

Eye Work With You Too



A research project designed to identify barriers and improve access to employment for blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland.

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Glossary

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

DDA Disability Discrimination Act

Orientation and mobility Skills developed by an individual with vision impairment to allow them to independently and safely navigate the environment around them

QTVI Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment

RNIB Royal National Institute of Blind People

VI Vision Impairment

VICTAR Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research

1. Executive summary and recommendations

Overview of the project

The objective of this project was to broaden understanding of the experiences of individuals with vision impairment in accessing the labour market in Northern Ireland. It intended to do this by taking a broad perspective, including looking at the experiences of young people preparing to transition from education and training into the labour market, the experiences of individuals who experienced sight loss later in life and the experiences of a variety of stakeholders who might contribute towards this.

The key research questions which we have sought to address within this report were:

- What are the barriers and enablers which impact upon the experiences of people with vision impairment accessing the labour market in Northern Ireland?
- What interventions can be successful in supporting people with vision impairment to better employment outcomes?
- What gaps in employment-related services are there for people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland, as well as for those involved in supporting them?

This summary report outlines findings from nine focus group sessions, which were conducted with a 49 participants. These groups consisted of:

- Young people with a vision impairment in education or training (2 groups)
- Parents
- Education professionals
- Working age people with a vision impairment in employment (2 groups)
- Working age people with a vision impairment not currently in employment
- Employment professionals
- Employers

Summary of key findings

Supporting transitions from education and training

Our focus groups with young people, education professionals and parents focused specifically on the experiences of young people with vision impairment making the transition from education and training, and into the labour market. A significant focus of the discussion with these groups was the importance for, and lack of, person-centred support for transition which caters for individual aspirations whilst also taking into practical considerations in relation to their disability. In order to provide improved person-centred support, it was suggested that there should be greater partnership between

schools, careers advisors and VI education specialists, as part of a joined-up, holistic support service. Work experience was also identified as an important enabler for young people with vision impairment, to help them prepare for the workplace. It was noted that there are often barriers to accessing the types of work experiences undertaken by other young people, and therefore specific intervention is needed to help foster these types of opportunity.

Barriers

Each focus group was asked to identify examples of barriers which negatively impact on the participation of people with vision impairment in the labour market. The most commonly identified barriers were:

- Discrimination and negative attitudes
- Lack of understanding of vision impairment across society
- Low self-confidence of individuals with vision impairment

Enablers

The participants also identified several examples of enablers which can benefit people with vision impairment in both accessing employment, and in their journey towards participation in the labour market. The most commonly identified enablers were:

- Having support from employment professionals
- Supportive and flexible managers and colleagues
- Access to Work

Positive interventions

The participants identify several examples of interventions which they had observed as being beneficial in supporting people with vision impairment in accessing, or progressing, towards the labour market. These can be summarised as follows:

- Opportunity to attend specialist employment programmes
- Support from an advocate
- Access to work placements

Suggested interventions and gaps in services

The participants also provided suggestions of interventions which should be introduced in Northern Ireland, and in particular to note any particular gaps in services. Across the groups, several potential interventions were identified which were relevant to all people with vision impairment. These can be summarised as follows:

- Raising awareness of vision impairment across society
- Raising awareness of Access to Work
- Access to peer support and mentoring

Summary of recommendations

Drawing upon the outcomes of the research, we outline a series of 9 recommendations.

Improving post-school transition support for young people with vision impairment

1. For mainstream schools, specialist services and careers advisors to work together to create a more joined-up, person-centred service to support young people with vision impairment to prepare and plan for their future.

Improving employment support service provision within the vision impairment sector

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

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

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

Priority areas for addressing gaps in services

8. For vision impairment charities and specialist services to facilitate individuals with vision impairment to access work experience opportunities, including internships and voluntary placements.
9. For improved opportunities for individuals with vision impairment 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 individuals with vision impairment in employment.

2. Introduction

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- Working age people with a vision impairment not currently in employment
- Employment professionals
- Employers

In Section 3 we provide an overview of the methodology used in this study, including introducing the 49 participants who took part.

In Section 4 we provide an overview of the findings of the study. We do this by exploring the findings from each stakeholder group, one at a time.

In Section 5 we draw conclusions by reflecting back on the initial research questions posed, before drawing together the findings of this research to provide recommendations and key messages for stakeholders in Section 6.

Throughout the report we have drawn upon language such as ‘individual with vision impairment’. This is to be inclusive of children and young people diagnosed as having a vision impairment as a baby or in early childhood, who would not consider themselves to have experienced ‘sight loss’.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the participants who took part in this study, for giving up their time and for sharing their experiences with us. We would also like to thank

RNIB colleagues for supporting us in identifying potential participants and for supporting the delivery of this research.

This project has been funded by UK Community Renewal Fund.

3. Focus groups: methodology

In this section we present the approach we followed to conduct the focus group sessions. This includes an overview of the approach followed for recruitment, a summary of the demographics of the 49 participants who took part and an overview of the process followed and the questions explored during the focus group discussions.

Recruitment

Participants for the focus groups were identified by RNIB Northern Ireland, who sent out targeted communications to the different groups we were interested in speaking with. These include:

- Young people with vision impairment in education or training aged 16-18
- Young people with vision impairment in education or training aged 19-25
- Education professionals
- Parents
- Working age people with vision impairment not in employment
- Working age people with vision impairment in employment

- Employment professionals
- Employers

To do this they drew upon existing databases and utilised their social media channels.

Interested individuals were asked to complete a consent form and short demographic survey on [Qualtrics](#).

Consent was received by 75 participants who were then contacted by the project team to arrange a date for the focus group. It was only possible to include 49 of these participants in focus groups, due to a variety of reasons, including:

- Lack of response from participant to follow up communication
- Participant unable to make the date arranged for their relevant focus group
- Focus group already at maximum capacity
- Participant not turning up at pre-arranged time.

Such attrition is common in studies of this nature. To attempt to mitigate for this, the researchers sought a range of contact information from prospective participants to help improve

communication with them after initial recruitment, and used email, text and telephone reminders in advance of the focus group sessions. We also offered a £20 gift voucher incentive to all those who participated in the focus group sessions.

Participant demographics

As previously noted, 49 participants took part in the focus group interviews. Table 1 provides an overview of some of their key characteristics.

Table 1: Overview of Participants (n=49)

Category	Frequency
Not in employment	6
In employment	14
In education or training, aged 16-18	3
In education or training, aged 19-25	5
Parents	3
Education professionals	8
Employment professionals	5
Employers	5
Vision impairment	Yes = 32* No = 17
Age when vision impairment was first diagnosed	From birth = 22
	5-11 = 1
	17-25 = 2
	Older than 25 = 7
	Not applicable = 17
Registration status	Registered severely sight impaired (blind) = 20
	Registered sight impaired (partially sighted) = 10
	Not registered = 2
	Not applicable = 17

Category	Frequency
Identified gender	Female = 31
	Male = 17
	She/they = 1
Age	16-18 = 3
	19-25 = 6
	Over 26 years old = 40
Identified community	Protestant = 16
	Roman Catholic = 13
	Neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic / N/A = 8
	Prefer not to say = 12

* 4 of the participants who responded in a professional capacity also had a vision impairment

Overview of focus groups

A total of nine focus groups were held on the cloud-based video conferencing service 'Zoom', taking place in both the day time and evening in accordance to the availability of the group members. A maximum of eight participants attended each group to ensure that there was opportunity for everyone to contribute and share their experiences. The focus groups explored a range of themes, which included:

- What might positive employment-related outcomes look like?
- Barriers and enablers which impact upon people with vision impairment seeking to secure employment and participate within the workplace
- Experiences of the Access to Work scheme

- Support available to transition-aged young people
- Interventions which have been successful in helping people with vision impairment develop the skills they require to work independently in the workplace and move closer to the labour market
- Gaps in employment related services for people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland.

The focus group meetings were recorded using the recording function within Zoom and later transcribed verbatim, with minor edits for clarity and to remove identifying features. The data from the nine focus groups was then analysed following a thematic analysis approach which sought to identify common themes within the data. The

computer software NVivo was used to support the qualitative data analysis, whilst quantitative data from the recruitment questionnaire was analysed using SPSS.

All names used in this report are pseudonyms.

Study limitations

This study provides an in-depth snapshot of the experiences of people with vision impairment in preparing for, searching for and accessing employment, as well as those of a range of stakeholders involved in this process. Whilst this research study was never intended to replicate exactly the demographic makeup of the population, we do recognise that there are some limitations with this study.

14 (70%) of our 20 participants who would classify themselves as being in the labour market were in paid employment, whilst only 6 were unemployed/economically inactive. On the one hand this is positive as it helps provide a detailed snapshot of their experiences in employment. However evidence has consistently shown that the proportion of people with vision impairment in paid employment is low, such as estimates from RNIB that only 23% of working age individuals are in employment (Slade and Edwards, 2015). Consequently, this report is more heavily focused on the experiences of those who are in employment, or have been employed relatively recently. Along with RNIB we actively tried to recruit those who were not in employment, but were challenged by both lower engagement, and also higher attrition

amongst this group. A future piece of work may wish to focus directly on the experiences of those not in employment, including investigating alternative approaches to data collection which may be more inclusive of this group.

We also found it challenging to engage young people age 16-18 and parents who have experience of supporting a young person with vision impairment through post-school transitions. Due to the timeline set by the UK Community Renewal Fund, it was necessary to conduct the research during the busy summer term when young people are likely to be involved in exams and other assessments, which may account for lower uptake from both young people and those supporting them. It may also be that 16-18 year olds found it difficult to engage with the purpose of the research, supported by the fact that we had more interest from those aged 19-25 and in education or training.

Finally, whilst we benefited from speaking to a group of very engaged employers, all those who participated to this group had an active interest in supporting disability in the workplace. Further research will be beneficial to explore the views of those who have less experience of working alongside disabled workers.

4. Focus groups: findings

Group 1: In education or training

Group 1 consisted of two focus groups, the first had five participants aged 19-25, two of whom were at university (Caine and Becca), Libby who had very recently completed a Masters level qualification, Lottie who was at college, and Hanna who was studying A-levels and hoping to go to university next year. In the second focus group which included participants aged 16-18, Josh and Faith were doing A-levels and Alice was completing her GCSEs. The opinions and experiences shared in this section are taken from both focus groups combined.

