

# Presenting: Eye Work With You Too

(summary report)



**Only one in four blind and partially sighted people are in paid employment. We want to change this.**

By the Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research at the University of Birmingham, with funding from the UK Community Renewal Fund, for RNIB.



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# 1. Overview

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Only one in four blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment [1]. We wanted to find out what more could be done to improve the employment prospects of blind and partially sighted people. As an outcome of this research, we have produced nine key recommendations for employment and education services, the government and charities, based on the insights and experiences of research participants.

This research looks at experiences of people in three key areas:

1. Young people preparing to move, or transition, from education and training into the labour market;
2. People who experienced sight loss later in life;
3. A variety of stakeholders who have an impact on the employment outcomes of blind and partially sighted people.

## Through this research, we wanted to find out:

- What are the barriers, and enablers, which impact upon the experiences of blind and partially sighted people getting work in Northern Ireland?
- What works when supporting of blind and partially sighted people to get work?

- Where are the gaps in employment-related services for blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland and those involved in supporting them?

We ran nine focus group sessions, which were conducted with 49 participants to produce our findings. These groups consisted of:

- Blind and partially sighted young people who are in education or training (two groups)
- Parents
- Education professionals
- Working age blind and partially sighted people in employment (two groups)
- Working age blind and partially sighted people not currently in employment
- Employment professionals
- Employers

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## Reference:

[1] Research taken from My Voice 2015: The views and experiences of blind and partially sighted people in the UK. Authors: John Slade and Rose Edwards. Publisher: RNIB My Voice | RNIB ([rnib.in/MyVoice](https://www.rnib.in/MyVoice))

## 2. Summary of key findings

Our focus groups discussed barriers, enablers and interventions which affect the employment prospects for blind and partially sighted people. Initially, we present the findings specific to blind and partially sighted young people who are about to make the transition from education and training into the labour market. We then consider the broader findings relating to all those of working age.

### Supporting transitions from education and training

“A careers officer told me that I should go to Tech because university wasn’t for, and this is a quote, ‘for people like me’. I was fuming!! It’s just sort of fuelled me to go and prove them wrong!”  
(Young person)

Our focus groups – consisting of young people, education professionals and parents – discussed the experiences of blind and partially sighted young people making the transition from education and training into the labour market. We identified the following common themes:

#### Person-centred transition support

“Like if I said I wanted to do aromatherapy, somebody would have said, oh no, you would have been better at teaching, like teaching the blind. And that just kind of threw me a bit because it’s not what I want to do. I’m old enough to make my own decisions on what I want. No one asked.”

Our discussions with these groups highlighted the need for, and current lack of, person-centred support for transition which caters for individual aspirations while also taking into account practical considerations in relation to their disability.

Blind and partially sighted young people often received careers support during the school day, but rarely would this take into consideration, or adequately understand, the nature of their disability.

It was argued that there should be more flexibility in terms of when careers support is available; young people aren’t always ready to have such conversations about their future. Tailored careers support should be offered as an inclusive school-based service, rather than as an add-on.

#### Joined-up services

Several of the participants noted that different organisations are not currently working together as well as they should be in order to provide improved person-centred support. Participants suggested there should be greater partnership between schools, careers advisors and education specialists, as part of a joined-up, holistic support service.

#### Getting work experience

Work experience is seen as an important enabler for blind and partially sighted young people, helping them prepare for the workplace. There

are often barriers to accessing the types of work experiences undertaken by other young people, and so specific intervention is needed to help foster these types of opportunities.

## Barriers

“The worst experience was when I got a job, done the training and one part of the training I couldn’t see. They brought me up to the main big boss, and he shook my hand, said I was the most qualified person in the room, but they would no longer be requiring my services.” (Job seeker)

### Barrier: Discrimination and negative attitudes

“I am nervous about job seeking because I had a let-down in the past and it’s made me kind of feel a bit self-conscious. I’m not saying that I’ll definitely not get a job, but what I’m saying is it kind of knocked my confidence and I’m worried is everyone going to be like that, or are they actually going to give you a chance.”

The focus group participants identified situations where they had personally experienced, or witnessed, discrimination against individuals because of their disability. These often included instances of employers not being prepared to work with an employee, or potential employee, to support them in the workplace.

