

Outcome Briefing: Roundtable on International Trade

A parliamentary discussion on the UK's position as a global leader in assistive technology (ATech) exports and how government, industry and policy can support innovation, international growth and inclusive economic opportunity.

Summary

On 28 April 2026, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Assistive and Accessible Technology (APPGAT) convened a parliamentary roundtable in Portcullis House to explore the UK's position as a global leader in assistive technology exports and the role of policy, innovation and international collaboration in supporting future growth. The session brought together representatives from industry, trade bodies, universities, financial institutions, accessibility organisations and government stakeholders.

The discussion highlighted that the UK continues to hold a strong international reputation in assistive technology, inclusive education and accessibility innovation. Contributors emphasised that the UK's success is driven not only by innovative products, but by the wider systems, expertise and policy frameworks that underpin inclusion, including Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), Access to Work and broader approaches to SEND and accessibility. Several speakers noted that governments internationally increasingly look to the UK model when developing their own approaches to inclusion and assistive technology adoption.

Participants highlighted significant opportunities for growth driven by ageing populations, digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), and increasing international focus on disability inclusion. However, contributors also raised concerns around barriers to scaling innovation, fragmented export support, investment

challenges and the risk that domestic policy changes could weaken the UK's international credibility.

There was a focussed discussion around the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) consultation and concerns that reducing emphasis on specialist assistive technology in favour of mainstream accessibility tools could undermine both outcomes for disabled people and the UK's position as an international leader in assistive technology. Contributors stressed that while mainstream accessibility tools have an important role, specialist assistive technology and personalised support pathways remain essential.

The discussion also highlighted the need for stronger collaboration across the sector, including integrated product ecosystems, improved routes to market, clearer economic evidence and greater cross-government coordination between education, disability, industrial strategy, innovation and trade policy. Overall, the roundtable concluded that assistive technology should increasingly be viewed not solely as a disability issue, but as a strategic economic, educational and industrial opportunity for the UK.

The Speakers:

- **Sadik Al-Hassan MP**, Officer, APPG for Assistive and Accessible Technology
- **Caroline Wright**, Director General, British Educational Suppliers Association
- **Jack Churchill**, Chair, British Assistive Technology Association
- **Paddy McGrath**, Head of Education EMEA, Everway

Summary of Discussion Points

The UK's strength lies in its wider systems, expertise and inclusive approach

Opening the discussion, Caroline Wright highlighted that the UK is internationally recognised for three particular strengths: English language education, educational technology and SEND, and assistive technology. She noted that governments around the world increasingly approach UK organisations seeking expertise not only on products, but on broader systems and approaches to inclusion.

Paddy McGrath reinforced this point, explaining that many governments internationally are now engaging directly at ministerial level around inclusion and assistive technology reform. Drawing on examples from the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe, he argued that countries are increasingly looking to replicate aspects of the UK system, particularly around inclusive education and specialist support. He stressed that international partners are often seeking “a system” rather than simply a product, including expertise, implementation support and policy learning.

Contributors from universities and accessibility organisations also highlighted the UK’s strength in co-production and inclusive design. Representatives from the University of East London’s Rix Inclusive Research Institute emphasised that disabled people and people with lived experience are often directly involved in the development and implementation of technologies, which they argued is a major reason why UK organisations are valued internationally.

Several participants also highlighted the role of longstanding UK frameworks such as DSA and Access to Work in helping establish international credibility. Jack Churchill argued that these systems have enabled the UK assistive technology sector to develop over decades and continue to act as an international benchmark for other countries exploring inclusive education and disability support models.

Government policy and funding frameworks are central to market growth

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the extent to which government policy shapes assistive technology markets.

Jack Churchill reflected on the role DSA has played in supporting disabled students and creating demand for specialist assistive technology. He warned that proposals within the current DSA consultation to rely more heavily on built-in accessibility features risk undermining specialist support pathways and could negatively affect both disabled students and the wider UK assistive technology sector.

Paddy McGrath similarly argued that domestic policy decisions have international implications. He warned that if the UK appears to move away from specialist support models, international governments may interpret this as a signal that specialist assistive technology is no longer valued. He stressed that countries developing their own inclusion systems often look directly to UK policy frameworks when shaping their decisions.