Barriers

Negative attitudes

The negative attitudes of others were seen as a barrier for some of the young people:

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. (Hanna)

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. (Lottie)

I'm looking at the moment about getting a guide dog, and I would worry about that having an impact on my opportunities for employment and schools. (Faith)

Indeed, Hanna already had direct experience of discrimination and negative attitudes from her employers:

And they were aware of my disability and my sight loss, but they didn't want to make any adjustments at all and they just fired me. (Hanna)

However Libby was able to turn her experience of negative attitudes on its head:

And this 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! (Libby)

Lack of individualised careers support and information

The participants found that careers support and information was not specialised enough towards them and their needs:

There was not really any kind of advice for me that was directed towards me as, somebody with a visual impairment, it was very general, and it was very... I don't know what the word is but... like I didn't really know what to do with myself, I've never had any kind of interview, I didn't really know what to do with myself. (Becca)

...I also find that in our careers lessons because I go to grammar school it's more just talking about STEM subjects and then medicine and law and I don't want to do stem subjects medicine or law, so our careers lessons aren't even useful to me anyway, so I think that having a disability, on top of that, just makes the whole careers lessons completely useless for me. In school I wasn't honestly given very much support and things like that, and I don't even know whether it's he didn't look, or he didn't know where to look. (Faith)

In high school, I went to just mainstream schools and they didn't even like consider that my vision impairment might impact my ability to be employed or how I might have to adapt in some ways. (Caine)

With the just kind of general careers teacher I had a kind of mixed experience. For the most part she was very good, but like there was one instance where my mom talked about my statement and she kind of just looked at it as like a blanket disability almost and she recommended working in some kind of farm for people with learning disabilities and this didn't really apply to me, so I think she didn't have the specific visually impaired tailored advice. (Josh)

These participants had all received a mainstream education, but Lottie who had received a specialist VI education, still felt that careers support was not tailored to **her needs**:

We had the odd careers advisor but I just think some people would have been very disapproving of the job that you wanted to do, they were more interested in trying to find a job that would suit them, not you, if you get me. 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. (Lottie)

Enablers

Being given the same opportunities as others

Being afforded the same opportunities and being treated the same as everyone else was seen as important for the young people. They noted the importance of having agency in decisions regarding employment/education, and in feeling like they were contributing as others in the work place:

....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. (Libby)

You want them to make sure they know what you're able to do with your eyesight and they take that into account, but at the same time you don't want them 'parenting you' for lack of a better word. You don't want them to underestimate you because of your visual impairment, but you want to make sure they're giving you things that you can do, and that for the most part you're doing the same work as your colleagues and the people around you, even if you need a bit of extra support to do that. (Josh)

You know, with 21st century now, we don't need to be told what we can do and where we can go we're old enough to make up our own minds, we should be [able to] freely express our opinions and decide where we want to go. (Lottie)

I have a problem with timing, I think for me things might take me longer, they'd get done to the same standard, but it might take a bit longer than other people, so I think I'd like them to be mindful of that whenever they're setting deadlines and things. (Faith)

Becca identified that her vision impairment does impose limitations to some extent due to managing her eyestrain, nevertheless she hoped that an employer would recognise "obviously we can do these things, but it just takes longer."

Work experience

The participants recognised that work experience was valued by employers, as well as being an important opportunity for their own personal development:

I think that it's a big difference people don't really realise until they do work experience themselves, and I think that might be some of the reason why employers employ people that have had work experience because it teaches you skills like responsibility and being able to adapt and learn new things on the job, I think that skills that you learn that you wouldn't really learn in school. (Faith)

Libby appreciated the work experience associated with her university course as it gave her the opportunity to get used to teaching and think about what adaptations she might need to make:

It was a very positive experience. ... being able to do it on my computer like from comfort of my own home was at the time, I think a godsend because it was getting me used to teaching. And you know, a really good experience to see just how visual it is if I need to make any adaptations if I don't, that kind of thing. (Libby)

Josh also recognised that a lot of his peers had part-time jobs, however this experience of work was not open to him:

I know, like a lot of my friends have jobs in shops as well and stuff and I don't feel confident doing that, even like reading the cash register and stuff. I think yeah even kind of simple jobs, I think there's still a bit of an eyesight barrier. (Josh)

In relation to part-time jobs, Faith identified that a lot of the 'typical' part-time jobs for young people would not be relevant to her:

I think a lot of the jobs for people, our age are they expect all of us to have cars and to be able to move about and go places like delivery drivers, a big one for people that I know, and that's not something that's accessible to me because I'm not allowed to drive. (Faith)

She was however undertaking some part-time work at her local primary school. She recognised that she might have chosen this setting as opposed to others as it felt 'comfortable' to her:

And I think that's maybe why I'm so keen to stay in that kind of a setting because I know that it's comfortable and I know that a lot of the time, I think, problems with other workplaces can just be people being intimidated by people with visual impairments, not because we're scary or anything but because they just want to help, and they don't know how. (Faith)

Becca was aware that work experience would be useful to her, describing it as "something that will help me grow and get out into the world." However she had not been successful in arranging anything suitable, suggesting "it was really difficult to find something that I could actually do." She got in touch with RNIB, who she described as being a "good help" but "nothing could really be found anyway." She then spoke of her experiences with a scheme at her university to provide work experience and part-time employment opportunities. Unfortunately this scheme was unable to offer anything "suitable that somebody with a visual impairment could do." Becca continued:

I emailed somebody to see what would what kind of things, there were and either it was too much screen work, the hours were weird or where it would require a load of

focus and it was something [quite visual] and I'm like I wouldn't be able to see that. (Becca)

Becca was quite despondent:

It's annoying because, like naturally I'm like timid, you know not really go out kind of person and I really want to try and get into work experience and that I kind of thing, because I know that it will help me. There's just no opportunity right now, I'm not able to go out and do something. (Becca)

Caine was able to share that his work experience was useful to him to understand how his disabilities might impact upon him in the workplace. This goes to show that work experience provides all kinds of insights and is important for all young people, regardless of disability or not.

Specific tailored support

I think I just have a passion for making sure that everyone has the same, not the same, but equal opportunities in education and employment, and I think to have equal opportunities in employment, I think it needs to start in education, so when I'm older, I want to be a visual support teacher. (Alice)

Participants spoke about the specific support they had received in education, to allow them to access the curriculum, whether at school, college or university:

I thought uni was just incredible, with the support that they gave me. And I had access to pretty much

anything I needed and that was all predominantly orchestrated by [the university]. So I'm so grateful to them for the help that they gave me, you know I didn't I didn't end up using half of it, but I knew it was there in case I needed it. (Libby)

I have had really good support at school. Helped me with my career and what I want to do after education. (Alice)

Support did not necessarily come from teachers, Josh explained that his classroom assistant was a big support, especially due to the positive working relationship that they had built up over a number of years:

Also kinda, to a lesser extent, my normal classroom assistant I've known her for a long time so it's even though she isn't you know from a careers background having someone who knows you and knows your needs very well is always useful, like she's pointed out different schemes and stuff that have been of use to me. (Josh)

Josh also spoke of the specific transition support that he was receiving:

And then, for this year and next year the Education Authority provides a transition officer to help people move into university. So you can use that one or this local charity. At the minute I'm working with one of them, so just kind of guiding you through things like Disabled Students Allowance and also contacting universities or potential employers

or whatever and kind of sorting out with them say if you need specific accommodation, or what kind of rights and special facilities you're entitled to. (Josh)

Josh went on to describe how we had received specific VI guidance and support from organisations such as Look UK, Blind Ambition and RNIB, with school providing the more generic support:

I didn't get the specific tailored advice from school, but I was able to kind of get the general advice from school and get the specific visually impaired stuff from elsewhere. (Josh)

Caine made the point that young people need to be in a position, both emotionally and educationally to take on board the support and advice offered:

There were a few talks I remember back before the dark times of Covid, with the RNIB. But I was so young at the time I was just kind of like "errr a job, what, I'm only in like GCSE or I'm only in like third year I don't need to think about that you know." Which I suppose is on me, and I wasn't quite as organised as everyone else here, it seems. I wasn't quite as mature. (Caine)

Interventions

Successful interventions

Work experience support

As mentioned above, work experience was identified as a key enabler for the young people and a number of them identified specific interventions around

work experience which they viewed as successful.

Lottie spoke of her guided work experience support from a specialist charity, which was invaluable to her:

I have been feeling happy working in the cafe and it has given me a good sense of independence. I'm not doing everything in the cafe from cooking or anything like that, but I'm doing quite a lot and you know what that's making me happy because, at least, like they respect me and respect the fact I want to help. (Lottie)

As well as her current placement in a café, Lottie had also previously had a placement in a customer facing role. In her placements Lottie was buddied with a member of staff who was on hand to give guidance. Someone from the specialist organisation also supported Lottie on the day of her interview. Mobility support was also integral to the placements. These things all came together to ensure that Lottie had a successful work experience placement.

Hanna had received work experience support from a further specialist organisation. The pattern of involvement was that individuals would begin on their training scheme by attending activities, and then as their confidence and experience grew, they would then volunteer and gain experience facilitating sessions. As Hanna commented this experience, "helped me to be able to do [work] experience in other areas."

Caine explained how work experience and employability skills were embedded in his university course:

The history department, at [City] university are very good in terms of employability because a section of our second year course, a core module, is dedicated to helping you think about your employability and also getting in touch with the careers department and various organizations... (Caine)

Suggestions for interventions

Opportunities to connect with others with vision impairment

The young people suggested that they would like to be in contact with others with vision impairment. Josh and Faith identified that there used to be opportunities to meet others, but none are available at the 'young adult' stage:

I've noticed that as well it's good up until you like 12, 14 and then it's good again once you can reach adulthood, maybe this gap in the middle and yeah I think it would be good, you know it's always useful to know other people in same position. They've probably picked up on things you haven't, you probably picked up on things they haven't. You could share stuff that way. (Josh)

I think it would also work as like a befriending opportunity like I think that there's so many opportunities for younger people through different charities and I think that there's just a gap in in that demographic of people our age, say 15 – 18 I think it starts from really young and then it goes to older people, but I think is

more things that are handier to us like careers opportunities, where we can connect on things like that will be useful. (Faith)

Faith also suggested that this may take the form of a peer-to-peer mentoring service:

Some sort of mentoring service that we feel comfortable asking questions about things like that which doesn't really come from a professional, because I think whenever it's more unprofessional I think it feels more comfortable people our age to talk about things like that, because we don't feel as unknowledgeable or something. (Faith)

VI careers advice in school for those within a mainstream setting

Leading on from the comments regarding in school careers support for individuals with vision impairment, Faith and Josh had a conversation surrounding the benefits of VI careers advice in school for those within a mainstream setting:

I think school is the best place to give anybody young knowledge, because they're already there, they're already sitting in the classroom, so you may as well give him that careers information while they're all in one place, and if you've got a school that has more than one visually impaired child, get them all together and give them all this information at once, like you may as well, because they do in mainstream schools so why not give it to those

with visual impairments, too, because then we're not going to feel left out, we're not going to have to go searching for it. We don't feel like we're seeking this like extra support because it's just given to us, if you know what I mean. (Faith)

The schools are the gateway to it at the bare minimum, even if they went to every school and said look here's 10 leaflets very clearly, stating exactly what the RNIB offer when it comes to career support, give that to the school and the school can distribute it to any of its students that need it. (Josh)

I don't know if, like you're more likely to listen, if you're sitting in school than if you go and search for it after because it's also intimidating like you have to go make the effort, whereas if you're just given it in school, you'd know more so you wouldn't have to go searching in the future. (Faith)

Group 2: Education professionals

In this group we spoke to eight education professionals with varying roles providing educational support to children and young people with vision impairment. The representatives included QTVIs, teachers/leaders in specialist schools, careers advisors, a FE learning support officer and a children and young people's officer working at a vision impairment charity.

Barriers

Lack of knowledge and understanding

A lack of understanding and knowledge around vision impairment across society was identified as a barrier to successful employment experiences:

And I would say, maybe just the lack of understanding, I obviously work in a [specialist] school, I have that understanding, but I wouldn't say I have it in a vast vast amount and I think, maybe there's a nervousness if you see that on an application "ooh they're visually impaired", or if they're asking for their application form to be in font whatever... (Kirsty)

Kirsty added, "there's just that nervousness I think that's a major barrier, maybe just that misunderstanding a misinterpretation of what it actually means to be visually impaired."

Peter gave examples of the thoughts that would be going through an employer's head, which would serve as a barrier to employer, "are they going to be a danger to themselves, will they be a danger to other colleagues, will I end up in some tribunal in court for health and safety?"