### Barrier: Lack of understanding of vision impairment

“I was a nurse, and as soon as they heard that I had this [medical condition] which affected my vision, I was called into the occupational health and the occupational doctor said to me, ‘I take it, you want to retire now because what can a blind person do?’ And that was a doctor! That was a doctor that said that to me!”

Many of the participants linked discriminatory actions and negative attitudes to a general lack of understanding of vision impairment across society in particular, of the types of support which can be put into place to support blind or partially sighted workers. Often employers and colleagues would make assumptions about an individual, the support they would need and that individual’s limitations. This meant that often it was challenging for the person to receive the reasonable adjustments they required.

### Barrier: Low self-confidence

“The opportunities aren’t there and then people’s confidence is shattered, and the stigma of disability, it’s putting people off from getting out there and achieving their best.”

It was highlighted how some blind or partially sighted people can often experience low self-confidence, which in turn can impact upon their ability to advocate for themselves, to put themselves forward, and to place

Anyone you think might benefit  
about eye conditions.

Anyone you think might need  
the support available outside  
i.e. Sensory Teams, Vision Re  
Services for Children with VI.

SmartView Synergy PI



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themselves in – what could potentially be – challenging situations, such as applying for jobs or promotions. This low confidence can often be linked to prior negative experience in the workplace or in seeking employment.

## Enablers

“I don’t think genuinely I could be in employment without Access to Work. I’ve had quite a lot of support from them; it’s not always perfect but it’s done the things I really needed to do, such as taxis, to get to work and home again.”

Positively, many participants identified ‘enablers’ which can benefit people with sight loss in both accessing employment and in their journey towards work.

### **Enabler: Support of employment professionals**

Throughout the focus groups, it was highlighted how important it is for blind and partially sighted people to be able to access the support of specialist professionals, across various stages of life.

This could include, for example, young people in education, or training, making decisions about their future, unemployed individuals wishing to access support for applying for jobs, or individuals who have recently experienced sight loss.

It is important support that is tailored to meet the needs of the individual, including the development of practical skills and help to boost self-esteem and acceptance of their disability.

### **Enabler: Supportive and flexible managers and colleagues**

“Being treated like everyone else. No deliberate, sort of special treatment if that makes sense, just because I can’t see as well as someone else you know, same expectations as my sighted colleagues, same workload, same standards, that’s very much what I would consider a positive work outcome.”

Many participants highlighted how their experience can depend on the individuals that they encounter on a day-to-day basis. Many accounts were shared of how positive outcomes can be achieved if an individual has a supportive line manager, or colleagues, who take the opportunity to improve their understanding of the adjustments needed by their colleague with sight loss.

### **Enabler: Access to Work**

Access to Work, the Government’s support scheme, was seen as an essential enabler, with some participants describing how they would not be able to work without the support it offers. However, many people are unaware of the Access to Work scheme, or at least are not aware of the full extent of support which it provides. Several participants also provided examples of challenges faced in accessing Access to Work, such as inaccessible documents and lengthy processes.

## Positive interventions

Focus group participants identified interventions which helped support people with vision impairment in accessing or progressing towards the labour market.

### Enabler: Employment programmes and advocates

“I used Eye Work Too [pre-employment programme], at the RNIB in Belfast. They were very, very good, they helped put up CV forms, mock interviews, requested some stuff in larger fonts. I’m just recommending that they have been very helpful.”

Many participants spoke very positively about specialist employment programmes which they had attended, including providing testimonies of how these had helped support them into paid employment, and also in some cases helped them to retain their role.

Having someone to act as an advocate is important, as well as the presence of someone to help provide a holistic perspective of the support that individual might require. This might include technology and mobility training, as well as counselling support to boost their self-confidence. For those still in education and training, having access to a dedicated transition officer was viewed as important.

### Enabler: Work placements

As previously noted, it was viewed as very important that young people have opportunities to engage in some form

of work experience. Similarly, several participants observed how beneficial supported placements/internships can be to help support people with vision impairment and their longer-term journey into paid employment.

## Interventions and gaps in services

“...if we look at autism, for example, so many places have made accommodations; supermarkets, workplaces, everywhere, and why is that? I think it’s just because autism is very good at the publicity, they’re very good at awareness raising, it’s on Facebook all the time.