Several contributors emphasised that policy direction actively creates markets. Representatives from technology companies and trade bodies argued that government-backed schemes such as DSA, Access to Work and teacher training programmes have historically helped drive innovation, growth and adoption. Participants also pointed to the role of SEND policy and inclusive education reforms internationally in generating growing demand for UK expertise and products.

Contributors from the education and accessibility sectors additionally raised concerns around fragmented policy-making across government. Caroline Wright argued that assistive technology and educational technology are often overlooked within wider industrial strategy discussions, despite their economic and export potential. Several participants stressed the need for stronger coordination between education, trade, innovation and disability policy.

Innovation remains strong, but scaling and routes to market remain major barriers

While contributors agreed that the UK remains highly innovative in assistive technology, many highlighted difficulties scaling products and businesses internationally.

Julian Jackson from VisionBridge argued that the UK performs strongly in early-stage innovation but often struggles to support companies moving from prototype to manufacturing and international scale. He highlighted the importance of networking, collaboration and funding support to help innovators move beyond small-scale development.

David Baines, drawing on international consultancy experience, suggested that while the UK remains strong in incremental innovation, more disruptive innovation is increasingly emerging from countries such as India and parts of Africa. He argued that UK companies often lack sufficient understanding of international ecosystems, funding structures, and procurement systems when attempting to export.

Several contributors highlighted challenges around investment and venture capital. Representatives from industry noted that many assistive technology companies are founder-led and driven by lived experience, often prioritising social impact over rapid commercial growth. While this supports innovation and user-centred design, participants argued that many SMEs struggle to access the long-term investment required for scaling internationally.

There was also significant discussion around routes to market. Paddy McGrath argued that many assistive technology companies develop excellent products but lack sufficient support around commercialisation, strategic partnerships and international market entry. He highlighted examples where multiple companies collaborate to provide integrated solutions across literacy, accessibility and inclusion, arguing that this “portfolio” approach can strengthen export opportunities.

Several speakers additionally emphasised the need for stronger economic evidence demonstrating the value of assistive technology. Contributors argued that clearer data around productivity, employment participation and wider economic return on investment could help strengthen both domestic adoption and international exports.

AI, interoperability and integrated ecosystems present major future opportunities

The discussion explored the growing role of AI, interoperability and integrated systems within the future assistive technology landscape.

Representatives from Microsoft and other technology organisations highlighted significant opportunities around AI-enabled accessibility tools, voice technologies and integrated digital systems. Contributors argued that the UK has strong

foundations in accessibility innovation and could play a leading role internationally if policy and investment support remain aligned.

Several participants stressed the importance of interoperability and collaboration between technologies. Contributors argued that disabled people rarely rely on a single product and instead use combinations of mainstream and specialist technologies. As a result, future innovation is likely to depend increasingly on integrated ecosystems rather than standalone products.

Discussion also focussed on the relationship between mainstream accessibility features and specialist assistive technology. Contributors broadly agreed that mainstream accessibility has significantly improved access for many users, but several warned against assuming that mainstream tools can replace specialist technologies entirely.

Participants also explored opportunities around AI and digital accessibility within education and employment. Contributors highlighted growing international demand for personalised learning tools, digital accessibility systems and AI-enabled support, particularly as governments seek scalable approaches to inclusion.

Finally, speakers stressed that assistive technology should increasingly be viewed as part of a broader economic and industrial opportunity for the UK. Several contributors argued that the UK's expertise in accessibility, inclusive education and digital innovation positions it strongly for future international growth, provided that domestic policy, funding and export support remain aligned with these ambitions.

About the APPG for Assistive and Accessible Technology

The APPGAT aims to disseminate knowledge, generate debate and facilitate engagement on assistive technology among Members of both Houses of Parliament. The group is chaired by Josh Fenton-Glynn MP (Labour), with parliamentary Officers Lord Shinkwin (Conservative), Sadik Al-Hassan MP (Labour) and Lord Low (Crossbench), and Members including Steve Darling MP (Liberal Democrat), the Rt Hon. Lord Blunkett (Labour) and Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson (Crossbench).

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