Peter also added that a lack of understanding and knowledge can give rise to fear:

I remember some research from the RNIB that vision impairment is actually one of the disabilities

that people fear the most, losing your vision, then that moves on to a sort of negative thing. You'll see it with parents with children in the early years, as a QTVI spending a lot of time working with the parents, showing them what their child can do, because they start from the premise that can't do anything. (Peter)

Enablers

Holistic transition services

Having a holistic approach to transition services which puts the young person at the centre of the process was seen as an enabler to employment/ training success:

I suppose, the first thing is the young person from transition at 14, when you begin to look at leaving school, that the young person is listened to, about what their desires, what their expectations are, and what they think that they can achieve. (Peter)

I think it takes a whole team of encouragement – parents, siblings, youth workers, education. Right across the board to encourage our young people. (Sue)

The education professionals noted that a focus of this transition service should include supporting young people to have the necessary skills to go out into the world and advocate for themselves and their needs:

By the time you're leaving school you're equipped with an understanding of the technology

you're using, how to use it, and an understanding of what you need to ask for, that you have developed self-advocacy to get your learning to access. Not saying that they desperately need specialised equipment, but developing with young people as they prepare in the transition years to leave school, that they've become really sort of able to access because they've been shown what they need to develop and access for themselves. It becomes their ownership that they have developed for themselves. (Peter)

You know it's so important. I find myself saying repeatedly in [school] that the single most important thing that I have to do is to set them off to leave us successfully, what they do after they leave us is everything. (Maggie)

However as Lisa noted, "students aren't aware that there is processes there to help them":

We would have some students say no, and I'm fine on my own, I had that at school, I don't want it anymore and you're trying to say no, this is your right, this is what is going to help support you, it's not a negative thing, it's a positive thing to help and support you develop, and to get security of a good job that you're going to continue in and progress in. So some students sometimes are a wee bit lax in that or they feel "I don't want to rock the boat anymore, I want to just be as same as all my classmates" and that's not always the right thing for them, and they need that wee bit of support helps definitely. (Lisa)

Having families involved in the transition was viewed as important for the young person's success:

But if they don't have that advocate in their corner at 18 years of age or 16 in some cases obviously, then they will get left behind, and I will see them if they're lucky they're getting a job and not there's anything wrong with getting a job in Spar or somewhere like that, but instead of stocking shelves, they could actually be holding down a very, very good career. (Chris)

Kirsty explained that one way in which a holistic approach was developed at her school was through the creation of specific role, that she undertook, that of an in-school transitions officer:

A big part of my role is just is that bridge between school and the parents and school and the further education and helping to reassure parents actually you know when they leave there's so much more available it's not just they're going to sit in their room and play video games. (Kirsty)

This specific role will be discussed further in the section on successful interventions.

Interventions

Successful interventions

Transitions officer

As mentioned above, Kirsty's role as an in-school transition officer was seen as a successful intervention. She was able to provide, labour intensive, bespoke transitions guidance to young people:

...having that person, having that link in school to really talk to students about what is it **you** want to do, what are your aspirations for the future, then how can we make that happen is huge. (Kirsty)

One of the reasons, why Kirsty's role was created was just because it is genuinely a very time consuming process that Kirsty engages in with parents and other organisations. (Maggie)

...somebody wants to do car mechanics and next year somebody might want to do photography or somebody but might want to do health and social care so you know everything's bespoke so it's very, very labour intensive. (Maggie)

Although recognising that transitions officers from the Education Authority exist to perform a similar role to Kirsty, due to high caseloads that do not have time to dedicate to individual students, furthermore they are often not specialised in sensory loss (Maggie). It meant that Kirsty could more easily liaise with parents:

Parents are incredibly anxious, what is going to happen when they leave the school. I felt very passionately about that, and I was like okay well, what happens after, what are we doing, how are we supporting their transition. (Kirsty)

Kirsty was able to build the necessary relationships with parents, colleges, universities and employers, to ensure:

...everything's bespoke, that's one thing I would say, for every child, everything is bespoke because what suits one child, may have no relationship to what the next child is like. (Maggie)

RNIB Trainee Grade Scheme

Another successful intervention, as recalled by Sue, was RNIB's Trainee Grade Scheme:

There was a year's post for a young person paid, and they came on for that year and worked alongside. Given tasks like events planning, hosting meetings, the role was wide and varied. (Sue)

The scheme "gave confidence to young people" and provided them with opportunities to advocate from themselves. The young people were working with other young people with vision impairment which "you know again role models come into this" (Sue).

Sue concluded:

It was a brilliant experience, and we had success, we had 5 over the five years of the project and each of them were then in employment, you know their thereafter... ..maybe it's you know it's another option, I know there's probably 101 things out there, but I just wanted to share that one particular one that I was involved in. (Sue)

Suggestions for interventions

Peer mentoring and role models,

A peer mentoring/ role model scheme was suggested as a potential intervention:

Some of our young people who have come through your service and who are now in employment that being architecture, a tutor of engineering, photography, working for the civil service, rehab worker. It is so wide and varied, they are amazing role models for younger ones coming up, that's something I think that could be looked at, workshops, you know for role models and talking about their career and the ups and downs of that. (Sue)

Debra concurred with Sue:

From a career perspective I think Sue's point about role models is very, very important because, once you can be speaking with a young person I think, to hear someone who has gone through that journey and has experienced and has been successful, is particularly important because it's difficult, in our role to maybe bring that to life or encourage it properly, because sometimes things can be viewed through what's not possible or a more constrained viewpoint. I think the role model idea would be very, very beneficial very helpful. (Debra)

Lisa provided an example of peer mentoring that already existed in her college:

We have a support worker that works with us, who is visually impaired and she is working with the student who is visually impaired. It's mentoring, supposed to be for the study skills side of things, will help the time management, but he has learned so much from her in her own independent life skills as well, so it, you know it really does work. (Lisa)

However such support was an ad hoc arrangement and was not part of a wider intervention.

Raising awareness of Access to Work

Raising awareness of what Access to Work is, how it can be used and applied for was suggested as a possible intervention:

[Raising awareness of Access to Work] is something that should be I think developed further, obviously it'll depend on Government funding or whatever, but I think a lot more people should be aware of it, because I've had quite a few people [with disabilities] who didn't know about it. (Lisa)

I do think there's a huge gap for young people, not being aware of Access to Work and have they that understanding of what Access to Work can do within the workplace? I think it would really change their attitude to work and what they could go on and do... .. It's there to suit your needs, your individual

needs, so there's a big gap there for young people. Young people just aren't getting that information. If they don't have that information, parents aren't getting that information. (Sue)

Developing connections between schools and the careers service

Participants spoke of a disconnection between schools and the careers service and the need to establish a closer link:

I think one of the things that you'd be good to see developing is a closer link between the careers advisors in Year 10, 11, 12 and QTVIs who visit the pupils in the schools, because sometimes it can be very ad hoc for the careers advisor and teacher to have a conversation about the pupil. If they have a statement, maybe an annual review, transition review, but maybe don't see more than twice a year, once a year, there isn't actually any input unless you've got a school who's very proactive and says to the career advisor, oh by the way Johnny's got a visual impairment, you might need to consider that. (Peter)

Debra, who was a careers guidance officer added, "I personally think that is a very, very valid point, because I think there is disconnect, and I think it's very difficult."

It was also noted that there is a need for non-VI specialists to develop their practice:

So, whilst I have no specialist

knowledge, I think it's important that we're all you know, prepared to contribute and find out more. About support services that are available and from what from our perspective of what potentially you know, should be available to help people make the transition as best they can. (Debra)

Debra also added:

Chris made an important point about realistic goals and expectations, and I think that's very important, but I think there's also a lack of understanding in terms of the range of career possibilities that are possible for people with sight loss and visual impairment, I think, colleagues in the career service probably would benefit from knowing about... (Debra)

She went on to add:

...the more we work together and the more we have better insight and resources and information to help us make a better support network for the young person or indeed the adult with a visual impairment, I think that would be very welcome and very necessary, because a lot of people do fall out of the system and they're not aware of the support that may be available to them. (Debra)

Group 3: Parents

In this focus group we spoke with three parents, all mothers, who provided insight into their experiences as a parent supporting

their older teenage child with transition from school into college and university, and thinking of next steps into employment.

This group reinforced the different experiences of those with vision impairment with Amanda's son and Denise's daughter having been born with their eye condition and having received support from RNIB, education services, and other charities and support groups since birth, whereas Marie's son's vision impairment and subsequent diagnosis was only 3 years ago, as a teenager.

Barriers

Negative attitudes

There was an awareness amongst the mothers that there exists within society negative attitudes and that this creates challenges for those with vision impairment:

...prejudice, there is probably a wee bit of prejudice if you have a disability, if you have visual impairment, then you're not going to be able to do this job, couldn't do this job because of your visual impairment and it would be nice to change that attitude... (Amanda)

...prejudice, unfortunately it's alive and kicking. You've got the assumptions of people what you can and can't do, also, I think, to a certain extent, and the various occasions you know "oh you're too slow I'll do it for you". You feel like you're being hurried because you're taking your time to do it. I think patience is a problem with some

people... (Denise)

However, on the flipside, Amanda recognised that things are changing and society in general is becoming more accepting of those with disabilities, nevertheless there is a way to go and it is an ongoing task to ensure equity for all:

I do think in the wider society it is changing, because we can see that we are a more inclusive society than we were but it's a work in progress isn't it (Amanda)

Parents however felt that they had to be realistic and that their child would always face barriers to some extent as a result of their vision impairment, as Marie commented:

I don't think there's going to be a magic wand that's going to create the environment where he can work without having to, overcome a number of personal and physical hurdles to achieve that. (Marie)

Lack of understanding

Participants felt that these barriers were often built from a lack of understanding or knowledge, fears about the unknown and not usually a blatant disregard for the individual's need, as Denise commented in relation to her daughter becoming a cane user, "There's no perception of... ..it's just that ignorance, you know that that lack of knowledge." Denise recognised that it was lack of education that created this barrier:

I only know about visual impairment, because of my daughter, if she didn't have that, I would be ignorant, so I think you know it would be nice if there was more education on it and information available for people. (Denise)

Nevertheless, there needs to be a recognition of what an individual can do as Denise suggested and not to make assumptions about an individual's capabilities:

I would like my daughter to be given a chance to show what she can do, and not be written off because of any assumptions that will be made you know. I would like people to be tolerant and accept that her way of doing things, maybe different to other people. I would like people to make allowances, perhaps if she's slightly slow at doing something it doesn't reflect on her competence or her brain power, you know takes a bit longer to do something so it's really tolerance and acceptance that I would like to see more of. (Denise)

Linked to this was the notion of full participation and for individuals to reach their full potential:

It's removing the physical and hidden barriers to fully participate in and, at the moment, my son is managing well, but he has a degenerative condition which can deteriorate, very quickly, we don't know what could it may not degenerate for another 10 years and but there are the barriers there. In terms of positive outcomes, I would just want him to achieve his

potential and be happy in whatever he can do, but be supported to get there. (Marie)

Amanda however also recognised that this was important for all three of her children, not only her son with a vision impairment, “I want them all to be in a job that they’re fulfilled in.”

Marie also recognised the attitudinal barriers that a person might have within themselves which may prevent full access to education or employment opportunities. Marie’s son had negative experiences of in-class support from a teaching assistant, which had left him reluctant to engage longer term with such support.

