

## Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Scotland submission on COVID-19 Inquiry Terms of Reference

## Introduction

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Scotland is the country’s leading charity working with blind and partially sighted people. We support children and adults with sight loss and help them to live full and independent lives, campaigning for their rights.

In 2010, the date of the most recent figures published by the Scottish Government, the number of people registered as blind or partially sighted in Scotland was reported to be 34,492.[[1]](#footnote-1) Research suggests that around 10 per cent of eligible people do not register making the true figure closer to 40,000.

Around 178,000 people live with a significant degree of sight loss in Scotland, around 4,300 of which are children and young people.

This number could eventually double unless we act to prevent avoidable sight loss. The rise of sight threatening conditions such as diabetes and an aging population will increase the number of people affected by sight loss unless action is taken.

RNIB Scotland welcomes the opportunity to comment on the COVID-19 Inquiry Terms of Reference.

### • What do you think the Inquiry should cover? What do you think the Inquiry should not cover? Is there any type of evidence that you think is essential for the Inquiry to obtain?

Blind and partially sighted people have been particularly adversely affected by the pandemic. RNIB Scotland carried out a survey of blind and partially sighted people in the summer of 2020 on the impact the pandemic was having on their ability to access food, their emotional wellbeing, and their ability to access information relating to the pandemic.

The results were stark: 21 per cent of blind and partially sighted people indicated that they had had to ration food; two thirds felt less independent; and one in five rarely spoke to anyone outwith their household.

We believe this Inquiry should examine the impact of coronavirus and what can be done to redress the negative impact, what can be learned from the pandemic for a similar scenario in the future, and what can be learned to improve the way the most vulnerable in society are treated after the pandemic.

As coronavirus cases rose in March 2020 and restrictions began to be introduced RNIB Scotland was aware that the reprioritisation of services, the shutting down of schools and many workplaces, social distancing rules and the ban on mixing of households would have a significant impact on the ability of blind and partially sighted people to live independently, engage in education and employment, and get emotional support. As the pandemic progressed there were issues around the accessibility of information relating to the pandemic for people with sight loss and we were aware that the necessary re-prioritisation of the NHS to deal with COVID-19 would be having an effect on the treatment of existing eye conditions and the diagnosis, or lack of, of undiscovered eye conditions.

The Inquiry should include the following areas highlighted below - accessibility of information, education, emotional wellbeing, independent living, and non-COVID health care:

#### Accessibility of information

Throughout the pandemic it was necessary to communicate important messages to ensure that people understood how to lower the risk of transmission of the virus, what was and wasn't permitted at different stages of lockdown and how to access the vaccine. The inquiry should examine how these messages were communicated, who they reached quickly and successfully and who they didn’t, and if these messages could have been communicated in a way that would have been more accessible to people with a sensory impairment.

#### Education

The pandemic had an impact on every child and young person's education in Scotland, but feedback we have received shows that it didn't affect everyone equally. Children and young people with a vision impairment faced additional challenges to their peers without sight loss. The Inquiry should specifically examine how the pandemic effected the education of children and young people with a vision impairment in both mainstream and specialist settings. It should investigate the long-term impacts and how they can be redressed.

#### Emotional wellbeing

Consideration should be given to the impact the pandemic has had on emotional wellbeing, who was worst affected, what support was available to them, and was this support adequate. By adequate we mean was it delivered in a timely fashion, what impact did it have on individuals, and was it appropriate for their needs. Within this, particular consideration should be given to people who were faced with additional challenges during the pandemic that limited their ability to get out of their house within the purview of restrictions, and to communicate with the people they care about. This group would include blind and partially sighted people who for a significant period during the first lockdown were uncertain as to whether they could be guided by someone outwith their household - a vital way for many blind and partially sighted people to get out and about - and who are less likely to be able to access technology, a key method of communication with friends and relatives when not possible to meet them face to face.

#### Employment

The effect the move to home working where possible had on blind and partially sighted people should be examined, specifically how consistently could people with sight loss access video conferencing and other virtual meeting methods and what impact did this have on their ability to contribute at work and carry out their job as normal. The effect on people with sight loss who had jobs that meant they were key workers should also be considered, as well as the effect on people with sight loss who were on furlough for any time during the pandemic.

#### Independent living

Two thirds of people surveyed by RNIB Scotland in summer 2020 said that they felt less independent than before the pandemic. The Inquiry should examine what long term impact COVID restrictions have had on people with mobility issues and if there is a long-term impact what can be done to redress this. The role of rehabilitation in this should be considered. In the context of sight loss this refers to the service that teaches independent living and mobility skills that enable people who have been diagnosed with sight loss to continue to do the things that they want or need to do independently.

#### Non-COVID health care

RNIB Scotland is particularly concerned about the impact the pandemic has had on the treatment and diagnosis of eye conditions. Delays to treatment and diagnosis result in eye conditions developing at a faster rate than if they were identified and treated quickly. The Inquiry should look at what impact the necessary reprioritisation of resources to fight COVID had on waiting lists for eyecare, if the waiting lists were and are ordered in the most effective way, and what can be done to tackle the backlog of cases of people waiting for assessment and treatment. The Inquiry may also want to look at good practice, including the response of community optometry to the pandemic.

### • What should happen to ensure the Inquiry is completed as quickly as reasonable thoroughness permits?

NA

### • How should the Inquiry report its progress? Should there be interim reports? If so, what should the Inquiry deal with in interim reports?

The Inquiry should report quarterly on its progress. Consideration should be given to the merits of prioritisation of the areas to be covered and whether all areas should be examined at the same time or if a handful of areas should be examined and recommendations produced before moving onto the next areas. Interim reports should cover the activity of the Inquiry over the preceding three months, what impact this has had or is expected to have and the plans for the following quarter. Where the Inquiry feels they must make an urgent recommendation before the conclusion of the examination of an area they should do so, otherwise all recommendations should be produced in the report that concludes the examination of the area.

### • Should the Inquiry be required to make recommendations? What should be done to ensure everyone learns from the Inquiry?

Yes, the Inquiry should be required to make recommendations to clearly communicate what improvements it believes should be made to mitigate the long-lasting effects of the pandemic and what can be learned in the case that we are ever in a similar situation again. From the beginning of the process, the Inquiry should seek buy-in from the bodies it may make recommendations to, so as to ensure it is understood how and why the recommendations have been produced.

### • How should the Inquiry be designed so that it takes a person-centred, human rights-based approach to its work? For example, do you have views on inclusiveness and accessibility of venues and information?

All documents and communications relating to the Inquiry should be produced in accessible formats including Braille, large print, and audio. Any public events should be advertised in a way that takes into consideration the needs of hard-to-reach groups of people. For example, blind and partially sighted people are less likely to have access to the internet and be able to access visual advertising therefore the Inquiry may wish to consider promoting any public events on the radio or TV. RNIB Scotland would be keen to help promote such events and has a dedicated radio station that could be used to promote these events to blind and partially sighted people.

### • What help and support could be made available for those participating in the Inquiry?

NA

#### • Do you have views on whether there should be a panel of members and/or assessors, in addition to the Inquiry Chair?

NA

#### • Do you have any other comments about the design of the COVID-19 Public Inquiry?

NA

### Contact

For further information on this submission please contact James Adams, Director RNIB Scotland on james.adams@rnib.org.uk.

1. A National Statistics Publication for Scotland: Registered Blind and Partially Sighted Persons, Scotland 2010, Scottish Government, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)