# Secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey 2020: comparison of people with sight loss to the rest of the population

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RNIB Research and Insight

## Headline messages

This report contains results from an analysis of the Labour Force Survey (LFS). LFS is conducted every quarter, and it provides the official statistics on employment and unemployment in the UK. This report summarises the four surveys conducted in 2020.

LFS is different to research such as My Voice, and the data is not directly comparable. More information on these differences can be found in the Methodology section of this report, but in summary:

* LFS uses a subjective definition of sight loss, the sample is representative of the UK population and it identifies are wide range of people with sight loss, including those who aren’t registered blind or partially sighted.
* My Voice uses an objective definition of sight loss based on Certification of Vision Impairment eligibility, the sample is representative of registered blind and partially sighted people and it focuses on people with more severe sight loss.

### Key findings

* In 2020, the employment rate of people with a disability as a result of seeing difficulty was 48%.
* The employment rate for people with a seeing difficulty was unchanged since 2019.
* But it is still significantly lower than the overall employment rate for the UK, and the rate of employment for all disabled people. The overall UK employment rate is 76%.
* Due to the small sample sizes, it is difficult to identify clear trends in the LFS data.
* However, there is evidence that, at best, the employment situation for people with sight loss has not improved since 2015.

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## Introduction

### Background

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a study of the employment circumstances of the UK population. It is one of the largest household studies in the UK, with 40,000 households (roughly 100,000 individuals) taking part each quarter. It provides the official measures of employment and unemployment used by the UK government. LFS survey data is available via the UK Data Service.

RNIB has conducted several projects using data from LFS over the last decade. These research reports have compared the employment circumstances of blind and partially sighted people to other disabled people and non-disabled people. These reports are all available on RNIB’s Knowledge Hub at [www.rnib.org.uk/research](http://www.rnib.org.uk/research).

### 1.2 Objectives

To conduct a secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey to:

* Provide an update on the employment status of people living with sight loss.
* Identify the extent of the gap in employment rates between people with sight loss, other disabled people and non-disabled people.
* Highlight any other data or trends in the LFS data that are relevant to RNIB’s priorities.

## Methodology

### 2.1 Identifying people with sight loss in the Labour Force Survey

The October-December 2020 survey conducted interviews with 74,832 respondents. All respondents were asked whether they had a physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expecting to last 12 months or more. People who answered “yes” to this question were then asked a series of follow up questions about the cause of this impairment and to what extent it limited their activity, the amount of work and kind of work that they could do.

Focusing on people with a seeing difficulty, in the October-December 2020 survey 1,214 respondents said that they had a problem with their sight.

Many LFS respondents who have a disability reported multiple health conditions. Previous RNIB research (Meager and Carta, 2008; Hewett 2014, 2015, 2016) and Department of Work and Pensions analysis (DWP, 2018) focused specifically on the main health condition reported by participants. For consistency, and due to limitations in the survey design, this report uses the same approach. Of the 1,214 respondents who said that they had problem with their sight, 395 people said that difficulty seeing was their main health problem.

A series of additional questions were asked about how health conditions or impairments limited activity or work. These questions are basis for deciding whether a respondent is Equality Act disabled (and previously whether they would be considered as having a disability under the Disability Discrimination Act).

Of the 395 respondents who said that difficulty seeing was their main health problem:

* 117 said that this limited their activity a lot
* 129 said that this limited their activity a little
* 149 said that this didn’t limit their activity at all

Therefore, in the October-December 2020 quarter, 246 people with difficulty seeing as their main health problem were classified as Equality Act disabled. This figure represents all the people who said that their activity was limited a little or a lot, and it excludes those who said that it did not limit their activity at all.

This approach to identifying respondents who are living with sight loss has been used in all the analysis outlined in this report.