Lack of VI aware careers guidance

Parents identified a lack of tailored careers guidance which takes into consideration the specific needs of the young person as a significant barrier:

Daughter went to a mainstream school, she had the teaching assistant, support like that, but there was no, she didn’t get any extra support for careers development, you know all the people that were brought in to speak, was the classic you know, doctors, the army. Things she couldn’t do. There was never a nod to other careers for people who couldn’t be active, you know which I was a bit annoyed about, but I suppose if you go to mainstream school and there’s maybe one student there that’s visually impaired, but there wasn’t any special support, nobody was

brought in to help. (Denise)

Well, I think yeah I would agree with Denise, I think school, because I suppose it is low prevalence, because there’s only one or two children in the school, there’s not a lot of specific careers advice around VI. (Amanda)

Denise also explained about a situation where the mainstream careers advisor was insisting that her daughter study seven or eight subjects, yet she wanted to study fewer so that she could manage her timetable. It was a very upsetting situation for daughter, and it was only when Denise went in “all pistol totting mama” that things changed:

It was all you know, you can’t do only two, you can’t go to university with two, they hadn’t any concept of part time study which annoyed me. It was only because [of occupation] I knew that you can study part time. But if it wasn’t for that and other contacts, we would have been in total despair, oh what are we going to do, we only have so many O levels, sorry I’m in old money here, GCSEs. (Denise)

Enablers

Transition support

Comprehensive, person specific transition support was identified as the key enabler to future employer/education/training success. Marie spoke about the importance of recognising the individual at the centre of the support, in particular noting the fact that it is common for children and young people with vision impairment to have more than one diagnosis of SEND:

...acknowledge that it might not be just one disability that a child is experiencing, for her [son's] situation he has an additional diagnosis, as well as a visual impairment... ...so there's more kind of complex needs there that need to be acknowledged within services and transitions. (Marie)

Marie also highlighted the importance of having professionals, family members and the young person all involved in the process. This was made more evident for Marie as her son received his diagnosis, as a teenager, at the height of the Covid pandemic. Due to restrictions she was unable to attend appointments with her son, which she commented, "would have been a great opportunity for him at that point to make connections with the statutory and voluntary services and meet people in person." However her son was unwilling or unable to make these connections and Marie felt that this was a missed opportunity:

I wasn't allowed into the room because of Covid, so he'd gone in, somebody who doesn't take help

or support at all, he didn't ask any questions, told them he'd see them next year. He went and that was our only opportunity to make those kind of connections with the support services that would be helping him now in his transition. (Marie).

Although restrictions because of Covid have now eased, it serves as a reminder that building connections between individuals and their families, and health, education and social care providers is paramount, as Marie went on to explain:

...we couldn't develop relationships, with anybody, with any of the organisations, we had a very poor experience with the health service, we were left high and dry. (Marie)

Amanda highlighted that transition is not a one-off process, "it takes years of preparation" (Amanda). It is not only that things take time but crucial are the relationships build up over a number of years:

But you need for transition somebody, he's an advocate for himself in many ways, and he has learnt this over the last 10 years but he still needs somebody to be that liaison for him. To be the advocate. To find out those details like where does he eat his tea, you know how far is it, how many steps are there, are the steps easily seen that you know all those basic things that he will need to get around. He will need the Guide Dogs to help him find the route when he's there. And I was worried if it's very hilly, I prefer the flat for him, and where's the crossing

points, where's Tesco's. That's an awful lot of work, you know it takes a lot of time. (Amanda)

In contrast to Amanda, Marie and her son had received hardly any transition support. Her son who was diagnosed as a teenager was unable to access support due to his age:

The reason why I talked about our unplanned transition is, like Amanda, we had been referred to the transition officer in [specialist organisation] and a week later, we couldn't access the service anymore, because we had transitioned. So that service wasn't available to [son] because he had made that transition. (Marie)

Marie continued:

...we don't know the system, we're navigating the system on our own and at the same time trying to let [son] enjoy his time in college without feeling different. (Marie)

However fortunately for Marie and her son the situation has turned out positively:

So we just moved without any kind of preparation or any kind of support and [son] found a kind of a new freedom when he did that, because he no longer had a classroom assistant. He had no-one pointing out his additional needs, he could work on computers. He didn't need enlargements. So it's taken us some time for us to get him to take the support that's available to him in college. (Marie)

Advocate

The idea of an advocate, a knowledgeable and experienced professional to smooth through the process was also identified as making the process easier:

The lady [at specialist organisation] has been fantastic. I know we were very lucky to get her through the Education Authority, but I know that's not the case for all children of his age transition, it's not available to everybody, we've been lucky. But I can see when he transitions into work, he is going to need that for work as well, he needs somebody to go to the workplaces to say what do you provide for a visual impairment staff member and if they don't know, then they can be told by where you need the screen to need this you'll need that, so I think manpower or woman power is necessary. (Amanda)

What Amanda described as I think something that's really important for children with visual impairment and young people as they transition that there's somebody holding their hand metaphorically and taking them on that journey. (Denise)

Amanda however recognised the importance of not doing too much for the young person, but supporting and guiding them through the process:

It does no harm to have someone there as an advocate as well at times, you know it's just getting that balance right when they're not adults isn't it, you know you want someone there to be eyes,

metaphorically, and saying things that they may forget to say. You want them to have that ownership of their pathway, like adults have. (Amanda)

Interventions

Successful interventions

Skills for independent living courses

Amanda's son had taken part in some skills for independent living and transition courses, both residential and short courses. These courses had been provided by Angel Eyes and RNIB. Amanda and her son had found them very beneficial:

They've been fantastic, he did a wee placement in the middle of Northern Ireland, he went for a weekend and it was all very much skills for transition, you know they have programs, and RNIB they have programs. (Amanda)

Amanda noted that such support is not available through the Education Authority and has to come through charitable organisations, which often due to heavy caseloads meant that experiences were variable.

Suggestions for interventions

Awareness raising of vision impairment

Participants were keen to suggest that further interventions, in a specific channelled way, to raise the awareness and visibility of vision impairment was important, particularly when comparing vision impairment with other groups. Participants acknowledged the good work done by other disability interest groups, in particular those relating to autism, in

raising awareness within the general public of specific disabilities:

...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 VI is more difficult because there's less of us, but everybody knows what autism is now, when I started teaching nobody knew, 30 years ago, it was very unknown. (Amanda)

Marie also commented:

That there isn't this visibility, you know, so it might be that that organisations, need to be more active in their outreach and encouragement in terms of work placement opportunities, in the same way as they have, as you said, with ASD. (Marie)

Participants suggested that interventions in this area may include producing documentaries/ films that include people with vision impairment in a range of employment positions, and increased visibility of people with vision impairment on TV and social media 'getting on with life':

Yeah that's the thing, you hit the nail on the head there, where are the high profile people with visual impairments? (Amanda)

I think perhaps we need more adverts, documentaries and things... ...social media things like that we need, maybe more high profile ambassadors, Paralympics, get people going around schools, giving talks. (Denise)

Bank of case studies

One suggestion for a possible intervention came from Amanda where she suggested that there could be a selection of different case studies exploring the different careers people with vision impairment might have, any support they might use, and the things that they did to get to where they are:

So even if there's a wee bank, if there was a program, if there was a bank of people with visual impairment in employment, if there was a wee video 10 minutes, of what they were doing. (Amanda)

Peer mentoring

For Marie some sort of peer mentoring support would be a good future intervention, allowing young people with vision impairment to meet and support each other. She was however aware that even if available young people might not want to take up this offer of support:

I think that mentoring ideas and peer support would be definitely fantastic, but I will have to get the horse to the water! [laughs] (Marie)

Opportunities for young people to be heard

The participants noted how important they felt it was to be heard in a formal context, and they were appreciative

of activities such as the focus group to share their opinions and experiences. Marie suggested that such opportunities be afforded to young people as well:

... it's getting young people, giving them their voice and getting them a seat at the table with decision makers. Government are good at listening to young people they're less good at ensuring young people with disabilities, their views are sought, because they're more challenging to get, and I'm sure VI children may be wee bit more challenging because there are fewer of them, but to ensure they have a seat at the table, somewhere for them to express their views. (Marie)

Policies and legislation

Amanda took the suggestion of opportunities to be heard one stage further and suggested that these voices need to be formally located within legislation and official policies:

...it's twofold I think, ambassadors and policies and legislation and action plans, because it has to be written down as well, work places have to see what's involved, everything's policy driven now, all workplaces, all schools, you know if it's in a policy, it has to be a tier two and that gives a security name for our children going into the workplace, because they know there's a policy to support a person with VI, and this workplace has to adhere to that. (Amanda)

Amanda also linked this to issues in relation to autism, where it appears that there are greater success and there are greater levels of accountability:

And everybody knows how to accommodate a person with autism and some do it better than others, but there is an understanding there's a knowledge and there's a feeling of accountability. Stores are trying to accommodate and workplaces are trying, and there's legislation in place. Even in Northern Ireland, it was quite recent, at Stormont they had their bill; so I suppose all that legislation just supporting the rights of people with VI. (Amanda)

Amanda also circled round to the first point regarding awareness raising, reflecting as to which comes first, bottom-up awareness raising, or top-down legislation. Ultimately, it may be both simultaneously.

Group 4: Not in employment

Six people with vision impairment who were currently not in employment took part in a focus group. All participants had previously been in employment but due to changes in their vision or specific life events e.g. caring responsibilities, mental health crisis, were currently unemployed. Tammy was currently on a vocational college course with a day's work experience each week.

Barriers

Vision impairment

For participants in this group issues their vision impairment was a barrier

to them accessing employment:

I haven't worked for about 8 years basically because of my eyesight. I can't go back and do the job I done. (Juliet)

Still haven't accepted it.. ...not coping with this more sight loss. Yeah I haven't accepted it. Haven't worked from 2019, worked all my life... (Anne)

I have RP, retinitis pigmentosa. I've been diagnosed about 9 years. I haven't worked full time since 2013. (Matthew)

For Juliet as well, it was not just her vision impairment per se but also associated eye strain and migraines which were a barrier to employment:

...I became really ill and my eyesight became worse so and some days I don't have hardly anything, some days it is a little better, and because I also have a type of migraine where you lose the sight in your eye. (Juliet)

Discriminatory employers and lack of reasonable adjustments

Participants had negative experiences in trying to get employment or whilst in employment, from employers that they felt to be discriminatory:

I've applied for hundreds of jobs over the years and I've just found the whole experience to be so stressful, full of discrimination and employers being unhelpful at every turn. (Alison)

I was actually able to bring [employers] to the Equality Commission, because they failed to provide reasonable adjustments. (Anne)

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 and the only adjustment they needed to make was a CD of software, which the Government obviously paid for. (Juliet)

Juliet described the stress that she felt dealing with these kind of situations, "That's the kind of thing you're up against, and it does get you down." Tammy described the release she felt when she decided to step away from a negative working environment:

...I just said no, I'd go with an agreement and just leave, and close that door and the stress that you felt being lifted off your shoulders, at that minute that you made that decision, just to part ways, it was unbelievable and so much more relaxed. (Tammy)

Alison took this one stage further, and having described her "horrendous experience[s]" of employment, with having to leave her last job in 2014 "because my boss bullied me", she had explained that she had given up trying to find work and was happy entertaining herself in other ways, leading her to comment:

...in the last couple of years I've had to come to terms with the idea that we're not on benefits, were on compensation, for the fact that we are in this situation and that the world of employment is just not set up in our favour at all. (Alison)

Lack of understanding and awareness of disability was identified as one of the reasons why employers did not put reasonable adjustments in place:

...I think its lack of knowledge and understanding of all these disabilities and people's conditions, I really do. (Anne)

It's really down to ignorance and education, and that's obviously where a lot of ignorance comes from is lack of education. (Juliet)

Employers being unwilling to pay for the associated costs of reasonable adjustments was another barrier:

...the employer doesn't want to foot the extra costs of what you might need. (Alison)

However, experiences were not all negative and Tammy shared how the positive mind-set of an employer can change things around:

[Work experience colleague] seems very laid back, down to earth, he's very interested in knowing different things about my eyes, whereas my last employer were just making excuses after excuses after excuses for over four years, why they couldn't get me in. It was just ridiculous what way my past employer was about visual

impairment, whereas now the [work experience colleague] seems to really want to help. And I think that's made it a lot easier for me to want to apply for a course like that, because I've found somebody that really wants to help. (Tammy)

Lastly, Anne raised the point that regardless of vision impairment or not, we need to be mindful of the economic situation we are living in and this too can create barriers in finding accessible employment.

