# Understanding how the onset of sight loss affects employment

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this report is to increase our understanding of what happens to the employment status of people newly registered as blind or partially sighted. What is the relationship between the onset of sight loss, and its effect on employment? Why is it that some people feel able to stay in employment, and others don’t?

The research focused on a discrete group of blind and partially sighted people of working age, residing in the county of Kent in England. It offers rich descriptions of people’s experiences, which reflect the complexity of issues that blind and partially sighted people are faced with when trying to find, or stay, in employment. The research is intended as a pilot study, to guide future work at a national level.

The report will be useful for employers and employment professionals (for example, eye care liaison officers, vocational rehabilitation workers, occupational health providers and employment advisers) in considering how to assist people experiencing the onset of sight loss to remain in employment.

## 2. Method

RNIB conducted the research, in partnership with Kent Association for the Blind (KAB). Participants were identified through the Kent Local Authority register of visual impairment, which is held by KAB. There were two distinct phases:

* Phase 1: A survey of people residing in the Kent area of the UK who are registered as severely sight impaired (blind) or sight impaired (partially sighted) in the last two years.
* Phase 2: Qualitative interviews and focus groups with people identified as in employment now, or at the time they registered as blind or partially sighted. The survey in phase 1 underpinned the qualitative work in phase 2, by providing evidence of the issues people were facing. This in turn underpinned the development of discussion guides for this phase.

Nineteen people took part in phase 1 of the research, which consisted of a telephone interview using a structured questionnaire. A total of 10 people took part in the qualitative work for phase 2 of the research; 7 depth interviews and one focus group of 3 people.

The sample size was very small, whilst participants were limited to a specific geographical area, and restricted to those who agreed to take part in the survey. The sample is therefore not representative of the wider UK working age population. However, the qualitative work in this study has raised some interesting questions about the enablers and barriers to employment, which echo findings from other research; notably Network 1000, which draws from a representative sample of people who are registered as blind or partially sighted. Testing the findings from this study with the forthcoming MyVoice research from RNIB, will enhance its validity.

## 3. Key findings

* Positive attitudes from employers made a significant difference in people being able to stay in work.
* Practical support from employers helped people to adjust to working with sight loss.
* Flexible and empathic support from line managers helped people to stay in work.
* Changes in expectations, especially productivity levels, caused conflicting emotions.
* People in work articulated a strong personal desire to remain in employment and not to be defined by sight loss.
* Larger organisations had a better awareness of the needs of blind and partially sighted people than smaller organisations.
* Support from colleagues and peers was important in adjusting to the workplace after experiencing sight loss.

* Most participants no longer in work did not want to leave their employment.
* People can be reluctant to tell their employer about losing their sight out of fear of losing their jobs.

* The majority of participants who were no longer in work felt this was a direct result of losing some or all of their sight.
* Specialist equipment made an important contribution to being able to stay in work.

* Participants’ experiences of using Access to Work were mixed.
* Knowledge of Access to Work was generally low.
* External agencies showed a lack of awareness of schemes and initiatives to support blind and partially sighted people with retaining employment or getting back into work.
* Most participants felt that their sight loss was a significant hurdle to future employment.

* Negative attitudes from employers adversely affected participants’ experiences of finding work.
* Participants no longer in work were unsure about what they could still do after losing their sight.

* Participants in receipt of welfare benefits described a lack of understanding from Jobcentre Plus staff about work capabilities with sight loss.

## 4. Recommendations

Evidence generated from this research strongly suggests there is work to do to improve the employment experience of blind and partially sighted people working across a range of different organisations in the UK today. RNIB therefore makes the following recommendations:

* At the point of diagnosis, blind and partially sighted employees should receive clear and practical advice on their right to receive reasonable adjustments at work.
* Every blind and partially sighted person in work should be offered regular work-based assessments that are holistic and person-centred.
* More should be done to promote the Access to Work scheme. Awareness of Access to Work was shockingly low amongst participants in this research.
* There is a need for greater awareness among employers to understand the business benefit of employing and/or retaining disabled employees.
* A flexible approach to working hours and location should be adopted by employers, where possible.

* Sight loss awareness training should be well-publicised and readily available to all employers.

* Local societies have a role to play in making people aware of national schemes that support working age blind and partially sighted people to gain and retain employment.

This research has demonstrated a range of different experiences of people facing the onset of sight loss whilst in, or seeking, employment. A deep rooted motivation by those of working age to continue in meaningful employment reaffirms the important role that statutory services and the voluntary sector must play in improving outcomes for blind and partially sighted people.

“You have to find a way of making employers see you as a rounded person. I’m not just blind”