### 2.2 Other health conditions and comorbidities

It is important to note that this analysis only includes people who say that their main disabling condition is a seeing difficulty. This is the only group of participants that we can identify who also self-report to meeting the Equality Act definition of disability. This is a weakness in the way LFS asks participants about their disability, as only the impact of the self-reported “main health problem” is recorded. Additional LFS participants report have difficulty seeing as a second or third health problem, but there is no way for us to know the impact this has on their life because they are not asked about it.

This is particularly important because of the high prevalence of multiple disabilities in children with sight loss and in adults with learning disabilities. We know that around half of visually impaired children also have an additional special educational need (Morris and Smith, 2008). There is also evidence that adults with a learning disability are 10 times more likely to be living with sight loss (Emerson and Robertson, 2011).

### 2.3 Aggerating data

A single LFS quarter includes responses from around 80,000 individuals. This is sufficient to allow a wide range of labour market, educational and demographic analyses, but does not provide a large enough sample to give reliable results for small population sub-groups, such as people living with sight loss. The nature of sampling variability means that the smaller the group whose size is being estimated, the less precise that estimate is. Basing estimates on data for a larger sample can increase precision.

Due to the consistency between the quarterly datasets, it is possible to regularly re-run the analysis upon the release of each quarter’s data. Within each survey there are five approximately equal waves of respondents, with a wave being dropped at the end of their fifth quarter of participation. This means that for each survey there is an 80% overlap with the previous quarter. Therefore, when aggregating the data the same household is included on multiple occasions.

As per ONS guidelines, and previous RNIB that have interrogated LFS data, we have aggregated data in this report. In most instances this is involves summing the weighted estimates for four consecutive quarters and divided by four. These estimates average both the numerator and denominator, and so this represents an annual average. In some cases, for examples when looking at unemployment figures when the sample sizes are particularly small, it has been necessary to aggregate 12 quarters of data.

ONS publishing guidance on the minimum publication level, and how this can be lowered by aggregating data. All the statistics quoted in this report meet ONS recommendations (ONS, 2016).

### 2.4 Weighting

The LFS collects information on a sample of the population. To enable us to make inferences from this sample to the entire eligible population we must weight the sample data. This involves assigning each respondent a weight, which is equivalent to the number of people in the population which that case represents. These weights are calculated such that they sum to a set of known population totals, and the weights of an entire dataset will sum to the eligible population of the UK. All data presented in the findings section of this report is based on weighted survey results.

### 2.5 Confidence intervals

It is important to consider the confidence we have in the estimates presented in this report. Some of the data in the tables are presented in percentages, those figures which are not sufficiently high to be used as confident estimates in publication are marked with an asterisk.

The process of aggregating quarters is used to increase confidence in the figures derived from the LFS. While confidence is increased we become less specific about the time period of the estimates, i.e. the aggregated estimates for 12 quarters gives us estimates for a three-year period.

### 2.6 Comparability to previous RNIB reports analysing LFS data

Since the quarter April-June 2014 there have been changes to the way that people are defined as disabled in the LFS dataset. Depending on how participants respond to questions on health and disability and how these impact on their ability to carry out daily activities and their work they are now categorised in the dataset as to whether they are Equality Act disabled. This definition based on the Equality Act has replaced the previous one based on the Disability Discrimination Act.

The Office for National Statistics advises caution when making comparison between analysis using these different definitions.

In practical terms, less people are identified as having a long-term disability under the Equality Act definition. For example, in the October-December 2018 quarterly survey: 270 respondents were identified as having a long-term disability with a seeing difficulty under the Equality Act definition; compared to 291 respondents under the old Disability Act definition.

### 2.7 Comparability to other RNIB employment research

The statistics on employment and other economic activity rates of blind and partially sighted people presented in this report differ significantly from those in other key reports published on the RNIB website, most notably the Network 1000 reports (Douglas et al, 2006) and RNIB My Voice survey (Slade and Edwards, 2015).