Low self-confidence

Participants also spoke about their individual low levels of self-confidence which they felt to be barriers in asking for support, and disclosing their vision impairment to employers:

I'm very reluctant to reveal my impairment. I'm still very vain, I'll not use magnifiers out. I'm trying starting to... ..I just haven't accepted it's been coming 10 years in June. (Anne)

Well, the barriers that I have in my head all of the time, which I shouldn't have, when I apply for the job, if I get an interview, and I try to tell them that I have a sight problem... ..It's declaring what's wrong, but then, if there's reasonable adjustments... (Joyce)

This is the first job that I've applied for in 10, 15 years. I'm a bit nervous about telling them about my eye condition. (Matthew)

Matthew also raised the important point that it is not only employers that may need to be aware of your vision impairment but colleagues too:

It's not just the employers but your co-workers as well. Some people might never have worked with somebody with an impairment. (Matthew)

Anne explained that she had received counselling to help her come to terms with her vision impairment, however she shared "[I] probably need more."

Alison also shared how a sense of confidence in herself and with her vision impairment, developed whilst at school, did not translate to real life experiences:

...I did really well at school and at university and was always told throughout my schooling, especially at the school for the blind, that if you try your best you can do anything you want to do, and that was a really good way to give us confidence and builds up and get us out there, unfortunately I didn't find that the real world was anything like that. (Alison)

Enablers

Knowledgeable and supportive professionals

Knowledgeable and supportive professionals were viewed as an enabler to successful experiences:

I was paid off in 2013 and I went to RNIB for help with benefits and I received an excellent service from one of the employees from RNIB and I would strongly recommend anyone with problems with their benefits to contact them. (Matthew)

The only other thing that I had to say was, RNIB sensory support team have been fab with me and then were in contact with me like and say 24 hours of me going to the eye casualty and inside a month of going to the eye casualty I was registered visually impaired and now I have my guide dog and we were matched up last September and we are just coming from our first holiday when I never even wanted to go out the door hardly. (Tammy)

I went to the appointment, done whatever I had to do, answered the questions, told him about my sight, about my health conditions. He told me something I didn't know anything about, it was called reasonable adjustments. And there's no reason why you can't work, they can make reasonable adjustments and he told me to contact Access to Work. (Joyce)

Alison added to this, suggesting that whilst knowledgeable and supportive professionals may be useful, employers do not necessarily listen to this expert advice:

I've had some employment support, both from the RNIB and from [specialist organisation], and I've had experience with contacting Disability Action, looking for some help and support as well, but what we tend to find is that none of these people actually really carry any authority or have any teeth to them, I suppose, as a way of putting it, and so you know they can come in and they can say X, Y and Z and not be listened to either. (Alison)

Additionally, whilst recognising the challenges of Covid, participants did suggest support from professionals is better received face-to-face:

Unfortunately with Covid and stuff and even before Covid and I think with funding and stuff I think some of the more face to face thing had been kind of pulled from the RNIB. I know the last time I had to do another form and I had to speak to somebody in London for the RNIB, there wasn't anybody in Belfast, face-to-face that could help me with that. (Juliet)

RNIB need to get back doing face to face in their branches. I'm just about to start a computer course on Thursday... ..I think I'd learn better if I was in their office on a bigger computer. (Matthew)

Interventions

Successful interventions

Eye Work Too

RNIB's Eye Work Too programme was identified as a successful intervention to support people with vision impairment into employment. Tammy had undertaken the technology element of the programme, and Matthew was about to start. Juliet commented how the programme had developed and changed for the better over the years:

I was on the Eye Work Too programme years ago. It wasn't very broad back then, you got a computer qualification and you got to speak to a career's person and that would be basically it, whereas now it's completely different, because obviously you have your own employment officer and then you have your IT person where you're able to work on your CV and your interview things, you're also able to ascertain your areas of interest and where you could possibly go, not only for employment, but voluntary. (Juliet)

Alison recognised the positives related to such an intervention:

I've seen some of the adverts for the Eye Work programs or whatever they're called these days, and you know they offer like a 12 week placement and those are good for people who have no work experience, maybe, and need to find their feet, but when you have more experience and you're further down the line, you actually want to get

something more meaningful from them. They're kind of doing the right things, but I think they just need to do more of it. (Alison)

RNIB Trainee Grade Scheme

Alison identified RNIB's Trainee Grade scheme as a successful intervention, albeit one that offered a low salary:

I had a job, through the RNIB's Trainee Grade Scheme, about 10 years ago, and whilst that was really good and you're obviously in a great place to be employed by an employer who supports blind and partially sighted people, and it was a 50 week placement and the pay was awful. A lot less than what I'd been getting in any other job. (Alison)

Suggestions for interventions

Awareness raising

Several participants noted that it was important to find mechanisms for raising awareness of vision impairment across society:

Employers are just human beings, and a lot of them will never have met somebody visually impaired, and I suppose if someone is different in some way, shape or form and that you've never come in contact with, you don't necessarily know their barriers or where the issue are, or what they can actually bring to you and I guess that's just where the problem is. I don't have the answer how it can actually be helped or fixed or whatever, and I think you know, as I said before, I think education. (Juliet)

Joyce suggested more visibility on television might be a good starting point:

I think what we need to do is more advertising what there is out there, maybe on the TV, circulars whatever, but it should be a lot more information. (Joyce)

Alison too suggested greater visibility in the media:

I mean it's such a huge huge thing isn't it, but it comes down to social awareness and, but there was always a saying wasn't there "you can't be what you can't see" so if there's not a representation of visually impaired people doing every day jobs in programs and soap operas, you know we don't all have to be climbing mountains and doing amazing things and all super blind people, but just doing regular jobs in the backgrounds. It might help sink into the consciousness of the general public that oh yeah blind people could do that. (Alison)

She was however keen to reiterate that the way in which people with vision impairment are portrayed is important:

We don't want the pity adverts, please give money to the poor blind people for the RNIB, we want the more empowering stuff. (Alison)

Finally, Alison also suggested that one way that RNIB might promote greater visibility is by actually leading more from the front and employing more people with vision impairment:

I think the RNIB actually needs to be leading the way and employ a lot more visually impaired people than they already do. (Alison)

Group 5: In employment

We conducted two focus groups with people in employment. There were fourteen participants in total. The first focus group had nine participants, with five in the second focus group. Participants came from a range of backgrounds and were employed in various fields including nursing, retail, Civil Service, and the charity sector. The majority had been in employment since leaving education. One participant was on long-term sick leave but was hoping to return to work in the next month or so.

Barriers

Low self-confidence

Low self-confidence was identified as a barrier, not necessarily for getting into employment but for career progression:

I don't know, I'm just very lucky in the position I'm in, I wish I had come off checkouts years ago, I held myself back and used the disability in place of it. Oh I couldn't do that because of eye sight. I think I hold myself back and you need to be thick skinned in society to go out there and take the balls and go "I've got a disability." (Aisling)

And I agree with Aisling that I don't do things because of fear of what people will say because I find in my job, they would normally say to me about my disability first, and about my aptitude second. So if I made a mistake they would go oh that's the blind nurse making a mistake, it's not a nurse making a mistake, that is why I am a wee bit reticent about doing any other jobs, so I just like to stay in my own wee place. (Jill)

Alternatively Michael spoke about how being self-confident and having the necessary skills was a key enabler to successful employment:

You know, going into employment, there is an element of self-advocacy, knowing again from experience or previous experience what works for yourself and being able to convey that you know that's relevant to the job... ..being able to have the confidence to convey that, in a way that the employer can understand and actually get to grips with. (Michael)

Discriminatory employers and lack of reasonable adjustments

Participants were able to provide examples of where employers acted in a discriminatory manner:

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! (Jill)

I was at a meeting and it was a PowerPoint and I said I'm not gonna be able to read this on the screen there's any chance of a handout. Look I'm visually impaired, there's no chance of reading that, and she said 'do you want me to see if there's anyone here who can sign for you?' [Laughter]. (Bruce)

I was in the meeting asking for reasonable adjustments regarding a camera, and I also had Access to Work fighting my corner with me. And my area manager turned around and said I don't want to have to invest money and do these reasonable adjustments for it not to work... (Ameera)

Other participants noted that employers would try and suggest adjustments that were not applicable to the individual, rather than seeking to work with them to identify potential adjustments:

In my job they're like, oh we will get you this, we'll get you that. How would you know what I need? What are you going to chase up for me when you don't even know my eyesight affects me? (Aisling)

...when I go into work people go you need this, and you need that, and you need the other thing, and you can't do this job and you can't do that job. And that would be too much for you. Without actually asking the question. (Ron)

Carol and Liam noted the requirement of a driving license for a role as a particular barrier:

So it was a shocking number of companies who list must have a driving license and be able to drive, and it's not necessary. I myself have missed out on lots of opportunities, because I thought, well, you know I can't drive, so I can't have that job and again, it would have been lovely to have known that I could have done that. (Carol)

One thing I've noticed is jobs that say you know require a driving licence for a job that really shouldn't. So, then you just feel there's no point filling out an application, because you're wasting your time, you wonder if you put 'no' are they going to bother reading the rest of it... (Liam)

As will be discussed later, some of the participants have benefited from transport funded by Access to Work.

For Linda and Ron it was issues around online aptitude tests that they faced challenges:

...I think the having to do everything online is very difficult. They just kind of assume everybody has all the equipment and everything and maybe suggest you go somewhere else or get something else, it's just not that easy to do. (Linda)

It's a long time since I've applied for a job, but the application process for promotions in the civil service, 99% of the time involves an aptitude test.

I'm not suggesting for one second that you shouldn't be measured in some way... ..But the way they go about it when you can't see detail or work at pace, with a PC. It makes it extremely difficult. It puts you off for applying for the promotions. (Ron)

However for both Ron and Linda, after some initial challenges both were afforded the adjustments they needed.

Aisling also pointed out that in her experience, employers might seem understanding and quick to provide adjustments, which often did not materialise:

Employers can talk the talk, but implementing walking the walk is completely different. (Aisling)

Aisling also identified that it's not only working with discriminatory employers that can be a challenge, but also members of the public can bring their own challenges, however Aisling was able to turn this to her advantage:

I have realized in the last two weeks, doing this new job role that I don't give a sh*t what my colleagues say about me, it was the customers, were always unexpected, they can say whatever they want to you. And they did! And I took it and it made me thick skinned and it's just hardened you to life a wee bit. (Aisling)

Enablers

Supportive, knowledgeable professionals

A specific enabler for Jill was to have a supportive and knowledgeable advocate, in this instance, someone from RNIB, who was able to work with her and her employer (and the organisation's Occupational Health Team) to allow Jill to return to work:

I had the RNIB with me, and they asked [colleague], would you like to come to the RNIB and we will show you what blind people can do, would you be open to that and she said yes, I certainly would, so she went and then she actually came later on and apologized to me because, she said it was it was my prejudice there and I didn't realize exactly what you know you could do, and what is that you need because I'll make sure you get it. (Jill)

It allowed her employers:

...to understand what blind people can do, or what people with low vision can do. And given them the opportunity to understand that and to experience that and then ask the questions and then they'll have a better understanding and a better knowledge of how we have to work or what we have to do to live. (Jill)

Ultimately Jill was successful and she did return to work, for which she felt grateful to the representative from RNIB.

