me who is an employability specialist to help me sustain this internship. This was eventually funded from a different source via my Work Programme provider, for which I am tremendously grateful. But. I had to really push for this help to be provided, and in the meantime there were issues in the workplace that I really needed help with, but had no real support.

There were also two times that my housing benefit was suspended, unnecessarily, both related to this change in my circumstances. In both cases they were sorted out quite quickly but both caused a lot of stress and distress at the time. In neither case was there any warning that this would happen and in each case the shortfall was more than £500 which is a considerable sum when my total income a month is about £1100 (including the PS salary), and my rent is £650. I live in the Private Rented Sector, and frankly I just cannot afford to be late with my rent as this could lead directly to an eviction.

So you see, there have been a lot of issues which have impacted on how sustainable this internship has been for me, and I have really been very unwell as a result. It has been a complete nightmare and my GP has been very concerned about me. In fact the only positive thing to come out of all of this is that I have been ‘fast tracked’ onto an NHS treatment program which was first recommended by my consultant in November 2013.

How is that being on the Work Programme, which is meant to help me get into work, means that when I get offered work and want to do it as “permitted work” as part of a gradual process towards coming off benefits and gaining sustainable employment, means that I can’t even apply for the very support that I needed to be put in place right away until a complicated process of getting permission takes place? How is it that nobody seemed to be able to be particularly clear with me about what was needed, promptly, and ensure that the right things were done? How is it that my earnest efforts to get into work should result in my being financially punished, twice (albeit temporarily) through incorrect automatic suspension of benefits payments? The very system that is meant to be helping me into work has set me back greatly in my process of doing so. It is hard not to feel like the system is deliberately designed this way in the hopes of encouraging people like me to just go away and give up. I have had to do everything for myself – my Work Program advisor was not aware of these disability internships. I have sought out and arranged voluntary work with very little guidance from my advisor, though he is very kind and sympathetic.
I feel that had I been referred to Work Choices instead of the Work Program, more specialist help may have been available. The referral to the work program was made at a time when I had just moved, and so had changed job centres. I turned up for an appointment, but no-one at the new job centre was expecting me. There had been some changes on my claim record to do with the prognosis but no-one really understood what these were or why they had been made. It seemed to me at the time that the referral should have been delayed to get better information, and maybe if that had happened I would have been referred to Work Choices instead.

A further issue has been the difficulty in accessing medical support and treatment to enable me to recover sufficiently and engage productively with the work program. I am now more than half way through my time on the work program and am even now not really well enough to try to move myself off of benefits and into permanent paid work. It does not seem right that you are expected to engage with the work program while the medical care and treatment is not in place to help you manage your condition.

Throughout the whole of my engagement with the work program I have lived in fear of sanctions. This has also not been helpful to my health. And now following the unnecessary suspensions of my benefits I live in fear every fortnight that again there will be problems with my benefit. None of this is at all helpful to my health, and recently I have been very unwell again.