Far lower rates of employment among the blind and partially sighted population were found in these two surveys compared to the rates found in the current, as well as in previous, studies of the Labour Force survey (Meager and Carta, 2008; Hewett 2014, 2015, 2016). While My Voice found that one in four registered blind and partially sighted people were in employment, the most recent LFS figure is just under a half for people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty.

**A reason for this discrepancy is that the LFS uses different criteria to My Voice for identifying the blind and partially sighted population.**

Network 1000 and My Voice are based on a representative sample of people who are registered as blind or partially sighted. This means:

* There are objective criteria for defining the population as blind or partially sighted
* People in this population can be regarded as having a severe vision impairment

The Labour Force Survey relies on self-reported measures to identify a person as having a seeing difficulty. Although the questions are designed to identify those people who can be regarded as disabled, they still rely on participants to answer the questions accurately. The population of people with a seeing difficulty in the Labour Force Survey covers a wider range of sight loss than in My Voice and includes people whose sight loss would not be eligible for registration, but which is still of sufficient severity to affect their everyday lives.

### 2.8 Terminology

#### Difficulty seeing

This term is used in the Labour Force Survey, and it is the option that participants need to select if they self-report having problems with their version. The phrase is used in this report for consistency with the original data source.

#### ILO unemployment

ILO (International Labour Organisation) define unemployment as those without a job, who have sought work in the last four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks or out of work, have found a job and are waiting to start in the next two weeks.

#### Economically inactive

Someone is defined as economically inactive if they are not in employment or ILO unemployed. This can include students, people who are long term sick or disabled, those looking after the family home and those who are seeking work but who do not meet the ILO definition of unemployment.

## Findings

### 3.1 Employment is lower amongst people with sight loss

Based on LFS data collected in 2020 (four quarters of data), the employment rate of people with sight loss remains lower than other disabled people and non-disabled people.

The proportion of people in employment (including self employment) were:

* 48% - people with difficulty seeing
* 53% - other disabled people
* 81% - non-disabled people
* 76% - all people of working age

### 3.2 Trends in the employment rate

Employment rates for people with sight loss fluctuate within the LFS data making trends difficult to identify. Due to the small sample size of people with sight loss in the LFS data there are large confidence intervals, this means that we need to be careful when interpreting changes. To demonstrate the extent of this variation, over the last 24 quarters there has been a variation in the employment rate for people with difficulty seeing between 58% and 42% in specific quarters.

The below chart shows the employment rate for people with difficulty seeing in 24 LFS quarterly surveys from 2015 to 2020. The employment rate fluctuates in the range of around 40%-60% (shown as a blue line). The chart also shows a red dotted line that shows the overall trend during this period. This trend shows that the employment rate of people with difficult seeing appears to be relatively flat.

##### Chart: Employment rate for people with difficulty seeing from Q1 2015 to Q4 2020

Another way to look at this trend data is to use a yearly aggregation. The employment rate identified in LFS for people with seeing difficult over the last six years is:

* 2015 – 47%
* 2016 – 52%
* 2017 – 53%
* 2018 – 45%
* 2019 – 48%
* 2020 – 48%

Again, caution needs to be applied when interpreting these trends. Direct comparison between years is problematic because:

* These changes are not significantly different when considering confidence intervals
* Older analysis of the LFS used the DDA definition of disability, and now this has changed to the Equality Act definition.
* The State Pension Age for women has been increasing over this period, and from 2020 is 66 years for both men and women.

In summary, identifying trends in employment rates for people with seeing difficulty is problematic using the LFS because of small sample sizes and fluctuations in the data. We cannot reliably say, for example, that more people with seeing difficulties are in employment because rate identified in LFS increased from 45% in 2018 to 48% in 2020 – in a similar way we would be unable to definitive say that less people with sight loss are in work for years where there are relatively small percentage decreases/

### 3.3 Education

For all groups (with and without a disability) the higher the qualification held the more likely people were to be in employment and the less likely they are to be economically inactive.