“I know it’s a higher prevalence disability, so there’s more people to get the message out and that’s where V I [visual impairment] is more difficult because there’s less of us, but everybody knows what autism is now. When I started teaching nobody knew [about autism]; 30 years ago, it was very unknown.” (Parent)

Finally, participants suggested interventions which should be introduced in Northern Ireland and in particular, highlighted any specific gaps in services.

As previously noted, young people, parents and education professionals spoke strongly about the importance of a joined-up, person-centred transition support service for for blind and partially sighted young people, which would draw together the expertise of a range of professionals, including mainstream teachers, Qualified



Teachers of Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment (QTVI) and careers advisors.

## Potential interventions

### Raising awareness across society

One of the strongest themes across the focus groups was a general lack of understanding around sight loss, or of being blind or partially sighted across society. It was noted how this might impact upon blind and partially sighted people when engaging with employers, with colleagues, with non-specialist service providers, as well as in day-to-day encounters with the general public.

Several ideas were provided by the groups of how to help raise awareness, such as targeted campaigns, working with the media and directly targeted events at employers. These were viewed as essential for challenging preconceptions and for helping the general public understand how blind and partially sighted people are able to successfully navigate day-to-day life.

### Raising awareness of Access to Work

Many of those participants who had been in paid employment noted how vital Access to Work was for them to be able to access the various types of support they needed to work. However, several gave accounts of how either they or a client had been unaware of Access to Work, meaning they weren't able to access the support they required. This often led to negative outcomes.

In discussion, it became clear that some of the participants were unaware of the extent of support available through Access to Work, so there were some discrepancies in the nature of the support allocated.

For example, some participants had benefited from having someone come into their workplace to deliver visual awareness training to staff, while others (who viewed the concept positively) had not known that they could request this. Across the focus groups it was noted that any promotion of Access to Work should focus on both disabled workers *and* employers.

### Peer support and mentoring

Almost all of the groups discussed the importance of blind and partially sighted people having access to mentoring or peer support. This would enable them to share experiences and to learn from someone who had had similar experiences to them. This was seen as a positive intervention across the age ranges, rather than something specific to young people. It was also suggested that it would be helpful to have access to case studies about blind and partially sighted people in paid employment.

These could be used to prompt ideas of adjustments which might be made in the workplace, as well as how Access to Work might be used most effectively. They could also be used to help raise the aspirations of a range of stakeholders, such as employers, teachers, careers advisors and parents.

### 3. Summary of nine recommendations

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#### Improving post-school transition support for for blind and partially sighted young people

1. Mainstream schools, specialist services and careers advisors should work together more effectively to create a more joined-up, person-centred service to support for blind and partially sighted young people to prepare and plan for their future.

#### Improving employment support service provision

2. For employment support services to offer a holistic service, addressing the specific needs of the individual and their stage and current circumstance in life.

#### Policy and campaigns – how charities can do more

3. For charities representing blind and partially sighted people to partner with key organisations such as Department for Work and Pensions to promote Access to Work to blind and partially sighted young people and employers.
4. For charities representing blind and partially sighted people to lobby for improvements to the accessibility of Access to Work.
5. For sight loss charities to lead by example and employ a greater proportion of blind and partially sighted people.

6. For sight loss charities to identify ways in which to work with employers to better understand vision impairment, such as working with mainstream media.
7. For sight loss charities to explore new and creative ways in which to improve awareness across society.

#### Priority areas for addressing gaps in services

8. For charities and specialist services to facilitate blind and partially sighted people to access work experience opportunities, including internships and voluntary placements.
9. For improved opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to learn from the experiences of others. This might include the creation of mentoring schemes and peer support networks, as well as a bank of case studies of blind and partially sighted people in employment.

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# Glossary

**Access to Work** Government funded scheme which provides funding to help remove potential barriers to employment for disabled workers

**QTVI** Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

**RNIB** Royal National Institute of Blind People

**VICTAR** Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research

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Use the QR Code to link to the full, in-depth Eye Work With You Too report. It can be read by visiting: [www.rnib.org.uk/eye-work-with-you-too](http://www.rnib.org.uk/eye-work-with-you-too)