Reasonable adjustments and understanding workplaces

Participants noted that reasonable adjustments and understanding workplaces were an enabler to successful employment:

I mean yeah I mean I actually think a lot of the anything is possible, is going to start at the very beginning, so, you can usually tell a good organization by what they will put in place even at the recruitment stage, you know sort of things like how open are they to understanding what your condition is and putting the right reasonable adjustments in place to give you a fair crack at the whip to get past the initial recruitment stage. And then their engagement with the likes of Access to Work, RNIB, all of that, and that usually just gives you a good feel for an organisation and their attitudes to people with disabilities. (Gary)

So, to have that sort of attitude that you don't question if somebody says they need something in a larger print, no question don't argue with it don't say all, but this is a problem, so if you actually get an organization, where people are willing to go with you immediately rather than saying we have to do these procedures, you have to fill in this form, you have to see this person you happen to be assessed, etc., that is such a huge difference really huge difference. (Carol)

Similarly, Bruce's supervisor was very understanding, "he said Bruce, we'll work around this. Tell me

what you can do and what you're comfortable doing." Rick too spoke of the adjustments that had been negotiated with his employer, not only as a result of his vision impairment but other medical conditions. However Rick was concerned that his understanding manager was leaving, and that it could be to the whim of his next manager as to whether these adjustments remained:

I've had occupational health involved so hopefully that will stand when I transfer over, but you've only got to get an unsympathetic or misunderstanding manager and you're on a hiding to nothing again. (Rick)

Likewise, Emma commented, "The manager is about to retire which is a bit scary you're always worried when someone else comes in."

The importance of not just direct employers, but colleagues and the business as a whole having a positive attitude and understanding of reasonable adjustments was identified as an enabler of employment success:

I've had internal interviews and things like that, support from managers has been fantastic. It's completely different. It's not even always an organization or a particular employer, it's down to the people directly that are dealing with you. (Gary)

...fantastic colleagues who are willing to and occasionally swap duties, so we're doing the same

amount of work, but we might swap what we're doing and to make it a bit easier for me personally. (Emma)

You can have like you can be working with the best company that has the best like ethos around disability rights and everything, but if it's not implemented by the staff there or the staff working at that time, unfortunately you're not going to have a great experience with even asking for the bare minimum. (Ameera)

Access to Work

Access to Work was identified as a key enabler:

The biggest benefit I found, and I haven't told my employment advisor this, it was actually being on Access to Work and having somebody from a third party coming in to my employers and keeping my managers on their toes, because somebody from outside the organisation was actually talking to me. (Ron)

Having a [Access to Work funded] support worker was vital for me to doing the role that has a lot of travelling. So having a driver has made my job easier and it's just a real positive experience. (Sandra)

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. (Carol)

Jill described the travel support from Access to Work, “the only way I can keep working.”

The participants also valued having an ‘official’ who was onsite, who could liaise with employers.

It seemed to put the fear of God to them if I said “oh I’ll phone employment adviser and speak to her about it.” And then the next thing it was done! (Ron)

It’s problematic sometimes getting management to listen, but once management realise what Access to Work do, they’re not too bad and it does help sometimes to push things along because getting them involved, it was the first time I actually got reasonable adjustments put in place I’d been asking for two years, so yeah it made a big difference. (Carol)

Aisling added, “A liaison between your manager. I like that idea now.” This demonstrates the importance of ensuring that eligible parties have a full understanding of the support available through Access to Work, and how it might benefit them.

However there were difficulties and problems associated with Access to Work. Una described it as a “slow and temperamental process” and Jill explained the administrative challenges she faced when claiming travel costs:

I think one of the problems with Access to Work was I used the travel side of it, and it cost me £930 a month on taxis, to get to work.

But they gave me white paper, so I couldn’t look at it, so I had to wait until somebody showed me how to fill the form because it was white paper and I couldn’t see the writing on it. And I says look, I’m registered blind... (Jill)

The timing and frequency of Access to Work support was identified as requiring further levels of flexibility:

[Access to Work] were great and I have got some things put in place because of Access to Work. The only thing I would say is that came in at the start of the employment, very near the start of my employment, and now I’m sort of two or three years into the job I know better know what my sight limitations are, and where the problems are, whereas if they come in when you’re starting out in employment, you mightn’t not always know where your barriers are until you sort of experience the job for a while. (Emma)

Emma also suggested that it would be useful if Access to Work could shadow an individual throughout the day to see what sort of equipment or adjustments might be suitable, instead of relying on an individual to name the equipment or adjustments when they might not know what is available.

Ron highlighted that although support may be heavy in the initial months, as time goes by support may be less frequent due to funding issues, nevertheless the support that was still available was “beneficial as it gave me somebody to talk to.”

Interventions

Successful interventions

Eye Work Too

As also identified by those not in unemployment, RNIB's Eye Work Too programme, was identified as a successful intervention:

It's only when I moved to Northern Ireland, and they had that Eye Work Too project that was the first time in six, seven years if I actually had actual assistance and help in getting a job. (Rick)

I used Eye Work, 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. (Bruce)

For Rick, the Eye Work Too programme was useful as it was directed towards those not in employment, whereas when he lived in England all RNIB's support was directed to those in employment.

However for Ameera, although employed, she felt that she had to take part in the Eye Work Too initiative in order to access support from RNIB:

The reason why I'm on these your courses now is because basically, if I don't go, if I don't take these classes, then [RNIB worker] unfortunately won't be able to help me with my employment issues, because RNIB usually tend to help people who are unemployed, rather than the people who are employed and struggling and

having you know problems at work or discrimination at work. (Ameera)

Jill too was frustrated with this, commenting "that's because they've changed their product...it's left us high and dry."

Suggestions for interventions

Awareness raising

Raising awareness of vision impairment was identified as a key intervention. Aisling suggested that it should come through education in schools:

Awareness training in school is needed for kids so they don't become ignorant to people with disabilities as an older, and you don't know when you're going to be in that position. (Aisling)

Rick suggested employment professionals going out to workplaces to explain vision impairment in general terms might be a useful way to raise awareness:

...these companies that go out to different companies and explain sight loss and how employees for sight loss will work in their company and what kind of adjustments they might [need], just generic not a specific. Give them a general concept of dealing with someone with sight loss. (Rick)

Gary pointed out that visual awareness training could easily be provided online:

I know from my own personal point of view, the visual awareness

training was fantastic and the new visual awareness training is really, really good and that literally you can do at your computer and it's also linking in to the fact that we are normal people, at the end of the day. (Gary)

He also suggested that it could be tailored to specific needs or questions that may come from employers:

The visual awareness training is really good because you're able to set it into a context, because I've had negative comments by senior managers, like we're going to be up to our necks in these reasonable adjustment requests, because we're going to be having all these disabled people in. (Gary)

Ameera and Ron also suggested that visual awareness training could form part of a person's Access to Work application, however as Ameera noted, this needs to be provided in a timely manner:

The biggest benefit for me was [Access to Work] actually run awareness sessions for my colleagues. On three separate occasions, so I think over the space of 4 years, there was 140 people at the awareness sessions. That wasn't mandatory training and 140 of them turned up. The people that I worked with came back said that they found it very beneficial to have them walk in dark glasses and glasses that obscured your vision. (Ron)

Training staff on visual awareness programs, that's all good and well you know, but I would hope that something is in place where there's like a time limit for that to be done, or that you know someone checking in, once that is agreed with RNIB and the employer, or even Access to Work, because I know Access to Work were trying to help me facilitate the visual impairment training for other staff members, the employer had agreed to RNIB to facilitate that, but three years down the line, and I have it in paper as well, still no training for staff members. (Ameera)

Lastly, Emma suggested that one further way of raising awareness would be to have a bank of case studies of people with vision impairment in employment, which employers could refer to

And I think employers, very often just don't know how to deal with someone what with any disability really, not just visual impairment and it would be nice if there was I don't know a bank of case studies of people on the adjustments that worked for them, and it might actually help people get employment as well. (Emma)

Awareness of Access to Work

Raising awareness of Access to Work amongst people with vision impairment was identified as a potential area of work, around which an intervention could be based.

Certainly, Access to Work would benefit from raising its profile and what it's there for to its customer base. Because you know, certainly by my perception of it before I experienced it was it was potentially a bad thing. ...I didn't know what they were, but the name of it sounded a bit, I don't know, something to be wary of. The major issue for me was a lack of understanding of who they were and what they did. (Gary)

I went through years of employment without the support of Access to Work, where really if I had known beforehand, then I would have not allowed myself to have struggled the way I did, before actually getting their support. (Ameera)

...it was actually very, very positive, but it was scary getting it, and again I didn't know about it, I didn't hear of it until I found out about it nearly by accident. (Carol)

Ameera suggested that one way that awareness could be built is by changing the name of 'Access to Work':

...if they were called something like 'we support you, while at work', I probably would have been quicker in contacting them because,

because when you know when they say Access to Work, it makes me think you know it's for people who is unemployed, rather than somebody who is in work and needs that support. (Ameera)

Carol added:

I'm totally in agreement with everybody on the Access to Work thing that the name is wrong, it is it really needs to be renamed. I always felt it was a condescending sort of feeling going in to it, this is somebody who's going to talk down to me... (Carol)

Opportunities to connect with others with vision impairment

Opportunities to connect with others with vision impairment was suggested as a potential intervention that could benefit individuals:

It was good to have that shared experience you know with each other. (Sandra)

...working with colleagues with sight loss as well just gives you that wee extra boost of confidence and having role models too within the workplace. (Sandra)

You know I thought I knew those platforms, but you know just having those little refresher classes again and even just hearing other people talk about what works for them, you know those strategies. (Michael)

You know that's encouraging then, people like ourselves to maybe tell our stories and then they get

shared by people and our friends and they all naturally grow, you know and that's something that wouldn't even cost a lot of money. (Gary)

Carol suggested a mentoring scheme might be an appropriate way for those with vision impairment to share their experiences.

Finally, Michael suggested that he had taken part in producing materials about his experiences as a person with sight loss, and if these documents and materials could be made available in a repository, experiences could be shared this way:

RNIB have done legacy stories over the years, you know so people would do case studies and I know that's specifically for sight loss, but you know and in terms of accessing those I don't know if there's a library, or if we widen that to other disabilities, you know. If those case studies could be sort of collected and shared, and that way, I think it'd be a good benefit a lot of people. On both sides, you know the employee and the employer and those looking for work as well. (Michael)

Group 6: Employment professionals

In this group we spoke with five employment professionals who, as part of their role, provide support to individuals with disabilities to help them access employment. This included one professional specialising

in supporting people with vision impairment.

Barriers

Employer preconceptions

Employer preconceptions were identified as a main barrier to employment success:

I think the preconceptions of employers are the biggest issue..... even when you're coming with those skills and even when you're coming with the confidence, one of the things is preconceptions – oh I just see too many problems here, just see too many difficulties employing this person, and I think that's what the main factor is that you're up against. (Paul)

I have had comments made in the workplace 'Oh well, he's blind, he can't get promoted.' (Lewis)

Inaccessible recruitment processes

Inaccessible recruitment processes were also identified as a barrier:

Some of the job centre websites don't have accessibility toolbar and it's such an easy fix, so when you have to rely on friends and families to help you apply for a job, you're not really getting that independence of applying for the role yourself. (Lewis)

...employers should be more imaginative in how they can get the right person for the job because sometimes a series of questions is not the right way, why can't employers think

outside the box and use more innovative approaches such as, an assessment, on the job and off the job. (Kate)

However participants were able to suggest ways in which to get around these challenges. Paul spoke of the 'ban the box' scheme, where employers are asked to remove the tick box for those with criminal convictions, meaning that when they are at interview no one will know whether or not they have a criminal conviction. However, "if you go in with a cane or a guide dog or you know with a physical disability, instantly the bias is set in that room" (Paul).