However, even with a degree, people with a seeing difficulty were less likely than people without a disability to be employed. People with a degree (or equivalent) qualification in employment:

* 73% - people with a seeing difficulty.
* 73% - other disabled people.
* 88% - people without a disability.
* 86% - all people of working age.

People with sight loss are less likely to be in employment than the rest UK population across every comparable qualification level. The largest gap is for those people who leave education with no qualifications. People with no qualifications who are economically inactive (that is not in employment or looking for work):

* 80% - people with a seeing difficulty.
* 77% - other disabled people.
* 35% - people without a disability.
* 53% - all people of working age.

Note: Inactivity has been used here to meet minimum publication guidance around sample size.

### 3.4 Seeking and wanting employment

Given the relative employment rates, it is not surprising the proportion of people with sight loss who they want to work is higher than the UK average.

Overall, 17% of people with difficulty seeing were either unemployed or said they wanted to find work in the future. This compares to a UK average of 8% - but some caution must be used when comparing these proportion because to the significant different in the overall employment rate.

There are also 33% of people with difficulty seeing who say that they do not want to work for whatever reason. By far the most common reason given for not wanting work is related to being “long term sick or disabled”.

Overall, this compares to a UK average of 16% of people of working age who say that they do not want to work for whatever reason.

### 3.5 Age

At all ages, people with sight loss are less likely to be in employment then other disabled people and people without a disability. The employment rate split into three broad age groups is highlighted below. The relative proportionate gap in employment rate between people with a seeing difficulty and the UK average is fairly consistent across age groups.

#### Aged 16 to 34 years

* 46% - people with a seeing difficulty.
* 54% - other disabled people.
* 75% - people without a disability.
* 72% - all people of working age.

#### Aged 35 to 54 years

* 56% - people with a seeing difficulty.
* 60% - other disabled people.
* 91% - people without a disability.
* 85% - all people of working age.

#### Aged 55 to 64 years

* 43% - people with a seeing difficulty.
* 42% - other disabled people.
* 73% - people without a disability.
* 64% - all people of working age.

### 3.6 Nature of work

#### Type of contract

97% of people with a seeing difficult in employment have a permanent contract with their employer. This compares to 94% for other disabled people and 95% for people without a disability.

#### Sector

68% of people with a seeing difficulty in employment were working in the private sector. This compares to 76% for other disabled people and 78% for people without a disability.

In comparison, 32% of people with a seeing difficulty were working in the public sector.

#### Hours

51% of people with a seeing difficult in employment are working full time. This compares to 50% for other disabled people and 63% for people without a disability. Full time has been defined as employment lasting for 35 hours or more per week.

### 3.7 Length of time in current job

People with sight loss have had a job with their current employer for longer than the UK average. 42% of people with difficulty seeing had been with their current employer for more than 10 years. This compares to an average for the UK workforce of 32%. And 20% had been with their current employer for more than 20 years, compared to a UK average of 12%.

On the other hand, 21% of people with sight loss had been with their current employers for less than 2 years, this compares to an average for the UK workforce of 28%.

## Summary and recommendations

#### Employment rate remains stable

On a positive note, the employment rate for people with a seeing difficulty has remained stable during 2020. This is also true for the employment rate for other disabled people and non-disabled people in the UK. As a result the underlying employment rate for people with seeing difficulty remains significant lower compared to these other groups.

#### Changes to LFS

There are some issues with the LFS data and how disability is recorded in the survey:

* The structure of the questions requires a participant to give a double disclosure of a specific disability.
* Only allows us to identity the “main disability”, but there is evidence that many people with sight loss have multiple health conditions.
* LFS does not record any information on the functional impact (i.e. not being able to see newspaper print, etc).
* LFS does not record information on whether or not someone is registered blind or partially sighted.