Paul went on to say:

I suggested that we had interview conversations almost like The Voice, where they sit with their back to you because you know it's a process where once you go into that room the bias and all of those preconceived ideas, and that's where the problems arise from. (Paul)

Lewis gave details of a project he was working on with RNIB to develop recruitment processes, based on his work with another specialist organisation:

We completely changed the recruitment process and we worked with [specialist organisation] on that. We're now working with the RNIB on this particular project and we're looking at what the learnings were from previous projects and

kind of take that, continuously learning from it. (Lewis)

Kate suggested that recruiting managers need to move away from, "old fashioned way, mainstream ways of recruitment, they need to change to be diverse because our society is diverse today and it should reflect that." She added:

Whenever somebody does get to interview stage, employers have the power to employ things like positive discrimination, ring fence jobs, guaranteed interview schemes, you know, looking at alternative ways of interviewing you know not maybe relying so much on things like psychometric testing, that's something that isn't maybe suitable for somebody who uses assistive technologies... (Kate)

Multiple disability

The impact of multiple disabilities, and the associated lack of understanding, was recognised by Sally as a barrier to successful employment for some individuals:

The amount of people that have more than one disability is massive and I think that's something that is quite often overlooked, and so, for example in my previous role, I would have worked with a few people who had dual sensory loss, sight loss and hearing loss. And I think that was wasn't particularly well understood, and I think people maybe had an image of you know, if someone has a disability they have one condition. (Sally)

Sally noted that some individuals may have:

...three or four or five conditions, some of which will have conflicting barriers, in the sense that quite often if someone has a hearing loss there'll be presented with visual information sort of almost by default, but actually there are people for whom that's not suitable at all. (Sally)

Technology

The employment professionals identified issues to do with the cost, provision and functionality of technology as a barrier to successful employment:

I think one of the barriers is the cost of technology, if you have to fund it yourself. (Paul)

Accessibility is a huge barrier, in terms of compatibility with assistive technologies like JAWS software or Zoomtext with websites to job search, that's something people with sight wouldn't think twice about. It can be something that's very difficult for somebody, and very off-putting because their Zoomtext or JAWS might not be compatible. (Kate)

Such are the issues due to compatibility at one organisation that people with sight loss cannot apply to those jobs (Kate). Kate also provided an example that a client had got a job, had an Access to Work assessment and she needed scripting done to make the systems accessible with her JAWS software, and it took

nine months for them to decide that they were not going to go ahead with the scripting because it was a cyber-security risk:

That's a big barrier. She got the job, but she couldn't start the job, because anything to do with cyber security risks that overrides accessibility really. (Kate)

The participants also found it frustrating that if a person moves jobs, an application for technology via Access to Work has to begin again:

If you go to one employer and that all has to be set up, and then you move in six months to a different employer and it all has to be set up, and then you maybe move again. To me, it just seems a waste of resources, you know where you have three employers with versions of JAWS which they may or may not ever use again. (Paul)

Somebody could move jobs within six months you've had a work based assessment carried out, paid for by Access to Work, they move into a new job six months later and have to have a new assessment to recommend the same things which costs money. (Kate)

Furthermore, Paul noted that if you work beneath the threshold, Access to Work will not fund equipment. He also suggested that it would be better if the equipment travels with the individual rather than being attached to the role.

Enablers

Raising self-confidence

Support, guidance or strategies aimed at raising an individual's self-confidence were seen as an enabler to employment success. Melissa located these strategies within the home and the education system:

...if somebody is built up through the school, through family and is encouraged with independence, rather than wrapped up and encouraged to seek further education and reach for the job that they would love to do and not just settle for anything. I do feel that self-awareness and building self-confidence is a huge part of that. (Melissa)

Kate too suggested that this needed to happen within the school environment:

You know I work with people who have acquired sight loss, or even you know have had sight loss since since a young age, and it's something that they're not familiar are comfortable with. So it takes time to be able to build up that confidence to disclose that you have a disability and to and to be open about what adjustments that you may require. That's something that really needs to start at a young age in school. (Kate)

Kate also suggested that young people with sight loss need to meet and interact with others with sight loss, "to see what people with sight loss can do and build their confidence" (Kate)

Interventions

Successful interventions

Holistic, specific, employment support

Kate details the employment support that her organisation provides. It is a well-rounded holistic approach and consequently is worth discussing at length:

The approach we take is quite person centred and holistic, so although we're focusing on employment, people might come to us and their confidence might be quite low, so I suppose, if we can look at what other services, we can help the person with, whether its internal services, for example counselling to help them come to terms with their sight loss if it's quite new to them. (Kate)

This support is available one-to-one or as a group. It is available for those in employment, or those looking for work, for those who have had a vision impairment all their lives, and for those newly impaired.

The employment professionals identified a range of components which should be included in such a holistic intervention packaging, including a condition management program:

To help them develop skills and acquire coping strategies to manage their condition, you know that that sort of overflow into in improving their confidence. Which will, ultimately, hopefully, have an employment outcome. It will make them better equipped to start their career journey, if you like. (Kate)

IT skill development:

They also must be able to navigate around a computer with their assistive technology, whether it be JAWS or magnification that is essential. Touch typing as well. People come to us and they have eye conditions which do not cause sight loss, but can also create things like discomfort, eye strain so they have to be able to reduce how much they use their eyes, which means they have to be as efficient as possible as they can be on the computer. (Kate)

Mobility and orientation skills:

There's so many positives. Mobility, you know, sometimes referred into sensory support, because if there's issues with mobility they need to be able to get from A to B. Okay, things are different now, a lot of people are moving to working from home but hybrid ways of working and they need to be able to be mobile and get from home to the office or get from home to work, whatever. (Kate)

Disability skills:

[to enable them to] “disclose a disability and talk about it to an employer confidently” (Kate).

Work placements:

We offer work placements as part of our into the workplace program, perhaps provide somebody who's maybe had to change careers after years of work, you know to be able to have the opportunity to train in

an area of work and see how they can manage their sight loss in the workplace. (Kate)

Employer visual awareness training:

Also things like visual awareness training, providing visual awareness training to the employer. So they are confident. There's transparency and that there's good communication. Advocacy as well. Good communication with the employers is key as well. (Kate)

Practical support:

We have an agreement with Sight and Sound, who do Zoomtext, they'll give us a trial for 90 days to give to that person a trial, because if it's a placement Access to Work won't fund that, or if they're waiting for things to come in we can give them a trial link to that as well. (Kate)

Practical sessions explaining how assistive technology works:

Whenever a customer is new to us, we would always offer them a demo of equipment, at the minute that's virtual, but pre-Covid people we would have had customers coming into the office, and we would have created a demo all the different assistive technologies so they can start to think how they can do their jobs, and that that really sort of builds their confidence because before maybe if they've had no experience in assistive technology, they can start to think how they can do their job and how it is really going to help them. (Kate)

Finally, participants will also have opportunities to learn about the in work support that is available to them such as Access to Work and to meet with others with sight loss, and in particular those who share the same interests or concerns.

Disability confident scheme

Lewis was keen to recommend the disability confident scheme as a successful intervention:

What that essentially means it that anyone who meets that minimum criteria for that job, they can offer an interview. (Lewis)

He does however suggest that it needs to be publicised more:

I think if I had known about that when I was younger, I probably would have saved myself 10 years of heartache and pain. (Lewis)

Lewis was prompted by one of the research team as to whether the Disability Confident scheme may be seen as a “tick boxing type thing rather than something that’s a real, meaningful change” to which he commented:

I disagree about that massively, and the reason why is because I’ve just spent the past four months [working on this] and for the first two levels you’re self-assessing but by the time you come to get your level three or your disability confident leader, you’re self-audited by the like of ‘Business Disability Forum’. You have to declare yourself as disability confident, yes, you can get away with that, but the work that goes

into the assessment, I think more employers need to be buying into it now. (Lewis)

Paul added:

But I’ve also come across many employers, who have said, well you know we don’t want to do things like the guaranteed interview because you’ll have people ticking the disability box who don’t have a disability. Just to make sure they get a guaranteed interview. It tends to be actually doing the opposite where disabled people even with a disability tend not to declare it. (Paul)

Suggestions for interventions

VI awareness schemes for employers

The employment professionals suggested the introduction of awareness schemes for employers to improve understanding of vision impairment as well as the legislation around their role as employers:

Making sure that employers are aware of the legislation and not frightened of it. (Sally)

I think, as well as that businesses need to have inclusion and disability awareness training as mandatory it shouldn’t be optional, it should be mandatory from the get go. (Kate)

Sally recognised that:

...some employers are really receptive and it’s just a case that they don’t know what to do and they just need a little bit of advice, which is fine. Others are

much more reluctant and almost defensive whenever this topic of conversation of legislation comes in, and they feel that they're going to be in trouble. (Sally)

Sally continued by suggesting that employers fear that they cannot give a role to a person with vision impairment because of concerns about health and safety:

So that kind of led me on to thinking about the importance of having conversations with employers around legislation. I think that's something that we found was sort of quite commonly misunderstood and a lot of employers in terms of their responsibilities and obviously in Northern Ireland we have the DDA and I think a lot of employers are a little bit frightened to have conversations about reasonable adjustments and their responsibilities within that. I think that's a really important area when planning for future interventions. (Sally)

Alongside this, Lewis was keen to suggest that any interventions should be provided by those with lived experience:

I think, what would be an amazing thing to see would be training actually done by visually impaired or disabled people. I don't know if anybody else feels this here, but most of the training I've ever sat on in my life about disability, has been people who have been able bodied and have not been able to actually capture the frustrations. (Lewis)

Group 7: Employers

Five employers took part in this focus group. Two were employed within the disability sector, whilst the other three had an active interest in inclusion and supporting disabled workers, and had previously engaged with RNIB. Therefore these participants likely had a better understanding of disability and employment than the average employer, and this should be taken into consideration when reviewing these findings.

Barriers

This group did not identify any specific barriers to employment for people with sight loss.

Enablers

Individual at the centre

The employers recognised that it is crucial to put the individual at the centre of any interventions, support plans and employment practices:

We do have a member of staff who does have a degenerative eye condition and unfortunately she is not office based. So in order to maintain her in work, you know, we have made it as positive as possible now. She has been very much understanding that certain elements of her role she would struggle to do so, we have redeployed her to another role still within that field but with you know slightly less responsibility that she is happy and confident in doing. We started off with did a lot of consultative work with RNIB and Access to Work, to see what we could do for her. (Maddy)

Simon identified that keeping individuals at the centre of employment practices means that those with sight loss are confident to enter employment, as they know that strategies will be put in place to make employment “a viable opportunity for them.”