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## Appendix – data tables

##### Table : Economic activity (broad) by disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Employed | 48% | 53% | 81% | 76% |
| ILO unemployed | \* | 4% | 3% | 4% |
| Inactive | 47% | 43% | 15% | 21% |
| Total (Weighted) | 99,300 | 8,052,384 | 33,386,663 | 41,538,347 |

\* = not sufficiently high for publication (less than 6,000)

##### Table 2: Employment rate by highest qualification level and disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Degree or equivalent | 73% | 73% | 88% | 86% |
| Higher education | 74% | 61% | 85% | 80% |
| A level or equivalent | 54% | 59% | 80% | 75% |
| GCSE grades A\*-C or equivalent | 26% | 47% | 74% | 67% |
| Other qualification | \* | 44% | 79% | 69% |
| No qualification  | \* | 19% | 60% | 43% |
| Don't know  | \* | 46% | 84% | 76% |
| Total (weighted) | 98,830 | 8,041,089 | 33,338,698 | 41,968,008 |

##### Table 3: Economic activity of 16 to 34 year olds by disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Employed | 46% | 54% | 75% | 72% |
| ILO unemployed | \* | 7% | 5% | 5% |
| Inactive | 48% | 39% | 20% | 23% |
| Total (Weighted) | 24,859 | 2,215,333 | 13,244,760 | 15,484,951 |

##### Table 4: Economic activity of 35 to 54 year olds by disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Employed | 56% | 60% | 91% | 85% |
| ILO unemployed | \* | 3% | 2% | 2% |
| Inactive | 38% | 36% | 7% | 13% |
| Total (Weighted) | 34,163 | 3,300,020 | 13,823,013 | 17,157,197 |

##### Table 5: Economic activity of 55 to 64 year olds by disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Employed | 43% | 42% | 73% | 64% |
| ILO unemployed | \* | 3% | 2% | 2% |
| Inactive | 54% | 56% | 20% | 34% |
| Total (Weighted) | 40,279 | 2,537,031 | 6,318,890 | 8,896,199 |

##### Table 6: Contract type by disability, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Permanent | 97% | 94% | 95% | 95% |
| Not permanent in someway | \* | 6% | 5% | 5% |
| Total (weighted)  | 42,251 | 3,586,442 | 23,420,870 | 27,049,563 |

##### Table 7: Sector of work by disability, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Private | 68% | 74% | 77% | 77% |
| Public | 32% | 26% | 23% | 23% |
| Total (weighted) | 47,101 | 4,221,971 | 27,000,571 | 31,269,642 |

##### Table 8: Hours of work by disability, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Limited hours | 15% | 19% | 13% | 13% |
| Part time | 34% | 32% | 24% | 25% |
| Full time | 51% | 50% | 63% | 61% |
| Total (weighted) | 38,392 | 3,356,79 | 22,894,504 | 26,289,689 |

##### Table 9: Length of time in current job by disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Less than 12 months | 12% | 15% | 16% | 16% |
| 1 to 2 years | 9% | 12% | 12% | 12% |
| 2 to 5 years | 21% | 21% | 23% | 23% |
| 5 to 10 years | 16% | 17% | 17% | 17% |
| 10 to 20 years | 23% | 22% | 21% | 21% |
| More than 20 years | 20% | 13% | 11% | 12% |
| Total (weighted) | 47,312 | 3,814,344 | 26,949,044 | 30,810,700 |

##### Table 10: Economic activity by disability type, 2020

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Difficulty seeing | Other disabled | Not disabled  | Overall UK population |
| Employed | 48% | 53% | 82% | 76% |
| ILO unemployed | \* | 4% | 3% | 4% |
| Inactive – unavailable for work | \* | 1% | 1% | 1% |
| Inactive – not seeking work but would like a job | 12% | 10% | 3% | 4% |
| Inactive – not seeking work and do not want a job | 33% | 32% | 12% | 16% |
| Total (Weighted) | 99,300 | 8,052,384 | 33,386,663  | 41,538,347 |

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