Likewise Kenny gave the example of an employee with over 20 years’ experience who was supported to remain in employment, albeit in a modified role, with the focus on what she could continue to bring to role:

I think that the real positive I got from management at that time was an immediate sense of okay we accept that we want to keep you, and the question was posed, what do we need to do to make it as easy for you as possible? (Kenny)

The organisation focused on, “what other ways can this employee who’s extremely valuable actually add value to our operation” which meant:

The person didn’t in any way feel kind of a liability, they actually realised that it was a different way they’re adding value, they couldn’t maintain all of the first part of their job what they could do is something else. (Kenny)

Flexible employers

Employers that were flexible and were able to adapt to the changing needs of their workforce were identified as enabling employment success. Alan gave the example of a longstanding employee who had developed sight loss, who was able to stay in employment:

We had a staff member long established very experienced, and they’ve got other underlying health conditions which contributed to their sight loss and it’s gradually going downhill. So from a positivity they have been able to remain in employment and undertake the same activity that they were undertaking before. (Alan)

Alan did recognise this may have been easier due to the office based nature of this person’s role:

Granted we’re in a position where its office based, it’s an administrative based work that they do, so that will lend itself positively towards a successful outcome of someone staying in work, but they continued on with their role with adjustments in place. (Alan)

Kenny explained that flexibility to working practices is key:

Depending on their situation, what we hear a lot about is flexibility, so could you look at ways in which you start to open up a job to perhaps two people working at it, or two people working different facets of the job someone with a visual impairment, together with perhaps a working mum, both of whom would work part time there’s all sorts of things there, but I think the first thing we always notices is the attitude and the openness from the employer. (Kenny)

Recognising the value in employing a diverse workforce

The participants identified how there can often be benefits to employing disabled workers, due to the fact that they can bring a different perspective to the organisation:

The benefit, without a doubt, of having someone with an impairment join your organisation is that they bring that diversity of thought... ..I would see the fact that the person who perhaps had an impairment could come and look, and tackle issues that we might have in the business in a completely different way than someone who, on paper is all singing, all dancing and doesn't have an impairment or disability or something else, that that would be the most open I think self-aware way to look at it, and that would be for us the utopia approach. (Kenny)

If we have workforce that's reflecting diversity that's only a good thing, and you know we're representing the residents of Belfast and that is a very large and diverse group of people, so we're keen to reflect that within the [organisation] as well. (Maddy)

I think what people with visual impairment bring to my team is authenticity and inspiration, it's sort of a unique thing that we do the work in eye clinics and they talk to people with sight loss but it's very inspirational for people who've maybe lost their vision to see people with sight loss in work, helping people how do you get around this, how do you get around that. (Kay)

Access to Work

Access to Work was seen as valuable in supporting employers to provide employees with the adjustments and equipment required:

The Access to Work scheme has been brilliant. They'll say this is what you need to do, this is what we can do for you and it's very much they lead you the whole way through it and they give specific recommendations, which is very, very useful in terms of adjustments in the workplace. You know longer breaks or give them more time all that stuff's relatively easy...but [identifying] this piece of kit would be useful for this person to get them... pointing us in the exact direction that we can go to get it, that's been very brilliant. (Alan)

In particular Alan appreciated that it was "tailored specifically to each of our staff, members it's not just general."

Kay too recognised that Access to Work can be:

...a very positive experience. Some of our staff members have support workers that are funded through Access to Work, too, and that can be very helpful and a lot of tech, specific accessible tech was purchased, that was really helpful too. (Kay)

However as identified in other focus groups there can be difficulties with its administration:

the only downside is just the admin can take a wee while to get the money back, there's processes and all of that, for a small business that could be more tricky. (Kay)

Simon also identified for those that rely on support workers "there's a real shortage of suitably qualified people to support the individual.

Interventions

Successful interventions

Employment Academy

A specific intervention 'Employment Academy' was identified by Maddy as a successful intervention for supporting those with sight loss into employment. Part of its remit is to link in with hard to reach groups, including those with disability, as part of their mass recruitment drives. A certain amount of posts are ring fenced for these groups and undertake pre-recruitment training, training, and mock interviews. People can bring their support workers with them "and they get a little bit of on the job experience as well before they do their interviews" (Maddy).

RNIB's Trainee Grade Scheme

Kay also spoke of RNIB's graduate trainee, as an example of a successful intervention, however unfortunately it did not run currently:

...something that was in RNIB being more than five years ago, was a trainee grade scheme, people with sight loss came in, and different types of experience, and I know it's been said by a couple of people in my team that

it was a great thing and they don't know why they stopped doing that maybe funding is the reason why.

But I'm sure there's great learning from RNIB, from that time, I'm sure there's a report somewhere about it, that could be a good framework, you know to be able to think about getting something similar, maybe in the public sector as a start. I think the RNIB should be putting something like that back in place. (Kay)

Kay suggested that such a scheme was useful as it "will address the skills [that] will address the confidence and it'll just build up that wee bit of experience, getting a foot through the door." Making the jump from unemployment to employment is tough.

Suggestions for interventions

Peer support

A peer support scheme was identified as a potential future intervention:

I do think some kind of a peer support mechanism is valuable, buddying for a want of a better term, whether it's either individual or sort of collective, so that people, in this case with vision loss, feel as if they're part of a group of some description, who are occasionally meeting up online or whatever, to share their experiences and provide peer support and ideas and just a more collective sense of purpose. (Simon)

So if you're a person with a visual impairment, one of the ways again

that you get a sense of what's possible, what's not, it's quite literally interaction with other entrepreneurs or other people that have done things and it kind of links in there, to the point that was made previously by I think Simon around peer support. (Kenny)

Peer support was seen to be beneficial because:

...people just don't feel that they're involved in an isolated situation, and there are others out there, like them and also others who've been through this before and come out successfully at the other end and

then are happy to feed into the fact that they're helping others to follow their path right. (Simon)

For Alan a peer support group was more favourable than a mentoring group as mentoring often involves significant resources for employers:

You're effectively having to give up a member of staff to mentor that person during that period of time, so then you're down a member... ..So I don't think anyone disagrees and it's a positive to do, it's just having the resources and the capacity to be a trainer organisation. (Alan)

5. Key Findings

In this section we discuss the findings of the focus groups as a whole, considering the common findings across the different groups, particularly in terms of the identified barriers, enablers and interventions. We focus first on the findings specific to young people with vision impairment preparing to make the transition from education and training into the labour market, before considering the broader findings relating to all of working age.

Supporting transitions from education and training

There was not really any kind of advice for me that was directed towards me as, somebody with a visual impairment, it was very general, and it was very... I don't know what the word is but... like I

didn't really know what to do with myself, I've never had any kind of interview, I didn't really know what to do with myself. (Young person)

Our focus groups with young people, education professionals and parents focused specifically on the experiences of young people with vision impairment making the transition from education and training, and into the labour market. Across these groups, several common themes were identified, which will be explored in turn.

Person-centred transition support

A significant focus of the discussion with these groups was the importance for, and lack of, person-centred support for transition which caters for individual aspirations whilst also taking into practical considerations in relation to their disability. It was shared that whilst young people with vision impairment often received careers support during the school day, this often would not take into consideration or adequately understand the nature of their disability. It was also highlighted that there should be more flexibility in terms of when careers support is available, to reflect the fact that young people aren't always ready to have such conversations about their future. It was seen as important that tailored careers support is offered as an inclusive school-based service, rather than an add-on.

Joined-up services

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

Access to work experience

Work experience was identified as an important enabler for young people with vision impairment, to help them prepare for the workplace. It was noted that there are often barriers to accessing the types of work experiences undertaken by other

young people, and therefore specific intervention is needed to help foster these types of opportunity.

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)

Each focus group was asked to identify examples of barriers which negatively impact on the participation of people with vision impairment in the labour market. Several common themes were identified, which are explored in turn.

Discrimination and negative attitudes

Several of the participants across the groups identified situations where they had personally experienced, or witnessed, discrimination against individuals because of their disability. This often involved employers not being prepared to work with an employee or potential employee to find suitable accommodations to support them in the workplace.

Lack of understanding of vision impairment

Many of the participants linked discriminatory actions and negative attitudes to a general lack of understanding of vision impairment across society. In particular, this included limited understanding of the types of support which can be put into place to support workers with vision

impairment. It was highlighted that often employers and colleagues would make assumptions about an individual, the support they would need and that individuals' limitations. This meant that often it was challenging for workers with vision impairment to receive the reasonable adjustments they required.

Low self-confidence

It was highlighted how individuals with vision impairment can often experience low-confidence, which in turn can impact upon their ability to advocate for themselves, to put themselves forward, and to place themselves in what could potentially be challenging situations, such as applying for jobs or promotions. Such 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. (Employee)

Positively, many of the participants identified several examples of enablers which can benefit people with vision impairment in both accessing employment, and in their journey towards participation in the labour market.

Support of employment professionals

Throughout the focus groups, it was highlighted how important it is for

individuals with vision impairment 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 was particularly noted how important it is that support is tailored to meet the needs of the individual, including the development of practical skills and support to boost self-esteem and help support acceptance of their disability.

Supportive and flexible managers and colleagues

Similarly, many of the participants highlighted how often the experience of people with vision impairment can depend on the individuals that they encounter on a day-to-day basis. Many positive 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 vision impairment.

Access to Work

The government scheme 'Access to Work' was seen as an essential enabler, with some participants describing how they would not be able to work without the support it offers. It was noted, however, that 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

They offer like a 12 week placement and those are good for people who have no work experience, maybe, and need to find their feet, but when you have more experience and you're further down the line, you actually want to get something more meaningful from them. They're kind of doing the right things, but I think they just need to do more of it. (Employee)

The participants were asked to identify interventions which they had observed as beneficial in supporting people with vision impairment in accessing, or progressing, towards the labour market.

Employment programmes and advocates

Many of the 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 was seen as important, as well as someone to help provide a holistic perspective of the support that individual might require. For example, 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 to be important.

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.

Suggested 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 VI is more difficult because there's less of us, but everybody knows what autism is now, when I started teaching nobody knew, 30 years ago, it was very unknown. (Parent)

Finally, the participants were invited to provide suggestions of interventions which should be introduced in Northern Ireland, and in particular to note any particular 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 young people with vision impairment, which would draw together the expertise of a range of professionals, including mainstream teachers, QTVIs and careers advisors. Across the groups, several potential interventions were identified which were relevant to all people with vision impairment. These can be summarised as follows:

Raising awareness of vision impairment across society

One of the strongest themes across the focus groups was a general lack of understanding of vision impairment across society. It was noted how this might impact upon people with vision impairment in a range of contexts, such as when engaging with employers, with colleagues, with non-specialist service providers, as well as in their 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. This was viewed as essential for challenging preconceptions and for helping the general public understand how people with vision impairment are able to successfully navigate day-to-day life.

Raising awareness of Access to Work

As noted earlier, 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 undertake their job. 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, and often leading to negative outcomes. Throughout the course of the discussions it also became apparent that some of the participants were unaware of the extent of support available through Access to Work, and therefore 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 vision impairment awareness training to staff, whilst others (who viewed the concept positively) had not had 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 people with vision impairment having access to some form of mentoring or peer support, to 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. Aligned to this idea, several of the participants suggested that it would be helpful to have access to case studies of people with vision impairment 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 aspirations of a range of stakeholders, such as employers, teachers, careers advisors and parents.

6. Recommendations

In response to the findings of this research project, we outline a series of 9 recommendations, under 4 categories.

- Improving employment support service provision within the vision impairment sector
- Policy and campaigns
- Priority areas for addressing gaps in services

Improving post-school transition support for young people with vision impairment

1. For mainstream schools, specialist services and careers advisors to work together to create a more joined-up, person-centred service to support young people with vision impairment to prepare and plan for their future.

Improving employment support service provision within the vision impairment sector

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

3. For charities representing persons with vision impairment to partner with key organisations such as Department for Work and Pensions to promote Access to Work to young people with vision impairment and employers.

4. For charities representing persons with vision impairment lobby for improvements to the accessibility of Access to Work.
5. For vision impairment charities to lead by example and employ a greater proportion of individuals with vision impairment.
6. For vision impairment charities to identify ways in which to work with employers to improve understanding of vision impairment, such as working with mainstream media.
7. For vision impairment charities to explore new and creative ways in which to improve awareness of vision impairment across society.

Priority areas for addressing gaps in services

8. For vision impairment charities and specialist services to facilitate individuals with vision impairment to access work experience opportunities, including internships and voluntary placements.
9. For improved opportunities for individuals with vision impairment 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 individuals with vision impairment in employment.

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